Indecent Proposal

by TyrantGuardian

Summary

Clay shifts uncomfortably as he tries to situate himself in the cluttered walk-in closet. A surprised yelp escapes him as he almost trips over something—a crate maybe?—and he braces himself on the back wall before he could face-plant into it. He curses under his breath, freezing in place while he mentally prays that his clumsy stumbling wasn’t loud enough to draw the attention of whomever decided to welcome themselves into Jessica’s room.

You know, before he could properly escape it.

Things at Jess’s party don’t go as expected. . .
So. A few things before you read:
- The chapters can be pretty long. Bring snacks. Also, grab a few for me cause I’m probably hungry.
- Heed the tags. If any of those tags seem like they could offend or trigger you, you may wanna skip reading this. I didn’t skimp on the details with this fic, so you have been warned.
- This story will ignore aspects of Season One and any subsequent seasons of the show thereafter. While some events do take place, they have more than likely been altered. (Examples: What happens at Jess’s party, Jeff and Hannah dying, Hannah getting raped or making tapes, just about everything with Hannah honestly, people’s sexuality, etc.)
- I don’t hate Justin, I swear.
- Sorry if I didn’t catch all the grammatical and spelling errors on my proofreading. I will of course fix anything I catch later.
- I have an unstoppable infatuation with commas. They’re beautiful and amazing and I tend to use a lot of em.

I’d like to give a special thanks to ‘Orion Shiitake’ for helping me with this.

See the end of the work for more notes.
In the Closet

Clay shifts uncomfortably as he tries to situate himself in the cluttered walk-in closet. A surprised yelp escapes him as he almost trips over something—a crate maybe?—and he braces himself on the back wall before he could face-plant into it. He curses under his breath, freezing in place while he mentally prays that his clumsy stumbling wasn’t loud enough to draw the attention of whomever decided to welcome themselves into Jessica’s room.

You know, *before* he could properly escape it.

He listened carefully, ears perking up when he caught the sound of the bedroom door closing. After a few stagnant moments, he gave a mental sigh of relief as he realized the pair of drunken voices talking loudly and cackling in merriment were dutifully ignoring his existence. Carefully, he slid down the wall into a crouching position and let out a low, shaky sigh as he rolled his eyes, mentally berating himself for getting into this situation in the first place.

This was turning out to be one *hell* of a night.

He let Jeff—erm—persuade him into coming to Jess’s party, despite his usual feelings of discomfort at these type of events.

He tried to abstain from drinking by sticking to the bottled water, terrified even the so-called non-alcoholic beverages may have been spiked, until he ran into Hannah, who managed to persuade him into having a few cups of most *definitely* spiked whatever that concoction was. It was enough to give him a nice buzz, the liquid courage instilling him with the false notion that he was in any conceivable way, shape, or form, a believable dancer. He proceeded to embarrass himself with moves that were such a cause for concern, that some rando approached him with an EpiPen and a threat to call for an ambulance. He had been ridiculed after but it had been worth it when the two of them, he and Hannah, retreated upstairs into what he guessed had to be Jessica’s bedroom, where a rather intense make-out session began.

Clothing started to disappear as goosebumps started to raise on his arms, the blood and adrenaline rushing to his crotch and flooding him with the sensation of anticipation and a nervous glee.

There were more kisses, then touches, followed by needy moans and Hannah nipping at his bottom lip as she gave him a playful smirk through hazy, slightly inebriated fueled eyes. He returned the smile as best he could and pressed their lips together as she released his lip, her focus now on letting her fingers playfully graze over the now rock hard stiffness in his pants. Her efforts were rewarded with an eager pulse of approval.

The kiss deepened, their tongues clashing together in uncoordinated ways as he felt her hand slip underneath the cotton fabric of his briefs and he wondered randomly when exactly she had unzipped his jeans just as fingers tightened ever so slightly around his all but pleading cock. He gasped out in surprise at the coolness of her hand, then in pleasure as she gave it a light pull. She smiled against his lips, repeating the action again, firmer with her grasp this time and he breathlessly moaned out a name.

“Jeff. . .”

Oh.

Well *fuck*.
The world seemed to screech to a halt then. His insides felt like they were being twisted into knots as he replayed the last couple of seconds back in his mind. Had he really just said that, out loud, in front of Hannah freaking Baker?! He blinked rapidly, trying to stutter out an excuse, any excuse he could think of, as his cheeks bore a steadily darkening red hue as their faces pulled apart. The more he tried in vain, the more baffling his speech became. Suddenly, Jessica’s dresser and the pictures taped around the vanity had become pretty damn interesting, so he decided to just shut the hell up and focus on that instead. He studied the haphazardly, uncoordinated way the photos were hung against the wooden frame and couldn’t help but arch a judgmental brow at it all.

Truly it was the pinnacle of picture hanging, just...simply majestic.

Hannah snickering under her breath is what grabbed his attention back toward her. Though she sounded thoroughly amused, there was just the slightest, itsy-bitsy, teeny-tiniest hint of bitterness as she leaned over the side of the bed to grab her t-shirt.

“Wow Helmet,” she emphasized in ridicule, following it up with a long whistle and another judgmental snicker as she pulled her shirt over her head and began adjusting her hair. She glanced over at him, her expression carefully crafted to look impartial but not enough to mask the obvious hurt in her soulful eyes. It was enough to make Clay cast his own gaze down to look at his now all-too-interesting lap in guilt.

“You sure know how to kill a mood.”

Clay flinched as if he had been hit. “Look, I’m sorry! It’s not you, I mean, you know—”

“Yeah, I guess I do now!” she joked and punched his arm playfully, though with a little more force than necessary. She brushed a strand of his short bangs away from his face before kissing him on the forehead and gazing deeply into his eyes, all too seriously. “Maybe warn a girl next time you’re not, you know, that into it?”

“I am! I was! I just...I mean, I don’t know why—” he tried but she was already up and moving, giving him an almost sympathetic glance over her shoulder as she made her way towards the bedroom door.

“You should probably figure that out.” she called back to him, possibly a little more bluntly than she intended. She paused halfway out of the doorway, as if giving it some thought before taking in a deep breath. She leaned on the door frame then glanced over at him with an sly smile playing on her lips.

“Want me to send Jeff up?”

‘...Maybe.’

“Funny.” he grumbled miserably as he began putting back on his own clothing and she snickered before giving him a finger wave and a smile, lingering for a few moments before finally departing the room.

Clay blinked out of his thoughts, quietly shifting his weight from one leg to the next as he continued to squat in the decidedly uncomfortably cramped closet. He felt the immediate sting of guilt and regret as he focused on the memory of that playful smile contrasting with the hurt latent in her eyes. He would have to explain things to her and most definitely, have to make things up to her and sooner rather than later. Hell, he may even try calling her later tonight!

If he could just get out of this fucking room!
He peered out through the sliver of an opening between the closet door and its frame, his gaze falling quickly over the two forms currently making out enthusiastically on the bed just a few feet away from him. It didn’t take long to discern who they were. That drunken girlish giggle, bubbly and giddy, entwined with an equally drunken cocky laugh, followed by the sounds of obnoxious smacking noises and heavy breathing.

Jessica and Justin. He’d know those lip-locking sounds anywhere. They could practically trademark it at this point.

Clay sighed and settled for fully sitting down to give his legs a rest, stretching them out and over whatever the hell this junk was on the floor. Considering how long the two could make-out, he might be stuck in here for a while. So he pulled out his cell, made sure it was on silent, and started looking through his social media accounts, careful not to let the light of the phone show through the door opening and give him away. Just as he had gotten comfortable (and had gotten a new high score on this stupidly addictive app game Sky had introduced him to), a miracle happened.

Jess, clearly too drunk to properly participate in their would be festivities, finally pushed Justin away before crashing backwards onto the bed in a drunken heap.

Knocked-out drunk.

For his part, Justin though appearing disappointed, lazily tried to pull the comforter over her. He managed to only cover her feet before he flicked off the light and stumbled out of the room, leaving it illuminated with the glow of the moon that was flooding in through the blinds of a bedside window.

Clay signed openly with relief as he put his phone away, bumping his elbow against the wall in the process but choosing to ignore the pain as he got to his feet, listening to various joints pop. He stretched his limbs as much as he could, hearing more joints pop as he yawned.

Time to finally get the hell out of here! It was still relatively early in the night, so he might be able to cram in some homework once he got home. He could still, also, maybe, if he worked up the nerve, call Hannah. Maybe have a heart-to-heart and fully explain (and explore) those feelings he had about a certain stoner jock he’d come to adore.

His head jerked up when he heard footfalls nearby and he peered through the opening again, face right up against the closet door. No one but he and Jess were still in the room, but just outside of it, he could hear voices. Two of them. He inwardly groaned... He had been so close...

He strained to listen, hoping they would move along when he just barely caught some of the conversation.

“Let me see.”

Clay arched a brow, frowning. 'See what? A girl trying to sleep off being passed-out drunk in what should be the safety of her own bedroom—while one of her classmates unknowingly squats in her closet like a creeper?'

...That sounded a lot worse when he factored his own predicament into things.

“What’s mine is yours...” He heard a familiar voice push when he was met with reluctance.

Clay’s head jerked back like he’d been struck hard in the face, which at the moment was scrunched up in the epitome of a ‘what the fuck’ expression.

Whoever that was couldn’t be serious, right?
He waited anxiously, giving a nervous glance over to Jess and hoping whomever was talking would just go away, at least long enough for him to leave and lock the door behind him, just in case said person decided to return. Then that someone came into the room, dashing said hopes and dreams. Clay fought to readjust his vision from the momentary light that filled the room from the hallway, squinting and rubbing at them, though he could already tell whomever it was, it wasn’t Justin—this guy had a broader build. As the door came to an ominous close, he was able to focus his vision enough to recognize who it was.

Bryce Walker.

Disdain flared almost immediately as he frowned, watching Bryce intently as the hulking teen joined Jessica on the bed, leaning over her sprawled frame. He felt his heart skip a beat as he watched Bryce lean his face in close to Jess’s.

He rapidly thought of what he could do.

Bryce was bigger than him and would prove more than enough of a challenge, even if he was possibly drunk. Heck, maybe even more so because he was drunk.

However, he certainly wasn’t about to let this asshole take advantage of Jessica like this. No, they weren’t very close—she was a friend of Hannah’s, (though the two almost saw their friendship dissolve over what amounted to asinine girlish drama that he chose to purposely not understand or be a part of)—but this was wrong.

And it was Bryce.

Attacking him head on was out of the question though.

'May I could try jumping him from behind to get the advantage? Maybe hit him with something over the head? There has to be something strong enough in this closet to do it…'

He looked up when he heard Jess mumble incoherently and saw as she tried to push against Bryce, who was pinning her down, holding her in place.

Clay turned attention to the darkened closet, feeling around as quietly but as quickly as he could, for something he could use. He couldn’t help but wonder just where the hell was Justin in all of this.

“Get the fuck off of her!”

Oh. There he was.

He watched as they struggled, Bryce trying to push Justin out of the room who managed to grab the sides of the door frame before stomping on Bryce’s foot, giving him enough time to try and throw out a sloppy punch that just missed Bryce’s face by inches. Bryce paused to glare at Justin, rolling his eyes and giving a mocking, exaggerated sigh at the failed follow-up attempt before he returned the favor with a lot better coordination and success, punching Justin in the face and sending him stumbling into the nearby wall.

"You done?" Bryce asked him, almost politely, while Justin took the few seconds to collect himself.

'Please be done.' Clay thought anxiously as Justin pushed himself up with an angry growl and charged at Bryce with enough momentum to bring the both of them crashing to the floor near the bed. As they continued to tussle around, managing to slam the bedroom door shut then bumping into Jess’s nightstand, shaking the lap sitting atop it, Clay had to randomly admire Jess’s dedication to staying in a booze fueled slumber as he still contemplated rather it was a good idea to leave the safety
"What the fuck is your problem!" Bryce snapped and he suddenly sounded close. Too close-

Clay jumped and let out an indignant startled (he would never admit) squeak when the duo slammed into the closet door. He froze in place, only relaxing as he continued to hear the pair struggling and realized he remained unnoticed. He chanced peering out of the opening again, watching as the two wrestled with Bryce now attempting a submission hold on Justin that he was fighting tooth and nail to get out of. Clay shook his head, taking a moment to calm his nerves.

No...he would wait this out. Jess was Justin's girlfriend after all and he seemed to have a...handle...on the situation. No need of him mucking up the works and possibly getting the two to say, turn the tables on him, which would most assuredly result in him subsequently getting beat up. See, the jocks tended to be punch first, ask later and Justin in particular seemed to have a shorter fuse than most. He could see it now: him popping out of the closet with every intent to help only for Justin to demand why he was hiding out in his precious Jessica's closet in the first place. Then Bryce's antics would be long forgotten as the two wailed on him for his perceived nefarious intentions.

No. He couldn't risk it. He needed another way out.

He was startled again when he heard another hard crash and looked up through the opening again. Bryce had completely gained the upper hand of the situation with an ease that didn’t surprise Clay in the slightest but did disappoint him. He straddled Justin, pinning his arms beside him with what Clay imagined was the same triumphant smugness he had whenever he won games or bragged about one of his various conquests. Clay couldn’t help but roll his eyes upon seeing it.

'Now what are they gonna do?'

“You done?” Bryce asked again with the patronizing veneer of innocence, as if he were chastising a disobedient child.

“Get the fuck off me!” Justin spat, pure piss and vinegar.

“Hey now, calm down.” Bryce warned still sounding condescending. “You might wake Jess up.”

Clay had to stifle back a laugh. A rocket being launched next to her wouldn't be able to wake that girl up!

"Besides, you shouldn’t have attacked me whe—"

“You were trying to fuck my girl!” Justin growled out, cutting him off as he continued to struggle.

“You’re overreacting.” Bryce insisted in a friendly tone even as he continued to refuse to let Justin up or give him any leverage. “I told you man, she’s just a fling. Some piece of ass you’ll get tired of and replace within the next couple of weeks. What’s the harm in letting me have a little fun?”

Clay sneered and narrowed his eyes as Bryce. Geez, did Hannah dodge a bullet when Kat convinced her not to give Bryce the time of day before she moved.

“Fuck you! It’s not like that with me and Jess!” Justin insisted, though he had lowered his voice as instructed, in a hushed drunken rage. Clay had to commend his continued attempts to get Bryce off of him, as futile as it was.

Bryce gave him this laugh that made Clay want to punch his face, as the large teen looked down at
Justin thoroughly unimpressed and unconvinced. “You think this bullshit you got with her is stronger than the bond you have with me?”

“Wait, what?” Justin said, speaking Clay’s thoughts aloud, seeming confused for a moment before he continued “You’re not sleeping with Jess!”

Clay watched as Bryce leaned in, face inches away from Justin’s before they were nose-to-nose then side-by-side, and he strained to listen to what Bryce was whispering in Justin’s ear. He didn’t know what was said, but it made Justin stop struggling and crane his neck to stare at the bigger jock in more confusion before a drunken smiled formed on his face and he laughed outright, his anger seeming to leave him with each passing second.

“Alright, what the hell have you had?” He slurred jokingly at Bryce, letting his head lay back so that he was laying flush on the carpeted floor as Bryce joined him in laughter.

Clay looked between the two, not sure how to gauge what was going on anymore. Justin took in a breath, clearing his throat as he settled down, shaking his head. “I’m not doing that.”

Clay frowned and couldn’t help but think, knowing Bryce, that he probably just suggested a threesome. At least even drunk, Justin had some common sense to say no to something like that. If he were being honest, he was growing a sliver of respect for him through all of this. He may be an asshole, but he was clearly an asshole that gave a shit about his girlfriend, enough to stand up even to the likes of Bryce.

“What? I thought you said it wasn’t like that with Jess.”

“It’s not. I’m serious man, I really like her.” Justin whispered insistently.

“Prove it.” Bryce challenged, staring down at Justin in what Clay could only describe, even in this light, as a predatory way. Like he wanted to eat him. Clay felt a chill of unease race up his spine as he heard Justin laugh again, though there was anxiety laced in his voice now.

“I mean...we can’t. I got Jess.”

“Right. You got Jess,” Bryce repeated mockingly. “Who means so much to you, that you reneged on letting me have a little fun with her.”

“I never said you could!” Justin hissed, a flicker of anger seeming to return.

“You let me in here.”

Justin didn’t reply as quickly this time, turning his head to look over at the bed for a moment, before he guiltily rebuffed “Not so you could that.”

Bryce laughed, unconvinced. “You knew what I meant when you let me in.”

“...Whatever. You said you just wanted to see her. You did, now get the fuck out.”

“Yes! Both of you! Get. The. FUCK. Out!” Clay thought desperately, no longer interested in seeing where this was headed.

“So you admit you’re going back on your offer?” Bryce pressed accusingly, and Clay felt that same shiver of unease as Justin swallowed.

“I never offered—"
“I’ve done so much for you Justy.” Bryce sighed, cutting him off, sounding thoroughly disappointed in the brunette pinned beneath him. “I’ve given you so much, whatever you wanted, whatever you needed. Helped your Mom, given you a place to stay, made sure you were always good. I’ve shared with you, whatever I have...and you can’t let me have this one thing?”

Clay could just make out the guilt ridden look Justin had on his face as he began to tremble a bit, looking up at the ceiling rather than meeting Bryce’s unyielding gaze.

“Have some honor.” Bryce continued with a twinge of coldness. “Keep your word,” He hunched then and added a sly "or...take my offer."

Clay couldn’t help feeling indignant for Justin as the sneer on his face deepened. ‘Was this bastard actually, seriously trying to goad Justin into letting him sleep with his girlfriend? While having the gall to try and guilt trip him and use some type of proposition that Justin apparently wasn’t interested in?'

Clay felt his fists clench at his sides. He may not particularly care for Justin, but damn if he didn’t hate Bryce more for him. Nevertheless, Clay waited for what felt like an eternity, watching the pair intently as the room became quiet, unnervingly so, save for the slowing of ragged breathing and the thump of his own heartbeat in his ears. Justin turned his face to look toward the closet, and Clay leaned away from the opening as not to be spotted. He could just see, from the corner of his eye, the troubled look on Justin’s face and the turmoil that reflected from his eyes. He was actually considering whatever it was, and Clay for the first time since he had ever known Justin, felt pity for him.

Justin sat up a little to look back over at the bed Jess was on, then he simply laid back down and closed his eyes. His response was too soft to be heard.

“What was that?” Bryce murmured gently, in all his smarmy glory, leaning his head down to hear what Justin repeated. Clay still didn’t hear what he said but it was enough for Bryce to give a low chuckle and finally let him up.

“You sure?” Bryce whispered, trying to sound concerned but looking to Clay like anything but as he and Justin sat across from one another. Justin only shrugged and nodded, looking down at his lap as he idly picked at imaginary fluff on his arm. Bryce watched him for a few minutes before he leaned back with a lopsided grin.

“Well?”

Clay watched as Justin let out a shaky breath then moved. Clay thought that he was getting to his feet to leave the room, to leave Jessica here alone with Bryce to do with as he pleased.

Instead, he moved over toward Bryce and moment’s later, Clay’s mouth parted as he heard the very distinct sound of zipper being undone.

‘Oh. Oh no.’

"Tha-this is all I have to do, right." Justin whispered, sounding utterly defeated. Bryce hummed in agreement then gave a playful ruffle of his hair. Justin pulled away from his hand, looking annoyed for a few minutes. Then with a sigh, he reached down and took a hold of, well.

‘Oh nonononoooooooo!’

Clay quickly diverted his eyes to scan the bed just as he saw Justin’s head begin to move into Bryce’s lap. Jessica was still laying there, calm, peaceful, and blissfully unaware of the disturbing
scene playing out mere feet away from her. *Maybe I can throw something at her to wake her up? They have to be too distracted to notice me do it at this point, right?!*

Clay tore his eyes away, staring into the darkness of the closet and purposely refusing to see what was happening just a foot or so away from him. It was a shame the same couldn’t be done for his hearing. He inwardly cringed at the low, throaty moans drifting into the closet. The whispers of encouragement that sounded far too duplicitous to be genuine. The soft slurping and light choking. The wince of pain and gasps because Clay didn’t care to know why.

He yanked his phone from his pocket.

He needed to help Justin somehow. He needed to get the hell out of here. He instantly thought of texting Hannah but immediately scrolled past her name, their last meeting fresh in his mind. Once he found whom he was looking for, he began texting furiously, hoping spellcheck for once wouldn’t screw him over.

Jeff? Are you still at the party?

He waited a few agonizing seconds and got no response.

*Crap.*

Clay bit his bottom lip anxiously, glancing over to catch the distinct movement of a head bobbing up and down more rapidly while Bryce held a fist full of Justin’s hair and thrust into his mouth. Clay made a face and quickly looked away, mentally kicking himself for bothering to look in the first place when he knew what was going on. He kept his face glued to his cellphone screen as he willed Jeff to respond, trying not to be distracted by the sounds before there was a long, low, moan of pure bliss that did just that.

He hesitantly looked up to see Justin coughing, his mouth covered and his eyes wide while Bryce laughed at him and began clapping him on the back a few times, all while he whispered something in a joking manner toward him. Justin, whatever was being said to him, refused to respond or acknowledge it and Clay watched him wipe his mouth on the back of his arm, trembling a little. The two paused when the sound of Jessica shifting caught their attention with Clay rooted for her to wake up. But alas, she only rolled over, her back now facing away from them completely as she settled back into her slumber.

Bryce turned his attention back to Justin, who was on his feet and making an effort to get to the door. Clay mentally cheered him on until Bryce caught him by the arm and pulled him back down to the floor. This time, Justin only stared at him before his head lulled to the side, facing away from Bryce and the closet, no longer making any effort to struggle.

The smile that formed over Bryce’s face made Clay quickly move on to another of his contacts when finally:

Was just about to leave. Why, need a ride?
He froze in his typing, relief washing over him as he quickly opened the discussion back up and began texting back.

I need you to come knock on Jess’s door.

For what?

Please? Just do it for me, ASAP? Right now, please?!

He got no response and Clay could only wait, unable to resist the urge to look up, only to see that the situation unfolding before him had worsened.

Bryce had already managed to work Justin’s pants down and had him pinned with one hand while he stroked himself with the other. He was kissing and sucking on Justin's neck while Justin himself looked emotionless, his eyes focused on the ceiling, mouth slightly agape, seemingly spaced out and tepid as Bryce used the hand pinning him to shift him around slightly, positioning himself between his legs. Clay had the rather troubling thought that this wasn't the first time Justin had perhaps been in this type of situation, what with how he had given in and agreed to do any of this in the first place. He hurriedly glanced down at his phone and upon seeing no response from Jeff, he gripped it tightly and came to a rash decision.

If he popped out of the closet and sprinted for the door, maybe it would spook Bryce enough to give Justin a chance to escape. Maybe just knowing someone had secretly been there watching would be enough to make Bryce rethink what he was making Justin do and stop in fear of being caught. Maybe Clay would make a run for it, trip, and get caught, with who knows what happening to him. He couldn’t know, but he couldn’t let this go on. He shouldn’t have let it get this far to begin with.

Clay took in a quiet deep breath, steeling his nerves as he placed a hand carefully in the closet door.

‘On the count of three. One. Two. . .’

Then, finally, there was a hard knock at the door.

“Hey! Anyone in here?”

Jeff!

The pair froze and Clay mouthed an enthusiastic ‘Yes!’ while shaking his fist in triumph.

The doorknob jimmyed and Jeff knocked hard again. “Hey come on, let me in! I forgot some stuff in the bathroom and I need to grab it before I leave! I won’t be long!”

Bryce cussed under his breath, annoyed, as he finally released Justin and got up, already rearranging his clothing and straightening himself up. Justin said nothing as he followed his lead, still looking hauntingly emotionless as he cast a long look at Jessica as she shifted on the bed for a moment but still stayed asleep. Once he fixed his clothing, he made no real effort to move and just simply stood in place, staring out into space. Then, in the moonlight, Clay could just make out the silent tears coming down Justin's face.

‘I should have come out of the closet sooner.’ Clay berated himself, feeling a surge of guilt as Bryce unlocked the bedroom door and peered out of it.
“Oh, hey Jeff.” Bryce greeted him with the most obviously fake smile Clay had ever witnessed as he reluctantly opened the door completely.

“Hey!” Jeff greeted back with a small wave and a smile that could make ice melt. Clay watched him peer around Bryce to look in the room, probably looking for him before his eyes landing on Justin. Clay turned his own attention back to the brunette, who was now staring at his feet in shame as he wiped at his eyes.

Jeff looked back up at Bryce and inclined his head at Justin. “What’s wrong with him?”

Before Bryce could answer, Justin cleared his throat and excused himself, stumbling out of the room as quickly as he could.

Clay felt his guilt grow bigger, but not as much as the disgust he felt watching Bryce shrug at Jeff in amusement, as if he had no clue why Justin was so distressed. He just leaned forward and looked over Jeff’s shoulder down the hall, looking pleased before pulling back to address Jeff properly.

“Nothing. We were just having a private chat.” He explained causally in a low voice as he brushed past Jeff, patting his shoulder lightly on the way out.

“Try not to be too loud getting your stuff, you might wake up Jess.” He added, glancing over at her with an amused expression, as if he had said some sort of private joke before finally leaving.

Jeff paused to stare at the spot Bryce had just been standing in before he crept into the room quietly, partially closing the door behind him with a bewildered look on his face.

Clay let a loud sigh, shaky and nervous, as he willed his legs to stop pretending to be jello. He tried moving them around, cussing under his breath as he bumped into something for what, the third time that night? Jess really needed to clean up her closet...

Jeff, who had been glancing over at the slumbering Jessica, looked towards the closet.

“Clay?” He called out, taking a tentative step forward.

Slowly, Clay opened the closet door and poked his head out, then stepped out fully into the room, a sheepish grimace on his face.

“What was that about?” Jeff asked, a light frown on his face, pointing a thumb over his shoulder in the direction the two jocks had gone. Clay instantly recalled that haunting look Justin had on his face and shook his head. He wasn’t ready to share what he’d just seen or heard with anyone, not even to Jeff. Not before speaking with Justin first.

“Just two drunk idiots sharing and caring a little too much. I needed a way out.” He whispered, offering a weak but grateful smile at his would be rescuer.

Jeff snorted. "How'd you get stuck in the closet anyway?"

"They came in before I could sneak out, so I hid. Didn't know how they'd react if they saw me in here.” Clay admitted, feeling like his actions were pretty dumb in hindsight.

Jeff only chuckled lightly at him. "Yeah, the guys can be dicks sometimes, so I can see why you weren't in a hurry to come out. Probably would have thought you were being a perv or something."

"Yeah...my night was already kinda shot. Didn't want to end it by getting the shit knocked out of me too." Clay admitted, forcing a laugh. The two finally turned to leave as another door could be heard
shutting somewhere in the house followed by a thump. Almost like something—or someone—was hitting the floor.

It made his stomach drop. What if—maybe . . .

“Want a ride home?”

“Huh?”

“Do you want me to give you a lift home? So you won’t have to walk?” Jeff offered again, already in the hallway helping some guy, another jock Clay didn't know all too well that was clearly intoxicated, up on to his feet. Clay's eyes shifted around as his brows furrowed.

"Did you hear that?"

Jeff looked at him confused as he shifted on his shoulders so he could be carried easier. "Hear what?"

Clay didn’t answer immediately, instead listening for any more troubling sounds but upon hearing none, relaxed. It was probably just someone going to the bathroom that drunkenly bumped the door, or someone else leaving the house and slamming the door so hard that it sounded close by, or maybe Jeff just now with super drunk jock shoulder guy, or something just as innocent.

“...Nothing. It was just me.” He said finally. "Yeah, if you don’t mind, I'd like a lift home."

“Cool, meet me at the car!” Jeff called back as he disappeared around the corner with his new companion. Clay started after him but paused, turning around and briskly covering the short distance back into the room. He went over to the bed, covering Jessica properly with the comforter before turning on his heel and departing just as quickly, stopping only to reach behind the door to turn the lock before shutting it.

Jessica didn’t need anymore visitors tonight.
Indebted

Chapter Summary

What happens after Justin and Bryce leave Jessica’s room.

Chapter Notes

So after some reflection, I decided to make a more in-depth note as not to blindside anyone with this chapter’s content and give a little context for why it’s written the way that it is.

First, the warning: this chapter is heavy with strong sexual content, is very descriptive (to possibly, for some, uncomfortable levels so I apologize in advance), and has non-consensual elements. It has such things like anal sex with bleeding to give an idea of what to expect. If any of that bothers you, you may want to avoid most of the chapter and skip towards the end, where the scene break symbol is ( —//— ).

This chapter was written like this because I have every intention of exploring (in-depth) how much Justin was effected by it and wanted to give a clear basis as to why it was such a conflicting and traumatic event for him. It will also play a huge roll in emphasizing Bryce’s own reactions and his consequent actions thereafter. So it does have a purpose and there is a method to my madness!

And if you don’t find the chapter to be all that bad, that’s fine too: I just wanted to be sure to cover my basis. While I can be flippant most of the time, I wanted to emphasize that I didn’t mean to upset or offend anyone with this, nor was I just writing this chapter the way I did just for the sake of it!

With all that being said: heed the warnings, heed the tags, and carry on if you will!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Justin stumbled his way down the hall, wiping harshly at his mouth with the back of his arm in disgust, the momentum of the action causing him to sway dangerously to one side before he was able to right himself. He took advantage of the moment to work up enough saliva to spit on the carpet, once more trying to wipe the bitter taste from his mouth, leaving a streak of residue on the back of his hand that he rubbed off on his jeans.

Once he was steady, he tried walking forward again, only to immediately trip over some piece of shit passed out in the middle of the floor that he miraculously never noticed. He barely caught himself as he stumbled to the side and fell down, bracing up against the wall at the last minute and leaning on it for support.

“Fucking idiot!” He cursed under his breath, glaring back hatefully at the drunken louse. The thought of kicking him came to mind before Justin thought better of it and let himself slide down until he was sitting. He immediately drew his knees up and rested his forehead against them as he
fought back the fresh tears threatening to fall.

The first part of his night had been so amazing, a menagerie of wild dancing and carousing. Fun and lighthearted, he was able to just forget about all the bullshit and the fucked up things going on in his life and simply enjoy himself.

Now he would give anything to just pretend the night never happened at all.

He ran his tongue over his lips, hoping to ease the feeling of them being chapped but instead grimaced in disgust when he tasted the faint traces of semen, spitting at the carpet yet again.

‘Atta boy Justy...swallow just like that...’

He recoiled from the thought as he let out a low growl, yanking at his hair until the sudden soreness woefully reminded him that Bryce recently finished doing the exact same thing to it just moments ago. He sat upright with a start and instantly let go of his own hair, rubbing his palms against the carpet until the friction of it began hurting. He ignored the pain and focused on the matter at hand.

He needed to get up and find a safe place to crash so he could sleep off all this booze and weed he consumed, so he could think straight and sort things out properly.

Maybe even confront Bryce about his recent stunt.

As if reading his mind, he suddenly felt himself being forced up harshly by the arm and pushed into the adjacent room—another bedroom, the master bedroom—before being shoved again toward the bed. He stumbled, this time tripping over his own feet and he landed hard on his ass, his palms again stinging from the carpet friction, though this time from the failed attempt to lessen the blow of his fall.

In his sobering-but-not-fast-enough haze, he looked up just in time to see Bryce locking the door as he turned his full attention back to Justin. He moved in closer then knelt down in front of Justin, arms resting on his knees with his fingertips pressed together as he gave him his usual courteous smile that only succeeded in filling Justin with more foreboding.

“Hey,” he started easily, whispering, sounding eerily pleasant as he watched Justin in a predatory like fashion. “Why’d you leave so fast? We weren’t finished yet.”

Justin began to speak, well yell at him rather, when the sound of movement had Bryce’s eyes darting first toward the door then back at Justin as he instantly moved to cover his mouth and keep him quiet. A muffled string of incomprehensible babbling noises proceeded to filter into the room, with Bryce ignoring it until footfalls could be heard approaching and he gave Justin a look. One that Justin very rarely saw from him, but it was enough to instantly make him stop struggling. The pair sat in silence as low laughter floated in from the hall. The same person the laughter belonged to could be heard admonishing someone—a fellow baseball player—before it sounded as if a person were maybe being lifted up. Then a second later, he asked:

“Want a ride home?”

‘Jeff.’ Justin thought, certain, when this was followed by the same question. Then he heard, “Did you hear that?”

Justin felt his heart skip a beat and he shuffled lightly, aching to call out and get Jeff’s attention, until Bryce tightened his hold and gave him that look again. Full of promise. A warning. He reluctantly remained silent, knowing what doing so would mean for him but also knowing that going against Bryce would be worse for him in the long run. So he chose glare at him in utter disdain as the exchange continued with Jeff and...he could swear he’d heard that other voice before...as they
proceeded to leave the hallway, their footfalls and voices disappearing with them.

Within a matter of seconds, Justin found himself being picked up and unceremoniously tossed onto the middle of the bed. He scrambled to sit up right and put some distance between them, kicking his legs out whenever Bryce reached out for him while trying simultaneously to scoot back towards the headboard.

“Why are you making this harder on yourself? You wanted this a few minutes ago.” Bryce insisted persuasively, slurring a few of his words as he leered at him and for a moment, Justin faltered.

Back in Jessica’s room, he felt there was no point in resisting: there didn’t seem to be a way out of it and felt like it was only a matter of time before things . . .well, better to do it when he could blame it on the weed and alcohol, he reasoned. But once Jessica moved like she may wake up and Jeff knocked on the door, he was given his chance to escape and the motivation again to keep up his resistance.

Little good that was doing him now.

“Get the fuck away from me!” Justin snarled, instinctively trying to fight back. Pushing, punching, anything to show that he was serious about not wanting to do this. Bryce ignored his vain attempts as he began to yank at Justin’s jeans, pulling them down, off, and then tossing them across the room.

He tried throwing a punch at Bryce’s face but his inebriated state only hindered his progress, just as it had before, and he missed by quite a large margin. Bryce snorted at this, amused, but didn’t retaliate in kind this time. Instead, he simply pushed Justin back and pinned him, smirking down at the smaller framed teen as if his previous attempt had been cute. Like someone would a misbehaving pet.

“I thought you said you were doing this for Jess?” Bryce reminded him in cruel mockery, making Justin narrow his eyes at him.

“Leave her the fuck alone.” He warned with a low threatening hiss and Bryce rolled his eyes.

“I am. I’m here with you aren’t I?”

“What for?! You said you’re not into guys!” Justin insisted in an accusatory fashion and Bryce shrugged.

“And I told you before that this is different.”

“How?!” He snapped.

Bryce only scoffed as if the answer should have been obvious then inclined his head to the right, staring down at Justin. “I don’t know why you’re so pissed when this is all your fault.”

Justin started to curse at him before he stopped mid word, certain he didn’t hear that right. What the hell was that suppose to mean? All his fault how?!

As if reading his mind, Bryce continued, “You put that bitch over our friendship. After everything I’ve done for you, you’d rather offer to be my literal whore then let me have a little fun with something of yours.”

Justin could only stare in disbelief as Bryce worked to unzip his own pants, the outline of his cock more pronounced through his underwear. This had been some kind of bullshit loyalty test?!
“So since you feel that way, I’m going to hold you to it.” Bryce continued callously but with that same oddly affable smile. “You’re going to fucking go through with this because you owe it to me.”

Justin had no idea how to respond to something that sounded so ludicrous. He always assumed Bryce did those things because they were close, because he cared about him, but perhaps he should have known better. Whenever Bryce started asking for favors in return, at first, it was always been simple things and Justin didn’t mind at all. On the contrary, he was more than happy to be able to repay Bryce in some way and show his appreciation and that he could be useful. Then somehow, someway, there was a shift, and Bryce started demanding repayment in more... personal ways, one of which he’d just finished doing and thought had settled things between them. Never before had things been taken quite this far, at least, not with Bryce being this persistent but then again, he was also pretty intoxicated, clearly more so than even Justin imagined. It was the only reason Justin could fathom as to why he would be saying and doing stupid shit like this. However, a small part of him couldn’t help but think that Bryce just wanted an excuse and this Jessica thing proved to be a good enough one for him.

Nevertheless, Justin had no doubt of his intent at this point and upon freeing an arm, pushed back against Bryce yet again, this time casting his anger aside and attempting to shrug off the antics in a more playful, friendly manner to try and give the whole situation a lighter air. If he could talk him down just enough to get him to back off, then maybe he could escape the rest of this.

“Alright, fine.” Justin responded trying to sound as calm and appeasing as possible with a forced, playful smile. “Let’s sleep this off and we’ll talk about it in the morning.”

As he went to prop himself up on his elbow, Bryce pushed him back down harshly, pinning him back to the bed with his body weight. Any hopes Justin had of this being a situation that could be talked out of vanished when Bryce pulled out his hardened dick through the opening pouch of his boxer briefs and began to stroke it, precum already seeping from the tip.

“You owe me.” Bryce repeated sounding resolute, eyes boring into him. “What’s mine is yours and what’s yours is mine. And you’ve always been mine.”

The words made Justin feel like the air had been knocked out of his lungs and repeated in his mind on loop as Bryce moved in. Kissing him, touching him, overloading his senses.

It felt—wrong.

“Stop!” He panted, squirming.

He was ignored as Bryce continued his onslaught, one hand holding his wrist while the other traced the seam where Justin’s skin and his underwear met before Bryce hooked his thumb under the elastic band and began to pull at it. Justin tried to knee him but Bryce bit down on the part where his shoulder and neck meets hard, making him cry out while Bryce simultaneously yanked at the fabric and tore the underwear away. He causally flicked the ruined article of clothing off the side of the bed.

“I mean it, get the fuck off me!” Justin cried, his voice devoid of his previous angry bravado and sounding more fearful.

And Bryce did, just long enough to flip him over onto his stomach, hooking one arm around Justin’s middle and pulling him up, forcing him to bend forward, shoulders lowered and his back arched.

“Yeah, that’s right baby, present your ass!” Bryce said, slapping it with enough force to leave a welt. Justin cried out in surprise, his voice higher and sharper than usual, making his cheek redden in
shame. He could hear Bryce’s mocking laughter ringing in his ears and with a renewed burst of anger, he tried fiercely to pull away again. Bryce put his knees on the back of Justin’s calf’s then held him in place until he stopped struggling. Justin’s eyes widened when he felt the tip of Bryce’s dick circling the ring of muscle that comprised of his asshole, leaving a trail of precum in its wake.

“I’m going to make you my bitch tonight.” Bryce purred in an matter of fact, boastful manner. Justin tried squirming away again, to no avail, and his mind raced to find any solution as his breathing became uneven and labored from his increasing panic.

Fighting wasn’t working and his cellphone was somewhere on the floor, maybe. It could still be in Jess room for all he knew, either way, it was unreachable. Anyone that was left in the house was pretty much useless, being utterly wasted or passed out. Even if he did scream for help and managed to get someone’s attention (having already blown that chance with Jeff and whoever was with him in the hall), he knew it was at the risk of upsetting Bryce. His only reliant, constant friend that he had at this point and, motivation aside, had truly done a lot for him throughout their friendship. Hell, he practically living with him right now thanks to that new asshole his mother was dating. As much as he hated to admit it, he just couldn’t afford for Bryce to stop supporting him, even if it was just as a friend he could open up and tell all his bullshit to.

He needed him.

Never mind that a part of him didn’t want any of his peers finding him. At someone else’s mercy, ashamed, and too weak to save himself from being reduced to-this. What if they were found by someone like Monty? Or worse, Jess?

He snapped out of his troubling thoughts when he felt the tip of Bryce’s cock began to push forward, the head spreading the tight ring of muscle apart and making it spasm in protest. Justin let out a pleading whimper, his fear and helplessness getting the better of him as he realized this most definitely was going to happen. His voice hitched an octave before catching in his throat as felt Bryce force himself in the first couple of inches. Justin recoiled and grit his teeth as he dug his nails in to the pillow beneath him, burying his face to muffle his own screaming.

Bryce hadn’t prepared him properly—probably just spit on his hand enough to slick himself up so the friction would be tolerable. Justin gave another pained wail into the pillow as Bryce gave a gentle nudge forward, already feeling unable to handle how badly it felt and how much it burned.

“Relax or it’ll get worse.” Bryce grunted ‘helpfully’ before he pushed in a few more inches, his grip on Justin’s hips tightening to keep him from squirming away.

Another push and Justin felt like his entire body was on fire, the throbbing pain and burning sensation from his abused hole only worsening and making his body lightly shake. Bryce pulled out, spit on his hand and slicked himself down again before forcing himself back in with a snap of his hips, going in even further this time.

While Bryce let a low moan, already enjoying the sensation, Justin bit down on the pillow hard and let out a another scream of agony. He felt a seal beginning to form between his entrance and Bryce’s dick, followed by thin trails of something wet making it’s way down the back of his thighs. When he felt it dripping off of his balls and onto the sheets below, he raised his head just enough to look under his body and confirm his worst fears.

He was bleeding.

Feeling renewed panic, Justin tried again to pull away only for Bryce to place a firm hand on the back of his neck. He pressed down hard enough to subdue him but not enough to actually choke
him, his other hand still holding Justin’s hip in a vise like grip while he used his upper body to keep him in position. Bryce gave a few testing pumps, coating himself in the new ‘lube’ before he pulled almost all the way out, the bulbous tip of his cock catching on the tight ring of muscle just as it involuntarily contracted around it. Then he pushed it back in harshly, wrenching out a full sob from Justin that he had been trying to hold back.

He hadn’t wanted cry during this, least of all in front of Bryce. Not when it would only serve to be something Bryce could hold over his head as proof of just how weak and pathetic he had been. He needed to keep some semblance of dignity and pride.

Of will.

Bryce spoke nothing of his sobbing, pulling out once more before slamming back in, finally burying himself balls deep. He let out an obscenely loud moan, pausing to relish in the sensual way Justin’s hole enveloped him, particularly the way its warm, moistening walls would spasm against the slit of his dick.

“Fuck, your tight!” He sighed blissfully, following it with a pleased breathless chuckle as he let go of Justin’s neck to take hold his hips with both hands again, giving them a tight squeeze as he circled his own and let out another moan. Justin didn’t dare move, not wanting to contribute to the immense burden of being impaled and stretched seemingly beyond his limits. He didn’t want to think about the increasing wetness he could feel as his body struggled to accommodate the intrusion, nor did he concentrate on the unyielding pain or the humiliating way Bryce kept complimenting him or the tightness of his ass. He focused on simply controlling his breathing, using the precious seconds allotted to him to prepare himself: deep gulps, shaky breathes, and pained gasps all intertwined as he gently rolled his head to lay it on its side, feeling a few tears roll down his face.

For a split second after, he felt his body fully relax, though it was short lived once Bryce finally began to move again, slowly at first, then taking on a painstaking rhythm that made Justin’s limbs quake. He struggled to stay upright, tightening his grip on the pillow further while letting out a stifled sob as that rhythm became punishing: hard and fast, deep and relentless. So much so that Justin could feel Bryce’s balls slapping against his ass. The steady smacking of flesh began to permeate throughout the room, assaulting and taunting Justin’s ears in way that was sure to cause the sound to get stuck in his mind for days to come.

A mind that was quickly becoming disoriented due to the pain so immense that it was numbing. He felt lightheaded, as if he were drifting away and just vaguely recalled when his legs gave out beneath him. Bryce supported both of their weight as they continued, not showing any signs of it slowing him down. In fact, he seemed more enthused at having full control over Justin’s body, forcing his ass to lift up at a higher angle so that he could supply him with deeper, gut stirring thrust that made Justin feel sick.

His grip on the pillow finally loosened and with a heavy sigh, Justin closed his eyes as a heaviness over took him, grateful for the small amount of comfort the welcoming darkness provided. . .

. . . Justin’s eyes fluttered open as he let out a low hiss of pain. He had no idea exactly when he blacked out or for how long it was, but it was apparently enough time to give Bryce the chance to rid them of all the rest of their clothing. That and there was the distressing fact that Bryce had yet to finish with him. In fact, he was being flipped onto his side when Bryce noticed he was awake.

“Good. It’ll be more enjoyable now.” Was all Bryce said with an amused smirk as he proceeded to continue flipping Justin onto his back, ignoring the wince Justin gave from the throbbing pain in his
that had yet to subside. Still feeling groggy, Justin made the subconscious effort to close his legs together at the knees and tried in vain to keep them that way. Bryce effortlessly pulled them apart and positioned himself in-between them, realigning and pushing himself up against Justin’s entrance but not actually pushing himself inside just yet.

Justin took the chance to take one of the other pillows laying beside him and pull it over his face, holding it there by crossing his arms over it. This position, he knew, was much more intimate and he didn’t want to have to look at Bryce and that smug expression while he was forced to continue enduring this. The pain, physically and otherwise, was more than taking its toll on him. It seemed even letting him have that courtesy was beyond Bryce though as he quickly moved to peel Justin’s arms away. He took the pillow and chucked it over his shoulder despite Justin’s weak protests. Justin settled for turning his face away to stare at the nearby dresser but Bryce took him by the chin and turned Justin’s head back towards him, forcing Justin to look him directly in the eyes.

“I want to see how you look when I fuck you.” He explained, with a hint of mirthful depravity in his blue eyes. Justin only blinked back, his expression fixed to seem emotionless as he struggled to hold back his anger, resentment, and sniffles while keeping his bottom lip from quivering. He let his nostrils flare when Bryce began to openly mock the display, squeezing his chin and giving his face a light shake and the budding seeds of hatred began to take form in Justin’s own blue eyes.

“You ready?” Bryce asked politely, feigning concern.

“Fuck you.” Justin spat vehemently.

Bryce only gave him an amused snort, as if to say ‘What the hell do you think you’ve been doing?’ before he pushed the tip back in. Justin tried to hamper the cry threatening to escape him, wincing, as the impromptu lubrication of the blood was doing nothing to ease the pain even now. Bryce let out a curious hum to himself as he watched Justin closely before he snapped his hips forward, burying himself balls deep again. This time, Justin let out a weak groan as he closed his eyes, his face contorting into discomfort while Bryce finally let his chin go as he moaned louder than usual in pleasure, gleefully enjoying the entire exchange.

Absently, Justin wondered if the very act of his resistance was spurring Bryce on and the thought mortified him.

With a shaky breath, Bryce gave him a few more long stokes, gripping his thighs as tightly as ever as he leaned forward and tried to coax alcohol flavored kisses out of Justin that the smaller framed boy absolutely refused to return. Annoyed, Bryce paused, angling his hips differently while lifting one of Justin’s legs past it, encouraging him to hook it behind his back. Then he pulled almost all the way out and thrust back in hard at this new angle. This time, Justin let out a weak groan as he closed his eyes, his face contorting into discomfort while Bryce finally let his chin go as he moaned louder than usual in pleasure, gleefully enjoying the entire exchange.

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This made Bryce give him a venomous, lecherous smirk as he snapped his hips forward again, jabbing the same spot and Justin tilted his head back into the bed as he let out another moan of rapture.

“Like that, Justy?” Bryce teased through strained, pleasured breaths, slapping the side of Justin’s ass as he continued, eliciting more sounds of approval from the reluctant brunette pinned underneath him. “That’s right, keep screaming for me. Show me how much you want it, how much you love my dick.”

As they continued, Justin was relieved to find that the pain, while not having completely vanished, was at least finally easier to manage, enough that he could try and focus on the pleasure. He cried out incessantly, feeling the first shivers of a familiar building pressure beginning to pool in the pit of
“Wrap both of your legs around me.” Bryce instructed but Justin still had the presence of mind to refuse, not willing to give Bryce better access to him or wanting to aid him voluntarily in any way. Unfazed, Bryce simply lifted one of his legs onto one his broad shoulders, then continued to fuck Justin with long, deep strokes, hitting that same deceptively delicious spot every time.

“Fuck! *Fuck, stop!*” Justin managed to croak out, taking a brief second to note that his voice was becoming hoarse as he grabbed at the sheets beneath him, balling them up in his fists and twisting them as more cries escaped his treacherous mouth. He was only met with the reverberating sound of their flesh smacking together mingled with Bryce’s own sounds of pleasure as he continued to pound into him with daunting strength.

He was ashamed to admit how good it felt, better than anything he’d experienced with anyone else before. The thought was enough to snap him out of his lust ridden haze and back to his senses. He released the sheets and tried once again to push Bryce away, by the shoulders, as he shifted his leg off Bryce’s shoulder and onto his arm. Bryce let it drop to the bed then rewarded Justin for his efforts by pinning his wrists beside his head, pushing them down into the mattress.

Justin opened his mouth to protest, but found them swallowed by carnal kisses, humming futility against Bryce’s mouth instead.

As much as he tried to resist and willed it not to, his body began to react to all the constant attention and over stimulation. Soon, his hips began to move to meet with Bryce’s demanding thrusts willingly. Justin eventually realized he’d wrapped both legs tightly around him, digging the balls of his feet into the small of Bryce’s back to pull him in closer. It made his stomach turn with revulsion but he couldn’t help the familiar sensation of desperately needing release. It was beginning to completely override the rest of his senses. His thrusts became more erratic and desperate and he felt himself teetering on the edge, but before he could lose himself completely, he felt Bryce slow down, pull out, and loosen Justin’s hold on him.

Contrary to what his body would have him believe, he was relieved, hoped that Bryce was doing this because he himself was cumming and that this would all finally be coming to an end, but he found himself dismayed when he felt Bryce repositioning them once more, this time with Justin on top of and straddling him. He said and did nothing, only swallowing as he continued to breath hard and through his nose, looking down at Bryce in what little dignity and defiance he had left to muster. He knew what was expected of him, but again, wasn’t willing to participate voluntarily. A futile effort at being stubborn at this point perhaps, but he still wanted to show that no matter if his body willingly gave in, his core being was still willing to resist, as much as he could as long as he could.

Bryce seemed to take no notice, simply taking a hold of his hips and sliding him upward, closer to his face to make it easier to realign himself with Justin’s abused hole. There was then an awkward stand-off as the two of them simply watched one another, waiting. Bryce gave in first, growing too impatient and forced Justin to impale himself, slamming him down with enough force to make an audible smack.

Justin bit his tongue to keep from crying out while Bryce hissed a curse in pleasure. Neither made a further effort to move, simultaneously experiencing the sensation that had their nerves standing on end but for two very distinct if not opposing reasons, until Bryce moved for them. He pushed his hips upward while forcing Justin down, pulling involuntary moans from him when his prostate was found once more.

The next few thrusts almost sent Justin over the edge and again he felt his body betray him as he braced himself up on Bryce’s thighs, squeezing them and digging his nails into the flesh, hoping to
draw blood in some form of half-assed revenge for everything he had been through. His hips began to move of their own volition, pulling perverse moans from Bryce that he immediately tuned out as his body went into full autopilot. For one brief, solitary peaceful moment, he completely forget who it was underneath him and why he was doing this in the first place, completely lost in the intoxicating, addictive friction.

A moment too long, as he was quick to remind himself that everything that was happening to him right now was against his wishes. That the moans he was actively trying to filter out should stand as a reminder of who he was with and why it bothered him so much. That he should feel ashamed for finding any sliver of enjoyment in what he was doing and for being so weak willed that he couldn't fight back against his own carnal urges as he was being debased. Soon, the vile belief that his reluctance and resistance had been nothing more than a farce began to take root. That deep down, he had secretly wanted to do this all along.

It was enough to make Justin cringe and stop completely, but the moment was short lived as Bryce took a hold of Justin’s attention starved dick and began to move his hand up and down in time to meet with their movements. It proved to be enough, Justin giving a distressed cry as he came, feeling spurts of warm liquid begin to fill his ass as Bryce joined him, growling in primal satisfaction.

His body collapsed on top of Bryce, breathing hard and bringing their faces nose to nose. Bryce took the chance to give him a few lazy kisses that he didn't resist while he tried to cling desperately to the fleeting thrall of their afterglow before laying his head on Bryce’s shoulder, feeling fingers running lazily through his hair. It wasn’t long before the bliss from his sexual high was completely gone and soon, he felt hollow and empty, the stings of a crippling and bitter self-loathing taking hold as the cold realization of everything that had just happened—including his own actions just minutes before—replayed in his mind like a movie.

“That was good, Justy.” He heard Bryce compliment, followed by a yawn. “I knew once you stopped acting like an ass, you’d get into it.” There was a chuckle, condescending and arrogant before he added “Really had you going at the end there, like some kind of desperate slut.” Another pause, to laugh at his own joke. "Didn't know you had it in you."

Justin refused to respond, too exhausted mentally and physically to fight back at this point. He simply gave in to the tempting pull of sleep, no longer wanting to feel or think as he begrudgingly let the oddly calming sound of Bryce’s heartbeat lull him back into the dark abyss.

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The next morning, Justin somehow felt worse than he had the night before.

His head was pounding, all his muscles ached, his eyes felt sensitive and irritated, his throat scratchy and sore, he swore he could feel the dirt, grim, and dried sweat coating his skin and most distressingly of all, there was still a constant throbbing pain from his backside.

"Shit,” he grimaced before wincing, swallowing hard to try and alleviate the pain, all while hating how dry and harsh his voice sounded to his own ears. He tried sitting up, slowly, but immediately regretted it as the room began to spin and a wave of nausea hit him full force. He laid back down on his side, taking in deep calming gulps of air as he focused on letting the feelings of sickness pass, willing himself not to vomit. He sighed in relief when his stomach calmed down, enjoying the sensation of feeling such nice, cool sheets against his naked, aching body.
Then he was forced to recall exactly why he was naked in the first place.

He sat up again, ignoring his body’s aching protests as his eyes swept the room frantically. When there was no sign of him, he strained his ears to listen for any sounds of anyone else still being in the room with him, only moderately relieved when he realized he was in fact alone.

Bryce was gone. Definitely for the best, as Justin admittedly wasn’t sure how he would have reacted if he was still there. Though a small part of him was actually hurt, angry that Bryce didn’t give him the chance to fucking react or had the balls to face him after. At least just see if he was doing okay and pretend he gave an ounce of a shit about what he’d just done to him. Justin gave that last thought a mirthless laugh, chastising himself for entertaining the belief that Bryce gave damn at all when he had forced him to go through any of that in the first place, despite his avid refusal against it.

Not wanting to give him anymore energy, Justin finally chanced getting back onto his feet and began looking around the room again, this time searching for his discarded clothing. It couldn’t be helped however when, as he made a move to bend over and look around the nearby entertainment center and felt something sticky and caked on the back of his thighs, as well as other areas he wished not to dwell on.

He shuddered, immediately making his way to the master bathroom, forgetting for the moment his hunt and instead focusing on bathing. He refused to look at himself in the large mirror, afraid of what he would find, though already having a pretty good idea: he’d already caught glimpses of the bruises decorating his wrists and the sides of his hips and he had no doubt that various other parts of his skin had the same ghastly bluish-purple markings.

He grabbed a washcloth and stepped into the shower, turning on the hot water and letting the scalding liquid cascade over his body. He made no immediate moves to clean himself, choosing instead to close his eyes and enjoy the feeling of his aching joints slowly relaxing.

He was uncertain how long he actually stayed in there, leaning up against the wall, trying not to think or feel anything but the water, but by the time he finally got out, he could hear someone knocking on the bedroom door.

Uneasily, Justin dried himself, still refusing to see his reflection as he made his way into the master bedroom.

He glanced at the time, realizing it was close to noon and began looking around for his clothing again frantically until he found his shirt, then snatched it up off the ground to put it on. He frowned when he smelled something faint, familiar and unsettling enough that he stalled to put it on, lowering the shirt as his eyes drifted toward the bed.

He froze, saying a cuss to himself under his breath. The sheets were stained with blood intermixed with semen. His fingers tighten on his shirt as he tried not to panic, ignoring the throbbing pain from his backside demanding to get his attention again, as if to remind him why those stains would be there.

He jumped at another sharp knock at the door, almost relieved that something broke his concentration before he sunk right back into said dark thoughts. Like begrudgingly being thankful to Bryce that he had enough foresight to lock the door before he left so no one could just barge in and see all of this, including him.

“Hey! Who’s in here? Open up!”

Jessica. Right, he was still at Jessica's! His heart plummeted into his stomach for a moment. Jessica.
He quickly pulled his shirt on, holding his breath to keep out that scent as best he could before quickly locating his jeans and slipping them on as carefully as he could as not to agitate any of his aches and pains, particular from his rear. He chose not to bother with his ruined underwear but instead kicked them under the bed, out of sight, for now.

Another sharp knock and Justin looked over his shoulder toward the door as he stripped the bed, ignoring the remaining pillows being flung to the floor before he hastily made his way over to the bedroom door to unlock it, making sure to tuck the stains away out of sight.

Jess stood in the doorway scowling, looking ready to give a piece of her mind when she realized it was him and her face relaxed.

“Justin!” She sighed with relief, offering him one of her beautiful smiles. “I thought you already left for home or went to Bryce’s!”

“Uh, no. I’ve just been in here.” Justin responded softly, trying not to show how badly just the mention of Bryce’s name was affecting him.

“It’s fine that you slept over, but I thought I told you no one was allowed in here.” Jessica reprimanded, rubbing her eyes and yawning lazily. Justin could tell she was still a little hung over and the thought made him feel a bit of relief. Maybe she wouldn’t notice—

The smile she had slowly faded as she got a good look at him, eyes lingering on his face and then at one of his wrist, which he quickly covered up with the sheets he was holding.

“Yeah, sorry, must have wondered in here at some point and fell asleep.” He replied, responding to her previous inquiry as he clenched the sheets in his hands a little tighter to himself. Jessica reached out to touch his cheek and he flinched away, giving her pause. He took in a subtle breath and relaxed, reminding himself of who was with him right now and how much he didn’t want to alarm her before taking a step forward and letting the tips of her fingers brush against his cheek.

“What happened to your face?” She demanded softly, examining the bruising by his right eye while her own flickered down at his now hidden arms. “and your wrists?”

Then she lifted his head slightly, giving an audible gasp as she saw the markings poking out above the collar of his shirt. He heard her mumble under his breath about teeth marks and he pulled back when she tried to touch it and she frowned, pointing at his neck and with the hint of an attitude, added “And that. What’s that on your neck?”

Justin gave the nearby dresser an aside glance, letting out a frustrated sigh. He could tell by her tone what she was thinking. Technically, she was correct, though thankfully, the rest of the bruising all over his body gave him a reasonable enough out.

“I got into a fight. A pretty bad one, after you fell asleep.” He explained, shifting the sheets he was holding to hang over his left arm before he showed her the bruising on his wrist, then lifted his t-shirt to show the bruising around his hips. He tried not to show his own surprise at how badly it looked, for the first time getting a real good gander at his sides, while Jess hissed in concern as she saw the patches of discolored flesh, poking at one of them lightly with her finger and jerking her hand back when he flinched in pain.

He tried to play it off, rolling his eyes to will away the threat of tears as he recalled his previous nights activities, bitterly making a joke at his own expense.
“I didn’t win.”

Jessica’s demeanor softened, giving him a sympathetic look before she nodded and reached over to caress his cheek, brushing up against the sheets he was holding and finally noticing them. She eyed them curiously then looked back up at him, waiting for an explanation.

“I threw up.” He lied quickly, sounding as ashamed as he felt, still completely unable to meet Jess’s eyes.

She only clicked her lips in mild annoyance as she brushed past him and into the room, inspecting it to make sure nothing else was too out of sorts before turning back to him.

“This is why I didn’t want anyone in here,” she replied, trying to laugh it off with a light chuckle. She held her hands out to take the bundle of linen. “Here, I’ll go put it in the wash.”

Justin took a step back, keeping the sheets out of her grasp and she gave him a bewildering frown.

“I got it! I fucked them up, I should wash them!” He explained hastily, looking genuinely apologetic.

“If you’re still cleaning up, I’ll help you once I get the machine going.”

Jessica eyed him for a moment longer, clearly suspicious of his behavior but not pushing the matter further. “Alright. Meet me in the living room once you’re done.”

With a slow pivot on her heel and a glance back at him over her shoulder, she left the room, cursing at some stain she saw in the hallway along the way and Justin rushed to shut the door, locking it once she was out of earshot before he let the sheets fall into a crumpled heap on the floor by his feet. It wasn't long before he had joined them, rolling over on to his side and curling into himself in the fetal position. He closed his eyes and tried to decompress.

He was never going to tell her what happened. It was better this way and there was no reason for her to know. Not when she would never understand it—hell, he barely did.

Though there was still the matter of what he would do once he saw Bryce again. Confront him about what happened? Avoid him completely? Try to go back to normal and pretend nothing ever happened, just as he had in the past after repaying one of Bryce’s favors? Was that even possible now after . . .

He continued to fret over which option to take when he made the mistake of inhaling the scent lingering on his shirt too deeply. His eyes snapped open instantly. He recognized it now.

Bryce’s cologne.

Justin rubbed at his nose furiously, trying to rid himself of the suffocating scent assaulting him, trying to will away the vivid memories of his previous night away, this time to no avail.

Being forced into the room, tossed onto the bed, and pinned. The kisses, the touching, the blinding pain he felt as he was entered for the first time. The sobbing and pleading, and the utter shame he still felt for ever allowing himself to feel any type of enjoyment over what they were doing. The sensation of something thick and warm filling him before leaving stains on the sheets laying next to him that he now had to wash to hide away the evidence of his own assault...

He blinked, feeling anxious.

Would anyone else call it that? Could he really say that a part of him hadn't technically agreed to when he didn't call out to Jeff for help? Sure, he hadn't wanted to chance forgoing his friendship
with Bryce, but not helping himself under the guise of that logic...wasn't that in a sense...consenting?

His jaw clenched for a moment, the bitter taste of self-loathing beginning to keep in as he climbed to his feet, no longer willing to entertain these troublesome thoughts anymore. He ignored his protesting body as he headed back to the master bathroom.

Jess and the sheets would have to wait. He needed another shower.

He needed to feel clean again.

Chapter End Notes

*I'd like to reiterate, this chapter wasn't meant to offend anyone, it does have a purpose, and I totally don't hate Justin, I swear! Next chapter will follow Clay around for a bit.*
Figuring Things Out

Chapter Summary

*Clay spends the next week reflecting on a few things, enjoying shakes, and trying to figure out how to talk to boys.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**Saturday (2:07a.m.)**

“Want some more chocolate?”

“No I think I’m good for the night,” Clay paused to look at the alarm clock on the night stand. “morning.”

Jeff stretched as he too glanced at the clock before getting to his feet, heading toward his dresser. “It’s getting late. We better head to bed.”

“Yeah.” Clay sighed, still feeling a little shaken.

The rest of his night was playing out adventitiously to say the least.

Soon after departing from Jess’s house, he and Jeff found themselves narrowly escaping what could have been a fatal car crash on the way to drop him off at home, with the jock swerving at the last minute to avoid the head on collision and ending up in a nearby front lawn, inches away from slamming into a tree. While his car suffered a few dents, the pair made it out of the crash relatively unscathed, though very shaken, Clay so badly enough that he opted to go to Jeff’s house instead of going home as it was closer and they could get off the road faster.

While The Atkins were concerned, they were overjoyed to see that the boys were alright and allowed Clay to spend the night, with the stipulation that he call his parents to ensure they wouldn’t worry.

After getting the all clear (with his mother fussing for a solid ten minutes with threats to speak with him in-depth the following day once he got home), the pair grabbed a few quick snacks and headed for Jeff’s bedroom. They chose to stay up, sitting on Jeff’s shaggy rug with their bounty of snacks sprawled out between them, having what ended up being a deep, philosophical conversation about life, death, and the pursuit of living one’s fullest.

Well, until recently when it shifted to sports and why Clay was so abysmal at them.

In any case, it so far was a wonderful, yet awkward experience and Clay couldn’t help feeling like the two of them had bonded throughout the night, getting much closer. He’d gotten the chance to learn a lot more about Jeff’s mindset, and while he may not be the most book smart person Clay ever
met, he was certainly full of interesting insight and had a creative way of thinking.

At the very least, it was helping him to get his mind off of the rest of his abysmal night, from his dance disaster that was sure to be on someone else’s social media feed, to the failed experience with Hannah that he would still have to address and soon, to witnessing what happened with Justin and the festering guilt he felt over his inaction (and the looming unease of not knowing whether Justin had made it out okay once he left the room), and finally, having to face the fragile mortality of his own life, which was almost snuffed out because some idiot knocked down the nearby stop sign.

“Here, you can use these.” Jeff yawned as he tossed Clay a fresh t-shirt and a pair of pajama shorts. Clay held them up, looking uncertain.

“I don’t think I can fit these.” Clay admitted, eying the large blue lion insignia on the shirt with mild distaste.

“Probably not,” Jeff admitted, with a light shrug of his shoulders and a smile Clay found decidedly charming (because Jeff’s dimples were more pronounced and his eyes seemed to have a nice twinkle to them) “but at least I get to see how great you look in my stuff.”

“Uh, thanks.” Clay mumbled softly, feeling his cheeks heat up as he fingered the shirt nervously, hating how much the small teasing compliment affected him.

“Plus, it’s the only way I’m getting you in a baseball shirt.” Jeff joked while removing his own and Clay’s witty retort got lost somewhere in his throat, which he ended up clearing instead.

He couldn’t help but stare as the sudden stirring of warmth spread across his chest and sent pleasant shivers throughout his body, electrifying his nerve endings. It only got worse once Jeff removed his jeans, with Clay taking note that he preferred boxer briefs as his eyes subconsciously lingered over his junk before darting back to the safety of Jeff’s chest. He knew he should feel ashamed of himself for ogling Jeff so shamelessly—he was practically drooling at this point—but he just couldn’t help himself. Plus his mind was already starting to imagine what Jeff looked like completely naked and the thought pleased him. Greatly.

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Greatly.

So much so in fact that he became lost in those thoughts and failed to notice Jeff had finished putting on all his night clothes and had noticed his staring. He watched him back with an arched eyebrow, fully amused but flattered by Clay having such obvious interest. Clay blinked back to attention as Jeff finally cleared his throat loudly. Realizing he had been caught, he had the good sense to at least look ashamed and gave Jeff an apologetic, sheepish grin of embarrassment.

Jeff only blew Clay a playful kiss in return, startling him while Jeff gave him a once over, following it with a cocky smile. “You should see me in the summer after I get a tan. You’d probably be able to do push-ups with it then.”

Clay only stared at him blankly, not following the joke until Jeff’s eyes gave him another once over, this one slower and more noticeable as his gaze lingered on the lower half of Clay’s body and his playful smile widened. Clay looked down at himself and his breath hitched audibly as his eyes widened, horrified to see there was a noticeably stiffness poking out against his pants. He quickly tried to cover it with the shirt, with Jeff’s out right laughter making him realize how futile that was, so he lifted it in front his face too keep Jeff from being able to see how red he was getting as he quickly spun away from him, completely embarrassed.

“It’s cool man, I get it. I’ve seen me.” Jeff joked easily, still laughing as he made his way across the
room and left to go use the restroom. "I'll give you a minute to handle that."

Clay only replied with incoherent mumbles as he massaged the bridge of his nose and shut his eyes.

"Let me know if you need help!" Jeff called back into the room teasingly and Clay willed the floor beneath him to open him up and swallow him whole.

—//— (7:43p.m.) —//—

“Yeah Mom, I’ll be home soon.”

Clay made a face of annoyance as his mother continued to lecture on about, well he wasn't sure as he had stopped paying any real attention to her minutes ago, slowing down as he came across the Baker’s pharmaceuticals store. He peered into the window and debated whether he had time to stop in and see if Hannah was helping out. He could get her to take a break, maybe treat her to a snow cone and walk around.

Talk about things.

Seeing no signs of her however, he continued pass the entrance without going inside. He didn’t really have time to stop in anyway; he was already late getting home.

'Maybe if I hadn’t insisted on walking instead of letting Jeff drive me home like he offered, I could have had the extra time.' He admonished himself but felt no real guilt.

After all of last night’s disasters, he would rather be safe and late than possibly in another car crash and dead. Plus, it was getting harder to be around Jeff alone and keep his sanity intact, especially now that his body saw fit to betray his trust and show Jeff exactly how he felt about him, nevermind that he was pretty sure Jeff was on to his crush (how could he not be after last night!?) and for whatever reason, would rather tease him about it than address it.

'Maybe he's waiting on me to actually say something...before he inevitably turns me down.' He mused as he caught the last part of his mother’s chatter and turned his attention back to their conversation.


He hung up the phone with a small sigh of relief and put it in his pocket just as he was getting to the end of the street. That relief was short lived as he looked up at the street signs and realized he was almost home already.

'Great! Now Mom can bitch at me in person in no time!' He though sarcastically just as he happened to look across the street once he finished crossing. He ended up doing a double take and stopping dead in his tracts.

On the other side, almost parallel to him, stood Justin Foley. In faded jeans, a pair of beat up sneakers and his Lions Varsity jacket. His dark hair was quaffed to the side as Clay had seen him do with it many times before at school and hanging from his shoulder was a small duffel bag and his book bag. He watched him press the button at the crosswalk intersection, impatiently looking in the direction he wanted to go in then back up at the light as he waited to cross.
Without thinking, Clay looked both ways before darting out into the street, crossing it as fast as he possibly could.

‘What am I doing?’ He admonished himself cautiously as he slowed down, approaching his classmate with a twinge of nervousness. ‘How in the hell am I suppose to even talk to him about this? Maybe start off with a joke? ’Hey Justin! Saw Bryce force you to give him a blowjob last night! I know that probably sucked for you but hey, at least you’ve got great form!’-wow. I would punch myself for that one. Come on Clay, be serious. Think! What can I say to him...?’

“. . .Hey.” He decided was good place for him to start as he plastered a goofy grin on his face that he was sure looked entirely too forced and stupid. Justin snapped his head to look over his shoulder at him, narrowing them as if he were trying to recognize who he was before fulling turning around to face him with a blank stare, waiting to see what he wanted.

'Well, at least he didn't completely ignore me like he usually does at school, so this is was a promising start.'

Clay took in a deep breath, opting to offer to take Justin out for a drink at Monet's in an effort to break the ice and hopefully get into the jock's good graces when his eyes zeroed in on the bruise close to his left eye. He instantly remembered seeing Bryce punch Justin into a wall the night before and almost openly flinched at the thought. Without thinking about how he was coming off, he stepped closer to Justin as he examined the discoloration peaking over the collar of Justin's neck, his smile fading as he realized he could just make out what appeared to be the beginning of actual teeth marks there.

'When did that happen?' He asked himself as a feeling of foreboding swept over him, desperately trying to recall if he witnessed Bryce biting Justin during their fight and realizing he in fact, hadn't. Then he instantly remembered the bump he'd heard as he and Jeff were leaving and his blood ran cold.

'Shit.'

"Hey um, Justin," he started, looking down at his feet for a mere second before looking back up just in time to see Justin, who in that fleeting second, was already jogging across the street, traffic be damned, as he adjusted his duffel bag while simultaneously trying to adjust his jacket to better cover himself- his neck mostly- all while maintaining an aloof, slightly annoyed look.

“Hey wait!” Clay called after him urgently, instantly feeling bad when the brunette only quickened his pace and refused to acknowledge him with so much as a look back as he continued on his way.

Clay started to run after him but instantly stopped himself, thinking better of it. Justin seemed self conscious about his injuries and clearly didn’t want his company. Not that he could blame him, what with the way he had just stared at him like he was some kind of freak lab experiment. So just stood there instead, letting the sense of overwhelming guilt as he placed his hands in the front pockets of his hoodie. As much as he hoped he was wrong, it would explain why he hadn't seen Justin or Bryce leave or just in general after, despite the two only leaving Jess's room moments before they had.

“It could have just been the fight.” Clay halfheartedly tried to reassure himself, trying not to think about that implacably indescribable look in Justin’s eyes or just how horrible he thought of himself for not coming out of the closet and just giving the boy a hand sooner, consequences be damned.

He let another moment pass before he realized he was just standing around and really needed to get home before his mother came out in the car, looking for him.
“I’ll talk to him at school.” Clay decided with a determined frown as he turned to go in the opposite direction.

“I’m going to make this right.”

---

**Sunday Evening**

---

“Wait, you guys slept together?!”

Clay pushed himself forward and back with his legs, refusing to immediately answer as he cast an exasperated look in Hannah’s direction. She sat next to him in anticipation, waiting impatiently for him to answer.

He’d spent the entire day keeping busy, doing chores and double checking his homework just to work up the nerve to call her so that they could try and finally hash things out. She’d insisted on meeting in person for this conversation and the two ended up at a playground, meeting up at one of the playsets Hannah nicknamed ‘The Rocket’.

After an awkward greeting, the two ended up going on the swing set, sitting in silence at first until Hannah finally opened up the discussion with a joke, at his expense of course. From there, they eased into a dialogue, first about their failed sexual encounter and then about the rest of their respective nights, with Hannah inadvertently revealing that she and Sheri were the ones that knocked down the stop sign (though otherwise, had an uneventful night). Clay ‘regaled’ her with the harrowing tale of how he and Jeff almost crashed into another car and watched her squirm with every word he spoke, her face shifted from one uncomfortable apologetic look to the next, each one more over-exaggerated and outlandish than the last, to the point that Clay had to stop to keep himself from laughing at her. He chose not to call her out on the obvious directly and he simply moved on with his story, though remained careful not to bring anything up that took place with Justin.

As much as he wanted to speak to someone about the situation, he would feel better speaking to him about it first. It had happened to him after all and would undeniably be a good first step in establishing the much needed trust they would have to build upon if things were going to go smoothly once he finally brought it up. Plus, keeping it private was a courtesy he felt was the very least he could do for Justin right now and was more than owed to him at this point.

So he continued on with his story about his night with Jeff, now at the part where he was sleeping over at his house. Hannah, upon great difficulty he was sure, managed to push aside her soul shattering guilt to pry nosily into exactly what happened between the two of them—though he refused to tell her about his getting wood. One embarrassing incident involving Jeff was more than enough for one night.

“So, what, are you gay? Bi? Or like, Jeffsexual?” she continued as she began to swing softly to and
fro beside him, looking out at the playground.

Clay furrowed his brows as he looked at the sand beneath his shoes, not moving much on the swing anymore as the cool evening breeze tickled his cheeks and made him happy he had decided to wear his pullover hoodie.

“I'm not really sure. I mean, I like girls,” he glanced over at her for a second then back at his feet. “like you.”

“Just not as much as you have a thing for Jeff.” Hannah suggested before letting out a playful chuckle. “He does have a killer smile, so I get it.”

“Yeah,” Clay agreed, momentarily thinking of it and smiling softly before catching himself, looked apologetically at Hannah, “Hey, not that you don’t have—!"

“Relax Helmet. I told you, I get it.” Hannah chuckled as she let her swing slowly come to a stop, planting her feet in the sand as well. “This isn’t the first time a guy picked someone else over me.”

“Really?” He asked her in honest disbelief and she looked flattered.

“Nope,” Hannah replied wistfully. “Justin and I were kind of a thing—I think—you know, right after Kat left. Remember?”

Clay tried not to look so openly uneasy at her mention of the brunette, pushing down the stir of troubling emotions as he answered. “Uh yeah, kind of.”

“Yes, well, we had a few dates. The first one right here.” Hannah continued, looking over at the ‘The Rocket’ with an almost sad smile. “I thought we were aces until he somehow hit it off with Jess at the winter formal. Next thing I know, he stopped calling and the two of them were making out in front of my locker.”

“Wow.” Clay said flatly, frowning at the insensitivity of the two towards Hannah’s feelings, who nodded and sighed out “Yep.”

“So were you guys actually dating by then or...”

“No, not really, but I was waiting for it. I even hinted at it but he was just kind of—it was just kind of weird.” She explained, frowning as she thought back on it. “It may sound dumb, but to this day, I blame Bryce for that.”

“Bryce?” Clay questioned, those troubling emotions only worsening as he cleared his throat. “Why him? I thought this was about Justin and Jess?”

“Well, this one time at lunch, I remember looking over and seeing them talking, you know, with the usual pack. He and Justin were whispering and kept looking over at me. It was super uncomfortable and I left early that day.”

“Where was I?”

“Sick. Tony brought your homework, remember?” she replied quickly. “Anyway after that, Justin would kind of like, blow me off and some of the other guys kept giving me weird looks. By the time of the dance, when he didn’t ask me to be his date, I resigned myself to be on standby for an evening of sad love songs and pints of ice cream.”

She cut Clay a grateful smile. “At least we got to dance though, right?”
Clay returned the smile. “Yeah. I sucked at it then too.”

They both laughed for a moment before Clay continued. “You know Jeff is the one that got me to go to the dance in the first place? He even helped me worked up the nerve to come talk to you.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Hannah exclaimed, slapping his arm as she chuckled at the revelation. “Now that’s some irony!”

“Yeah.” Clay admitted, chucking softly to himself before clearing his throat. “So, did you ever talk to them about it?”

“Yes.” Clay admitted, chucking softly to himself before clearing his throat. “So, did you ever talk to them about it?”

“Yeah, and we all almost stopped being friends over it.” She admitted with a snort and an eye roll. “Jess and I were already on thin ice over the Alex thing—"

"Alex thing?"

"The list."

"That was Alex?!"

"Yep."

"I thought that was Bryce!"

"I think it still was but Alex put me and Jess on it.” Hannah clarified.

“How did you guys get over that?” Clay pushed, recalling the rather nasty incident with distaste.

“I tricked him into confessing in a text and sent it to her.” She replied simply with a little shrug. “That’s why he spent that whole month trying to make it up to me. Jess won’t let him do it with her because, well, she can kind of hold a grudge—but we’re getting off topic, Helmet! In any case, we managed to patch shit up and be okay for a while. . . until I might have, kind of, maaaaaybe, totally. . . accused her of purposely stealing Justin away from me because I thought she was still secretly holding a grudge against me about Alex.”

“Wow Hannah.” Clay admonished, looking at her in disappointment and she held up her hands.

“I know, I know!” She began, sounding defensive "Look, our friendship was already in a weird spot and I was still feeling really bad about Justin and what was going on between us—it just seemed like she swooped in and took him right from under my nose! Then when I confronted her, she had the nerve to accuse me of being jealous of their relationship!”

". . .Weren’t you?” He questioned.

"Yes, but I didn't need her accusing me of it right then!” Hannah huffed. "I ended up calling her a backstaber and a bitch, I got slapped and she called me a slut—it was a whole mess.”

Then she looked at Clay and shrugged with a cheeky smile. "Friendships are hard."

She followed that up with a cheerful laugh and Clay watched her puzzled, worried over how she could recall such a situation with any type of fondness.

“So uh, that was a real fun time for you I take it?” He asked sarcastically.

“Oh no, not at all!” Hannah exclaimed jubilantly, her own sarcasm more apparent now and he relaxed. “But I did end up becoming friends with Skye over it. Plus Jess and I made up, we’re even
better friends now, and Justin and I even get along okay now despite everything. So all and all, worth it?"

"I guess?" Clay responded with a bewildered shrug as she leaned in to him, eyes narrowed. When she didn’t immediately say anything, he looked around then back at her, confused and slightly anxious.

"What?"

"You know, you would have known all of this already if you hadn’t kept blowing me off the entire time I kept trying to vent to you about it." She accused in a matter of fact way.

“It sounds like it was a lot of unnecessary drama, plus we had finales that week.” Clay insisted, looking unapologetic. “Plus, come on, once I overheard Ryan gossiping about you two in a slap fight, I felt the need not to want to be involved.”

“Like I said: friendships can be complicated.” Hannah joked and he gave her a pointed look. “Girls can be complicated.”

“Not when your friends actually get involved and pay attention.” She insisted, giving a playful frown of disapproval.

"Sounds like it would only get worse." Clay insisted and she shook her head. “Well, as your personal bi-bestie, you are officially obligated to listen to all matters of my ‘gal pal’ discussions, gossip, and have to referee any further disagreements I have that can’t be settled on my own merits.”

“Bi-bestie what now?” He frowned, confused and she gave him a small smile. “I’m thinking you’re bi, so instead of a ‘fag hag’, I’m your ‘bi-bestie’!”

“Hannah, stop applying labels to yourself for this and I don’t know if I’m actually bisexual yet!” Clay admonished with a slight roll of his eyes at her.

“Well you said you had a thing for me right?” Hannah inquired and he nodded slowly, not sure he wanted to know where this was going. “Right. We know you already have a thing for Jeff too. So have you ever liked or kissed another guy before pretending I was one?”

Clay glared at her for the joke but answered “…Once.”

“Once?!” Hannah repeated in exclamation of excitement, leaning forward toward him again, out of her swing. “With who? Was it Alex?!”

Clay gawked at her as if she were crazy. “Where did you get Alex from?”

“You guys started hanging out a while ago, you fight like a married couple, he’s cute, and I caught you staring at his butt once.” Hannah replied haughtily with her nose in the air, looking sure of herself as Clay gave her an unimpressed frown.

“Just at lunch sometimes, not like he does with Justin, not as cute as Jeff, and I was not staring at his butt! I had to pick up my pen and he bent over right when I did it!” Clay insisted.

Hannah looked at him, unconvinced. “Sure you weren’t Helmet. Okay, if it wasn’t Alex, then who? Marcus?”

“Marcus.” He repeated bluntly, arching a brow at her.
“He’s into all that academic stuff and likes to over achieve, so I figured he was the equivalent of nerd catnip.” Hannah responded and Clay shook his head.

“He’s—I don’t know, kind of a dick? Plus, I’m pretty sure he isn’t into guys.” Clay pointed out and after contemplating what he said, Hannah nodded in agreement.

“Ryan?”

“Okay, now you’re just guessing.” Clay scoffed and Hannah looked defensive.

“What? He’s not your type?”

“What do you think?” Clay frowned and Hannah shrugged. “He can be—"

“An over-the-top diva with a superiority complex that thinks he’s God’s gift to writing, fashion, and blond highlights?” Clay challenged curtly and Hannah immediately closed her mouth, holding up her hands in surrender.

"Okay, okay. Not Ryan." She responded quickly as she lowered her hands and furrowed her brows as she tried to think up a new name. Clay watched as her eyes widening rapidly as she slowly turned to face him with traces of fear evident on her face that made him feel anxious.

'Could it be that bad?'

"Bry—"

'It was that bad!'

“Hannah, I will never speak to you again if you finish that name.” Clay sneered unamused, cutting her off as she gave him an apologetic but relieved smile.

“Sorry Helmet. I just had to make sure you didn’t get so wasted once, that you completely went off the rails in the taste department.” she admitted and Clay couldn’t help feeling an uneasy lump in the pit of his stomach at how close she had nailed the situation with Justin, giving an open shiver of disgust.

“I know,” Hannah snapped, thinking he was simply imagining himself with Bryce. After a moment of thought, a sudden flash of anger entering her eyes. “You know he squeezed my butt once?!”

Hannah began pushing herself off the ground again to swing slightly as Clay’s sneer only deepened.

“Considering the type of asshole he is, I can believe it.” He admitted bitterly, once again thinking back to Bryce’s actions in Jessica’s bedroom.

“I ended up ‘accidentally’ hitting him in the crotch.” Hannah recalled, a pleased, Cheshire cat grin slowly forming on her face. “He almost smacked his face against the store counter, he doubled over so fast!”

She laughed while Clay’s face lightened up, though he still couldn’t help but linger on the memories from the previous Friday.

“I bet ‘Jock Darth Vader’ won’t try that shit again.” She continued, sounding pleased with herself. “I still don’t get how anyone can be friends with that jerk. He’s such a cree—"

Clay tuned her out as sank further into his thoughts, clear concern now evident on his face.
‘Maybe I should try to confront Bryce directly? No, maybe just talk about it with Justin. Will he be pissed at me for not coming out to help him? Upset that I saw it at all? Will he even let me help him after I tell anything? Maybe I should just forget this ever happened and let him deal with it on his own. They seem to have some kind of arrangement, and maybe I don’t understand it and would be interfering—no.’

He swallowed, letting out a shaky sigh, seeing Hannah’s mouth move but hearing any words as he continued debating with himself. ‘Come on Clay, you saw him yesterday. You saw how he looked right it after too. No way that shit was normal. He needs help. I have to tell him...’

“Helmet? Clay?” She called out to him, snapping her fingers in front of his face. When he still said nothing except for the muttering under this breath about a locker, she stopped swinging and leaned over, giving him a sharp poke on the shoulder to get his attention.

“Huh?” He said quickly, blinking rapidly and looking startled as he faced her. Hannah’s frown deepened.

“Are you okay? Is there something you want to talk about?”

“No, I’m fine. Just, uh, just thinking about...stuff.” Clay mumbled, then clearing his throat, moved to change the subject as he could tell Hannah wanted to pry.

“So my kiss, it was with Tony.” He announced going back to their previous discussion.

“Tony!” Hannah cried, slapping her forehead and looking annoyed with herself that she hadn’t guessed that. Then she gave him with a scandalized look. “You locked lips with Tony Padilla?”

Clay averted his gaze back to his feet and shrugged while Hannah giggled. “Well?!”

“It was nice,” he mumbled, smiling lightly at the memory.

“And?!” Hannah pressed anxiously.

“And that’s it. We kissed—once—and Tony got a boyfriend before I could tell him I was interested and take things further.” Clay announced and Hannah deflated.

“Man, you're worse than I am at dating, Helmet.” She sighed and he gave her a ‘geez, thanks’ look.

“Anyway, that solves it: it sounds to me like you’re bi,” she paused to point at him, then she pointed at herself while smugly adding “and that makes me, your bi-bestie.”

He rolled his eyes in an over exaggerated way and she smirked, kicking off to swing again, looking triumphant. The two stayed silent for a few minutes before Hannah looked back over to him with a hopeful, coy smile.

“So does this mean you’ll come over and watch chick flicks with me and the girls? Maybe we can do each other’s hair, paint our nails, and get facials together now?”

Clay narrowed his eyes at her, slightly annoyed at the prospect. “Absolutely not.”

She scoffed in annoyance, pouting by sticking out her bottom lip at him and he couldn’t help but crack a smile before finally, pushing off fully to swing himself.
Clay hummed the last few bars of the guitar solo gently to himself as he began sifting through his locker.

‘I really have to thank Tony for the mixtape!’ He thought to himself as he reluctantly shut off the portable player and stuck it back in his book bag before hanging that up in his locker, picking out a couple of notebooks and his Communications Workbook.

Just as he was grabbing a few pencils, he jumped as the loud clattering sound of one of the hall doors being forced open spooked him and he spun around to see what was the cause of the commotion.

His pressed his lips into a fine line as he saw Justin hurriedly make his way down the hall.

He looked furious with a flushed face, his eyes seemed irritated, like he might have been or was about to cry, and his mouth was fixed into a deep, almost snarl like frown.

Clay felt like time slow down when Justin abruptly looked his way for a briefly moment. Their eyes met and Clay could clearly see the hurt and turmoil within Justin’s eyes just as he was certain Justin could see the guilt and remorse in his own, even if he didn’t understand why it was there.

Justin didn’t stop to speak with him about it however as he faced back around toward his freedom, going as quickly as possible and shoving a protesting Tyler out of his way harshly and into a nearby locker as he made his way for the exit.

“Justin?” Jess called after him, and Clay watched as she took a few steps in his direction. Justin completely ignored her as he hurried out of the building and Clay watched as she quickly excused herself from her friends and ran after him.

Clay gently shut his locker, fighting to keep his face as neutral as possible as to not outwardly show his distress over what he had just witnessed. He wanted nothing more than to go after Justin too. To comfort and talk to him, to maybe open up about what he had seen, what he had heard, and to apologize about not doing more to help him. To offer to be that support he needed, when he needed it, as long as he needed it, if Justin would allow him to do it, even if it had nothing to do with what happened with Bryce.

Clay wanted to...but he didn’t. It wasn’t the right time. Not with Jess already going after him and Justin clearly in bad sorts.

So he simply continued to watch as the metal double doors slowly swung to a close with Justin long gone and completely out of view. He could just make out a pair of freshman girls whispering near him, already gossiping about what they had just seen with excitement and he only glared at them until they stopped and went about their business elsewhere, seemingly confused over his sudden disdain of their presence.

Clay then made his way to his first period, shuffling his feet to buy himself some time as he wondered what upset Justin so much that he opted to leave school today altogether.

Though he already had a good idea as to what—or whom—that something was.
Clay frowned contemplatively as he tapped his pencil against his notepad in a swift, almost absentminded rhythm.

Justin was a no show again today.

This was the second time in row since he saw him leave on Monday. The boy was garnering an erratic attendance habit and Clay would be lying if he said he wasn’t already beginning to worry.

The fact that no one else seemed too worried by Justin’s sudden absence, significantly after he left in what could only be described as a clearly distressed state, bothered him to no end. Though not nearly as much as the unnerving fact that throughout all if this, Bryce seemed to be acting, well, *normal*.

Despite what little respect Clay held for him, he at least had given Bryce the benefit of the doubt, enough of it at least to believe that he would be somewhat concerned about Justin's welfare. He didn’t know much about their relationship, but he did know the pair were suppose to be considerably close. As far as Clay was concerned, that asshole owed it to Justin considering, well, *everything* that transpired between the two jocks last Friday. Even if Bryce wanted to take no accountability for his actions, at the very least, he would show some kind of empathy based on their so-called friendship (not that he would ever stoop to calling Bryce any type of a true friend).

Alas: Bryce seemed perfectly fine. Carefree, cocky, just another hyena in a pack of rowdy douchebags wearing a letterman jacket. It made Clay’s hair instantly stand on end and his blood run cold to know that someone could have pushed something like that on another person and then just pretend like everything was fine between the two of them, and that was *if* the blowjob was the only thing that happened that night... Clay let out a sharp gasp as he winced in pain, taken out of his thoughts just as a crumpled up piece of paper hit him on the left side of his temple and fell to floor by his feet.

He looked down at it and stopped tapping his pencil as he leaned over to pick it up and unfold it, thinking it was a note.

When he realized it was empty, he frowned in confusion just as a sharp, over dramatic clearing of a throat made him snap his head over to look sharply to his left at Ryan Shaver, who was a couple seats up in the row next to him. He glared at Clay with deep disapproval, gesturing with a rather sassy wave of his hand to stop tapping his pencil against his notebook just as the bell to signal the end of first period rang.

Clay only gave him a quick flip if his middle finger as he paid little attention to his teacher’s closing remarks and began to gather his things, his eyes lingering on a particular blue notebook he had been filling out over the past couple of days before he stuck it safely in his backpack, followed by his Communications Class workbook.

“Hey Helmet,” Hannah called as she approached him, snaking her way around other students and desks before coming to stand at his side and touching him on the shoulder to make him look up at her. “Are you still coming with us to Monte’s on Saturday?”

“Are you guys going to keeping teasing me the whole time?” Clay asked with a hint of annoyance
and Hannah snorted, covering her mouth quickly to keep from laughing directly in his face before she shook her head that they wouldn’t.

He arched a brow at her unconvinced and she cleared her throat, trying to look serious. “I can’t promise that we won’t try to give you some advise, but we’ll keep the teasing light.”

He gave her a skeptical arch of his eyebrows, frowning and she simply flashed him a big smile before starting for the door, giving Courtney a playful nudge as they both almost walked out of the room at the same time.

“See you at lunch!” Hannah called back to him as she exited the class and he gave her a small smile to indicate he heard her as he got to his feet and shifted his book bag in his shoulder, ready to exit the room himself.

Saturday Afternoon

Hanbone

Friday 9:29a.m.

‘Hey class is about to start! Where are you?’

‘home’

‘Home?’

‘got a stomach thing.’

‘Stomach thing?’

‘going to practice later’

‘Practice later?’

‘Hannah’

‘What?’

‘you just gonna repeat everything I say’

‘...Everything you say?’

‘HANNAH’

‘Lol, chill dude. So you’re playing hooky today.’

‘I said I have a stomach thing’

‘Yeah right. I saw you this morning on the way to school. You looked just fine to me.’
‘I look good every morning babe, doesn’t mean I can’t be sick’

‘You sure everything is alright?’

‘Yeah why?’

‘Jess is worried and you’re still acting weird. Do I need to punch someone?’

‘I’m fine stop being such a chick’

‘What do you mean ‘a chick’?!”

‘u know weepy n emotional n shit’

‘Oh fuck you!’

‘u wish!’ .Kiss emoji:

Clay furrowed his brows as he reread the text a second time before handing the cellphone back to Hannah.

“How long has he been skipping second period?”

“All this week, I think. I’m not sure he’s been going to first either.” Hannah admitted, pocketing her phone before taking a sip of her latte.

“Otherwise, he’s acting normal to you?” Clay pushed and Hannah eyed him peculiarly.

“What’s with the sudden Justin interest?” She countered with a question of her own and he shrugged, playing it off casually.

“I wanted to catch up with him.” He admitted.

“Why.”

“Tutoring. I wanted to offer my services, heard he’s doing not so great in English.” Clay lied easily and Hannah only watched him under careful scrutiny.

“And that’s why you wanted to know if he was okay.”

“Yeah. I have to make sure he’s in the right mindset. It’s kinda hard to study if you’re stressed out.” He replied and Hannah eyed him a moment longer before nodding, taking another sip of her drink.

“Well, yeah: he seems fine. Nothing majorly off about him that I’ve noticed anyway.” She admitted finally, staring at her beverage and Clay picked up on the obvious uncomfortable eye shift she made but said nothing of it as only nodded thoughtfully before taking sip of his shake.

So despite Justin's best efforts, Clay clearly wasn't the only one that had picked up on the little cues and sudden changes in his overall demeanor, though Clay had to had it to him: just about everyone else seemed to be fooled as Justin was surprising well accustomed to maintaining the visage of retaining his normal behavioral practices, despite the hiccup from Monday.

Almost as if he was well versed in doing so and had done it many times before.

The thought bothered Clay on a deeper level than he cared to admit, but nevertheless, he had made knowing everything he could about Justin a top priority of his as of late, so noticing the subtle ways
that the jock was becoming more withdrawn and distant had become easy for him to spot.

Like how his expressions didn’t quite always meet his eyes, or the way his body would tense up on occasion, especially recently when others touched him, or the way he was more subdued and quiet in general. Then there was also the significant shift in his seemingly rock solid relationship with Bryce.

On the surface, everything seemed to be fine between the two, but to him, it was increasing obvious that Justin was trying to distance himself from Bryce as much as possible, though for whatever reason, maybe discreetly. And the more he thought about it, the few times this week Justin was at school, he couldn’t recall seeing Justin hanging around Bryce as much as he used to. At lunch, in the hallways at their locker, and now, if the text Hannah had shown him was any indication, Justin was beginning to steadily skip a class that Clay had come to learn he shared with Bryce. Heck, yesterday, when he had been unlucky enough to catch Bryce and the rest of his cronies (minus Jeff, of course) outside of school at a local diner, Justin was noticeably absent.

There was only one other glaring, increasing noticeable person Justin seemed to be trying to distance himself from, and she had just walked through the front entrance, stopping by the counter to speak with Skye before the pair began making their way over.

“Hey!” Jess called out to them with a small wave as she took a seat next to Hannah, followed closely by Skye, who swiped off her apron before sliding in next to Clay.

“I am never working a double on the weekend again.” She grumbled miserably and Clay gave her a sympathetic smile. “You off now?”

“Taking my break since we have down time, now that everyone is here.” She corrected him, passing over a hot chocolate to Jessica who thanked her with a big smile before turning her attention to Hannah and Clay. “What were you guys talking about?”

“Just the timeless and age old question of who would win in a fight: Spider-Man or Batman.” Clay lied before Hannah could respond. She gave him curious look though went with it, opting to sip of her drink instead.

“Spider-Man. Batman needs time to prepare in order to be able to defeat him and Peter's great at thinking on his feet.” Jess announced, seeming positive of her assertion.

“But Batman also thinks on his feet and has a utility belt, filled with a bunch of gadgets that always helps him get out of unexpected situations he hasn't planned for,” Clay countered.

"How can he use it once he's stuck to the wall while Peter's making bat puns?" Jess countered back with cocky smirk.

"Who says he wouldn’t have already done his research on Spider-Man and didn't coat his uniform so that the web fluid can't stick?" Clay insisted. "Actually, it would be more likely that he would have, considering Peter not only has spider like abilities, but is also seen as controversial figure and has been mistaken for and labeled as a villain by civilians. Batman may consider him threat or at the very least, someone to keep an eye and thus, make sure he had a way to counter and defeat him should they meet.”

"But Peter looks better in spandex, so he automatically wins." Jess huffed and Clay snorted into his drink, laughing as he nodded in approval. "Touche'. You win."

Hannah looked between the two, focusing particularly on Clay. “Wow, you’re an actual ner—”

“Yes.” Clay cut her off pompously, taking a long sip of his shake and the two shared a chuckle at
the inside joke with Jess lightly confused and Skye uncaring. The quartet sat in silence, simply enjoying their beverages for a few minutes until Hannah cleared her throat.

“So when did you first begin to think I was a drag queen?”

Clay choked and Jessica immediately reached over and smacked him on the back to help him clear his airways. Skye gave him a few sympathetic pats of her own on his lower back before she went back to taking sips of her ginger ale.

“What are you talking about?” Jess asked Hannah, confused but amused.

“I touched his dick, he called me Jeff, I have to assume he thinks I have man hands.” Hannah said easily with a shrug and Skye snorted, tipping her head down as she began to laugh.

Clay opened his mouth to rebuttal but ended up choking more instead, with Jessica giving his back a few more hearty smacks.

‘I knew I shouldn’t have come to Monet’s with her!’ He thought miserably, narrowing his eyes at Hannah’s taunting smirk as Jess turned her attention to him.

“I didn’t know you like Jeff!” She cooed with surprise, smiling at Clay as she gave him a few more taps on the back, lighter this time, then stopped as she took her proper seat and took one of Hannah’s hands in to hers, examining it.

“They don’t look manly to me,” she mumbled to herself as she turned it over in her palm before giving a critical look at Hannah’s nails. “You could use another coat of paint though. This one is chipped.”

“Really? I just got them done…” Hannah mused curiously as she took her hand back and examined it. Clay stared at her incredulously.

“Hannah.” Clay snapped and she only gave him an impartial look.

“What?”

“Stop telling everyone I like Jeff!” He admonished.

“Nothing about the man hands, huh?” Skye teased and Clay shot her an aside glare.

“Hannah knows I don’t think she has man hands.”

“Oh I don’t know,” Hannah replied with a melodramatic sigh. “you once complimented my ability to shovel popcorn when we worked concession.”

“And you’re pretty good at catching footballs, big butt.” Jess teased and Hannah flicked her on the forehead with an unused straw.

“You don’t have man hands, I was just drunk!” Clay grumbled defensively.

“Being drunk doesn’t make you want to fuck a guy.” Skye countered flatly and Hannah gave him a condescending ‘gotcha!’ smile while Jess gave him a knowing, hopeful look.

“I meant, I wasn’t trying to call her a man because I thought of Jeff when she—why am I even telling you any of this?!” He cried, exasperated.

“Because it’s easy and you have no self control?” Skye smirked and Jess snorted in amusement.
Clay facepalmed. This was his life now, to endure the constant teasing and abuse of cackling hens masquerading as his ‘friends’.

“Wasn’t Alex suppose to be here?” He asked, sounding desperate for someone else to take some of the heat, knowing Alex well enough to know that he wouldn’t be problematic if he knew of his newfound crush.

“He cancelled, on a count of Jessica threatening to knock the bleach out of his hair if he showed up.” Hannah announced woefully, giving the girl in question an aside glance and Jessica only folded her arms over her chest, frowning.

“I’m still mad at him.”

“That was last year, Jess!” Hannah reminded her and she only gave Hannah an unsympathetic, hard glare.

“He broke up with me then insulted my looks while praising yours and almost caused a rift between us. All because of a bruised ego. He is not allowed back at ‘the office’ until he grovels for my forgiveness.”

Skye nodded silently in approval while Clay winced at her harshness. “Don’t you think maybe you should—”

She snapped her head to glare in his direction, narrowing her eyes and he eased off immediately, already having learned that while she could be sweet, she was not to be trifled with.

“Grovels.” She emphasized, leaving no further room for discussion.

The table became awkwardly quiet until Hannah cleared her throat. “So, um, Clay, have you talked to Jeff about how you feel?”

Clay began fidgeting with his drink as he stared at the table. He should have known things would back around to him and his lack of a love life.

“No. I haven’t worked up the nerve.” He said truthfully, still refusing to tell them that he suspected Jeff may be on to him.

“It’s Jeff.” Hannah pushed.

“Your point?” He challenged.

“He’s a sweetheart and one of the easiest guys ever to talk to. Besides, didn’t you guys like spoon? That’s a pretty good sigh that he might be into you.”

“I never said we spooned.” Clay said incredulously.

“You never said anything, which told me everything.” Hannah corrected him with a smile, a wink, and a thumbs up.

“Fine, whatever, but can you stop telling everyone everything I told you about Jeff and I?” He pleaded in annoyance and Jess waved a hand at him.

“Relax, we work on a the ‘girl code of ethics’. she replied before taking a sip of her hot chocolate. “One of the rules is that we’re not allowed to gossip or tell the secrets of others in our group once we are sworn to uphold them.”
Clay gave her an under-eyed look disbelief. “Seriously.”

“No, but for the sake of not upsetting you so you’ll give us more juicy details, we’ll do it.” She responded candidly, taking another sip of her drink.

Clay snorted lightly, leaving his gratitude unspoken, even if their reason for keeping things under wraps were a tad self-serving and at his expense. He had been picked on for quite some time when people simply thought he was gay, and the teasing had just eased up recently, in the past several months. He could only imagine how bad it was going to be once people found out he was bi and he would much rather be dating Jeff if he were so lucky, at least at that point, so he would have someone help him through it. Especially with the jocks like Montgomery de la Cruz.

“As for Jeff, just take things easy and only say something to him once you’re ready.” Jess prompted with an encouraging smile, patting his arm from across the table.

“You two have great chemistry anyway, so you’re practically made for each other.” Hannah added. “If he does say no, well—”

“He’s not the only guy out there, so fuck him, his loss, and find someone better.” Skye finished bluntly, cutting Hannah off rudely as she finished her beverage, ignoring the glares the dark haired girl was throwing her way.

He gave them all a grateful smile, feeling a little reassured and appreciative of the encouragement.

“Thanks ladies.”

The trio answered at the same time, Skye’s “Whatever.” sticking out and making him smile despite her seemingly bored tone.

The group sat in relative silence after that, with the exception of he and Skye having idle chit-chat about their respective weeks and Hannah and Jess whispering to one another, every once and a while looking up at Clay. After a while, Skye got in on their private conversation and joined them in whispering and looking at him.

And giggling.

“What now.” He sighed, giving a partial eye roll as he leaned back in his seat.

“So if you and Jeff start dating...are you going to start coming to all of his games?” Jess teased. "Maybe we can get you a spare set Pom-poms to wave around while you sit in girlfriend section of the stands with us?”

Clay glared at them as they all began to laugh.

“Seriously. Why did I agree to come here again?” He sighed agitated.

“Because you wanted our advice with Jeff!” Jess beamed and Clay arched his brow.

“No I didn’t.” He retorted bluntly.

“Right, you needed it.” Hannah corrected him.

“I can always ask Justin to put in a good word for you, if you like.” Jessica offered with a wink, sounding half serious and half teasing.

The mention of the jock brought Clay back to his previous thoughts and Hannah’s text and he began
moving his straw around his almost empty cup, stirring what was left of his shake as he watched the small whirlpool take form.

“Hey, how is Justin?” He asked, trying to sound as nonchalant as he could.

“Hm?” Jessica asked, all amusement leaving her face as she instead looked a little perplexed and pensive.

“I mean, I haven’t seen him much at school and I was just wondering if he was okay.” Clay admitted keeping his eyes locked on his shake.

He could feel Hannah looking at him as Jess hummed in acknowledgement, tapping one of her fingers against her cup.

“He’s...okay.”

He flicked his eyes up to give her another under-eyed look, this time frowning in concern.

Jess let out a low troubled sigh. “He’s just been so moody lately and being such an ass. He’s barely answering my calls, not taking me out on dates, won’t come over—nothing!”

She looked out of the large window next to her. “He keeps saying everything’s okay, but I know he’s hiding something. I’ve asked his other friends, you know, Bryce and Zach? Bryce said he was in a fight,” she paused for a moment, looking worried and discouraged. "but other than that, both swear they don't know what's wrong with him either."

She took a final sip of her hot chocolate before adding "Or at least, they won’t tell me.”

Clay gave a troubled hum, trying to keep his expression impartial. He couldn't speak for Zach, except for the fact that he seemed to be some variant of asshole, just like all the other jocks (save Jeff and now maybe Justin, give or take what may have been the cause of his behavior) but it flat out disgusted however did not surprise Clay, to know that Bryce was lying to Jess about what was wrong with her boyfriend. It unnerved him in fact, to think that he was possibly even making fictitious attempts to comfort her, despite knowing that he was the exact cause for Justin's newfound behavior towards Jess.

Hannah gave her a sympathetic back rub while Skye only looked unsurprised, her body language indicating that she assumed Justin was up to no good, perhaps cheating and Clay felt compelled to defend him.

“Maybe he has some stuff going on at home?” He offered, sending Skye a quick glance of reprimand. She seemed to consider it, though refused to seem apologetic for her previous perceived conclusion.

“Maybe.” Jessica said with a heavier sigh, seeming more concerned than before at the mention of it and Clay instantly thought if the rumors he’d happened upon about Justin’s unsavory home life were accurate, something else that had been a cause for concern he held for Justin recently.

“I’m sure whatever it is, he’ll say something eventually.” Hannah offered with an encouraging smile. “You know Justin: he likes to act all tough and bottle it up before he’ll really let you in.”

“Yeah.” Jess agreed but sounded uncertain, still looking out of the window and Hannah took the time to shoot Clay a warning glare, indicating this topic was officially off limits for discussion any further.
He nodded in understanding before getting to his feet.

“I better get going. I have homework to get done and I promised Jeff—”

The whiplash Jess must have received to turn her attention back to him as she and Hannah broke into a chorus of teasing coos almost rendered him speechless.

‘At least it’s getting her mind off Justin.’ He reminded himself, noticing that she was perking up and decided to roll with it.

“—that we could meet up for an extra study session. He’s got a test this coming Wednesday.” Clay finished, choosing to officially henceforth ignore their antics as the pair did this odd thing with their hands as they shook them in excitement. “See you tomorrow at school.”

“Tomorrow?” Hannah asked with an arched brow and Clay closed his eyes and slapped his forehead, embarrassed.

“Monday! See you Monday!”

“See? He’s so busy thinking about Jeff that he forgot what day of the week it is!” She joked with Jess as he made his way for the exit, and the pair shared a laugh as he rolled his eyes at them and waved at Skye as she got to her own feet, heading for the counter.

'I guess her break is officially over.’

“See ya Helmet!” Hannah called after him as she and Jess waved before beginning to talk anew and he left the cafe, heading toward his bike.

As he unchained it and placed his helmet on, his thoughts wondered back to Justin.

It was clear he hadn’t told Jess anything about ‘The Incident’ and possibly had every intention of keeping it that way, even to the detriment of their relationship, if Jess was going to Bryce for answers was any indication.

Though in a sense, he couldn’t say that didn’t completely understand Justin’s position.

How exactly was he suppose to explain to his girlfriend that his so called best friend had tried to possibly rape her and that he chose instead to offer himself up in her place? And that said ‘friend’ had accepted that offer and forced fellatio on him just a few feet from her bed where she slept? And that it would have been much worse had they not been interrupted?

Hell, he could barely work up the courage to talk to Justin about the entire ordeal, and all he’d done was watch!

Clay began to peddle home as a troubling though began to plague him.

‘How is Justin dealing with any of this if he wasn’t talking to Jess about it? Is he opening up to anyone else at all or was he simply bottling it up’—he already knew the answer before he could even finish the thought. Clay slowed to a stop the nearby crosswalk, attempting to give himself a much needed pep talk.

'I have talk to him as soon as possible. No more excuses, no more putting it off.’

Despite his own anxieties about coming forth with what he had witnessed and the constant fear of the backlash he may face from the jock in question, if there was even a remote chance that Justin
would be receptive, he had to take it. If nothing else, he had to at least offer Justin a chance at an
outlet to get whatever he was feeling off of his chest, before he could inevitably crash and burn from
the stress of what he was having to deal with, possible alone.

He would do it Justin’s sake. For Jess’s sake.

And his own.

Chapter End Notes

Next time, we'll see just how Justin's week went.
Saturday Evening

Justin finished helping Jess clean up her house then decided it was best that he go despite her insistence that he sleep over.

As much as he wanted to be with her, considering Jess was usually a great source of comfort for him when he felt distress, this time was showing itself to be a different matter. Much to his dismay, his prolonged presence around her only served as a constant reminder of what he had done, or to be more specific, the reason why he had done it. Unwanted feelings of unwarranted bitterness and resentment towards her, as well as the self-contempt he felt towards himself, kept rearing its ugly head. It made each passing moment with her feel like torture, more so as she kept trying to get him to come around or open up to her about what was clearly bothering him, making the guilt of his resistance that much worse. It didn't help that all the while, he was in the place where it all happened, which only further elevated his discomfort.

After making excuse after excuse and almost getting into a flat out argument with her, he was finally able to worm himself away, deciding it would be best to at least visit with his mother before he made any further moves.

Seth was gone thankfully and she, well, didn’t inquire too much about why he looked the way he did. She just took his lie about a fight at face value and left it at that, not really pressing the matter at all. While her lack of concern was disappointing if not expected, just being around her gave him some form of solace. She also managed to get him a glass of water and a couple of aspirin for the pain. While it may not have been a lot, it was something he could at least appreciate.

After an hour of simply milling around his room, not really doing much of anything but pacing or sitting on the floor while rolling his old basketball around, he got up to check the fridge. Unsurprisingly, he found there was little in there to eat but didn't truly care one way or the other as he
wasn’t really hungry: it was just something else to do, another way for him to try not to think or focus on the pains and aches of his body. Shutting the fridge, he went back to his room and began packing a duffel bag.

While his time there to decompress had been...something, he was never going to stay the night. Not with the known risk of Seth returning, possibly drunk and most assuredly to be in a fowl mood just by his mere presence. It was inevitable that he would then start up his bullshit and there was just no way he could handle that right now, mentally or psychically.

So he packed the bag with everything he could ever think he would need for a while, just as he had in the past when he was unsure of when he would be returning. Pausing only to grab up his book bag and shut his bedroom door, he headed out, giving his mother a kiss on the cheek with a promise to come back at some point and stay out of trouble.

He stretched his arms once he made it to the sidewalk and began to stroll away from his mother's place and then, the neighborhood. He was uncertain of where exactly he was headed or even where he felt like going but after a moment of fretting over it, he decided to wing it, reassuring himself that he would figure it out along the way eventually.

—//—

Justin stopped jogging only when he realized he had not been followed, finally slowing down enough to catch his breath as he lowered his two bags at his feet and placed his hands on his knees as he hunched over.

"What the fuck was his problem?!' He thought angrily, thinking of that guy—Calvin Jensen or whatever that he’d seen around school—at the crosswalk just moments before.

He rubbed at the wound on his neck, hissing at the instant pain he felt just by making skin contact with it. It probably looked hideous, if the way that guy was eyeballing it was any indication. He frowned in misery. There was little he could do to really cover it despite his best efforts: his varsity jacket was the highest thing with a collar he had, sans wearing a turtleneck and it was still too warm for that. He could always try the make up crap chicks wore to conceal it, but...eh, no. He would rather wear it like a badge of honor and pretend it was a battle scar than do that.

He sighed. Maybe he could put on a light hoodie and tighten the strings around his neck to cover it.

He let his hand fall to his side as he tried not to dwell on it or what just happened, instead contemplating where exactly he was going to go. Alex was with his parents at some event and Zack wasn't answer his phone right now, so that didn't leave many options. Just as he picked his bags back up to get going, his phone began to ring in his pocket. He let it go for a few seconds, listening to the sound and enjoying the soft vibration it made against his thigh before finally pulling it out to answer, only pausing when he realized who was calling him.

It was Bryce. And this was apparently the second attempt he'd made to get in touch with him.

He quelled the arrant desire to chuck his phone at the nearest wall in a fit of grief as it continued to buzz in his hand. He watched as it finally stopped, before a little notification popped up that there was a voicemail waiting for him, followed quickly be a text asking simply
Are you okay?

He quickly pushed down the power button, shutting it off completely in response before putting it back in his pocket. The he stared at the ground for a few moments as the aches in his lower back began to pulse in alarm, compounded with the quickening of his heart beating in his chest.

'Breath. You're fine, he's not here, it's just a phone call. Stop acting like a little bitch, you can handle this.'

Nodding his head while feeling passably reassured, he began walking toward destinations unknown, ignoring the tensing of his muscles whenever someone with a large frame got a little too close to him, or the anxious dread that crept up every time a darkly colored vehicle passed him by.

Sunday

Justin stood in front of the wide mirror, staring at his reflection transfixed.

The bruising wasn’t going away fast enough. Dark angry purple and blueish blotches decorated various parts of his skin, mostly his wrists, the lower parts of his back, and the sides of his hips, though he had a few on his thighs as well. The left side of his neck was littered with the same type of markings, accumulating into the nasty looking scar close to the base of neck from where Bryce had bitten him. Now he understood why Jensen looked at it the way he did.

His eyes lifted as he focused on his face. Other than the little bags under his eyes and the slight red twinge of irritation to them, it looked alright. A lot better than the rest of his body did at least. Even the swelling from where Bryce had punched him had already gone down and the bruising from it was a lot lighter than the rest. It would probably be gone in the next day or two.

He took in a gulp of air as he turned, staring at his back as best he could for what felt like the millionth time since he’d been in there, unable to stop looking at the markings on his hips.

“Justin!”

The bathroom door unexpectedly flew open and he jumped back into the bathroom counter in shock, cursing in pain as his back connected with the marble surface as Alex came into the bathroom.

“What the fuck, Alex?!” He hissed, wincing in pain and looking annoyed. "Show a little privacy!"

“You’re the idiot that left the door unlocked.” Alex shot back seemingly unapologetic as he glanced around, noting the lack of a steamed up mirror or toiletries strewn about.

"What have you been doing in here?” He asked in light confusion as he turned his full attention to Justin. His expression began to crumble, much like Clay’s had, as he took in the extent of Justin’s injuries, in particular the bruising along his sides and neck.

"Keep your dick on Standall, I was coming out.” He grumbled back, rubbing the spot where he bumped himself before realized the way Alex was staring at him and what he was staring at. He side stepped further away from Alex towards his shirt, snatching it up from the counter. Scowling, he quickly put it back on.
“Like what you see?” He joked darkly, coming off a little harsher than he meant to.

“I thought you said you got into a fight.” Alex accused softly, folding his arms over his chest as he watched Justin more closely now.

“I did. You saw all the bumps and scrapes and shit, didn’t you?” Justin replied flippantly, offering the best cocky smirk he could muster while nervously trying to keep his emotions in check.

“Some of those looked like fingerprints.” Alex pressed gently, as if afraid even admitting it would provoke a reaction. He cast a quick glance at Justin's now covered hips and silently pointed at the left side of them. Justin quickly stared at the tiled floor, not wanting Alex to see the flash of emotions he was sure he would be unable to hide right now.

‘Fingerprints! He actually left fingerprints! I wasn’t just imagining that shit!’

“Has Jess seen any of those yet?” Alex asked and Justin glanced up at him. "Yeah, she saw it yesterday."

"Did she see how bad it looks now?" Alex pressed, looking as though he were already certain of the answer. Justin rolled his eyes in annoyance.

"She saw it, threw a bitch fit and put some shit on it last night before I left her place." Justin lied as he leaned back against the counter, propping up on his elbows. She had seen it when he woke up, but the markings had only worsened as the day wore on and once he thought he saw the fingerprints, he refused to let her see them again in fear that she would start asking questions much like Alex was now. It was the reason the two had almost gotten into a fight before he left, along with refusing to let her put any medication on them, despite her constant worrying and protests to allow it.

"She saw all of that," Alex paused to point to the various spots he remembered seeing bruises "and let you leave?" he finished unconvinced, clearly knowing better.

“Look,” Justin started, trying to sound amused but instead far too shaken. He cleared his throat, determined to maintain the easy going vibe he was going for and convince Alex that he had this all wrong. “it’s fine. What happened was no big deal.”

“Look’s a bite mark on your neck, Justin.” Alex emphasized bluntly, with a look admonishing him for trying to insult his intelligence. “So unless you got attacked by a fucking vampire, that’s not the type of shit you get from a fight.”

“You could.” Justin defended lamely. “Evander Holyfield did.”

“You sound like a dumbass.” Alex prompted.

"And you sound like a prick." Justin insisted immaturesly, picking at imaginary pieces of fluff on his shirt. Alex only rolled his eyes as he made his way over, reaching out to take a better look at Justin's wrists but the brunette pulled his arm back quickly, shifting uncomfortably as he put it behind his back.

“You want some ointment?” Alex asked carefully, softening up his approach.

“I wanted privacy,” Justin grumbled, almost pouting as he shuffled his feet in place.

“And I wanted to pee, but here we are.” Alex sighed back sarcastically and for a blink-and-you’d-miss it moment, Justin cracked a genuine smile as he snorted at him in amusement. Alex tried again to take a hold of his hand, tentatively. With a few moments of hesitation and a deep breath, Justin
finally relented, placing the back of his right hand in Alex's palm, who immediately began examining the bruises on his wrists, muttering lightly to himself. Justin only watched him with a feeling of shame and mounting discomfort, pulling his hand out of his once Alex brushed over one of the bruises with his fingers.

"Just hold on," Alex said softly as he made his way over to the medicine cabinet, pulling it open easily and examining several bottles and tubes. Justin shook his head and looked at the wrist Alex examined, still feeling the soft, soothing touch of Alex's fingertips against it.

"You don't have to do anything." He announced, letting his hand fall to his side. Alex hummed to acknowledge that he heard him but otherwise ignored him as he continued and Justin sighed out of his nose.

He shouldn't be surprised. Despite the strain in their relationship, due in part because of Jessica being his current girlfriend and Alex's ex, on top of other...factors...they still managed to remain close, and he considered Alex to be a relatively good friend. He would even venture to say that Alex was single-handedly responsible for broadening his horizons and opening his mind to a few experiences he may have been too scared to allow himself to enjoy just months prior of knowing him. If he hadn't hit it off with Jess, things might even be different between the two right now, he was certain of it.

The thought almost gave him a wistful smile, until he a rogue thought crossed his mind.

'I bet he wouldn't want to be near me if he knew what I did with Bryce.' He thought darkly, the stigma of shame returning tenfold as Alex approached him with various medicinal supplies. He took a step back away from Alex and toward the door, shaking his head and hugging himself lightly as he refused to meet Alex's gaze any longer.

'I don't want his help. I don't need it...I don't deserve it. I got myself into this shit, I can deal with it and get over it on my own.'

“We can wait until my Mom gets back. To do this, if you want.” Alex offered politely sounding hopeful that he would accept the offer.

“I want you to leave it alone!” Justin replied with a sudden outburst of emotion and Alex to a step back in surprise, his expression alone enough to make Justin instantly reel himself in. He gave him an apologetic but firm look.

“I said it was fine, so drop it! Please?” Justin reiterated, all but pleading and cringing internally at the way his voice was starting crack. He quickly left the bathroom and shut the door behind him, keeping his eyes glued to the ground, not waiting for a response. Two seconds of thinking of Bryce and he was already threatening to fall apart, feeling the sting of tears ready to assault his eyes. He knew that if he cried in front of Alex, then he would in turn comfort him and push him to talk—and he would possibly tell him everything.

If he did, Alex might tell his father and then his life would fall in to complete shit.

They would insist on him making a deposition and pressing charges, with no evidence other than that of his word—the word of a bastard child with a drug addicted mother with a pension for dating abusive jackasses. He already knew it would be an uphill battle to get people to believe him from the start, on the virtue of having to believe that Bryce would ever sleep with guys to begin with, given his rather infamous reputation and streak of luck with the ladies. Even if anyone did eventually believe him, it would make little to no difference other than ruining what little good left he had in his life. People would accuse him of attempting to get something out of it, painting him as some kind of
jilted lover or ungrateful lowlife attempting to blackmail or get a quick payday from Bryce. They would at the very least, refuse to believe he didn't in some way bring it on himself, and even he could admit that to a degree, he felt they would be right. His reputation would be destroyed, he would be ostracized by his friends and teammates, maybe even his coaches for his actions. And as for Jess, well, what use would she have with a guy that literally let another guy fuck and use him like some weak willed whore?

He touched his left wrist with his right hand, pressing down on the bruise there, not even flinching as the pain worsened.

'Yeah, I'll get all the shit while Bryce remains untouched, just like he always does.' Justin sneered to himself in disgust and bitterness, pressing down so hard on his skin now that the pain was starting to throb. 'Just like he always will.'

He jumped when he felt a hand on his shoulder and pulled away startled. Alex lowered his arm, concerned but not terribly surprised by his reaction.

"Justin," he started carefully with determination. "I promise I won’t tell my Dad if something else is really going on. Just talk to me."

Justin looked down at his wrists, letting his nerves settle, thinking the promise over but already knowing he wouldn’t tell Alex the truth. He would never tell anyone. He could handle this: he just needed time.

"Justin?" Alex repeated, still waiting for an answer.

"It's-stop trying to be my fucking mother." Justin replied coolly, turning away the moment he saw the look of hurt on Alex’s face.

"Well somebody has to be," Alex scoffed judgmentally and Justin rounded on him, giving a warning glare as Alex immediately looked regretful for his choice of words. "Look-"

"Whatever! If you want me to leave then just say so!"

"What?!" Alex exclaimed flabbergast. "I didn't say shit about you leaving!"

"Well clearly you fucking do, since you won't shut the fuck about this!"

"Jus-"

"Drop it or I fucking leave! Your choice!" Justin announced harshly, putting on the front that he was ready to follow through with his threat. Alex sucked on his teeth, blowing air through his nose and looking as if he were ready to say that he could do just that, but one quick glance at Justin's neck had him simply let out an huff in complete frustration instead.

"Do whatever you fucking want! You do it anyway!" He replied infuriated, waving Justin off as he stormed into the nearby kitchen, leaving him to stand by himself in the hallway.

Justin let out a wavering sigh as he ran his hand through his hair.

He knew full well that he wouldn't actually leave unless he was explicitly asked to or he felt as though he was being too much of a burden, which he was feeling awfully close to now. One of the reasons he’d wanted to come here was because of Alex’s parents, Mr. Standall and Mrs. Standall, who were a deputy and a nurse respectively. It made Alex's house one of the safest places he could think to go after spending the previous night half-sleeping in an alleyway. And while it had been
risky because they too had asked questions when he first arrived—what with neither clearly believing his claim of being in a fight and Mr. Standall asking oddly specific questions about his home life, making it very clear where he thought the bruises had come from—he was willing to go through it because he felt protected. Protected by them and comforted by the fact that he was around a friend that he knew truly gave a damn about him, even if he could be fucking worrisome.

A part of him knew he was being irrational and taking the chance of putting a further strain their relationship by pushing Alex away, one that he needed more than anything right now but Justin refused to let himself care. As long as it meant Alex would stop prying and he could distract himself with literally anything else just so he didn't have to dwell on what had happened. He already did that more than enough as it were and if his sleep was any indication, he wouldn't be getting any reprieve there any time soon either. He just wanted to hang out with a friend and not think and Alex was making that extraordinarily hard right now.

He gave a more depressed sounding sigh this time as he considered how much of a hassle it was going to be tomorrow at school if this level of inquiry were to continue. He was certain Jess would bombard him the moment she saw him, in no small part thanks to him ignoring her calls since he'd left her place, nevermind that she would be sober and would have gotten the chance to really think things over. He knew other people would at least ask about his face and his neck was enough to gain even the attention of one of his teachers, particularly Coach Patrick, who once he got one good look at him in P.E. . . .

'There's no way I'm going to school tomorrow. Not while I look like the poster child of one of those abuse victim posters.' He told himself, looking at his palms and rubbing them against his pants as they suddenly felt sweaty to him. 'Not when the reason I look like this will be waiting for me by his locker.'

He took in a deep breath and headed for the kitchen, preparing to smooth things over with Alex (provided he was willing to truly drop the subject), already having made up his mind.

As soon as he got up in the morning, he would bail, not only from here, but from going to school as well.

He'd find somewhere, anywhere else to go.

Just not back here and not back to school.

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**Monday Morning**

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"You want me to walk you to your locker?" Alex asked in a semi-mocking tone as he parked his car in the school parking lot.

Justin audibly sucked his teeth as cut him a dirty scowl.

The bastard had all but strong armed him into coming today, catching him before he could sneak out of the house this morning and threatening to tell his Dad that he was planning to skip school so he would go willing.

'The fucking narc.'
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“You’re not my fucking warden.” Justin reminded him in annoyance.

“But I am your fucking friend and I want make sure you’re fucking okay, you fucking ass.” Alex responded in kind as he reached into the backseat to pass him his bookbag. Justin snatched it from him and started to lean back himself to grab his duffel bag, but paused when Alex touched his shoulder. “Just leave it in here. You’re coming back to the house tonight, right?”

“No.” Justin stated flatly, snatching it up as he climbed out of the car and slammed the passenger side door, not bothering to look back at Alex as he quickly made his way into the building.

‘Fucking Standall and his overbearing bullshit.’ Justin thought miserably as made his way through the halls, already feeling several eyes on his person. He shifted uncomfortably, hugging his bags to his body closer and pulling the strings of his hoodie in an attempt to better hide his face, keeping his head down. He had only been here for a few seconds and it was already starting: people whispering and watching, staring at all his bumps and bruises. Judging him and making him feel naked. Venerable.

'No way am I staying here.'

He headed straight for his locker, deciding to stash his bags there so he wouldn’t have to lug them around town with him. He was only reminded of the futility of this plan when the sound of Bryce’s laughter rang in his ears and made him stop dead in his tracks just before he could round the corner to his destination. Right. Their lockers were almost side by side with one chamber separating them. Bryce always had a habit of standing around it in the mornings, chatting with the usual crew and the like before first period, which from the sounds of it, was happening right now.

Luckily, their class was in the opposite direction, so all he had to do was wait for the bell to ring. Then he would have his chance to put his bags away without having to confronting him, and all he’d have to worry about then was sneaking away without being caught by the facility, but he was far less worried about that right now.

He leaned against the row of lockers he was standing next to, glancing at a clock on the wall before pushing himself back up to leave, deciding it would be better to wait in the nearby restroom. He turned and almost ran straight into Alex, who was about to tap him on the shoulder. Justin stifled a yelp of surprise as he jumped, balling his fists up at his sides and glaring at the blond before him.

“What the fuck, Standall?!” He whispered in agitation.

"What did I do now?" He sighed exasperated, eying the brunette critical.

“You keep sneaking up on me!” Justin whispered urgently in annoyance, casting a quick glance around the corner to make sure he they hadn't been heard.

"No one's sneaking up on you, stop being paranoid." Alex replied dully, peering around the corner to see what Justin was looking at before leaning back around the bend and gently, carefully, moving Justin away from the locker he was standing in front of so he could get into it.

"You've been doing it all damn weekend!" Justin insisted, instantly ducking his head and coming to stand on the other side of the blond, further away from the corner where he could be seen.

“You haven’t been with me all weekend," Alex retaliated as he concentrated on the combination to his lock, casting Justin an accusatory side glance just as he popped the metal door open and began to pile his things inside "and maybe if you weren't acting so suspicious, I wouldn't be able to sneak up on you.”
"I'm not acting suspicious!"

"Then why are you whispering?"

A beat.

“And why are you hiding.” Alex finished in a bored tone, already sounding exhausted with the exchange.

“I’m not hiding, I just don’t want to go to my locker right now.” Justin half-lied glumly, no longer whispering but speaking in a low voice.

“Why.” Alex pressed suspiciously with an inquisitive frown, his eyes drifting down to look at Justin’s side where they both knew a nasty cluster of bruises waited beneath the layers of an old cotton t-shirt and his hoodie.

“Because I don’t want to be here.” Justin insisted, readjusting one of his bags as he involuntarily pulled at his jacket to try and cover himself better, which did not go unnoticed by his companion.

“You’ve never had a problem with going to your locker before when you wanted to skip school, or do virtually anything else.” Alex reminded him, his eyes narrowing as he stopped in his task of putting away his things and looked at Justin with scrutiny. "So you’re either hiding or trying to avoid someone."

“I’m not, now will you cut it out?” Justin snapped. Alex looked undeterred.

“Not until you tell me what the hell is actually going on with you.” Alex retorted firmly, leaving no room for disagreement. "Is the 'fight' you got into with someone over there by your locker? Is that why you don’t want to talk about what happened?"

Justin scowled at him. “Why do you keep hounding me about this like you give a shit all of a sudden? You usually never give a damn!”

“I never not give a damn, Jus! It's just whenever I try to fucking show it, you like to shut me out!" Alex shot back in an anger and Justin ushered him to keep his voice down, which Alex ignored. "Just like you're trying to do right now! I don't know why you don't want to tell me, but I do know that you didn’t get that shit all over your body from a fight! I can't help you if you won't fucking tell me what happened!"

Justin nervously eyed his surrounding as a few passerby shot them curious glances. He nodded rapidly, ready to calm Alex down so he wouldn't continue speak so loudly when a very familiar laugh caught his ears and made in freeze. His mouth opened and closed as if he were mimicking a fish and all he could get out were odd gargling sounds as Alex stared at him in bewildered concern.

"Justin?"

He ignored him as the sound of voices got even closer, Justin focusing on one in particular. They probably heard Alex talking and were coming over to chat with him. He probably only had seconds...

He quickly looked around and fled into the nearest classroom, ducking out of sight and clutching his chest as a full blown panic attack began to seize him. He struggled to control his breathing, the beginning stages of hyperventilation flaring up that he struggled to wrangle control of. He slide into a squat, hugging his bags close as if they were a lifeline to shield him from the outside world. He laid his face on them and breathed in the slightly musty odor, listening to the sound of his own heartbeat,
refusing to move until the unease in his stomach began to quell.

Throughout it all, right outside the room, he heard Alex being greeted, who after a moment's hesitation, greeted them back. Justin felt grateful as he heard Alex deflect the inquiries of anything being wrong or about thinking they heard him speaking with anyone beforehand. He listened intently as the group began another round of light banter he could give less than a shit about before the voices began to drift further away from him until he could no longer here them—him. He didn't get up completely, giving it few more minutes until he was satisfied that Bryce was well and truly gone before he rose to his feet, legs shaking lightly as he braced himself against the nearest desk. He looked around the dimly lit room, feeling the rise of frustration and embarrassment as he wiped a few stray tears staining his face that were becoming more frequent with each passing minute.

He jumped, giving an audible yell of terror as the classroom door swung open wide and a teacher he didn't recognize walked into the room. He stared at him in confusion as Justin grumbled a weak "Shit," to himself, his increasingly toxic self-criticism making its presence known for the umpteenth time as he admonished himself for being stupid enough to think Bryce had somehow known he was there and had come to find him. For becoming so jumpy lately and acting like such a damn coward in the first place.

"What are you doing in here?" The teacher demanded harshly in an accusatory tone and Justin simply looked up, unable to control his crying as he tried to respond, the teacher's face melting instantly into that of concern.

"Hey, hey, what's going on here?" He asked a lot nicer, taking a step toward Justin. "Are you alright?"

Justin tried to speak again, his words getting tied and catching in his throat before frustrated with himself, he gave up. Quickly, he made his way past the man, almost bumping into him as he exited the room, clutching his bags as close to him as he could while ignoring the calls for him to come back as he stormed down the hall. He could barely see as everything melting together under the blurry film of tears, ignoring the curious stares and loud whispers as he passed people by. As he was making his way he glanced to his side and noticed Jensen, yet again staring at him and looking—guilty?—before he passed him by. He didn’t take the time to process whatever the hell that look was about. He just kept going, vaguely hearing Jess calling out to him but not daring to stop to speak to her. There was no way he could face her right now.

He focused on snaking his way past the other students, pushing Tyler then the double doors out of his way with force as he made it to freedom. He made his way toward the parking lot and kept walking despite hearing the ring of his cell accompanied by a familiar buzz. He didn't bother to take it out. He didn't give a shit who was calling him right now, he didn't want to talk. All he could focus on now was the anamnesis of his night with Bryce, playing on repeat as it once again consumed his every waking thought. As those inner thoughts worsened, entering the stage of self-blame for what had occurred, he struggled to grapple with the vastly different array of turbulent emotions before he finally just began to sob fully, burying his face completely in his arms.

He stayed this way until he was too exhausted to cry anymore, finally raising his face to wipe it on
the sleeve of his hoodie. He froze in mid action, not wanting that gunk on it and decided to wipe it on the bottom of his shirt instead.

His eyes stung and his mind felt heavy, but it didn't stop him from trying to think up a much needed solution to his problem. When no easy one came to him, he relied on self-reassurance instead, wiping harshly at his face to will away the straggling salty lamentation.

He’d already been though so much already, so this should be nothing. He was certain in the next few days he would be able to get over it, get his shit together, forgetting all about what happened. A part of him knew he was lying to himself and that it obviously wouldn't be so simple, but he chose to believe the lie, for now, because the alternative was to keep feeling the depressive bleakness of his situation.

And believing in false hope was much better than succumbing to that.

Wednesday

Justy? Where are you? Answer me please!

He stared at his phone, feeling uncertain. As guilty as he felt about shutting Jess out, he would be lying if he admitted he was ready to talk to her. Frankly, he was afraid to, after the way he'd made things awkward at her place, kept ignoring her 'summons' (calls and texts), and had been avoiding her like the plague, especially after she'd seen him run out of school on Monday. He knew she was pissed at him and had every single right to be, but he also knew she was worried and as such, would demand answers, which technically she had a right to know. And that he couldn't give.

He bit his bottom lip, feeling foolish. 'If I could stop acting like a bitch about this shit with Bryce, I wouldn't be upsetting her.'

His thumb hovered over the digital keyboard when the little notification bubble indicating he'd gotten another text message caught his eye. Sliding the conversation over, he looked to see it:

Hey. Call Jess. She's worried. (And won't stop blowing up my phone.)

He frowned in distaste. Bryce.

Justin quickly pressed the power button and flicked his phone back off, his frown deepening into a scowl as the implications of Bryce's text hit him full force. Jess was calling Bryce. He had gotten her so fucking worried about him, that she was talking to and potentially bugging Bryce about him. And there was no fucking telling what that asshole was saying to her.

'...I'm such a damn fuck up.'

"Here."

Justin snapped his head up, blinking rapidly. He had been so lost in thought that he forgot where he was and what he was just doing. It was happening a lot lately.

He looked over to see Hannah holding out a candy bar to him, leaning as far as she could over the
counter of her parent's shop. He stared out it, as if he had no idea what to do with it.

She arched a brow, shaking it at him a little. “Want it? Cause I'm about to tip over in a few minutes, so...”

“Hm...thanks.” He mumbled, taking it. He didn’t move to put it away or eat it, he just held it in his hand as he stood there awkwardly for the next several seconds.

"Welcome!" she grunted as she sprung back on to her feet. As she pushed her hair off of her shoulders, she watched him, giving a little awkward smile and a nod as they stood there in silence. When neither spoke up further, she leaned against counter and propped herself up on her elbows.

"So."

"What."

"I talked to Alex."

'Great.' "Okay."

"He told me you stayed with him over the weekend."

"So."

"Jess thought you went to stay with Bryce."

"She's anal about Alex and I didn't want to upset her, so I didn't tell her."

"Didn't want to upset her?"

"Don't start the parroting shit."

"...Parroting shit?"

"Bye," he snapped rolling his eyes and turning on his heel to storm out, but she reached over the counter and poked him in the back with a rope of taffy.

"Okay, sorry, I should have guessed you weren't in a joking mood." she apologized in earnest and reluctantly, he stopped, turning to glare at her and softening up when he noted how genuinely apologetic she looked.

"This is the part where I ask you if there's anything you want to talk about, but considering you won't talk to Alex or Jess, I guess my chances are...what? A solid 0.02%?" She asked him softly and he just shrugged. "I'll try this then: What happened Monday? Why'd you run out of school screaming like a banshee?"

Justin scowled at her in annoyance. "Who the fuck said-I wasn't screaming, I just fucking left! I was pissed!"

"About?"

"Personal shit." he said in finality, giving her a cold glare that told her this conversation was officially over as he finally pocketed the candy bar. She arched her brow with a challenging frown, showing him she wasn't going to back down so easily before lazily pointing a finger at the pocket he'd just stuck the candy in.
"So are you going to pay for that or are you going to remember that we're suppose to be friends? Friends who do nice things for one another, like give each other free candy or share information that will ensure friends won't continue to be worried sick about other friends?" She replied smoothly then offered him a small smile when he tried to give her an intimidating narrowed eye glare. Sighing in defeat, he rolled his eyes at her and shifted from his right to his left and back, looking at his feet as he spoke.

"I got into a bad fight and everyone keeps bugging me about it, making it more than what it is. I just want to drop it so I can move on." he said with a hint of sincerity. "I've got some shit I need to deal with and the sooner people let this go, the better."

She pondered what he said for a moment before nodding understanding.

"I can see that. Maybe people are freaking out because you’ve looked better."

"I've felt better." He shrugged, not meeting her eyes.

"Is that why I haven’t seen you at school for the past couple of days? Are you getting sick?"

He shook his head absently. "I'm fine. Like I said, I just have personal shit to deal with."

Hannah gave him a heavy sigh and removed herself from the counter by hopping over it, smoothing her shirt out as she came to stand closer to him. He watched her as she looked as though she was trying to motivate herself, nervously readjusted her hair. Then she met his gaze head on and he was almost taken aback by the amount of sympathy and concern evident on her face. He swallowed and braced himself for whatever she was about to say.

"So...I talked to Bryce."

He didn't even try to hide his confusion or shock. "I thought you didn't like him after-"

"I don't, and I normally wouldn't if I can avoid it, but I haven't really seen you and you're not answering your fucking phone." She snapped, glaring at him for a moment in disapproval before softening up. "I got worried when Zach didn't know anything and Alex would only tell me you slept over after a fight. I remember seeing you with Bryce before I left the party, so Jess and I cornered him at his locker and asked him what was going on."

She looked uncomfortable and Justin held his breath as he waited for her to continue. "At first he tried to pretend he had no idea what we were talking about, but then," then she paused, looking more serious. "he told us about the fight you got into with Seth."

Justin blinked in disbelief. "What?"

"He said you tried to go home but got into a fight with Seth, then came back to Jess's and collapsed." She replied, her expression becoming subtly suspicious as she watched his reaction. "He said that's what you told him when he called you last Sunday."

Justin shook his head with his mouth slightly agap. No wonder Jess was freaking out. She thought he had been abused (which was of course true, just by the wrong asshole this time) and thought he was trying to keep it from her...

"Hey! Justin!"

They both looked up as Zach walking over to them, flanked by Scott, who tossed the pair a halfhearted hand wave before going back to texting on his phone, clearly distracted.
Justin didn’t bother to greet the shorter of the pair, only focusing on Zach, who shared a flirtatious smile with Hannah before he turned his attention back to Justin.

“Where have you been man? Coach is about to have a bitch fit because you missed practice again!” Zach exclaimed with an easy going smile.

Justin took a minute to collect himself before giving him a practiced smile in return and a sheepish shrug “I just had some stuff going on. I had to take off for a few days.”

“Bryce said you got beat up.” Scott announced still texting and not bothering to look up.

"Did he?” Justin replied, a flicker of unease flashing in his eyes that both boys seemed to miss.

"Yeah, at Jess's party. Said you got into a fight and got beat-” Zack elbowed Scott in the side, who grunted and looked up at him.

“Dude.” He responded, giving Scott a warning frown.

“No, it’s cool.” Justin replied with another shrug, briefly wondering what else Bryce had been saying and to whom as he maintained the easygoing air he wished he could actually feel. “I did, but I still had some stuff to do, so you know.”

Hannah began to straighten up the small displays on the counter as Scott nodded at his explanation, cutting a frown at Zach before stepping away from them to continue texting. Zach put his hands in his pockets while Justin gestured for him to walk over to shelf a little further out of the way.

"So, uh...what exactly did Bryce say? About the fight?” he asked, trying to sound as casual about it as he could. Zach shifted uncomfortably and cleared his throat before he spoke. "He's just been saying you got into a fight at the party, but he uh, he told me about Seth."

Justin turned away from him and Zach quickly added "We were alone and the only other person I think he might have told was Jess, but we didn't know you were trying to keep it from her at the time, I swear."

Zach gave him an sympathetic, worried look. "Hey, if things are still, I mean you can sleep over my place. Tonight, tomorrow, whenever, okay? Bryce told me you haven't been over there and Alex hasn't seen you since Monday,” he scratched the back of his head and offered up a small smile. "Everyone's really worried about you, man. Coach is even starting to ask questions because you've missed practice and he heard about the fight."

Justin didn't immediately respond, as he was trying to digest everything he'd just been told. Bryce had taken his cover story about the fight, probably after hearing about it from either Alex or Jess. So he was virtually stuck with his own lie now, with Bryce not only backing it up, but spreading and embellishing on it when it was convenient.

'I really am a fuck up.'

"You need to come to school, Justin." Zach urged, looking hopeful that he would agree. He cast a look at both Hannah and Scott to ensure they were preoccupied before leaning into Justin with a more pronounced look of concern "Like I said, you can stay at my place so you don't have to worry about getting into any more 'fights' at home, okay?"

Justin hesitated. As much as he wanted to-that alleyway was starting to get weird-and as touched and grateful as he was to Zach for giving a shit about him, he didn’t want to risk burdening him. But at least he wouldn't have to worry about getting hounded with questions by him, and Zach was right
about school: he couldn't keep holding things off forever. Not when he'd inadvertently given Bryce the advantage and the potential to make things worse.

“Yeah.” He said finally.

"Yeah?" Zach repeated, perking up.

"Yeah, okay." Justin confirmed, still feeling uncertain about how he would handle things tomorrow but resolute in at least trying.

“Great!” Zach beamed in relief, clapping him on the back. "Do we need to go grab your stuff?"

"I got my bags with me, let me go grab em."

"Alright, we'll be waiting at the car!" Zach replied as he walked over to go fetch Scott but Justin stopped him.

"Hey Zach?"

"Yeah?"

"Can...is it cool if it's just the two of us? I mean, Scott is fine but, no one else?" Justin asked softly and when Zach frowned a little, he clarified "I just don't wan to be bothered by a lot of people right now."

Zach nodded and smiled. "Sure. No promises that May won't bug us though."

Justin offered back is own smile, looking genuinely relieved. "That's cool."

"Cool," Zach agreed before whistling and waving Scott over so they could leave. Scott lifted his head from his phone then went to follow Zach, inclining his head at Hannah before he departed, with the taller of the two pausing to turn back to her.

"See you later!" he called to her with another flirtatious smile. Hannah gave him an exaggerated one in return with two thumbs up. "Sure! Great talking with you!"

He tossed his head back and laughed. "Yeah, sorry about that. Can I make it up to you? Maybe with a movie?"

"Call me?" She announced with a hopeful smile and waving to one another he left to go wait on Justin, who was grabbing his bags from the side of the counter, shaking his head at the two. As he went to follow Zach, Hannah reached out to touch him on the shoulder. He flinched away, then caught himself and relaxed as fast as possible, glad to that Zach and Scott had left already to miss the exchange.

Hannah on the other hand...

“If you need anything—" she began, worry evident.

“I'm good, just a bruised ego.” He said, laughing off her concern while offering one of his trademark charming smiles. “Don’t wanna go around talking about how you got beat up, you know?"

“Yeah,” She sighed and he could tell she wasn’t convinced. She didn’t press it though, only adding. “Just please call Jess. She’s stupid worried and driving me nuts about it.”

He nodded slowly in agreement with a sigh. “Yeah, alight.” He departed from the store, already
pulling out his cell as he tossed his bags into the trunk of Zack's car, scrolling down until he found her name. He didn't want her worrying about him anymore and he definitely didn't want her seeking aid from fucking Bryce. With a deep breath, he pushed the dial button and held the phone up to his face. An odd mixture of guilt and joy washed over him the moment he heard her concerned voice shout into the receiver after the first ring.

"Hello? Justin?!!"

". . .Hey Jess."

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**Thursday**

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Coach Patrick ushered him into his office the moment he walked into the gym and he saw that bruise on his neck.

He asked, of course, how he had gotten it and just like he before, Justin lied, explaining the details of a phantom brawl that never happened. It was obvious he didn't believe him and much like the Mr. Standall, he started an awkward conversation about domestic abuse, hinting that it was okay if he wanted to speak to him or get a referral to go see the Mr. Porter, the guidance counselor. He ignored it, even tuning him out at some point before telling him everything was fine and going back to enjoy class.

They were playing a simple game of dodgeball and Justin had to admit, it was nice to get a little of his stress and anger out by hitting people rather aggressively with a rubber ball. Maybe a little too much, as he ended up smacking his fellow teammate Willem Barclay in the face by accident, sending him reeling to the ground in a heap.

"Damn Justy!" Bryce called out to him as he and a couple of other students began laughing, but he completely ignored him in favor of helping Willem up instead. He apologized to him profusely before Coach Patrick stopped the game long enough to pull Justin off to the side for a chat. He ignored the feeling of linger eyes staring at the back of his head as he folded his arms over his chest and waited for his coach to speak.

"Maybe it would be best if you sit out the rest of the game." he suggested in an even tone, giving Justin a concerned, meaningful under-eyed look.

"I'm fine." Justin sighed, looking as annoyed as he felt.

"I can't have you trying to knock out the entire class," Coach Patrick replied, joking mildly as he added "plus I don't want to risk exacerbating that wound any further."

"It's nothing really and practically gone. I'm fine!" Justin insisted, thankful his shirt and his sweat armbands that Zach let him borrow covered the rest. Coach Patrick only shook his head.

"Can't risk it. Shouldn't have done it in the first place."

"Okay, fine, can I hit the showers a little early then?" Justin asked curtly, showing his irritation over being denied the right to return to the game. Coach Patrick seemed to think about it for a moment before he nodded in agreement.
"Sure, go on."

Justin could tell just by the look on his face that he felt sorry for him and thought he was doing him a favor. Maybe because he thought it would make him feel better or make him more likely to comply with his discussion. Whatever it was, Justin was just grateful and in the blink of an eye, he was gone.

Away from the stares, the glares, and the whispers. Away from the meandering bullshit his classmates kept sprouting that he was constantly having to tune out.

Away from Bryce.

Justin absentmindedly began to hum to himself, no song in particular, as he removed his clothing and walked in to the shower. He quickly turned on the hot water, balancing his weight from leg to leg as he let the spray cascade down his back, instantly relaxing his muscles and relieving the tension he hadn't realized he felt.

He had always liked taking showers. They were a calming, soothing task that allowed him some much needed privacy.

Today as a whole had been relatively decent thus far. Sure, Alex was still mildly annoying with his not-so-subtle shadowing of him, Jensen was still gawking at him when he thought he wasn't paying attention, and Jessica was hovering and fussing over him, but it was nothing he couldn't handle. As long as he avoided spending prorogued, unnecessary amounts of time with anyone else, he fared well enough with this whole 'everything is fine, nothing to see here' shtick. Well, give or take a few snappy comebacks or biting remarks here and there, but he doubted anyone really noticed anything was amiss considering he'd always sort of been like that. There was however, still the 'small' issue that was Bryce Walker.

His hand hovered over the knob that controlled the hot water, a silent threat to turn up the heat as he swallowed lightly.

Avoiding Bryce had been quite difficult for the past several days, but here at school, it had been more like virtually impossible. Along with their locker's being borderline next to one another, they had a few of the same classes (including this one), shared the same lunch, friends, and until recently, even the same place to live. Their lives were just that interwoven and had been since they'd first met back in third grade. Back when no one cared to notice him or even wanted to, save to pick on him. Except for Bryce.

Even after he'd rebuffed him and wanted to fight him, Bryce persisted.

‘He’s always been persistent and forceful. You should have remembered that.’ He berated himself randomly and he cleared his throat, willing away the encroaching thoughts as he tried to refocus.

When he showed up to sit with him at lunch, Justin remembered feeling conflicted, paranoid, and confused. Mostly however, he was curious as to why someone like Bryce was taking an interest in him in the first place. Even back then, Bryce was fairly popular with their other classmates and he was more like the class pariah. He honestly thought it was some elaborate prank when Bryce sat with him at lunch and offered up his sandwich, which he refused, still not trusting him. No one ever does someone a favor for nothing, that he was sure of, even at that young of an age. So Bryce ‘borrowed’ a Twinkie from another boy and ‘traded’ it with him to show that he was being sincere, just so he would be able to eat and asking for nothing in return.
Justin couldn’t help but smile at the memory even as it brought him bitter pain.

That act alone made him believe that Bryce was different, that someone finally gave a shit about him despite clearly not being worthy of affection of any kind. To say the pair became close was an understatement, and he went out of his way to be the very best he could to Bryce since the latter was so often good to him, time and again. Food, clothing, a place to stay when he couldn't stomach being at home, insisting his parents bring Justin along on summer trips, even once bailing his mother out of jail. He always felt like he was falling short in their relationship and as such, while he really couldn't repay his 'kindness' with material things, he tried to give it back in loyalty. He made sure to do whatever he could to show his appreciation and gratitude toward Bryce for everything he had done, quick to please but careful not to do so in an unctuous way. Even when...this...all started, he thought it was a small price to pay for everything that had been given to him.

Until he realized that even he had a limit, and her name was Jessica Davis.

He could envision her clearly in his mind, bouncy playful curls, chocolate warm eyes, bright big infectious smile. He could just imagine how they must have swayed from side to side as she fussed at him over the phone yesterday. She'd been so furious but after giving her a chance to cool down, she seemed to forgive him, even if he refused to back up Bryce's claim of Seth assaulting him when prompted to tell her about it. He already felt horribly about lying to her in the first place but he would be damn if he wasn't going to do it on his own terms. She had only been willing to get off the phone once he swore he would come to school today and she wrangled a promise of it out of Zach as well, threatening to look for him first thing in the morning.

True to her word, she was waiting on him on the front steps of the school and hugged him the first chance she got, like he'd been off at a great war or something before giving him a quick peck on the lips and hugging him again. While the kiss gave him slight discomfort, he reveled in the hug. It was the first time he'd allowed anyone to do it in days and he almost cried by how comforting it felt, burying his face in her neck, while she gently consoled him and made him promise to never to worry her like that again. Then he walked her to her locker while she started chatting about all sorts of different things, but all he could think about was how much she deserved someone better than him. How weird it felt kissing her and knowing where else his lips had been, with her just a few feet away from them at the time. How livid she was going to be and how much she was going to hate him if she ever found out the truth.

'You technically cheated on her.' His subconscious cut into his thoughts, reminding him solemnly. 'No way she will forgive you for that.'

Justin felt goosebumps rising on his arms despite the consistently hot liquid pouring over them and tried to concentrate on anything else. The weird face Zach makes when he chews bubble gum. His favorite color, wondering if his mother missed him or even noticed how long he had been gone, how much he didn’t look forward to doing any of his make-up homework. Just little tidbits of things to keep his mind busy, never dwelling on one thing for too long.

Until he thought of Alex and back to the experience they'd shared, his mind wondering back to that night in Alex's room. Bryce had been out of town, Seth was on the rampage, he wasn't dating Jess yet, and Zach was dealing with some pretty heavy things due to the death of his father and needed his space. Alex's parents were out of town and his own mother was nowhere to be found and had locked him out of the house.

The two of them had consumed a looooooot of weed, and before he knew it, he was admitting how he’d always been curious to know what it was like to kiss a guy. Alex had been willing to oblige him.
He responded passively at first with a little hesitation—kinda brushing his lips clumsily against Alex’s who took the reigns quickly. When the time came, he just barely opened his mouth so Alex could push his tongue in, still nervous about the entire thing. Alex was patient however and gently began coaxing him to react more favorably by caressing their tongues together and giving Justin time to get more comfortable.

Once Justin pressed back against him in earnest, Alex deepened the kiss, plundering his mouth and sending demanding pulses of a wonderful tingling sensation down to his groin. He offered no reluctance as the kiss became more aggressive, instinctively leaning Alex back against the bed, who wrapped his arms around his neck as he spread his legs so that Justin could position himself in between them. He began running his finger along Alex's scalp, enjoying how the soft, fine hairs felt against his skin. When Alex pushed his hips up against his, he moaned into his mouth, feeling another jolt of pleasure, drowning in the breathless depth of their kisses as he ground back against him fervently.

He had never experienced anything like this at the time, wanting and needing more. When they finally pulled apart, Justin smiled and laughed breathless, gulping in air in between accusing Alex of being a fish. Alex only returned the gesture, making some witty quip that Justin couldn’t quite remember before leaning in for another kiss. This time, Justin melted immediately, opening his mouth obligingly, needing to feel the contact as a surge of warmth electrified his senses and the world seemed to become an entangled array of vibrant colors and sounds.

He smiled at the memory, even remembering how Alex’s gold septum ring lightly brushed up against his face. How that night didn’t end with the two of them fucking, he would never know, but it had been one of the best moments of his life, one he would always treasure no matter what happened between the two of them.

‘. . .If you hadn’t told Bryce about that kiss, none of this would have happened.’

He felt his nerves begin to stand on end as he closed his eyes, willing away the impending mental assault to no avail.

‘It’s how this started. You told Bryce about it and he used it to convince you to ‘experiment’ with him. Then he insisted you start trading ‘favors’.

“Stop.” He whispered to himself, trying desperately to beat back the poisonous thoughts, desperate to keep that memory untainted and safe.

‘For all the whining you do about it, a part of you must like it deep down.’

“No.” He demanded of himself, the crippling self loathing returning in full force as he stared hatefully at his own feet.

‘You agreed to do it!’ his mind screamed back at him venomously. ‘Just like you did that night! You even came!’

“I didn't want to. . .it hurt.” He insisted in desperation.

"Is that why you wrapped your legs around him and started fucking him back? Because you 'didn't want to'? Because it 'hurt’?

“Shut up.” He snapped to himself in a louder, forceful voice, gripping the shower faucet handle until his hand began to ache from how hard he was holding it.
'Admit it! You liked the way he made you—'

He twisted the knob, following through with turning up the heat, not caring that the water was becoming unbearable. He kept a hold on it as he controlled his breathing focusing on evening it out and keeping his mind clear, listening to the thumping of his heart beat as it's quickened pace gradually slowed down. He didn't let it go until all traces of his panic dissipated, shaking his hand a little and flexing his fingers to ease the pain.

With a sigh, he once again allowed himself to enjoy the spray of hot water, even turning it down some as not to flat out scald himself.

He kept completely still, eyes closed, losing himself to the pulsing rhythm of the water hitting his skin and the linoleum tiles beneath his feet. Until a random thought invaded his short lived tranquility: it felt and sounded a lot like this the first shower he took after his night with Bryce. Warm, hard, and fast.

He frowned, eyes springing open as his thoughts swiftly began to betray him again and flashes of a memory better left forgotten began to assault him.

Hard and fast. . .and painful.

His stomach turned as he fumbled to turn the spray of water off, eyes transfixed on the liquid as it pooled around his feet and vanished down the drain. Then before he knew it, he was laughing. It was barely audible and sounded broken, completely alien to him. He couldn't help it though, just thinking about how Bryce was invading and ruining what he use to consider private safe havens for himself. His girlfriend’s bedroom, his body, his thoughts. Now, Bryce was even fucking up his showers!

He covered his face with his hands and tilted his head back, trying to remain calm. He felt his fingers grasp at his short hair, nails digging into his scalp before he instantly let go, once again vividly recalling that Bryce had and seemed to really enjoy doing that. Just like he enjoyed grabbing him by his waist and his wrists, to hold him down and make him feel weak, to take control—

“—gotta get dressed,” he mumbled to himself as he quickly exited the shower stall and headed to the gym locker occupied with his small assortment of things.

He blotted himself with a dry towel, not bothering to dry himself properly and leaving it for the air to do. He slipped on his underwear, a pair of jeans, socks, and a pair of sneakers. He shook out his gray t-shirt, popping it once in the air then began pulling it over his head but paused just before he pulled it down all the way as he caught his reflection in the long mirror just to his right. He stared directly at his waist, mesmerized by the slightly faded, stubborn discolored blotches that refused go away. It's wasn't like he'd never had or seen bruises on himself throughout the years, having gotten more than his fair share of them, but never before had he gotten any quite like these. He knew once they finally faded away, he would still see them, feeling the phantom touch of the hand that put them there.

Maybe for a long time.

His head perked up at the unmistakable sound of a stampede of feet headed his way and he began to quicken his pace, pulling his shirt on all the way, then his hoodie. He wanted to be out of here before the rest of the class let out, but he'd wasted too much time in the shower, trapped in his thoughts, in the past, and in the pain.

He continued collecting the things he needed to take with him as the room filled with loud jubilant
voices and the constant noise of lockers opening, closing, and showers starting up.

“Hey Justy.” A voice called behind him and Justin instantly froze, all the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end.


He repeated this in his head like a mantra, taking a few precious moments to collect himself before he turned to face Bryce who standing obnoxiously close to him. He took an involuntary step back away from him, almost bumping himself into his locker and feeling a twinge of anger when Bryce only snickered at his action in ridicule subtly.

“What do you want?” He snapped bluntly, too late to catch himself as a few curious glances shot their way. Bryce arched a brow at his tone, eyeing him carefully. Thoughtfully.

“A couple of us are going out to grab a burger and fries. I figured you’d wanna come.”

Justin hoped he didn’t look as uncomfortable as he felt as he shook his head. “That’s okay.”

“Come on, I’ll even spot you.” Bryce pressed with a friendly smile but Justin only turned back to face his locker, not really looking for anything in it so much as using it as an excuse to not look at Bryce.

“I can’t. Busy.”

“Yeah, you’ve been real busy a lot the past couple of days.” Bryce emphasized with a hint of mockery, his voice lower but his demeanor still seemingly friendly as he took a step closer. Justin felt his body stiffen and he let go of the locker door as not to show that he beginning to tremble. ‘I can do this, just stay calm.’

“I feel like you’ve been avoiding me.” Bryce accused smoothly with a deliberately meaningful look. “Ignoring my texts and my calls. I just wanted to see how you’ve been doing since...you know,” He smiled a little. “the fight.”

Justin fought to keep his composure, his eyes locked on one of the hooks in his locker while Bryce continued watching him attentively, waiting for his response.

“I’ve been fine, Bryce. Just busy.” Justin reiterated as he cast a nervous glance to the nearest exit, trying to judge the distance to it and any openings he might have.

“You should come out with me and guys then! Take a break from whatever and give yourself a chance to relax!” Then Bryce clamored, leaning against the locker next to Justin's. He leaned in a closer before whispering “Maybe after, you and I can take off. It'll give us a chance to talk about some things.”

Justin cast him an aside glance and the look Bryce gave him now made it very obvious he had no intention of accepting no as an answer. He refused to respond, lowering his gaze to the ground while his palms became sweaty, rubbing them anxiously against his pants. He inhaled and his nose caught the faint whiff of the cologne coming off of Bryce. The same one he wore at the party. Justin felt a lump in his throat. It took him a day to convince himself that he had gotten it all off of him and longer than that to convince himself that he couldn’t smell it...

"So you're coming?” Bryce pushed expectantly, the traces of a smugness touching the corners of his lips at the seemingly inevitability of his triumph.
“Yeah, he’s coming out for burgers, right?” Zach interjected as he made his way over to them, and Justin had never been so happy to see or hear him in his life, offering up a grateful smile at his arrival. Zach briefly greeted Bryce who returned it with a smile, a pat on the arm, and a quick "Hey!" before he attempted to pull Justin into one of those hand-grip-hug-things that guys tend to do, unceremoniously. He visibly stiffened, not returning the gesture immediately before he gave a quick tap on Zach's back and pulled away, looking just as uncomfortable as he felt. Zach looked confused, exchanging a glance with Bryce who only shrugged in baffled amusement.

Not wanting to leave the entire incident feeling awkward, Justin decided to offer up an explanation. "My back kinda hurts."

Bryce shot him a mocking look that seemed to be asking him 'Still?!' over Zach's shoulder and Justin rightfully ignored him as Zack cleared his throat.

“So?”

“Hm?” Justin hummed, returning to stuffing things into the book bag in his locker.

“Burgers?” Zack repeated.

“Huh? Uh, no. No, I got homework and shit.” He responded causally enough with a light shrug before grabbing the bag and shutting the metal door softly.

He could feel Bryce staring at him but still refused to look at him directly, knowing he might not be able to keep up the currently barely passable facade of being ‘a-okay’ if he did.

So he focused entirely on Zack instead.

“You, want to come over later then?” Zack offered, as he took off his gym shirt and tossed it in his bag before looking back at Justin. “I can help you study Mom’s cool with it and she’s even making beef dumplings.”

Justin inwardly groaned. He loved Mrs. Dempsey’s dumplings but with a swallow, he only shook his head. He was barely keeping things together now, no way would he be able to pretend through the night that everything was fine, even with Zack.

“I’ve already got plans. I’ll be fine.” He lied, even managing a playful smile.

“What’s up with you Foley?” Montgomery butted in, peering over his locker door with an eyebrow cocked up so high it could have reached his hairline. Justin only glanced his way and Monty continued with a look that said he should already know why he was being questioned. “You’ve been skipping out on us all week. What gives?”

“You wanna talk about it?” Scott mocked, trying to sound like he was from one of those adverts from ‘a very special episode’ as he threw an arm around Justin’s neck, laughing when Justin pushed him off just a quickly, clearly not realizing he had somewhat just offended him.

“I’ve just had some stuff I’ve had to handle lately, that’s all.” Justin replied, fighting back his annoyance with a forceful smile that didn’t come close to meeting his eyes.

“Well I know you’re going to my party Saturday,” Bryce announced, finally standing up right and moving away from him while spreading his arms out and beaming at him. A few of the other jocks whooped in excitement and Monty slapped a high five into his open palm.

Justin's smile faded fast. “A party?”
There was no way he was going to something like that again with Bryce there, especially since it would give him the home court advantage so to speak.

“You didn’t know?” Zack chimed in.

“I’ve been trying to tell him about it all week!” Bryce interjected "He’s been ignoring my calls!"

The crowd erupting into playful jeers and booing and Justin couldn’t help but feel defensive, not wanting to give him any leeway.

“My phone’s being a bitch.” He stated simply, feeling it was a good enough excuse before he slung his book bag over his shoulder, prepared to leave. “and I’m not going.”

The room seemed to fall into a deafening silence.

Scott cleared his throat and ducked his head as he moved away, sharing an awkward look with Zach. Monty looked between Bryce and Justin with an instigative smirk just as Jeff passed him by to get to his locker, paying all of them no mind at first until he noticed how quiet the room was and whispered for Monty to explain what was happening. Justin could have kicked himself for drawing in so much unwanted attention. He should have just lied and said he would go then not show up.

Bryce stepped towards him with eyebrow arched in disbelief as if he been affronted. He crossed his arms over his chest, challenging him.

“What the hell, you’re really not coming Justy?”

Justin shrugged and shook his head, finally chancing a determined glance Bryce’s way and noticing the obvious darkened hue his otherwise usually bright blue eyes had taken. He was pissed but choosing not to outwardly show it, at least, not so much anyway.

“You and Jess hookin up?” Monty offered with a suggestive leer and Justin couldn’t help but snort. He hadn’t slept with Jessica since her party. It was hard enough for him to be around her and act normally after what happened, let alone be truly intimate with her in that fashion.

“I’m studying with a tutor.”

The room erupted with laughter and Bryce clapped him hard on back and he made an effort not to stumble forward. When he then kept a hand firmly planted on his shoulder, holding him in place, Justin chose not to visibly pull away. Bryce knew what he was doing and how uncomfortable it was making him, and because of that, he refused to give Bryce the satisfaction, no matter how much it made his skin crawl and how desperately he wanted to punch him in the face and run as fast as he could out of the room.

“And here I thought Atkins was the only dumbass around here!” Bryce joked.

“Suck it Walker!” Jeff responded in a sing-song voice, as he peered around his open locker, pausing to throw him the finger playfully.

“No, but I can get someone to do that for me!” Bryce shot back, returning the finger gesture while flashing Justin a too-quick-to-be-seen suggestive smirk and Justin felt as if he’d been sucker punched.

‘Did he just make a joke about...with me standing right here?!’

When Bryce tried to take a hold of his other shoulder, he yanked himself away hard, hitting Bryce's
hand away from him while barely resisting the urge to throw a punch at his face. His shoulder ached in protest from the swift and harsh action, but he ignored it as Bryce looked over at him, shocked then annoyed.

"Justin, what the hell is your-"

“Stay the fuck off of me!” Justin snarled angrily with a hateful scowl before Bryce could finish.

The room quieted down once more and there was sudden, thick tension in the air. It made Justin feel claustrophobic. He needed air.

“I...forgot my science book.” Was all he grumbled as he quickly made his way for the exit, eyes downcast, not daring to meet the stares of any of the those around him.

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It's just a few of the guys coming over and hanging out in the pool house, not a real big party.

Bryce.

Justin ignored the text, almost chucking his phone out of the open window before he opted to toss it one the floor in front of him instead and push it a small ways away from him with his foot. As he heard another buzz, he turned his face away from it.

He had gone back home. After his little episode in the locker room, he couldn’t stomach someone asking too many questions about it, so he chose not to stay with anyone. Though he definitely had no intention of staying here much longer either. Seth was there, already high or drunk, though thankfully was too preoccupied with bitching at his mother to care about his existence for now. As guilty as it made him feel and as much as he wanted to go out there and duke it out with the bastard, he couldn’t help but feel a little grateful to just be allowed to sit quietly in his room and be left alone.

He kept the lights off, listening to them argue as he tried not to think to hard about anything other than where he was going to spend the night (maybe the alleyway again, as long as that creepy bum was gone).

The sudden ‘ping’ of an incoming message disturbed him yet again. With a growl of annoyance, he got to his knees and reached over to snatch up the phone, intending to turn it off. As he began to hold down the power button to prompt the request, another message came in:

I know you're there. If you're reading this, respond!

Justin rolled his eyes as he sat back and leaned with his back against his wall, pulling his legs in and draping his arms over his knees and propping his chin up on them as he held up the phone to his face, frowning at it. After a minute of no response, another ping:

Come on, I miss hanging out with you!

Justin only watched as the icon indicating yet another message was coming through popped up, the phone illuminating his face in the darkness as that message came in:
We need to talk.

Then another message that caught him a little off guard:

We can't make things right if you won't let me.

Justin jumped when heard the front door slam, realizing Seth must have stormed out of the house as he heard his mother still fussing in the living room. Maybe the bastard would stay gone and he could stay the night after all. Another ping grabbed his attention:

Justin, just give me a chance. Please.

He knew better.

He knew better as he sat there actually contemplating what he wanted to do. As he finally began texting back, the prompt that Bryce had been texting something else disappearing instantly as he must have seen Justin replying. He knew this was a stupid, if not horrible idea, but a part of him felt like he owed it Bryce. To their longtime friendship. And as much as he loathed to admit it, a tiny part of him desperately wanted to give him a chance to explain himself. To try and make amends and salvage whatever it was they had left of their relationship.

With a shaky sigh and every voice in the back of his head screaming at him not to do it and downright calling him stupid, he finally pushed the send button to shoot him his simple response:

what time.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter may be posted early or later than usual, because I have some things going on next week. It just all depends on when I get the time to get the proofreading done!

Next time, Justin and Bryce share a heart-to-heart. Should be fun!
Making Amends

Chapter Summary

A chapter where two friends sit in warm water and have a deep, heart-to-heart conversation about some issues between them. Also Bryce may be, but don't quote me on this, kind of a dick.

Chapter Notes

**Warning!** This chapter contains general douchebaggery of varying degrees! You have been warned! ( ’▽’)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“—the game!”

“Hm?” Justin said with a start, blinking rapidly.

“You gonna start the game or what?” Montgomery demanded, looking annoyed.

Justin looked down at his hands as his fingers lightly traced over the analog stick and input buttons, suddenly remembering he was supposed to be playing video games right now.

'Fuck, how long did I zone out?'

Apparently long enough that everyone in room was staring at him.

“Hmmssorraraaa.” He drawled incoherently, yawning as he stretched his arms, almost dropping the controller as he didn’t have the best grip on it.

“How much weed have you had?” Zack ridiculed him, ruffling his hair and he half-heartedly shook him off, forcing a light chuckle.

“You're the only one 'round here that likes getting their ass pounded, bitch.”

Justin felt an sharp twinge of apprehension as the group began laughing and egging the trash talk on. He should be used to Monty and his bullshit but lately, he couldn’t help but feel more insulted. Like he should be taking the jabs personally instead of in light jest as he knew he meant it, that
maybe Monty knew more than he was letting on.

He said nothing however as they played a few rounds, choosing instead to let the ass whooping he delivered to Monty’s character be all the rebuttal he needed.

“Fuck!” Monty snarled as he slung the controller from his hands and the room erupted into more laughter and jeering as a few hands patted Justin on the back and shoulder for a job well done. He mostly ignored them, thoughts elsewhere, as they had been for most of the night and just in general lately. As the group settled down and Monty demanded another rematch, Justin declined as he put the controller down and rubbed his face, focusing his eyes before he got to his feet.

“Dude, you sure you’re alright?” Zack asked sounding more earnestly concerned than before while Alex picked up the controller and began to pick a character, giving Justin a curious aside glance before focusing back on the television.

“I’ll be back,” was all he said before he traveled outside, shutting the door to the pool house behind him.

It was a warm night with the moon peaking out from behind the clouds. The flood lights that illuminated the backyard cast gloomy shadows closer to the outreaches of the large yard, making it seem like they were reaching out to grab him and pull him into the darkness. Shivering at the thought, Justin moved toward the well lit area of the pool and took a seat in one of the nearby chairs surrounding it. He lounged back and simply stared at the water, marveling how it seemed to shimmer and glow thanks to the lights lining the walls of it. It made him briefly think about how he and Bryce once came out here when they were younger, swimming in the water after Mrs. Walker told them they weren't allowed to because it was too late. They had to turn off all the lights so they wouldn't get caught and he remembered how beautiful the pool looked as the moon reflected off of the water.

A hand hit his chest and he jumped, hissing when he bumped his arm on the armrest.

Bryce snickered down at him before tossing him a large towel that he fumbled to catch.

“Come on, let’s get in to the jacuzzi. We need to talk.”

Justin said nothing, only staring cautiously after Bryce before tossing a look back at the pool house when an eruption of laughter filtered from it. He wanted nothing more than to be back there as he slowly got to his feet and reluctantly shuffled closer to the pool, standing away from Bryce who’d already stripped down to his boxers and was getting in the warm bubbling water.

Justin stalled, making no effort to remove his own clothing and upon noticing, Bryce snorted.

“You’re not getting in with full cloths on.”

Justin couldn’t hide his obvious discomfort at the idea as he touched his forearm subconsciously. The prospect of getting in with Bryce had been dizzying enough, but the thought of doing it in just his boxers... 

“Justin,” Bryce called out to him, his voice friendlier and less demanding than before. “It’s fine. Get in with me.”

He turning to look back at the pool house once more, convincing himself that if he needed to, he could call for help. Zack was there and so was Alex, who no doubt would come looking for him if he was gone for too long anyway.

So he removed his shoes and socks, placing them by the chair before reluctantly removing his shirt
with the speed of an elderly person before tossing it over the back of the nearest pool chair. He adamantly refused to remove his jeans however, feeling the need to have some form of layer of protection and very cautiously, joined the older jock in the water. He sat as far away from Bryce as he possibly could, sitting across from him as to keep his eyes on him at all times. He pulled his legs in so that they had no chance of brushing up against Bryce and pressed his back into the granite wall so hard that it was beginning to hurt, almost as if he were trying to force merge with it.

Bryce watched the entire spectacle with amusement, shaking his head as he mocked him under his breath but spoke nothing further of it. Instead he casually started to idly chit-chat with him about various random topics, catching up somewhat. While Justin could admit that it was helping to loosen him up, he couldn't relax. He felt like he was being toyed with and the odd look in Bryce’s eyes every once and a while certainly wasn't helping matters.

As the night began to wear on, Bryce shut the bubbles off to the jacuzzi. Justin immediately stood up to get out but Bryce caught his arm and Justin stilled. He didn't pull away, all but freezing in place as he nervously waited to see what would happen, his right hand balling into a fist at his side, more than prepared to be used should the situation call for it. But Bryce only attempted to gentle coax him in to sitting back down, letting him go once he complied.

“So,” he started with a heavy sign, giving Justin an unflinching stare "about what happened at Jess’s party.”

Justin swallowed and set his features to remain as calm as he possibly could, feeling the looming sense of dread settling in the pit of his stomach.

“Why did you tell her I got into a fight with Seth," he blurted out almost immediately, almost stumbling over his words then clearing his throat, spoke more concisely "That's all I need to know. We don't need to talk about anything else."

“Sure we do, things have been off between us because of it.” Bryce lamented, though there was a hint of accusation behind his words. He was sure Bryce put a bulk of the blame on him for their current standing, and technically he could. If Bryce wanted to ignore the fact that it was his actions and him acting like an unapologetic asshole that started all of this to begin with. "And why do you think? She kept bugging me and you weren't answering her-or my-fucking calls. I tried to tell her it was just a fight but she kept insisting there was more to it because you looked 'too fucked up'."

Bryce paused to try and look over his body and Justin instinctively dipped down lower into the water to shield himself, already regretting that he'd taken off his shirt. Bryce ignored him and chose to continue "She wouldn't leave it alone, so I told her something believable. What, you wanted me to tell her that we fucked in her parents room?"

Bryce laughed at the notion and Justin flinched in disgust. How in the living fuck could he just laugh it off like it was no big deal? Like what they did was... Justin felt his anger rising at the thought, bobbing his right leg slowly under the water to steady his nerves. He chose not respond immediately and decided to watch how calm the water surrounding them looked using it as a method to calm himself down.

After a while, he heard Bryce continue “About what happened though, don't take it the wrong way: I don't want Jess or anything. I just wanted to get my dick wet and she was right there.”

Justin took a deep breath, swallowing his further agitation down but still said nothing. He only narrowed his eyes slightly at Bryce, who once he realized he was getting no response, pressed on “I honestly thought you wouldn't mind sharing.”
To this, Justin snapped at him with loathing “She’s my girlfriend, of course I would mind!”

Bryce rolled his eyes as he reclined, stretching his arms out along the Jacuzzi’s edge. “Is this shit with Jess what’s really bothering you?” He paused giving him a small, mockingly coy smile. "Or is it something else?"

Justin looked back down at the water, aggravated that Bryce was bothering to ask such a stupid question he already knew the answer to. That he was honestly trying to play this game with him when he was certain Bryce was at least some what aware of badly this had been affecting him.

“Well no shit.” he fumed.

Bryce gave him a dismissive hum before scoffing a little. “You’re overreacting. You know that right?”

Justin breathed air through his nose indignity, looking insulted at the insinuation. It was one thing to feel that way about himself and his own action—he at least had a somewhat understanding of what that was about and why he felt that way. But for Bryce to say it to him?

"Don't," he warned simply, jaw clenching with a stony expression on his face.

"Come on Justy, I thought you were bi," Bryce pressed on with an impish grin, paying his outrage no mind. "I figured fucking a dude didn’t bother you.”

“It doesn’t,” Justin admitted coldly, feeling uncomfortable as he subconsciously began rubbing one wrist under the water. “I just didn't want to with you.”

There was a flash of emotion Justin couldn't quite make out in Bryce's eyes before he challenged “Why not? You’re mine, right?”

Justin's eyes widened slightly, feeling a wave of panic as his heart began to beat faster. “What?!”

Bryce slightly inclined his head to the right, his smile widening. “You’re mine, like my best friend. We're close is all I'm saying, so if there was anyone you should be okay with doing it with, it’s me.”

Justin averted his gaze with an uneasy clear of his throat. He was certain that isn't what Bryce meant, not when he could vividly remember him claiming ownership over him just before they’d started, but he refused to argue the issue. When he didn't answer immediately, Bryce gave him an easy shrug and continued “I mean I knew if I ever went through with trying out guys, it was always going to be with you.”

Justin watched as the smile on Bryce's face softened into something more genuine, flirtatious even, resulting in making him feel even more uncomfortable than before. “You’re the only one I trust enough to do it with.” He chuckled softly to himself before looking Justin directly in the eye, holding his gaze. "You’re that special to me Justy. You always have been.”

Justin shifted in his seat in looking as ashamed as he felt, conflicted to realize that despite everything that had gone on between the two of them lately, what Bryce said still mattered to him. Knowing that Bryce presumably thought so much of and even possibly desired him in some fashion, filled him with an odd sense of flattery and he couldn’t deny that it meant something to him, as disgusting as it also felt. Old habits that had yet to die, he knew, but it made it no better.

Still...

“You didn’t stop.” He countered factually.
“...What?”

“I said no and you didn’t stop.” Justin reiterated stoically, watching Bryce expectantly. Bryce let out a heavy sigh, as if he was expecting this to come up and looked Justin in the eyes. He looked calm, prepared, but troubling so, not remorseful or full of regret.

“I was drunk. I didn’t mean anything by it.” He retorted simply, and Justin flexed his fingers out repeatedly before placing his hands in his lap to keep himself still. There was a tense silence between the pair as they simply watched one another, before slowly, Bryce cast him a insidious smile masquerading as an innocuous one.

“Sometimes I just like it a little rough and can push things a little far, but you know I didn't mean to hurt you.” He insisted, making his explanation sound innocent enough despite the conspicuous predatory like smirk stating otherwise. "But, come on. The girls I’ve been with before, they’ve never complained about it when I treated them that way. And well, it’s just that, we're guys. I figured you could handle it since," he paused and that smile took on a more openly contemptible edge. "they could.”

Justin felt worsening shame with every subsequent word, whether Bryce meant it as a stealth insult or not. Though he was certain that he did. He remembered how much he'd cried and begged and screamed, acting so fragile and weak-willed. He refused to outwardly show his hurt or distress however, keeping his features just as stoic as he had before as Bryce admitted with a air of smugness “To be honest, I was kinda surprised by how willing you were to do it. I figured you wou—"

“I did it for Jess.” Justin retorted immediately cutting him off with a spark of defiance. He wasn’t entirely sure what was making Bryce purposely omit that he had in fact, fought back against him once it became clear exactly how far he was willing to take things, but he certainly wasn’t going to let him believe he was willing to do for or because of him in the slightest.

Bryce arched his brow at him, nevertheless unconvinced. “The blowjob? Sure, but when we—"

“I did it. For. Jess. All of it.” He punctuated with emphasis, once again cutting him off and meeting Bryce’s gaze directly with an indomitable stare. Only for a matter of seconds, was there a look of utter resentment on Bryce's face, his eyes flashing with cold indignation before settling back into a more subdued and casually reserved expression, but Justin managed to catch it. And something just clicked.

“Does it bother you that I was willing to do something like that for her?” He demanded as realization dawned on his face.

Bryce snickered as if he were being ridiculous, giving a partial roll of his eyes as he leaned his head back and sunk lower into the water. “What the fuck are you talking about.”

“It bothers you that I was only willing to sleep with you because of Jessica.” Justin states firmly with a hint of accusation, watching Bryce’s body language for any clues, but was given little to nothing to work with.

“I just think it’s stupid and desperate that you would do something so reckless for some drunkin party broad you’ve only been dating for a couple of weeks.” Bryce corrected him rather coldly, tossing him a belittling look.

At this, Justin backed down, refusing to meet Bryce’s now unrelenting, judgmental stare. He wasn’t entirely sure how he to respond. He could tell Bryce was being serious about what he was saying and to that, he didn’t regret his decision, at least, not completely. Not if it meant keeping Jess safe
because he did like her, possible to an insurmountable amount, in just the little amount of time he had
gotten to know her. But he knew he hadn’t been wrong either: it did bother Bryce, whether he
wanted to admit it or not. Just like it had bothered Bryce when Hannah showed an interest in him
and he ‘warned’ him about her reputation. Or how he ‘warned’ Justin about ‘experimenting’ with
Alex once he accidentally confessed about kissing him, accusing the blond of taking advantage of
Justin’s inebriated state (the sheer irony of that now almost hurt him physically) and warned him to be
weary about trusting him after Jess and the list. Or when Bryce cautioned him about spending too
much time with Zack after his father died, because he was ‘concerned’ people would start accusing
Justin of trying to use his fellow basketball mate while he was vulnerable.

Now Jessica was nothing more than just some party girl, someone he definitely shouldn’t be putting
between he and Bryce. Over Bryce. Before Bryce. It was all starting to come together clearly and it
disturbed Justin far more than even he would care to admit.

“Come on, let’s go up to my room.”

"Wait, what?" Justin asked in alarm as he blinked out of his thoughts and watched as Bryce got out
of jacuzzi.

"We're going up to me room." Bryce repeated, clearly over having this conversation with him any
longer. "I got something for you up there."

The elder teen turned back to him expectantly, waiting.

Justin got out of the water and began toweling himself off as best he could, once again going as
slowly as possible to stall. Bryce simply watched his futile efforts in mild amusement before he
announced "You're gonna have to take your pants off now."

When Justin gave him a doubtful, worried look, Bryce rolled his eyes at him with impatient
annoyance. "I'm not letting you track water and shit into the house. Mom would kill me."

Justin cast a quick look back at the pool house, trying not to show how increasingly terrified he was
to follow the larger teen to a more reclusive spot, especially with little to no clothing on. It clearly
felt like a very bad idea to him, one he could and possibly would come to regret.

He let the soaked towel drop down to the ground, making no further effort to remove anymore of his
clothing or follow Bryce, instead standing idly in place as he lightly traced his fingers over one of the
bruises on his side. When he looked up, he caught Bryce staring and he quickly put his hands to his
side. Bryce moved a bit closer and Justin fought not to flinch away as the older teen marveled over
the fading bruising littering Justin's skin, as if it was the first time he'd actually taken the time to
notice them since he'd seen Justin without his shirt on. It probably was.

"I did all that?" He asked softly, his index and middle fingers nearly grazing Justin's side before the
latter twisted sharply away so that Bryce wouldn't touch him. He only glared at him in response and
Bryce brows furrowed a little. "Jesus."

Justin shifted uncomfortably, staring at his feet and hating the way Bryce watched him with such
scrutiny, not noticing until it was too late that Bryce had moved in even further. Before he could
react, he was pulled into a tight hug that made him instantly stiffen as his breathing hitched and his
eyes widened in alarm. He pulled back instantly, but Bryce held him there, tightening his grip.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” Bryce reassured him softly, sounding so sincere that for a split second,
Justin would have been tempted to believe it if he didn't already know better.
As such he only responded with a soft, humorless snort as he forced his body to relax, nodding against Bryce’s shoulder as he gave him a minute hug back, hoping it would be enough to make Bryce willing him to let go. Instead, it seemed to give Bryce incentive consent to deepen the hug, much to Justin’s dismay, even more so when he felt a small tingle of warmth and comfort from the act that made his self loathing flare up, hating how starved for affection he was and how easily receptive he was to it, even when he knew better.

A robust a grunt like wail of panic and irritation escaped his throat that went largely ignored, much to his chagrin. After a few more excruciatingly uncomfortable minutes, Bryce finally broke the drawn out embrace and Justin backed up into the pool chair behind him. Bryce rolled his eyes and muttered for him to wait a second before he strolled over to the pool house and disappeared inside, reemerging after a few minutes with sweats and a t-shirt that belonged to Justin. He tossed the clothing at him and Justin caught it with a curious frown.

"Put them on in the kitchen when we go in. You're still not tracking water in because you're too fucking scared to take your pants off around me." He replied bluntly as he made his way towards the main house, not waiting for Justin to follow him. Justin waited until Bryce was inside before he quickly ducked behind a few bushes, safely out of view of both the pool house and the kitchen window and changed into the dry clothing, opting to keep on his wet boxers as he didn't want to chance going 'commando'.

He chanced another glance at the pool house, thinking of simply 'forgetting' to follow Bryce and go back within the safety of numbers when the backdoor swung open.

"Justin!" Bryce barked, stepping back out on to the patio, glaring around to find him. Justin slowly emerged, smoothing his shirt out. "Let's go, I don't have all night!"

Very reluctantly, he followed him inside, letting Bryce guide him throughout the house he knew so well and into his bedroom. He kept the door open, much to Justin’s relief despite already knowing it was probably only being done in an factitious effort to regain his trust.

Bryce went over to his dresser, opened the first drawer and pulled out a white case before tossing it Justin's way, who just managed to catch it before it dropped to the ground. He looked down at it.

A cellphone.

A very expensive smart cellphone.

“Since your old one keeps crapping out.” Bryce shrugged with a smile, giving Justin a knowing, meaningful glare. Justin only blinked and looked back down at it, fingers tracing over the letters on the box. While his old phone was a little on the beat up end, it still worked perfectly fine and they both knew that. Just like they both knew that wasn't the reason he'd gotten him this gift.

“Thanks.” Justin mused, managing a begrudgingly soft smile as he continued ogling the box and feeling—cold. Empty and hollow, but he continued to wear that smile like the paper-thin disguise that it was, praying that it was working.

“Don’t mention it.” Bryce replied warmly. “Just a little something to say I’m sorry. For everything.”

Justin looked up at him, wanting to believe it. That Bryce meant all of this and that he was truly sorry and that this wasn’t just another attempt to get his guard down and manipulate him. Except Justin couldn’t because he knew and always had, the type of person Bryce was, even if he'd done his absolute best to delude himself and ignore it until recently. Just to prove his point, Justin searched
Bryce's eyes for any hint of sincerity and found none, until Bryce added “I missed talking to you, missed this. Us.” He decided not to press the issue, accepting that Bryce meant what he'd said if only because he already knew it wasn't in the straight forward way it'd come off and that there was a hidden meaning behind the words.

It was keeping that in mind, that while Justin turned the box in his hands, he was left wondering if he should bother even keeping it, knowing Bryce would take it as a sign that all was forgiven. Which it wasn't. However, he wanted to move on from this and he still wanted to go through with his plan of getting his life back to normal or at least making it appear as though it were. Bryce was a part of his life, whether he wanted him to be or not, and as such, would be integral to ensuring there was seemingly nothing amiss with him. He couldn't just cut him out abruptly without people noticing and thus, asking questions, nevermind that even he could admit he risked the chance of his life falling into further turmoil—there was still the small problem of Seth and generally having a steady support system. Continuing to try and just ignore him was taking too much of toll on him as it were, however, he still wasn't keen on being around Bryce and was certain the only reason he was stomaching it so well now was because of the weed he'd been supplied with before hand.

Something would have to give, and soon, but he needed time to figure it all out, and wanted to do it the somewhat most comfortable way possible. So despite how much it hurt him, he would have to keep Bryce in his life. He would have to find a way to reconcile his feelings and let it all go. Somehow.

“...Yeah.” He said finally, placing the phone on a nearby dresser and offering Bryce a smile that he knew was far more sorrowful than he'd meant it to come off. "I miss talking to you too."

—///—

“Thanks for the ride.” Justin replied in a quiet tone, not really looking in Bryce’s direction but instead out of the window as they drove along, his hands resting in his lap.

"No problem.” Bryce replied just as he stopped at the sign, then hooked a right to turn onto the street where Mrs. Foley lived.

He'd fucked up, that much he was willing to admit.

They'd gone back to the pool house right after he was given the new phone, only stopping by the kitchen to grab another case of beer. He instantly felt safer and behaved more comfortably being surrounded by the others, in particular Zach and Alex. It was exactly what encouraged him to let his guard down enough to partake in more of the weed and booze offered to him, which naturally loosen him up and dulled his senses. Before he knew it, he'd fallen into a semi comfortable sleep—well, one better than any he'd had over the last couple of days at least—leaning against Alex' shoulder.

He awoke the next morning shifting uncomfortably, eyes springing open as he instantly realized someone was laying next to him. Someone with a much larger frame than Alex. He quickly rolled over and upon seeing that it was Bryce, almost fell out of the bed as he scrambled to get to his feet. He proceeded to go into full blown panic mode, hyper ventilating as he checked himself over to make sure Bryce hadn’t taken advantage of him while he was incapacitated. He found that he hadn't been but it did little to reassure or actually make him feel better as he gradually and very slowly, began to calm down.
Only then did he realize Bryce had been watching him the entire time. He seemed to find the entire ordeal amusing, calmly watching the freak out from the comfort of his bed with a rather condescending smile as he idly played on his cell phone. He spoke nothing of it however, only casually offering him breakfast, as if what he'd just witnessed was natural and no big deal at all. Though Justin had more than a passing thought that it more like he was deriving some form of pleasure from the fact that he was afraid of him, which naturally bothered him, but not nearly as much as Bryce’s comment once they'd begun making their way to the kitchen:

“You should relax. If I wanted to do something with you again, I’d wait until you were awake,” then after a pause, he added with a secretive, sly smirk “and sober.”

To say the unspoken promise that Bryce had every intention of continuing their little arrangement, particularly that aspect of it, had put every sense of his on a high alert ever since was an understatement. The only bright side he could find was that it shattered in annoying lingers of doubt and proved to him that he'd been right in his assessment. That the talk from the night before was nothing more than pointless fluff designed to get his guard down. A band-aid Bryce had been hoping would help him ‘get over it’ so he would be more receptive to the idea should—no, Bryce was making it clear that it was more a matter of when it would—present itself again.

He had no intention of ever finding himself in such a predicament again and it started with him declining breakfast and insisting on going back to his mother's place. Except Bryce in turn insisted on him staying the rest of the weekend and when he refused, he chose to forgo eating breakfast as well to drive him home despite Justin's continuous protests of being able to walk there.

The ride had been mostly quiet thus far, save Bryce trying to strike up small talk every now and again that Justin barely engaged in. He just wanted to get to the house and more importantly, get away.

“Are you sure you don’t want to crash at my place? You know I don’t mind—"

“It’s cool. I don’t want Mom to worry.” Justin stated bluntly as moved to unlock the passenger side door, barely waiting for the vehicle to come to a complete stop as he opened it. Bryce only gave him an unconvinced, amused smile at the notion of Amber Foley giving a remote shit about her son, but said nothing as he shut the car off while Justin quickly got out of the jeep. Bryce made no attempt to get out himself or even unbuckle his seat belt. He simply waited, watching Justin which unnerved him to no end. Regardless, he spun on his heel and made his way up the walkway, letting out a breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding. Once he reached the front door, he jingled the handle.

Locked.

He took a step back and looked at the house more closely. He could see a light on in the living room and hear the television, so someone was there. Nervously, he pounded on the door. When no one answered, he tried again, this time shouting. “Ma, it’s me! Open the—"

The door swung open hard and wide and there in the doorway stood not his mother, but her shitty boyfriend Seth. The elder man leaned against the doorway with his arm up, scowling down at Justin who glared with equal amounts of loathing. He should have fucking known he wouldn’t be so lucky to have this jackass not be here.

“What the fuck do you want.” Seth demanded coldly, blocking Justin’s way into the house when he tried to side step him.

“I fucking live here!” Justin snapped, barely feeling any real truth behind the words he just spoke.
"So get out of my way!"

“Watch your fucking tone, you piece of shit.” Seth snarled, pushing Justin back almost completely off the stoop, with the brunette stumbling to catch himself before he fell down completely. “I ain’t gotta do shit and I sure as fuck don’t feel like being bothered by your sorry ass right now! So take it back wherever the hell you came from and get the fuck out of here!”

Justin’s nose flared as his fist balled up at his sides, something Seth caught. A dangerous glint caught his eyes as he stood up completely straight, glaring hatefully at Justin. "You wanna do something about it, you butt fucking bitch?” he challenged with a hard sneer, showing barely contained restraint. Justin swallowed, saying nothing and even taking a step back away from him, knowing exactly where this would lead but tried looking defiant none the less, staring Seth down. He didn’t need this shit right now. He just wanted to go to his room and rest before school tomorrow.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked over to see Bryce now standing beside him, pulling him back a little with an encouraging gaze that clearly indicated he had his back before he faced Seth himself.

“Justin just came to grab a few things.” Bryce stated in a calm yet authoritative manner. “So he'll be in and out and we’ll be on our way—unless we have a problem.”

Bryce gave Seth a look that spoke volumes, absolutely daring him to deny him while never taking his eyes off of him and adding “I can always call for an escort if you prefer.”

Seth’s lower jaw clenched as he looked from Bryce to Justin then back again, knowing full well what Bryce meant when he said an ‘escort’. With a angry grunt, he begrudgingly stepped aside then completely out of the doorway as he brushed past the two teens and down the walkway.

“You got five minutes.” He boomed as he walked further away from the house, attempting to retain the illusion of being in control over the situation. Bryce scoffed and rolled his eyes, sneering in disgust at the retreating man’s back before he hit Justin lightly on the arm with the back of his hand.

“Go get your shit so we can get the fuck outta here.”

“...Yeah, alright.” Justin agreed reluctantly, sounding almost defeated as he sulked his way into his house, taking a quick glance around the place and noting his mother sitting on the couch. He couldn't help but feel hurt that she’d been sitting here the entire time, not bothering once to try and help him just moments before and was now, completely ignoring his presence. Typical of her and he should be used to it by now, but still.

“Hey Mom.”

“Ms. Foley.” Bryce said politely with a charming smile. She barely looked up, making a noise of greeting as she leaned back in to the couch, looking spaced out and completely out of sorts.

“Alright then.” Bryce chuckled to himself with a judgmental, condescending smirk as he averted his eyes away from her and glanced over at Justin.

“Come on.” The brunette murmured defensively as he eyed the living room, particularly the drugs just sitting out in the open on the coffee table with disdain before continuing onward to his bedroom. He would be embarrassed but Bryce already knew ever dirty secret there was to know about his family at this point.
“I should be fine to stay here. He probably won’t even come back.” Justin said in a half-hearted attempt, not believing his own lies as they sprang forth from his mouth.

Neither did Bryce. He only arched his brows at him, looking almost insulted, as if to say ‘yeah right’ to his assertion. “Come on, I’m not leaving you here with that piece of shit around,” he tried to look uncomfortable. "and not with your Mom, uh, you know.”

“Yeah, I get it.” Justin snapped defensively, taking a moment to smooth his hair back before taking a breath and continuing. “Look, she’s got her shit out of whack sometimes, but if anything happens, she’ll handle him. I’ll be fine.”

Bryce’s contemptible look only worsened as it bordered on condescendingly sympathetic now, with Justin being able to tell that he was trying not laugh outright. If that snorting of his was any indication. He knew, however, that Bryce wouldn’t push the issue, at least about his mother. Despite all of her flaws, they both knew Justin cared for her deeply, even if the affection he received in returned was lacking, so trying to bad mouth her as a means to an end would be prove futile. He’d have to try a different tactic if he was going to get his way. Justin didn’t have much hope though: Bryce was the master of getting what he wanted.

‘You have the bruises to prove it.’ Justin teased himself viciously without remorse as he eyed a few things he would more than likely end up taking with him.

“Look, Justin, I get where you’re coming from. Really. But I can’t leave you here knowing what could happened to you.” Bryce insisted, trying to sound as earnest as he possible could while eyeing him with great concern. Justin only gave him a passing glance as he thought to bring his favorite gray hoodie, waiting for whatever he had up his sleeve.

“We both saw how Seth came at you and your Mom. . .I get that it's normally different, but she's clearly is in no condition to help you now.” Bryce continued darkly, both knowing he was being very generous when describing his mother right now.

“Get to the point.” Justin pushed, no longer wishing to entertain Bryce’s little performance.

“If you stay, I’ll have to call the police.” Bryce started finally with an apologetic grimace of a smile that didn’t quite meet the mirth or triumph in his eyes.

Justin took in a audible deep breath.

'Good tactic.'

“Threatening to get my Mom arrested. Guess I can’t say no to that!” Justin chuckled bitterly as he snatched up his practice jersey harshly and tossed it into his duffel bag.

“No, whatever the hell she’s doing in your living room would get her arrested.” Bryce corrected him calmly. “I would just be doing my civic duty as your friend or some shit. If I leave you here knowing what could happen and something does, then it’s on me. And we can’t have that.”

He looked over at Justin with a hint of disappointment. “You should be grateful.” He chastised looking exhausted, as if it were tiring him just to say it. Justin stopped mid bag stuffing and glared at Bryce, opening his mouth to angrily protest but spoke before he could respond.

“I’m not leaving you here.” Bryce repeated in a firmer tone of finality, folding his arms over his chest, daring Justin to argue with him further.

“I get it, I’m packing, so stop bitching.” Justin snapped moodily, giving up as he finished packing,
silently cursing Seth for inadvertently giving Bryce just the excuse he needed to get him to stay with him for an indeterminate amount of time. Effectively trapping him, at least until he could find a different arrangement for himself.

Justin moved a ball of lint with the toe of his shoe as he grabbed up his book bag, hooking it over his shoulder then zipping up his duffel bag, which Bryce reached over and sling over his shoulder before Justin could. Justin eyed him a moment before nodding absently at the gesture.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. Now let's go. I would hate to have to call the police.” He reminded him in warning, glancing at Justin over his shoulder.

“Yeah.” Justin responded flatly, not bothering to hide the fact he didn't believe him in the slightest as they started for the door, passing him by on the way.

They only managed to get a few steps into the hallway before Bryce spoke up. "Hey, about the pool house."

Justin paused, rounding on him. He looked guilty—or rather was pretending to be and Justin instantly felt anxious but irritated more than anything as he simply waited for him to finish.

“It’s getting cleaned all day because of the party last night, so you’ll have to stay in the main house.”

Justin’s eyes narrowed. Sure, they could be a rowdy bunch, especially when drunk but he didn't think it had gotten that bad.

"Okay, fine, I'll pick a guest room to stay in then," Justin retorted factually but Bryce melodramatic hold of the word "Eeeeeeehhhh." made him sigh. "What."

"It'll have to be in my room again: Mom and Dad will be home in the next week or two and we have to keep the house together, looking perfect or some shit.” Bryce replied with genuine annoyance before his features softened seemingly at the prospect of Justin having to sleep near him again. "It's easier if you just stay in my room until the pool house gets put back together."

"Of course.” Justin responded in a dry, flat tone and Bryce simply clapped him on the back, smiling. "Think of it as a sleepover, you know, like back when we were kids!"

"Yeah." was all Justin said before turning on his heel and walking away, ignoring the smirk that was forming on Bryce's lips. Just as always, Bryce had managed beguile him into getting his way, frustrating Justin to no end, especially now that they weren't exactly on the best of terms. Then again, maybe he shouldn’t be so annoyed with these ‘unexpected’ turn of events.

He should probably just be grateful.

Chapter End Notes

In the next chapter, Clay has an unexpected run in and starts acting like a rebel!
Chapter Summary

Justin continues to deal with the whole 'trying to be around Bryce' thing. Clay makes his first attempt to talk to Justin.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Justin yawned audibly as he fought to stay awake, stretching out his limbs and popping a few of his joints in the process. Once he was done, he pulled his legs in and folded his arms over his knees so he could prop up his chin on them, resting the balls of his feet on the end of the comfy armchair. He stared with boredom at the adjacent wall to his left, focusing on nothing in particular as his head began to slowly fall more to the right and his eyes fluttered shut. Seconds later, he jolted awake with an audible gasp, almost as if he were having trouble breathing. His eyes were wide and wild with alarm as he quickly looked around the room to ensure that he was still alone and hadn't fallen asleep for too long. He listened to the still, quiet house with the only sound wafting into his ears being his own breathing which was beginning to even out. Calmer now, he settled back down, once again propping his chin up as he now stared directly in front of him.

His eyes focused on the inactive fireplace, particularly on one of the paintings that hung just above it directly in the center. Though he couldn't see it very well in the darkened room, he knew the Walker Family portrait well enough. Mr. and Mrs. Walker standing behind their son who sat between the two of them, with Mr. Walker's right hand resting on Bryce's shoulder. All with charming, welcoming smiles plastered on their faces. The picture perfect family.

Justin could almost feel those tauntingly bright mirthful blue eyes boring into to him and he forced himself to look away from it, focusing instead on one of the many outlines of various trophies the Walker men had earned throughout the years.

It wasn't as if Bryce had actually done anything to him recently to cause him so much distress. In fact, if he were being perfect honest, Bryce had actually been quite nice to him, maybe even a little more so than usual. He'd spent the entire previous day outright spoiling him, doing whatever he wanted to do for their activities, eating his favorite dishes for all their meals, getting him an entire bag of weed to himself and a new bong to go with it, just the works. By nightfall, Justin had began to feel out right bad and guilty for still feeling so apprehensive around Bryce, but the truth of the matter was he was still having a hard time letting his guard down after what happened. So having to sleep near Bryce in capacity proved to be next to impossible for him.

He ended up sitting on the edge of Bryce's bed, waiting for the latter to fall asleep before taking a pillow and going to sit in a far corner of the room. With his back flush against the wall, he placed the pillow in his lap and hugged it whenever he felt his most anxious, watching the steady rise and fall of Bryce’s chest. In a vain attempt to ease his mind—as well as growing tired of the constant throngs of panic that threatened him whenever Bryce shifted in his slumber—he ended up sneaking out of the room and going to sit in the study. And thus began the rest of his night being trapped in a hellish cycle of sitting in quiet, self-imposed isolation as he drifted in and out of a fleeting slumber. All because he couldn't let go his arrant fear that Bryce would try to assault him while he was unaware
and defenseless.

He felt his eyelids began to slowly close as they became increasing heavy, his need to sleep clawing at the core of his being. His body begged him to relax long enough so that he could catch a quick nap but he recoiled at the idea, having to do nothing more than simply picture Bryce walking into the room to make him open his eyes fully again.

Only to nearly jump out of his skin and fall out of the chair when he found himself staring almost directly into sparkling blue eyes.

Justin struggled to steady his breathing as he quickly looked around the now sunny lit room, peering down at himself to ensure he was still dressed properly then over at Bryce who was staring at him in annoyance, clearly jaded by this newfound routine of his.

“What are you doing in here?” Bryce questioned curtly, in an openly accusatory manner as his eyes narrowed somewhat. He folded his arms over his chest as he waited for an answer and Justin could only manage a slight shrug and a tired yawn as his lack of sleep and fatigue caught up to and hit him all at once.

"I couldn't sleep and didn't want to bother you." He slurred truthfully, now sounding as sleepy as he looked as he silently questioned just when exactly he'd nodded off to sleep.

"So that's what you freaked out for when you saw me in here?" Bryce challenged sarcastically and Justin barely managed a sluggish nod as he made an attempt to get up—or at least he did in his mind because his body never actually moved.

"You were like -yawn- right there. It was like the painting moved or something." Justin explained as best he could and Bryce’s brows furrowed in confusion.

"What?"

"I fell asleep looking at picture, woke up, you there, moving picture." Justin tried explaining further, making a lazy circling gesturing with his right hand as he spoke before letting it drop on the armrest.

Bryce only arched a brow as he looked back at the family portrait, then back at Justin with in amusement. "Are you high?"

"Sleepy." Justin corrected him with a slight frown as he sluggishly scratched his head.

Bryce slowly nodded and softened up just enough to uncrossed his arms.

“Well look man, it’s morning so we better get to school.” he announced while pointing his left thumb over his shoulder.

Justin nodded, trying to will his legs to stop pretending they were gelatin so that he could actually stand up, giving up after the second half-assed attempt to do so. Bryce rolled his eyes at this and openly laughed.

"You really look like shit when you've got no sleep." he joked as he helped him to his feet, pulling him up by the arms. Justin didn’t have the energy to pull away or struggle, so he allowed it and let himself be guided safely into the kitchen. Bryce sat him down carefully on a stool at the kitchen counter before going to get the pair something to eat for breakfast.

"I feel like shit." Justin joked back finally half asleep, yawning loudly before folding his arms onto the counter and resting his head atop them.
Bryce glanced back at him quickly. “Well nobody told your dumb ass to try and sleep on the floor or in a cramped armchair.”

Justin frowned, realizing Bryce had at some point witnessed him hiding in the corner of his bedroom but was too sleepy to give it his full energy and the scathing rebuttal it properly deserved. So he chose to stay quiet and simply watched as he moved around the kitchen.

“Why don't you take a nap? We can skip first and catch second period.” Bryce offered eventually over his shoulder and Justin immediately shook his head.

"I'm fine."

“You're about to fall off the stool.” Bryce counter as he came back with two plates of soft scrambled eggs with cheese, slices of bacon and two triangular pieces of toast slathered in butter. He ruffled Justin's hair playfully which made the brunette attempt to pull away and almost resulted in him falling off of the stool and face-planting onto the glossy wooden floor.

Bryce frowned as that same jaded look from before returned. "Want me to get you a high chair?"

"Fuck you.” Justin grumbled moodily then snapped to full attention, looking fearful and alert when what he just said dawned on him. "I didn't mean, I meant-"

"Relax douchenozzel, I know what you meant.” Bryce snapped before going to the refrigerator to grab a carton of orange juice. Justin jumped a little when he returned and slapped it on the counter with with loud bang, keeping a tight grip on it as he watched Justin with a eerily calm expression.

"Take your breakfast, grab one of the guest bedrooms, and catch some sleep.” He ordered firmly, inclining his head just slightly to the right as he spoke and pushing one of the plates closer to Justin. "I'll get you up later."

Justin swallowed lightly as he quickly flicked his eyes down to glance at the plate then back up to Bryce. “You don't to. I don't need to take-"

"Stop with this weird bullshit.” Bryce ordered bluntly, while his glare hardened at Justin momentarily. He poured orange juice into one of the nearby glasses without looking, never breaking their eye contact. "We're still you friends. I'm allowed to do shit for you."

Then he narrowed his eyes at him in deliberate suspicion. "Right? We are still friends, aren't we?"

Justin nodded quickly if not uncomfortably. "Yeah, man, of course."

"And everything is square between us?" Bryce pushed, pouring orange juice into the other glass while he spoke.

"Yeah, yeah. We're fine." Just insisted, adverted his gaze to the marble counter top so that Bryce couldn't see his hesitation and uncertainty in that moment. He was pretty certain it hadn't worked, if the look on Bryce's face now was anything to go by, and Justin desperately wished he could be anywhere else in this moment. However, Bryce didn't push the issue. He only pushed one of the glasses of orange juice closer to him before pointing for him to get out of the room.

Justin rubbed the back of his head, feeling awkward, guilty, annoyed, just a torrent of emotions as he tried to think of a way to ease the tension between them but coming up with nothing except doing as he was told. So the quietly took the plate and juice, mumbled his thanks and leaving the room immediately, quickly picking the nearest guest room to his left. He sat the food and drink down on a nearby dresser and locked the door behind him, glancing around the room before his eyes settled on
a wooden chair near the corner desk. He quickly took it and wedged it against the door to hold the
knob in place then went back over to his meal and scarfed it down as fast as he possibly could.

He barely had time to close his eyes properly once he began leaning back, practically already asleep
before his head ever hit the soft mattress.

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“I thought you said you would get me up for second period.”

“I tried. You dead bolted the door and since me beating on it didn’t wake you the fuck up, I figured
you needed the extra sleep.” Bryce retorted, bringing his car to a stop at the a red light. He made a
face as a bubblegum pop song started to play and quickly leaned forward to press the button on the
radio to find a more suitable station.

Justin said nothing, leaning back in the passenger side seat with his book bag in his lap, trying his
hardest not to nod off again. The nap ended up being a bad idea, as he was just more irritable than
before from not gaining nearly enough sleep from it, though the horrendous nightmare that ended up
wrenching him from said troubled slumber probably didn’t help matters. Nor did the fact that he
knew it wasn’t the first one he’d experienced since the night of the party and it undoubtedly would
not be the last for possibly a very long time.

“You alive over there, Justy?” Bryce asked indifferently, breaking into his thoughts.

“I'm great.” He rebutted with the same enthusiasm just as his phone pinged, the new one, and he
took it out to see he’d gotten a notification.

Are you coming to school? Is everything okay? Where are you?

Jess. He completely forgot to call and let her know he would be showing up late today.

Curing low under his breath at his mistake, he slid the interface open and immediately replied back,
telling her he was already on the way and not to worry.

She responded back and he sent her a smiling emoji before turning the screen off.

“You don’t find that suffocating? Her checking up on you all the time?” Bryce asked nonchalantly
as he gave his passenger a quick glance. The look that Justin was giving him made him hold his
fingers up in surrender as he kept hold of the steering wheel by hooking it with his thumbs. “I’m just
saying she’s a little clingy.”

“No she's not, she's just worried about me.” Justin corrected him defensively in annoyance while
tossing the phone in his book bag and zipping it up.

“Well if you weren't being such a moody asshole, she wouldn't be so worried.” Bryce shot back
condescendingly, glancing over at Justin again before adding “or blowing up my phone.”

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about," Justin countered testily, ignoring the 'yeah right'
quick glance Bryce tossed his way before adding “and I’ll tell her stop calling you.”

“Or just stop acting like such a dipshit so she won’t need to in the first place.” Bryce countered.
Justin opened his mouth but quickly clamped it shut again, refusing to dignify him with a comeback upon realizing there a chance Bryce was trying to entice a certain kind of response from him on purpose. He instead focused on staring out of the passenger side window, tuning Bryce out complete and allowing a deafening silence to form between the two of them for the rest of the trip. He still refused to look over at Bryce when they finally arrived in the school parking lot, ignoring the light humming the elder jock was doing under his breath as he found a parking spot beside Marcus's car. Justin quickly unbuckled his seat belt and moved to get out of the car, jimmying the handle to let himself out and instantly feeling a spike of panic when the door wouldn't budge.

"You have to wait until I turn the car completely off cause it's got this weird safe lock thing." Bryce reminded him, looking at Justin peculiarly as he finally shut the vehicle off.

"Are you sure you're okay?" He asked him skeptically. "Do you even want to be here today?"

"No, but I'm here, so let's go in." Justin announced, moving to get out of the car but stopping in mid-movement when Bryce put his hand on his shoulder to keep him from leaving, causing him to stiffen in place.

"Justin," he began slowly. "if you don't want to be here, we can just take off. We can go wherever ever you want and just hang out for the day."

He smiled, looking blatantly hopeful that he would agree to go elsewhere. Unsettled by the prospect, it only strengthened Justin's resolve not to do so under any circumstances.

"I already told Jess I was coming. She'll be looking for me." He announced, thanking ever deity he knew that Jess had texted him this morning inquiring about him and his whereabouts. Then the traces of a cocky smirk touched the corners of his mouth as he threw back in Bryce's face, "I have to stop acting like a dipshit, remember? Lying that I'm coming then not showing up won't help with that."

"Fair enough." Bryce scoffed in light amusement, holding up a hand in defeat all the while hiding his disappointment under a momentary playful smile that faltered as he pushed "So you're sure you're going to be alright then? You're not going to get in there and start acting weird n' shit all day? No more of this mopey, overreacting bullshit you've been pulling lately?"

Justin fought to keep from responding in the manner he truly desired to at the jab, not wanting to chance angering Bryce while the two were alone and he was practically cornered. Instead he offered up his own weak smile in return as he tried to relax and stop showing how tense he was being in this situation or how he truly pissed he was at the insinuation.

"Yeah, I promise I'm fine," he replied, then after thinking it over for a second, he added with reluctance "I'm sorry I've been so...you know. It's just I'm still tired and sleepy."

"Sure." Bryce smiled, clearly not believing his explanation for a second but once again choosing not to push the matter further. Justin was becoming very weary of his reasoning for constantly doing this, but decided not to dwell on it for now, filing it away mentally as the two of them simply stared at one another for an increasingly awkward length of time that was growing more so by the second. Finally, Bryce arched his brows up at him expectantly.

"So get out of my car? I'll see you inside?" He said coolly and Justin averted his gaze, feeling a little stupid for not doing so sooner.

"Right, sorry, tired." Justin explained grumpily and Bryce just nodded as he unbuckled his own seat
belt, paying Justin no further attention as he reached over the back of passenger seat to grab all the he
would need from the backseat.

Justin quickly got out of the car and began jogging up the walkway to enter the building, expecting
to feel a wave of relief once he'd gotten away from Bryce but was surprised and troubled that he felt
no better than he had just mere moments ago.

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"You've got to be fucking kidding me!" Clay hissed through clenched teeth in exasperation as he
fruitlessly continued to yank at the handle of his locker. He let out a growl of frustration and
smacked it with his open palm, ignoring the curious glances of other students passing by before he let
his forehead collide with the cool metal surface. He closed his eyes and began to mentally count to
ten as slowly as he could to try to keep a level head.

His day had been going absolutely stellar thus far.

First, his alarm clock stalled which resulted in him waking up late. He ended up having to forgo
breakfast just to ensure he would be able to make to school on time. Since he'd woken up late, he
missed any chance he would have had to get a ride from either his friends or his parents, which
resulted in him having to ride his bike through the rain. This wouldn't have been so bad if some
asshole hadn't purposely decided to drive as fast as he could through a large puddle along the side of
the road to splash water on him, almost knocking him off of his bike. Any attempts he made to try
and dry off proved to be fruitless and by the time first period came around, he was already freezing
cold. Then his teacher decided the day’s assignment needed to be done in pairs and he'd been stuck
with Ryan Shaver, who proceeded to gossip and bitch 90% of the time, driving Clay insane. When
they turned in 'their' work-the bulk of which he had done alone-Ryan decided to have a passionate
disagreement with the teacher about the one point she’d deducted from the assignment, insisting on
Clay staying to be 'moral support' and to stand in solidarity with him throughout the entire ordeal.

It made him late for his second period, which earned him extra homework in the form of a three page
ey essay on the importance of attendance and attending classes on time.

Now here he was trying to change out his books and make it to his next class on time, which
normally wouldn’t be a problem—except his locker decided it was the perfect time to jam itself shut.

He tried yanking at the locker again and when it refused to budge, he punched it, cursing and
shaking his hand as it began throbbing in pain. Discouraged and defeated, he turned on his heel to
go to class sans the books he needed. In his haste and lack of paying proper attention, he
immediately bumped into something solid, dropping to the floor in a heap.

"Ow.” he grunted out as he took a few seconds to collect himself, surprised when two hands took
him by the arms and helped him get to his feet.

“Watch where you’re going.” a familiar voice murmured grudgingly and Clay looked up to see none
other than Justin Foley glaring back at him in mild annoyance.

“Hey!” He cried out in surprise with wide eyes and the jock frowned at him as he straightened
himself up and adjusted his gym bag.

“What.”
“You’re at school!” Clay announced then winced openly at how dumb he sounded, saying something so obvious. Justin seemed to agree with his sentiment as he gave him a scoffing laugh of contempt.

“Well no shit.” He drawled sarcastically, arching a brow at Clay before following it up with a yawn that he covered with the back of his hand as he stretched.

“Yeah I guess I had that coming.” Clay replied sheepishly before glancing away awkwardly. He licked his lips, eying the small mess that had been made before kneeling down to pick it up. Justin made no move to assist him, watching him for a few seconds before growing bored and making a move to side step him and his mess to continue on his way.

"Oh um, hey!” Clay called after him, quickly arranging the supplies in a small pile next to his locker before turning his full attention back to Justin. The jock paused, turning back to look at Clay with a mixture of impatience and slight irritation.

“Are you doing okay?” Clay asked meaningfully, making sure to look at him in a heartfelt way to show that he was sincere.

Justin didn't hide how taken aback he was by the question, batting his eyes while he furrowing his eye brows and frowned in abject confusion at him. Then just like that, his expression gradually devolved into a more aloof state, though now there was a hint of curiosity reflecting in his eyes as they narrowed.

“Why do you care?” He asked softly, clearly full of suspicion but with no clear malice behind his words. Clay cleared his throat, feeling a little more reassured by Justin's seeming willingness to not simply brush him aside or ignore him.

“I—uh,” then suddenly Clay found himself clamping his mouth shut, feeling more subconscious about what he wanted to say as he realized that technically, Justin was absolutely right to question him. He technically shouldn’t care. They didn’t really know each other too well, nor did they have most of the same circle of friends or hang outs. Nevertheless, just one good look at Justin was enough to deter any reservations or nervousness he had in his willingness to speak with him. He looked exhausted, with little bags under his eyes denoting that he wasn't achieving enough sleep. The bruising on his face had completely faded but he could still make out some of the bruising on his neck, with the teeth markings having completely scabbed over and threatening to leave a permanent scar.

He only became aware of how long he had been standing there in unnerving silence while he just stared at—or rather through—Justin when the latter clapped his hands in front of his face as loudly as possibly, making Clay jump slightly. He shook his head a little, noticing that Justin was now standing closer and looking more agitated than before as he crossed his arms over his chest.

Clay swallowed a little. “Sorry, what?”

"Why did you ask if I was okay?” Justin demanded, exasperated. “And why do you keep staring at me like that all the fucking time?!”

"I'm sorry, I just, I was making sure you looked better.” Clay babbled, avoiding to look at Justin directly as he was now subconscious about his staring. "You looked hurt and I was worried."

"Why.” Justin demanded.

"Because it looked. . .bad.” Clay stated as he uncomfortably shifted his weight from his left to his
right leg, finally having the courage to look up at Justin as he took in a calming breath. "I thought maybe you needed help or something."

Justin watched him with an unreadable expression, his lips pursed into a thin line. He finally nodded in understanding, adjusting his gym bag on his shoulder as he turned on his heel to leave again. "I'm fine so don't worry about it."

"Justin—wait!" Clay called after him again taking a few steps forward and he almost slammed right into the back of him before Justin once again spun around to glare at him.

Waiting. Irritated, impatient, but waiting.

"I need to talk to you." Clay said with overwrought insistence, biting his bottom lip as he let out a puff of air, collecting his nerve. Then with a reassuring nod, he stared Justin square in the eyes.

"Look, I want to talk to you about Friday." Clay started calmly, but firmly, denoting a serious and frank tone as he cast the jock a serious look. "Last Friday, at Jessica’s party."

Justin’s entire demeanor faltered as his eyes widened with the expression of consternation. His grip on his bag tightened and he licked his lips, taking a deep calming breath as he suddenly eyed the floor for a moment before staring back up at Clay, no longer able to hide behind a mask of indifferent mocking bravado. It would have been amusing if Clay couldn’t already guess why he was having such a strong reaction.

"What about it?" He asked sounding more than a little on edge.

"You—maybe we shouldn’t talk about this here." Clay stated cautiously, looking around the hall as a couple of stragglers heading to their next class passed them by.

"No, go ahead," Justin insisted solicitously. "What about Jess’s party? What do you gotta to say?"

"I was—"

‘Worried? Concerned? Trapped in Jess’s closet and deeply affected by the trauma you endured that I can’t stop thinking about it and how guilty I feel knowing that while you were going through it, that I just stood back and watched?’

"-needing to tell you that I—"

"Trying to ask him out on a date?" A voice mocked with a feigned innocent inflection and Clay watched as a swirl of emotions pooled in Justin’s eyes while he fought to keep his expression impassive. The pair looked over at the same time with Clay barely able to conceal his annoyance at being interrupted. None other than Captain Douchebag himself approached the pair with a couple of textbooks under his left arm and his gym bag slung over his right shoulder.

Bryce walked directly past him, paying him no real attention as he went to stand on Justin's right side, who looked uncomfortable despite his best efforts. It made Clay feel just as uneasy as Bryce watched his would-be friend before looking over at Clay.

"You need to work on your technique, your delivery sounded a little flat.” Bryce advised, giving him a sympathetic, toothless grin before wrapping an arm around Justin’s shoulders, completely ignoring the way the smaller jock tensed up.

"Though you shouldn’t bother with Justy anyway.” Bryce mocked, giving him a secretive smirk. "He’s not really your type.”
“At least I don’t force one on him.” Clay grumbled lowly under his breath without thinking.

"What?” Bryce snapped frowning at him in confusion. Clay tried not to let on that he just realized he said his comeback a bit too loudly, thankful at least that Bryce hadn’t actually heard him but feeling trepidation all the same when he looked over at Justin. He was staring at him slightly wide eyed with a mixture of concerned bewilderment and something Clay couldn’t quite place, making it obvious he’d in fact, heard what he said.

"What the hell did you say?” Bryce insisted, taking his arm away from Justin and narrowing his eyes slightly at Clay, who darted his own around for a moment as he tried to come up with a good lie on the fly.

“I—"

“He made a crack about me being too much of a dumbass to date.” Justin lied easily, stepping away from Bryce and coming to stand next to Clay, slinging his arm around his neck and giving it a 'playfully' hard squeeze. The unexpected cut of oxygen made Clay’s breath hitch before he started coughing. Justin only smiled down at him with a look that told Clay to go along with the lie. “The guy can be a real asshole.”

“Well you are a dumbass.” Bryce joked and Justin flicked him the bird while letting Clay go. He took a step forward and threw a less than playful punch at Bryce shoulder that he was clearly trying to sell as more innocent than it was.

“Fuck off!” He chuckled, sounding just a bit too awkward as Bryce dodged his hit. Clay frowned in open concern as he rubbed the back of his neck and watched Justin closely. He paid the most attention to his body language and overall demeanor, finding it to be off kilter. Not to say that he was at all surprised, though he still couldn’t understand how Justin could—pretending or otherwise—be so calm and civil towards Bryce after what happened.

“Let go!” Justin called out with unease when Bryce caught him in a headlock and began to dig the knuckle of his fist into his scalp.

“Tell him you’re my bitch first!” Bryce joked and Clay felt discomfort at the tasteless jab. Without thinking, he moved forward and struggled to pull the two apart, only succeeding because his efforts caught Bryce off guard. He frowned at Clay in confusion as the lankier teen pulled Justin behind him, effectively wedging himself between the two.

“What’s your problem?” Bryce questioned in bemusement and Clay glanced back at Justin who was once again watching him with that odd expression he couldn’t place, rubbing the spot Bryce attacked vigorously with his fingers.

“He looked uncomfortable.” Clay announced, looking at Bryce as if the fact should be obvious. Bryce simply scoffed at him with a light sneer.

“Are you fucking serious? We rough house all the time, right Justy?” He responded and the pair looked his way while Justin silently nodded but avoided either of their gazes. Clay watched him uncomfortably adjust his gym bag before he turned his attention back to Bryce, troubled by the smile the jock gave him that was frankly creeping him right the hell out. “You don’t have to mother him. He’s a big boy that can handle me.”

Clay almost had to wonder if Bryce’s choice of words were deliberate at this point.

"Right.” he nodded, looking as uncomfortable as he felt. "Well, I guess I was just trying to help out
"Right," Bryce returned, placing a firm hand onto his shoulder that made Clay tense up, unsure of what his intentions were. "but next time, maybe stay out of it things you don't understand. Kay buddy?"

Clay frowned at him a little as Bryce arched his brows with look that asked him if he understood what he meant as a sly smile graced his features. Clay slowly nodded, briefly wondering just how much of the conversation with Justin he'd heard before he made presence officially known. The older teen's smile widened into something more natural, seemingly satisfied as he patted Clay on the shoulder in a friendly manner before completely releasing him. Clay looked at his feet and cleared his throat, uncertain of what he should be doing or saying now.

"Don't you have class or somewhere else to be?" Bryce prompted him, arching an inquisitive brow at him.

Clay returned it with a frown. "Don't you?"

"P.E. Coach won't mind if we're a little late." Bryce announced with an air of arrogance and Clay fought not to roll his eyes.

"I'll be late at this point no matter what, so what's another few minutes." He sighed truthfully before turning his full attention back to Justin. He was staring down the hall, not really focused on looking at anything, seemingly lost in his thoughts. If Clay had to wager by the look on his face, troubling thoughts. Not doubt aided by being in the presence of Bryce.

“So...um...you wanna meet with me later?” Clay offered and Justin looked at him in bewilderment. "So we can talk...about math? You know, for your exam?"

"Right, the tutoring thing!" Justin 'recalled' complete with an 'oh yeah!' expression, Clay's intent seeming to finally dawn on him. "Whatever, sure."

"Why don't you get Jess to help you?" Bryce interjected deliberately, looking between the pair as though he already perceived their back-and-forth for what it truly was but was choosing not the acknowledge said fact. "Your girl's pretty damn smart."

Justin lightened up, but only a little as replied with a weak, playful smile “I can never get any of my homework done with her around. We only know how to study 'French'.”

Bryce snickered lewdly and Clay fought hard once again not to openly roll his eyes at such a lame joke. Justin didn't bother with his own forced laughter, instead choosing to start walking toward the hall that lead to the gymnasium. "I gotta get going. Maybe you can be late, but I can't. Coach'll have my ass."

"Well maybe don't skip school for bullshit reasons." Bryce remarked flippantly as he moved to follow him. Clay caught the way Justin's face faltered momentarily at Bryce words then sneered at the back of said asshole's head. Bryce had to know he was the reason Justin missed so much school the previous week, so how the fuck could be so crass about something like that was beyond him.

As they kept walking, Justin paused to turn back to Clay while Bryce kept going. The pair held each other's gaze, only for the briefest of moments, but it ended up feeling like years to Clay as he carefully took in each turbulent emotion that surfaced within Justin’s eyes. Then with a blink, Justin broke away and began to leave again.

"Later." He called over his shoulder.
“Uh sure! Just make sure you study the latest chapter from your English book before our session!”
Clay called after him and both Justin and Bryce glanced at him.

“It was Math!” Justin called back somewhat amused, smiling despite himself. Clay almost smacked his forehead at the faux pas, remembering that English was the subject he predominately helped Jeff in, nevermind that he was probably giving away their little cover up to talk later. Not that he didn't assume Bryce had already caught on, if the doubtful smirk he'd retained since they'd mentioned it was anything to go by.

“Right! Math! Study math! All the math!” Clay insisted, and Justin chuckled at him as he and Bryce disappeared around the corner.

Clay cringed at himself, rubbing the bridge of his nose, the pausing as he thought about that fleeting smile Justin had just given him. One that was genuine and not forced to keep up with appearances. He'd made Justin Foley smile at him, and with a rather nice looking one at that.

The thought made him smile to himself until the sound of the late bell snapped him back to attention. Cursing under his breath, he sprinted off to his next class.

—//—

Hey, I'm sitting with the girls at lunch. The first round of cheerleader try outs start today and I want to see if I can get Hannah and Skye to try out with me!

Baker will never go for that and you've gotta be kidding me about Twilight

Okay you guys really need to stop calling her that and why can't she try out!

really babe?

REALLY. What's wrong with Skye?

Justin snickered to himself under his breath, taking a moment to sit up and stretch his limbs before returning into a hunching forward position with his elbows propped up onto his knees. He sat on the long bench lining the entryway leading into the male locker room, having already showered and changed back into his casual clothing. He began texting Jess a response, not bothering to look up at the figure approaching him from the right out of his peripheral.

"You're here early." he commented just as he pushed 'send'.

"I finished my exam, so Mrs. Barns let me out." Alex announced as he took a seat next to Justin on the blue perforated plastic coated bench, setting his gym clothes beside him. "Why are you sitting out here?"

"Waiting on Zach." Justin admitted. "I need to grab some shit I forgot at his place out of his trunk before math starts."

"Why didn't you wait in there?" Alex inquired, pointing his thumb into the locker room proper.

"...Needed some time to myself." Justin shrugged, taking the moment to glance at the blond before concentrating on his text again, sending another reply.
"Want me to leave?" Alex asked and Justin shook his head. "You're good.

"Cool." Alex nodded as he took a chance and looked over the brunette's shoulder somewhat as he continued texting fervently.

He arched a brow. "Jess?"

"Yeah." Justin admitted before eying the blond again. "You wanna sit with us at lunch? She's sitting at your table so she can con Baker and Twilight into cheerleading."

"What, was trying to prove the existence of mythical creatures not challenging enough for her?" Alex scoffed and Justin smiled faintly while he shrugged. "Dunno, but she thinks it's a good idea."

"Has she met Skye?" Alex mocked in ridicule and Justin's smile widened as he chuckled under his breath. "She thinks it'll 'expand her horizon' to try or some shit."

"Stop giving her weed, Justin." Alex sighed shaking his head and Justin's mouth and eyes widened as he feigned being insulted. "Don't blame this on weed! No amount of kush could make anyone that delusional!"

The pair began laughing quietly to themselves, both looking up attentively when they heard an eruption of uproarious laughter filtering in from the shower area.

"Think someone slipped on soap again?" Alex pondered and Justin shrugged disinterestedly. "Who cares. You sitting with me at lunch or what?"

"Yeah sure. Thanks." Alex agreed, getting to his feet. "I'm gonna go put my shit up. Want to come with me?"

"Nah. Still talkin to Jess." He responded as an excuse, sounding colder than he had before while ignoring the curious look Alex gave him. He said nothing more to the blond and returned to his texting, feeling when Alex left his side and went further into the locker room. He heard a slew of voices greet Alex at once, with Bryce's standing out to him, sounding closer than it had before. He subconsciously scooted over on the bench, further away from the open doorway to ensure he remained out of view and would continue to go unnoticed.

Justin proceeded to try and tune out the obnoxiously loud chatter, concentrating on trying to fully explain to her just why Skye coming within a twenty mile radius of the cheerleading try-outs would be the funniest and scariest thing, at least to him anyway. That is, until he couldn't help but start to pay more attention to the conversation being had a few feet away from him when he heard Monty ask a very particular question:

“So was that you at Jess’s party?”

Frowning up in concern, he paused in mid sentence of his text, shutting the phone off while pocketing it. He quietly got up from his seat and slipped into the room behind the nearest rows of lockers, careful to stay out of sight as he dared to peak out of his hiding spot at his usual group of his friends and fellow teammates, all gathered around Bryce at his gym locker save Alex, who was nearby arranging things in his own locker. Bryce was the only on currently facing his direction, though he still hadn't noticed him as he stretched, the trimming of his varsity jacket brushing against his grayish-blue cardigan as he looked over at Monty and arched an inquisitive brow his way. “What do you mean?”

“We heard some bitch got plowed upstairs.” he explained with a devious look on his face. “We assumed you were responsible.”
Justin’s heart skipped a beat as he watched Zack only shake his head smirk while Alex outwardly groaned in frustration.

“For once can’t you practice the art of gathering your shit without the need to talk about what desperate sluts someone else has fucked?” Alex drawled with a hint of sarcasm.

“Just because you’re a faggot that likes to suck tiny dicks doesn’t mean the rest of us don’t like hearing about bitches getting splayed.” Monty drawled back and Justin could have literally heard the sneer on his face even if he’d never seen it.

“Hey, enough.” Jeff admonished him with a disappointed frown as he elbowed Monty in the gut, making him grunt and glare back at him. Jeff ignored him as he continued “Besides, Alex has a point. This happened days ago so why are you just bringing it up now, numbskull?”

“I didn’t want to fuck up and chance talking shit around Foley.” Monty grunted, still looking annoyed at being hit as he rubbed the spot and glared at Jeff who continued to ignore his plight. Justin narrowed his eyes in concern as a few sets of eyes looked at Monty curiously.

“Justin,” Bryce inquired with an air of amusement but with a look of subtle suspicion before he pressed on with curious concern. “Why not?”

“I thought it was Jess.” Monty offered with a simple shrug of his shoulders and a suggestive leer. “I heard she got real fucked up and thought maybe you guys had—you know—”

“Nah, she’s a good girl.” Bryce defended, lightening up and Justin couldn’t help but feel a smidgen of gratitude toward him for that, considering how he knew the guys, particularly Bryce, tended to treat and talk about women.

"So it was you then?" Scott frowned curiously and Bryce shrugged with a suggestive smirk, making the group react with various forms of laughter and celebratory cheering as Justin's stomach began to knot.

“Yeah, but the 'broad' I was with was much better anyway.” Bryce smirked and Justin's eyes widened as a current of whispered excitement lingered throughout the group, with Scott insisting for Bryce to explain. Alex smacked his arm with an incredulous glare and Scott grunted in indignant annoyance before glaring at him.

“What?”

“How desperate are you? Get laid so you won’t have to beg for scraps!” Alex admonished and there was another round of light snickering within the group.

“I don’t mind.” Bryce insisted with an amused leer and Justin felt those knots turn several times in his stomach as he swallowed hard and tried to remain calm. Bryce...no. He wouldn't possibly—

“She was real tight.”

“A virgin?”

“Oh yeah,” Bryce bragged and Justin sneered in disgust at the sleazy smirk he had on his face, looking as cocky and confident as he usually did when he boasted about things, with the added bonus of having his chest puffed out like a damn peacock. Justin balled up his fists at this side, a swell of turbulent emotions clashing and fighting for dominance as he continued to listen. “By the time I was done with her, you'd never know it though. She was like a bitch in heat the way she worshiped my dick.”
The group started laughing, save Alex, who looked skeptical of the story and Jeff who looked remarkably uncomfortable listening to the entire affair. Justin felt a twinge of gratitude for both, particularly the former despite how annoyed with him he had been in the past week.

“Are you sure she was a virgin?” Alex challenged with a flat tone and a look of disbelief.

“Sluts lie.” Monty added as if he were reminding Bryce of some well known truth and Jeff cut him another disapproving frown.

“Trust me, I was her first.” Bryce insisted smugly. “I've known her for a while and know she's never done anything with anyone else—in that way. I mean she bled and everything.”

Justin's mouth parted slightly in disbelief as he leaned himself against the lockers he was standing next to in a bid to help hold himself up while the others had their own various responses to the news, with Jeff's face notable spelling out he had just been given far too much information as he gave an uncomfortable chuckle before cringing and looking at the floor.

Bryce seemed completely unbothered by his discomfort, his pompous smile widening, "About the only real complaint I have is how she sucks a dick: it was kind of sloppy and she almost choked on it!"

With every subsequent word, Justin felt pieces of his dignity being callously stripped away. He wasn't entirely sure how to comprehend or put into words exactly everything he was feeling at the moment. Hurt, betrayal, and anger certainly, but there was so much more he couldn't put into words, feeling as if he weren't really there, seeing himself and the entire situation from the outside looking in.

He snapped back to attention as he caught a glimpse of the fading marks on his wrists and without thinking, yanked down the sleeve of his jacket to hide it, feeling subconscious and ashamed to have them. He closed his eyes and concentrating on how the cool metal touching his cheek felt, willing away the tears that stung his eyes and threaten to fall as he began breathing through his nose, no longer caring if he was heard or seen at this point.

Here he had been fighting to be able to function normally since this bullshit happened and this callous son of a bitch was actually standing here, telling their friends all about it. Bragging about it. Making it sound like what happened was a causal hook up, making him sound like vapid whore who'd wanted nothing more than to please him when he knew-fucking knew—how much he'd hurt him and how little he wanted to do it.

Justin blinked his eyes open, jaw clenching as the tears began to fall, feeling emotionally numb as Monty asked, “So, you gonna hook up again?”

"With a bitch that loves to take a deep dicking? Fuck yeah, it was some of the best sex I've had!" Bryce replied enthusiastically and Monty gave him a high-five, congratulating him as Scott whistled and Alex scoffed.

“She was a virgin. Virgins don't know the meaning of 'best' sex, they've got no experience!” Alex emphasized in disbelief. "Plus you two were probably drunk! All sex seems good when you're drunk!"

“Everything we did, I can’t get out of my head.” Bryce began to explain with an air of fondness that made Justin's blood run cold. "It's the way she looked or sounded, you know? How she kept moaning and begging. The way she arched her back pleading as she rode my cock. This one's...special.”
There was a moment of complete silence within the group before Scott cleared his throat loudly.
“So... are you gonna introduce us? Share maybe or...?”

“Fuck no, she's not your sloppy seconds! This slut’s all mine!” Bryce beamed proudly, beginning to laugh as he looked up.

And that's when he finally realized Justin was standing there, watching them and his face faltered slightly.

The world felt like it stopped and everything else melted away as the two of them stared at one another. Then the smile on Bryce face widened, twisting into something so openly pernicious that it would unnerve Justin for years to come.

"Got something you wanna add?” Bryce asked rhetorically, seeming to find pleasure in his malcontent and simultaneously cutting him deeper than he ever had before. Justin came out of his hiding spot completely, taking a step forward as he opened his mouth, ready to spew forth the most vile, hateful shit he could think of to wipe that shit eating grin off of that bastard's face. Instead he turned on his heel and bolted away with the sound of Bryce’s laughter echoing in his ears.

He just needed to get as far away as he possibly could. Away from the knowledge that while his life was slowly becoming one large spiral of clusterfuckery, Bryce took it all as some sick fucking joke. That he took him as some big fucking joke.

He took in deep breaths, still predominately breathing through his nose as his nostrils flared. Just the thought of it filled Justin with indignation, too angry to cry anymore as his head spun trying to think of what he could do. Fuck whatever bullshit he'd been telling himself before—there had to be some way he could get this asshole out of his life without completely ruining it.

There just had to be...

"Justin?"

He didn't stop walking or even turn to acknowledge Clay as he continued storming down the hall, not certain of where he was headed but just knowing the further away he got from Bryce, the better he would feel.

Chapter End Notes

Well at least Bryce had a great time during the party, right? Next Chapter: Clay finally gets his locker open! Maybe! Oh and I guess he and Justin may interact more. Maybe even have The Talk. Maybe. . .
Of Lockers and Lunches (Part I)

Chapter Summary

The locker saga continues. Also Clay tries to enjoy a nutritious lunch while Justin tries to stomach his.

Warning: for some mild homophobic language and violence.

Chapter Notes

So it's been a while! I haven't abandoned this story or got writer's block: I legit got sick for a while. With a common cold (or so I initially thought) that blossomed into something a bit more serious. Enough for me to have to go into hospice care anyway. After that, I decided to go ahead and get a few chapters written for both stories I'm working on before I updated either. With all the proof reading and such, it took a little longer than I meant to update. For that, you guys have my sincerest apologies.

I also want to say a hearty thank you so much for all of your patience, for reading in the first place, as well as the love you've been showing my work(s). It means a lot and makes me feel all tingly.

Now on to the chapter! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Come on, you know you want to open.” Clay whispered as he tried in vain to sweet talk his locker. He ran his finger tips over the handle, eyeing it determinedly before he pulled it with all his might.

It didn’t budge.

Clay let out a frustrated growl as he once again hit the stupidly uncooperative metal compartment with an open palm, contemplating kicking it when he saw something moving swiftly in his peripheral vision.

He turned just in time to see that it was Justin looking much the same way he had the previous Monday: devastatingly morose.

“Justin?!” He called out to him concerned. He went completely ignored as Justin continued to storm down the hallway and Clay frowned deeply as he jogged after him.

He wasn’t the most athletically fit, at least not comparably so to most of the jocks (such as Justin), so he was reasonably shocked when he was not only able to catch up, but able to keep up with him. Though admittedly, he had to keep up a brisk pace to do so and was already feeling the strain in his legs.
“Justin! Hold on a second!” Clay pleaded and Justin abruptly did as he was told, turning to face him. Clay ended up walking past him, double-taking when he realized what had happened. He stumbled, almost tripping over his own feet when he tried to stop on a dime himself. He took a moment to catch his breath before turning to face Justin just as the bell to officially end third period classes rang.

“If this is about the party, I don’t want to talk about it right now.” Justin rebuffed him coldly but Clay shook his head.

“I just wanted to make sure you were alright.” Clay replied in concern.

“I’m fine. Are we done?” Justin scowled, but there was no malice behind his words and it was obvious by the look in his eyes that while he was once again confused by Clay's consideration for him, he did appreciate it. Nevertheless, Clay wasn't about to let up, frowning in disapproval at his initial rudeness.

“Look, I get that you’re upset—” Clay began, sounding somewhat chastising.

“You don’t ‘get’ shit about me,” Justin snarked at him, pivoting on his heel to walk away.

“I know you’re about to bail on school again and that in the long run, you'll come to regret it.” Clay announced, stepping in the way of Justin’s path so that he couldn’t leave. Justin only gave him a hard glare, unmoved by his words and went to side step him so he could continue onward. When he tried, Clay stepped into his path again, even going so far as to hold his arms out.

“Move.” Justin warned but Clay didn’t budge.

“You don’t have to keep bottling everything up and running away.” Clay stated firmly but with a hint of hope that he would heed his advice. “you don’t have to talk—” Justin semi rolled his eyes and tried sidestepping him yet again, and just as before, Clay moved to block him. Only now he was keeping a weary eye on the balled fist Justin was now making with his right hand at his side.

—just walk with me to my locker,” he insisted and Justin gave him an under-eyed 'are you for real' glare through his lashes and Clay continued undeterred, "Do it for Jess, so she won’t spend the rest of the day unable to concentrate on getting anything done. You know, because she’s too stressed out worrying over you.” he said as quickly as he could. That seemed to be enough to not only make Justin stop trying to get around him, but visibly consider what he was saying. His fist unfurled as he gave a look of guilt and remorse for a matter of seconds before it was replaced with his patented brand of ‘too cool to care’ aloofness.

Nevertheless, once Clay began walking back toward his locker, Justin followed. Soon, they were once again walking in unison though this time, moving a lot slower, much to the delight of Clay's legs.

“So why aren’t you in class.” Justin asked, clearly having no real interest in what he was saying but trying to start up some friendly small talk all the same. Clay decided to humor it in the hopes that it would not only be enough to keep Justin talking, but enough to hopefully segue the conversation onto the more important topic of Jess's party.

“I finished my assignment early and Mrs. Barch let me come to my locker so I could unjam it.” Clay replied, glaring hatefully at the offending metal object just as they reached it.

“Kinda like Alex.” Justin motioned as he leaned against the locker directly next to Clay’s on the
"Yeah, I guess." Clay explained, starting once again without success to open the metal door. "Is that why you left class too?"

"Huh?" Justin grunted, his brows creasing in confusion.

"Because you finished up early; is that why you left class early too?" he asked, already knowing it wasn't the answer (and even having an idea as to who was responsible for Justin's departure) but wanting to see if Justin would open up and tell him on his own. Justin didn't answer immediately, thinking about whatever was obviously increasing his negative disposition, (if the face he made now was anything to go by) and Clay was almost sorry he asked.

Justin shifted uncomfortably where he stood as he finally answered, "Nah. It was just stupid crap."

"You um, would you like to talk about it?" Clay offered earnestly, in a quieter tone. He could already guess the answer to that as well as he yanked hard on the handle again. He began to mumble to himself in frustration about how stupid it was being as Justin let out a small sigh and crossed his arms over his chest.

"No. I don't want to even think about that shit anymore." Justin replied truthfully and Clay chose not to acknowledge when he used his shoulder to wipe away a stray tear from his eye as subtly as he possibly could, in the hopes to not to be noticed.

They stood in silence after that, save the sounds of Clay still struggling with his locker and the eventual ring of bell that classes had officially ended. Justin began watching some of the students passing by as they filled into the halls, offering no response to the few that attempted to greet him. Then he turned his full attention back to Clay’s increasingly pathetic attempts to force his locker door open.

"Do you want me to get that?" He finally offered, lazily pointing at the metal door.

"No, I almost got it," Clay grunted, becoming increasing flushed with anger and now embarrassment, suddenly very aware of how physically weak he must look, especially when compared to the likes of a jock such as Justin.

"Really, I can just—" Justin offered, the creeping lingers of a smile touching the corners of his mouth, glancing up for a moment as a fellow basketball player called out to him and waved, Justin finally returning the gesture in earnest.

"No, it’s done this before, I can get it!" Clay insisted, determined to get the damnable thing open as he subconsciously worried that more students were filing into the halls and thus, would be able to witness his failings.

His frustration peaked when he accidentally pinched his index finger between the latch's opening mechanism on the handle. "Fuck!" He growled in frustration, snapping his arm back. Justin leaned out his reach just in time, but Clay still managed to collide it with someone’s face.

Namely the one belonging to Montgomery de la Cruz.

His blood ran cold the moment he realized who it was, the dark haired brute touching the spot where he'd been hit before glaring at Clay with a look that clearly said he should start making peace with the god he worshiped. Justin unfolded his arms and stood up straight just as Monty moved in toward Clay.
“Watch what the fuck you're doing, you limp dicked faggot!” He snarled in rage, pushing Clay harshly back into his locker before he even had a chance to apologize. The loud bang permeated throughout the hall and a few students looked over to see what the commotion was about. Clay hissed in pain the moment the back of his head collided with the metal, eyes tightly shut to will away the instant dizziness. As he put a hand to the back of his head to rub at the aching spot, he just registered when Justin took a step forward and pushed his fellow jock away from him just as Monty looked as though he'd strike again.

He glanced at Justin in confused shock while Monty glared at Justin as if he'd lost his ever loving mind. “Since when do you take up for this bitch?” he demanded with an air of hostility, as if the sentiment of Justin wanting to defend Clay was an affront on his very being.

"Since you you decided to start acting like one!” Justin snapped back, sounding just as hostile, taking the chance to put himself squarely between Monty and Clay.

"What the fuck is your problem, Foley?” Monty snarled, taking a threatening step forward and ensuring they were now chest to chest but Justin didn't budge, almost seeming to invite any ensuing violence or mayhem the delinquent had to offer.

"You're my fucking problem, dipshit!” Justin seethed. The pair stared each other down in silence then, waiting for the other to make the first move.

Clay felt a nervous tension, realizing this was 'escalating quickly' as his father liked to say.

He wasn't certain why Justin was choosing to defend him from someone Clay was certain he considered a friend, especially when the basketball star had never done so previously when any of the other jocks attempted to pick on or torment him. However, if the simple action of being pushed into a locker by Monty was temporarily impairing his vision and making him see spots, then Clay was more than happy to let him continue. . .after he took a side step to the left to ensure he wouldn't be hit by the seemingly inevitable fist that were soon to be flying.

Thankfully, it never came to that. A trio of jocks—Zack, Jeff, and Bryce—came jogging over, with Zach immediately pulling Justin away and Jeff doing the same for Monty while Bryce stepped in between the pair to break them up, kinda pushing Clay aside somewhat. For the first time since, well ever, Clay was grateful to see the physically imposing jock with the light blue eyes, which flickered over at him with curiosity before he turned his attention back to his two would be friends.

“Calm down,” Bryce quickly ordered, accessing the situation as his eyes lingered on Justin who was too busy speaking with Zach to notice.

Jeff shot Monty an accusatory frown of displeasure as it became more apparent to him that Clay had been hurt. It softened considerably once he stared back at Clay in open concern. “Hey, are you alright?”

“He would be if you kept this dumbass on a leash!” Justin snapped moodily, moving over to help Clay stand up straight, checking the back of his head. Clay blinked, unsure of what to say to this newfound and frankly bewildering turn of events. He was the one that was suppose to be concerned about Justin’s well being and welfare right now, not the other way around. . .

“That fuckward hit me in the face!” Monty snarled infuriated, pointing and glaring at Clay before turning his attention to Justin, looking as though he’d been betrayed. “Then this little cock-sucking bitch decided to step in!”

Clay’s breath caught when he saw the look on Justin’s face. It only lasted a few seconds if that, but
the way he cut his eyes over to look at Bryce before looking back at Monty as if he’d truly struck a
nerve, was very telling.

Justin’s eyes flashed and seething with rage, he balled up his fist and advanced forward, determined
to punch the a-hole square in the jaw.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Chill out!” Zach replied to him calmly, trying to placate him as he managed to
restrain Justin. Clay proceed to assist Zach in calming Justin down until he finally took notice of the
small crowd of students gathered around and watching as things continued to unfold. Clay couldn't
help feeling more embarrassed and a little guilty over the ruckus he caused over nothing more than
an accident.

The two jocks continued to trade insults with one another, tossing some pretty scathing words back
and forth until Monty went so far as try to hit Justin by reaching around Bryce to do it. The older
teen slowly turned to glare back at Monty as if the smaller teen had officially lost it, flat out daring
him with his eyes to try that bullshit again while he was still standing there. Clay couldn't decide
whether the look stemmed from Bryce almost being hit, Monty trying to hit Justin, or a little of both.

“Cut it out.” Bryce warned, eying Monty in particular. When neither seemed ready to comply,
going back to their heated argument, he put a little bass in his voice. "I said knock it the fuck off!
"

It was enough to snap both to attention, both still looking perturbed but clearly no longer will to fight
as long as Bryce was there to intervene. It was almost fascinating to Clay, how these jocks really did
tend to act like a pack of animals, complete with following their lead alpha male. Fascinating and a
little nauseating to be honest, more so when he realized how much Justin was willing to comply
despite the issues he knew were going on between him and Bryce currently.

“Go wait by your locker.” Bryce instructed Monty coolly, nudging him toward the other side of the
hall. Monty opened his mouth, seemingly ready to argue, but one look from Bryce of what would
happen if he dared to challenge him was more than enough to shut him up. Once again, Clay found
himself unnerved as Jeff took the moment to step forward toward Monty. He took him gently by the
arm and began to coax him to follow after him, giving him a comforting but concerned smile of
encouragement with a dash of pleading in those mesmerizing gorgeous eyes of his.

Clay watched with slight amazement (and a twinge of jealousy) as a Montgomery easily relented to
him, visibly relaxing under Jeff’s touch. Their eyes met and Monty even offered Jeff a small smile in
return, almost grateful looking. Clay felt a jab of pain in his chest, his heart sinking as he recognized
that look anywhere. In an instant, it was gone and Monty took a few steps towards Bryce, casting a
rather withering aside glance over at Justin who returned it with gusto.

“Just keep your whore in check next time,” he sneered, whispering low enough to where Clay just
barely caught what was said.

Bryce only arched a brow at him unimpressed, but there was a shared look of understanding between
the two of them that made Clay's skin crawl. Justin glanced between the two of them as well,
looking uncertain as to what was said but letting their shared look speak enough for them as he took
a step forward, with only Zach catching him by the shoulder to stop him. He cut Zach an ‘mm I
allowed to retaliate now’ glare, clearly incensed. Despite this, Zach returned an ‘come on, you know
better’ look, which to Clay, was a given.

Noticing, Jeff gently pulled on Monty’s arm again. He went ignored momentarily as Monty
exchanged threatening looks with Justin until he gave another, more urgently insistent tug. This
made Monty cut Jeff an exasperated glance before with a roll of his eyes, he allowed himself to be
pulled off in the direction Bryce told him to go, cutting Clay a rather odd side glance as he caught him staring at Jeff. He gave the lithe teen a knowing, almost taunting smirk, slinging an arm around Jeff's shoulder as the latter cut Clay an apologetic yet reassuring half-smile over his shoulder as they departed. Clay struggled not to look openly forlorn as he watched the two, Monty moving in and whispering something in Jeff's ear that made him laugh and simultaneously made the ache in Clay's chest increase.

Their departure seemed to make the rest of the students that had crowded around to watch move on, realizing no more action was to be had and Clay openly sighed with relief, glad all that attention was gone at the very least.

Bryce looked after the two, smirking and shaking his head before he turned his full attention to Clay, his jovial look somewhat fading as he proceeded to glare at him subtly as if he were an insect.

"You okay?" He inquired though it seemed more like a formality than him actually giving a shit about his well being. Clay slowly nodded at him, eying him with subtle disdain as he took a subconscious step towards Justin. Bryce noticed and only lightly arched his brow with a equally subtle smug smirk, once again making Clay's skin crawl.

"Yeah." Clay finally answered with a murmur, diverting his gaze to Zach's pretty sweet sneakers, randomly thinking about how he wouldn't mind having a pair of them.

"Good," Bryce replied dismissively, already turning his full attention to Justin, who was busy still letting Zach try to calm him down, the two talking in voices low enough not to be heard.

"You okay Justy?" Bryce asked, raising his voice to get his attention and Clay noticed, for as much as it was worth, that he did at least appear to be far more sincere now.

Justin didn’t immediately acknowledge Bryce at all, still speaking with Zach who seemed to be pleading with him about something, which made Clay frown in concern. He took a step forward and gently touched Justin’s arm, which made him snatch it away, snapping his head around to see that it was Clay before he instantly calmed down, giving him an annoyed but apologetic look.

"Sorry." He stated curtly and Clay nodded, giving him a private, understanding look, brushing his reaction aside. Something seemed to click with Justin and he stared at Clay as if he now, finally understood what Clay's 'unusual' behavior towards him had been about lately. The vast array of emotions that pass through his eyes caught Clay off guard while the pair shared a prolonged look of their own.

"Justin."

The brunette finally looked up, glaring at Bryce but still saying nothing. Bryce cut him a bit of an under-eyed glare, clearly demanding a proper answer before he repeated "Are you okay?"

There was a pregnant pause as the two eyed one another. Clay looked from Bryce’s face to the withering look on Justin’s, sensing that he was missing something critical here.

Something more than what he was already aware of. Whatever it had been, it faded fast and Justin wordlessly stormed off.

All three of them looked after the fast moving brunette, with Clay struggling not to follow him. He noticed out of his peripheral that Zach looked as though he wanted to do the exact same thing but refrained from doing so as well, cutting Bryce a curious look over what that could have been about. The latter only shrugged in return.
“Just let him cool off, maybe get a little weed in his system.” Bryce joked with a smile, voicing said indifference and Clay decided this was the best time to turn his attention back to his locker and give this incident no further attention, now that Justin and the direct threat of Montgomery were gone. It would keep him from saying something to Bryce and thus, making matters worse for himself in this case, at the very least.

After a few minutes, he finally realized that not only were Bryce and Zach still nearby, but they had now been joined by a few other jocks, primarily from the baseball team. They were carrying on with some monotonous private discussion that Clay was certain he could give less than a shit about and thus, decided to leave ignored.

However, their presence ensured that all further attempts to open his stubborn locker were done with more discretion, not wanting to draw any more attention to himself or his plight. Given the day he was having thus far, this went about as well as to be expected. Soon the hushed whispers and frequently incessant snickering made him more than a little aware that they had all become sidetracked with watching him try and fail time and again to open his locker.

“You need a little help there, Jensen?” Bryce asked with what Clay was sure was mock concern, finally speaking up. Clay paused, turning to stare blankly at him for a split second as if he didn’t understand why he would be offering. He followed his line of sight to the locker when Bryce gave it a pointed glare, showing he knew full well that Clay was aware of what he was referring to.

“No, it’s fine.” Clay insisted quickly, letting go of the latch.

“You sure? I mean, you nearly knocked off Cruz’s jaw to get it open,” Bryce reminded him, sounding casual and in good nature but Clay knew better. He pursed his lips in annoyance as a round of snickering started from within the group.

“No, really, I’ve got it.” He stated a little more firmly, trying not to come off as too rude but unable to mask just how little he wanted to do with the likes of him at this point. “I just have to hit it—"

Clay attempted to demonstrate what he meant by smacking his locker and pulling on the latch, dismayed that it still refused to cut him a break and open up for him.

"Liiiiiiiiiiike…” Bryce started, drawing it out in a comically playfully fashion as he yanked on the latch to try it. Then he simply tapped the metal door and it popped open, much to Clay’s astonished annoyance. “That?”

Their was a audible round of laughter from the group of jocks, as well as a few nearby students and Clay had to wonder what deity hated him so much today and what exactly he’d done to piss it off. Of course this arrogant piece of shit would manage to get it open with ease while making him look like a weakling in the process! With an audience no less!

“Yeah.” Clay deadpanned, unimpressed by his gratuitous show of bravado. He glared at his locker in betrayal, refusing to even so much as give Bryce the satisfaction of a glance. Not so he would have to endure what was sure to be an infuriating look from the sleaze that would make his face punchable. Well, more so than it already was to Clay as of now. True to what Clay imagined, Bryce flashed a rather nasty smile of ridicule that only grew across his face as he departed with the small group of laughing jocks, openly mocking and joking at Clay's expense as they followed close behind their 'king'.

Clay swiped a hand over his face, pinching the bridge of his nose as few students continued to watch on, still also snickering in ridicule at his predicament before moving on as well.
“. . .Stupid locker.” He sighed as he quickly switched out his books and slammed the door shut, pivoting on his heel to race to fourth period. . .

. . .and nearly jumping out of his skin, giving an undignified, startled yelp as he found himself unexpectedly almost nose-to-nose with Ryan Shaver.

The blond jumped a little himself, giving him a incredulous sneer as he recovered quickly, then a light chortle. “Jumpy little queen, aren’t we?”

“I’m not gay.” Clay snapped irritably, immediately walking around and past him. He was not in the mood for the likes of Ryan right now. Too bad he didn't get the memo—or just didn’t give a shit about it.

“Sure Jan.” He announced with an eye roll, following Clay. “That’s why you were eyeballing Jeff’s ass like that.” Then Ryan looked somewhat sympathetic towards him. "Tough break about that by the way. Jeff must have the patience of a saint to deal with the likes of Monty."

Clay whirled around, glaring at him “What are you talking? Monty not gay! ”

"Hit a nerve, did I?" Ryan mocked, looking a little pleased with himself. "You can tell they're tots an item: just look at the way the talk to one another. They way they touch."

Clay glared at him unconvinced and Ryan gave him a challenging look in return. "What? You think Monty can't be gay just because of all the hateful bullshit he spews? Please. Self-hating gays, while a scourge among our people, do unfortunately exist." Ryan sighed. Then he mumbled "He's so trapped in the closet, you'd think he come out with a better wardrobe."

Clay shook his head.

"Jeff has better taste than that," he insisted, not wanting to believe that someone as nice and as kind and as just plain amazing as Jeff was, would want to be with the likes of an absolute deplorable scumbag like Monty.

"Good sex can make for dumb decisions," Ryan insisted, looking thoughtful. "plus some people just like a project. And young Monty is in need of a lot of renovating."

Clay blanched, feeling a little nausea at the mere thought of the two sleeping together. "They—I have to get to class!" He snapped, pivoting on his heel to leave.

Ryan caught up with him easily and Clay cut him a look of annoyance once they were walking side by side.

"What." he deadpanned.

“You’re next class is with Tony, right? Tony Padilla?” Ryan asked him hopefully, looking as though he already knew the answer to his question.

“Yeeeew,” Clay drawled giving him a suspicious look. "So?"

“And you’re just friends, right?” he pushed. Clay's eyes only narrowed at him, so Ryan continued. “Can you bring me up in conversation? Maybe ask a question or two about me and see how he acts when you do?” Ryan asked sweetly. When he refused to respond, scoffed a little, looking put off. “Please?” He pressed, even batting his eyes and offering a sickening sweet smile in an attempt to persuade him. “I'll even put in a good word for you with Jeff!”
Clay rounded on him in wide eyed panic. “No, you won’t!”

“Yeah, I won’t. I wouldn’t want Monty to try and rearrange this beautiful face.” Ryan admitted waving off his own lie with a tiny shrug before patting Clay on the back, not catching the look of irritation on Clay’s face as Ryan continued to speak, “Jocks are all assholes anyway and you’re too—well. You.”

“Thanks.” Clay said sarcastically and Ryan nodded, completely ignoring his general unwelcoming demeanor.

“No problem, so you’ll talk to Tony for me?” He asked again quickly and Clay only stared at him, hoping he would catch the hint. Which he did, though because it didn’t suite his needs, (and Clay never expressly said no) he took it as a form of acceptance. “Great! See you at lunch!”

“I never said—Ryan?!” Clay called after him, then simply stopped speaking as he realized Ryan wasn’t listening, if he ever had been as the blond hurried down the hall away from him.

He simply rolled his eyes and made his way to his next class, pausing when he noticed Justin and Jess standing in front her locker. He noted that Justin looked a lot calmer and had his forehead pressed against hers with his eyes closed as she whispered to him, caressing his cheeks in a soothing, gentle fashion with her thumbs.

He felt an odd sense of relief, seeing Justin look so serene for the first time he had in days that he could recall. Then the bell rang over head and cursing to himself, he hurried along to his fourth period class, certain he’s never make it before the late bell. Sure enough, once he got to class, Mrs. Bradshaw stopped in mid sentence of the lecture she had just started, glancing at him in disapproval before pointing to a empty desk.

“Detention.” She stated curtly before going right back to in lecture. Clay ignored the soft snickering as he took the seat to the left of Tony who gave him a sympathetic look.

“Rough day?” He asked with an air of amusement.

“If you ever start dating Ryan Shaver, I will officially disown you as a friend.” Was all Clay whispered back in frustration, ignoring the bewildered look from Tony as he opened his text book to begin aggressively taking notes.

—//—

Clay watched Justin discreetly as the latter idly poked his uneaten food—which by the way absolutely required no utensils because it was a simple burger and fries—with his spork. His eyes were down cast, focusing on nothing in particular with his now trademark carefully crafted aloof expression set on his face. Clay felt a twinge of pity for him as he watched him continue to perforate the less than fluffy bun, feeling his previous suspicions from this morning were all but confirmed: Justin wasn’t eating properly lately, nor did he seem to have much of an appetite.

Clay contemplated asking Justin to sit with him for lunch, if for no other reason than to ensure that he would eat something, when Alex took a seat directly across from the brunette with a soft greeting to grab his attention. Clay watched how Justin visibly relaxed at his presence which only seemed to ease even more so when Zach joined them shortly thereafter. The trio began a light conversation
among themselves, though Justin refused to contribute much more than agreeable hums as he went back to his passive aggressive assault against his uneaten food.

Upon taking notice, Alex and Zach exchanged glances before the blond placed a bulk of his French fries on Justin’s tray, offering up a nonchalant smile at Justin’s inquiring gaze before coaxing him to eat them. Clay felt the corners of his mouth perk up when, after some hesitation, Justin took one of the longer fries and give it a tentative bite under his friend’s watchful gazes.

Justin snorted and batted Zach’s hand away with a hearty yet playful “Fuck off!” as the latter patted his head and quipped “Good boy!” like he were an obedient dog. As he watched Alex add in with quips of his own, Clay hoped the blond could get him to get more food into his system.

If not, maybe there was a way he could broach the conversation with Jessica...

The clattering of a tray made him jump, snapping his to attention as he whipped his head around to find the source of the disruption.

“So I heard you started a riot at your locker?” Hannah joked as she took her seat across from him, giving him a playfully critical smirk. Clay snorted as he dipped one of his own fries into his ketchup.

“All I did was try to open my locker. It’s not my fault that it has a vendetta against me...or that Montgomery is a thug.” He reasoned, eying the very boy in question as he passed by a few tables down, with Scott in toe. The pair headed to the same table Justin was already occupying and Clay frowned as he watched the asshole purposely ruffle Alex’s hair roughly, giving his head a nudge forward before taking a seat next to him, glaring daggers at Justin the entire time.

The pair continued to stare tensely at one another while Alex rebuffed Monty’s antics. Zach and Scott awkwardly greeted one another while carefully watching the pair have their stare down, quietly exchanging remarks as Alex went ignored.

“So why were they fighting over you?” Hannah asked softly, watching the group as Justin and Montgomery began to speak to one another surprisingly civilly. Clay reluctantly tore his eyes away, wanting to see where exactly that might be heading, but instead giving Hannah his somewhat undivided attention.

“They weren’t. Not really—I was trying to get my locker open and after overreacting to accidentally hitting him, Justin defended me from that asshole.” Clay grumbled, tossing Monty a quick side glance of irritation. Then he looked back at Hannah. “Where were you?”

“Huh?”

“Your locker is close to mine. Where were you?” Clay inquired. “You didn’t see what happened?”

She shook her head, taking a frie from his tray. “I was at Sheri’s locker with Jess until she bailed on for Justin. They were talking about that cheerleading try-out stuff and trying to convince me to do it.”

“How’d that go?”

“Don’t change the subject, Helmet.”


“. . .I have my sources.”
Clay grimaced in annoyance, forgetting the blond’s fourth period was with Hannah as he took a bite of his burger. Hannah once again looked over at the table where Justin sat then she looked back at Clay, studying him with an intense gaze and in the process, unnerving him, causing him to chew slower and visibly swallow his food harder than usual.

“What?” he asked wearily.

“This obsession ‘thing’ you have with Justin lately. What’s it all about?” She asked him in a lower volume than she usually spoke, as if what they would be discussing was a secret.

“There is no ‘thing’ with Justin.” Clay frowned lightly, speaking in a low voice himself. Her gaze remained unwavering.

“Then why have you been snooping around and asking all these questions about him lately?” Hannah demanded, frowning a little. “You’ve been like, stalking him.”

“I’m not stalking anyone! It’s more like concerned citizen-ing.” Clay rebuffed, saying the last word with an awkward inflection. "You know, Scooby-Dooing."

“Alright then Shaggy, what’s going on?”

“Nothing is going on, Daphne.” Then Clay paused, pretending to looking a little hurt. “Really? Not Fred?”

“Not even close,” she admitted. "and why are you such a ‘concerned citizen’?” she pressed sarcastically while air quoting with her fingers.

“Stuff.”

“Stuff?”

“Not serious stuff. Just stuff.”

“Like?”

“...Non Hannah stuff?” He tried and the narrowing of her eyes and the hard glare of disapproval she gave in return was enough to make him duck his head and look apologetic in shame.

“I mean it’s really not important enough that you should worry about.” He corrected himself in quick clumsiness before clearing his throat. “It’s just—ahem—basketball.”

“Basketball.” Hannah repeated flatly, looking insulted that he was attempting to deceive her so sloppily. “Sure. Basketball. Now seriously, what’s going on with you two? What are you being so secretive about?”

“Nothing!” Clay lied as he took a shallow bite of his burger, not feeling particularly hunger anymore. “I just had a few questions about sports and since Justin plays basketball, I figured he could help.”

“Sports?” She repeated sounding even more unconvinced than she had previously. “Since when do you care about sports, Helmet!”
“Since...I thought about joining the track team.” He announced and Hannah hummed in amusement, still unconvinced and even whistling a sarcastic ‘yeah, okay...’ under her breath.

“What?” he demanded, taking his turn to look insulted. “As much as I ride my bike, my leg strength should be good enough for running.”

“I’ve seen you run Helmet.” Hannah reminded him, looking as though nothing more needed to be said. Clay rolled his eyes a little in agreement.

“Still, having some form of extra curricular activity under my belt would do wonders for my college application.” he insisted truthfully. “I just wanted to make sure he was feeling better before I started bugging him about stuff.”

Hannah seemed to consider what he said as he began motioning for her to lean in over the table.

“Besides, I didn’t want ask in front of, well...” he stated in a hushed whisper and they both glanced over at the table currently housing Justin, who only gave a half-hearted effort to smile as a roar of laughter erupted from the others seated around him, the seats at the table filling up as more jocks joined the table.

Hannah nodded in understanding. “So why not just ask Jeff?”

He gave her glare that reeked of ‘you knew better before you asked’ and she batted her eyes back at him innocently. “What’s the matter? Can’t focus with Jeff’s butt in gym shorts?”

Clay huffed out a laugh, choosing not to respond right away as he went back to eating his fries. He kinda couldn't...

“I could focus,” Clay lied, refusing to acknowledge how unconvincing he sounded to his own ears. “It would just be easier to ask someone else.”

“Alright then; ask Zach.” Hannah suggested next, humoring him. “He’s great at basketball.”

“Not as good as Justin, and I’d rather ask someone I know better.” Clay insisted.

“Pushing you out of the way while almost trapping you in your locker is not knowing someone better.” Hannah snorted.

“That was Monty.” Clay corrected her in a flat tone and a look of disdain, just realizing that lockers, himself and Monty were turning out to be a bad combination.

“Justin was there laughing.”

“You were there laughing!” he pointed out, looking a little outraged.

“You made this face and otter sound, I couldn’t help it!” Hannah cried defensively, quickly covering her mouth for a moment, clearly trying not to laugh at the mere thought of the incident. “Besides, I got you out!”

“Bryce got me out,” Clay corrected her, pretending to be hurt far more than he actually was. “With most of the football team surrounding my locker and laughing at me.” Yet another combination of things of he would have to avoid in the future.

“But who was the one that went and got him?”

“Sheri. Who never laughed and told everyone else to cut it out.” Clay added with a smug
judgmental eye brow arch.

“And who told ‘Saint Sheri’ after repeated failed attempts to get you out?” Hannah pressed, determined to be right.

“You,” Clay conceded reluctantly, then feeling particularly petty added, “but you still laughed.”

“And you’re still trying to justify wanting to spend extra time with Justin.” She retorted and upon his glare, she held up her hands defensively.

“I’m not judging you for it,” then she smirked and pointed her fork at him. “except for, you know, the whole dumping me for yet another guy part.”

He sighed. He was never going to living that night down. Then again, maybe he should consider himself lucky she even spoke to him again after. Though he liked it more when they were awkwardly flirting—she teased him a lot less then.

“I can’t dump you if we were never dating.” He challenged and she feigned having her pride wounded.

“Ditching me for the unfairer sex then.” She corrected herself, satisfied as Skye took the seat next to Clay.

“What’s his deal?” she asked taking note of Clay's expression.

“Clay’s caught a ‘secret’ crush on Justin.” Hannah whispered suggestively with a wag of her eyebrows while Clay’s mouth flew open in disbelief at her audacity.

Skye quickly glanced over at the table of the increasing loud, obnoxious jocks and sneered lightly, looking back to give him with a disapproving glare. “Come on Clay, I expected better taste out of you.”

“I. Am. NOT. Into him!” He punctuated through clenched teeth and the girls shared a look of skepticism that drove Clay crazy.

“In to who?” Jess inquired in wonder, eyes wide in delight at the prospect of Clay having a new crush for her to gush over as she took a seat beside Hannah. “Clay’s got a new crush?”

“Yep. Justin.” Skye replied matter of fact and Jessica whipped her head around melodramatically to stare at Clay in feigned outrage, arching her brow at him in an over-exaggerated fashion, immediately catching on to the joke.

“You’re trying to steal my man, Jensen?” She accused him in a low, over-dramatized betrayed fashion, her beautiful brown eyes widening in fake outrage. He immediately began massaging the bridge of his nose in response, realizing it was going to be one of 'those' lunches.

“It’s the smile.” Hannah reasoned, pretending to ponder her words while thumping her index finger against her cheek.

Jessica glanced her way and quickly relented.

“He does have a gorgeous smile.” She admitted in an almost dreamy fashion and Skye snorted.

“More like something is in the water.” She quirked and Jess gave her an insulted glance that Clay wasn’t so convinced was entirely playful.
“Are you saying Clay and I have bad taste in guys?” Jess demanded and Skye only shrugged while Clay gave both girls an astonishing look.

“Jess, I don’t have a crush on Justin.” He stated flatly.

She cut him a look as if she were suffering from crippling disappointment. “Now come on Clay! You can’t just give up on your dreams the moment someone teases you about your unbridled love!” She chastised him with over-dramatic, passionate theatrics. Hannah choked on her milk as she snickered under her breath and Clay realized he should have sat at another table. Damn Alex sitting with the jocks today...

“Where’s your conviction?! Justin needs a fighter and I like the competition!” She announced confidently, then leveled her gaze at him, giving him an under-eyed look behind her long, beautiful lashes, accompanied with a devious smirk. “But be warned Clay Jensen: I will do whatever it takes to protect that smile, even if it means not fighting fair!”


“Shut. Your. Mouth!” Jess screeched melodramatically while faking a rather poor British accent and Skye simply flipped her off with a small smirk, getting a few curious, amused glances their way. Clay gave Hannah a pleading look to throw him a bone and she nodded in understanding, winking at him.

“I think Jeff turned him down.” Hannah suggested as her attempt to ‘help him’, popping a chip into her mouth.

Clay glared daggers at her while she only smiled sweetly at him in return.

Skye simply rolled her eyes as slowly as she could to emphasize her disdain. “So now he’s lowering his standards. Typical.”

Jess pointed a finger at her. “Watch it.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I think you lowered your standards by dating him too. No jock is worth the trouble,” Skye shrugged before bitterly adding under her breath “just a bunch of moronic, drunken douchebags...”

“Oh honey, who hurt you?” Ryan asked, making the group turn to see him standing directly beside Skye. Once he realized he had their full attention he flashed a dazzling smile at them with a flourish of his hand by his face to emphasize it.

“Do not adjust your eyes or ears cats and kittens! Ryan Shaver is actively sitting at your lowly table to make it more popular and fashionable acceptable!” The blond announced arrogantly as he took the open seat next to where Tony usual sat.

Jess snorted in amusement while Skye and Clay shared a look of utter annoyance. Hannah smiled at him sympathetically. “Did Courtney banish you from her table?”

“Oh honey, who hurt you?” Ryan asked, making the group turn to see him standing directly beside Skye. Once he realized he had their full attention he flashed a dazzling smile at them with a flourish of his hand by his face to emphasize it.

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“Okay, yeah, no, it’s my table first of all, so I am the banish-er, not the banish-ee,” Ryan quickly corrected her looking mildly insulted by her assertion. “And Courtney is out sick today and I didn’t want to sit by myself.”

“So why don’t you sit with people that actually like you.” Skye scowled and Clay chuckled lightly under his breath despite himself.

Ryan exaggeratedly sulked. “I would, but since Tony likes to sit here, so I have to settle for the losers table—minus the likes of Jessica and maybe Hannah when she does her hair better.”
Hannah subconsciously touched the back of her hair and Ryan nodded at her with a condescendingly sympathetic smile. “Don’t be afraid of volumizer hon, it’s your best friend.”

Then he looked over at Clay, glancing up at his hair with a regrettable frown. “I’ve heard your cry for help and yes: I would be honored to make a donation fund to help you get your hair professionally done.”

Clay gave him a withering expression that could rival one of Skye’s best but Ryan only waved it off. “Now I won’t promise you any miracles—after all, even the best can only do so much with so little to work with. However, I’m sure we can at least get it to ‘acceptable’ fag levels at least.”

“I’m not gay you un-fucking-believable ass.” Clay muttered more so to himself as he ran a hand over his face, jerking his head away when Ryan tried to feel a strand of his hair.

“Okay, okay. Ding-ding-ding, Helmet’s had enough.” Hannah announced finally coming to his aid for real this time, much to his relief and sincerest gratitude. “We should be helping him through his crush crisis instead of criticizing his hair or tastes he may or may not have in guys.”

“Jeff is pretty cute, so I get it.” Ryan offered and Jess scoffed. “Jeff is last week’s crush, where have you been? He’s challenging me for Justy these days.”

“. . .He does have a cute smile.” Ryan agreed thoughtfully and Jess shot Skye an ‘I told you so!’ victory smirk of smugness while Skye only rolled her eyes in return.

“Will you stop that?!” Clay asked her exasperated and Jess cackled at him.

“Oh come, you know I love teasing you! You make it so easy!” she smiled and Clay couldn't help but ease up considering how beautiful it was.

“And fun.” Hannah added trying not to laugh herself.

“But okay, okay but down to the real business now,” Jess announced with a clear of her throat. “So as you girls know, the cheerleading try-outs officially start today and I was thinking—“

“Hard pass.” Skye sneered in disgust, looking at Jess as if she were completely insane. Jess look flabbergasted that she didn’t even get a chance to finish her sales pitch.

“Oh come on! It would be a fun way to expand your horizons and try something new you may be really good at and come to like!”

“And give those disgusting chauvinistic meatheads something else to laugh about and make fun of me for? Fuck. That.” Skye proclaimed. “Besides, they’re rewarded more than enough around here for basically doing jack-shit and I won’t contribute to the inflation of their superiority complexes.”

“Here here!” Ryan agreed, raising a celery stick in the air and Skye gave him a curt nod of appreciation.

“I kinda of have to agree,” Hannah admitted and Jess rounded on her.

“Et tu, Hannah?” Jess pouted and Hannah gave her an apologetic smile.

“People tend to put a lot of stock and merit into the sport stars around here. They get away with a lot and then most of them turn around and treat other people like dirt.” Hannah elaborated, casting a knowing look at Clay as she said it before continuing, “If I’m going to be part of the problem, I’d rather being playing the sport as the star, not cheering it on.”
As if on cue, Zach’s laughter drifted over mixed in with others from the jock table and Hannah smiled despite herself. “Though I don’t mind cheering on one or two of them on. You know, from the stands every now and then.”

“Weak-willed traitor.” Skye teased, shaking her head and Hannah tosses a grape at her.

“Gee, thanks girls.” Jess frowned, looking between the pair before her eyes landed on Clay. Sweet, charming, and alluring, Clay could instantly see why guys were so infatuated with her.

“You’ll come then, right Clay?” Jess asked sweetly, batting those beautiful brown eyes of hers at him through those long lashes, giving him the same hopeful smile she gave the girls. He in turn, gave her much the same look Skye had.

“**Hard** pass.” He repeated and Skye gave him a smile, looking honored as Jess inclined her head and poked her lips out.

“Oh don’t you dare try to tell me you have something against cheerleading!”

“Other than it being the grossly overused stereotype sport of the gays?” Ryan raised and Clay didn’t even bother to remind him that he was in fact, once again, not completely homosexual. Not when he raised a pretty solid point anyway.

“That aside, I’m not cheering for the same assholes that pick on or try to beat me up almost day. It would only get much worse if I became an actual cheerleader.” Clay added astutely.

“Jeff is a jock though,” Jess pointed out.

“He’s the *exception* not the rule.” Clay refuted.

“Still, you can’t tell me you wouldn’t love being on the sidelines cheering your man on with pom-poms!” Jess pushed.

“I can do that from the safety of the bleachers, or better yet, my bedroom.” Clay reasoned. “I definitely won’t do it in a skin tight outfit, over a sport I could give less than two shits about. I mean really, I barely go to other social events, can you picture me cheering?” He leveled a look at her that asked her to seriously consider what he was saying. “Seriously Jess, can you?”

“I dunno, I think you’d look pretty rad cheering me on.” Jeff called directly behind him and Clay froze, looking instantly mortified.

The girls ducked their heads, snickering at him while Ryan chose to pay the group no further mind in favor of texting while he impatiently waited for Tony to grace them with his presence (who, unbeknownst to them, was being held up in a discussion with one of his teachers).

Clay struggled for a response, stumbling over his words. Jeff playfully hit him on the arm with a smile. “I’m messing around. I just wanted to make sure you were okay. You know, from earlier.”

“Right.” Clay agreed immediately, shooting a look over to where he knew Monty was sitting. He was indeed watching the pair out of the corner of his eye as he talked to Scott, scowling lightly at Clay in particular. The latter swallowed, not wanting to decipher what that look meant, choosing to abide by the 'ignorance is bliss' approach. He turned his attention back to Jeff. “Yeah, I’m fine. I’m good.”

“You sure?” Jeff pushed in concern. “Monty can be, uh, kinda of a handful.”
“A vast understatement when describing him, but yeah, I'm sure. And I'm okay.” Clay insisted then fought not to blush as Jeff gave what he said a light chuckle in response.

“Good, as long as you're okay. Do you still want to meet you after school for our study thing?” Jeff asked with that charming, award-winning smile of his so infectious that it made Clay give him an awkward, lopsided smile back from just witnessing it.

“Sure!”

"Your place or mine?"

“Mine is fine.”

"Cool! Want a ride?"

“Does he,” He heard Hannah whisper to Jess and Clay cut the pair a look to shut up while Hannah snorted and Jess bit her lip to try and comply.

“Yeah, sounds good. The ride in the car not what they—”, Clay stopped himself short when he caught the quizzical look Jeff gave him, realizing he hadn’t heard what Hannah said.

“So um yeah, rides are fun, I mean they are with you, so yeah. A ride. With you. Cause they're fun and so. . .yeah.” Clay babbled a little flustered, trying hard to sound as nonchalantly confident as he could and failing miserably, earning another wave of giggles from the duo sitting across from him and a sympathetic grimace from both Skye and Ryan that served to let him know they thought they were watching a train wreck.

“Uh...okay. Sure,” Jeff said slowly with a nod, looking as though he wasn’t entirely sure what the hell Clay was going on about. Which made two of them.

“we can meet in the parking lot.”

“Yeah! The lot of parking! Great!” Clay joked, already feeling his face heating up as he heard Ryan mutter “Dear lord, make him stop,” under his breath to Skye as he openly cringed.

Clay wished the floor beneath him would open up and swallow him whole. When did it get so freaking hard to simply talk to Jeff? This was worse than when he had a thing for Hannah!

“As smooth as ever I see Jensen!” Bryce exclaimed with a teasing smile, clapping him hard on the back with his free hand while the other held on to his tray. He made Clay lurch forward and bump into the table, making him push his own tray enough to spill a bit of his drink. “At least you have taste but you really need to work that small talk of yours: you've got no game.”

“Come on man, lay off of him.” Jeff frowned protectively and Clay couldn’t fight the small smile that graced his face as Hannah and Jess all but outright fawned over the act.

“It’s all in good fun, Atkins. Your precious boyfriend knows I’m just fuckin around with him.” Bryce insisted, slapping Clay on the back a second time and once again sending him reeling, making Clay realize he really needed better upper body strength.

“So you coming or you gonna keep flirting it up with the ladies?” Bryce continued inclining his head toward their usual table.

Ryan cut him a narrowed eyed scowl as he continued texting but said nothing and Clay blew out puffs of air trying not to look as embarrassed as he felt, biting down several zingers he had for Bryce as not to out what he knew about his situation with Justin. Especially not in front of Jess.
Jeff meanwhile cut Bryce a look of disapproval, who only shrugged at him as he leaned in to whisper, “Let me know when you’re finished trying to con Jensen into sucking you off,” out of earshot of the others sitting close to them before cutting Clay an almost accusatory sneer of ridicule as he continued on his way to the jock table. Clay narrowed his own eyes at Bryce, almost wishing he had the balls to say what the jock assumed he’d said low enough not to be heard by anyone but Jeff out loud. At least so people like Jess could get the idea of what kind of asshole-ish creep Bryce really was to stay away from him.

Jeff gave Clay the best, most sincere apologetic smile he had in his repertoire. “Sorry about that, he’s just—”

“An complete, unapologetic asshole? You don’t say.” Clay fumed sarcastically, recalling all the teasing and bullying he endured on behalf of Bryce and his fellow jocks about being gay. He looked up at Jeff with an earnest and serious expression. "You don't have to keep apologizing for those assholes; it's not your fault they can't all be as great of a person as you are."

Ryan cut him a sincere ‘good one’ glance over the top of his phone as Jeff smiled at Clay, looking a tad—just a tad—bashful from the compliment, making Clay's heart flutter for a moment.

“Thanks,” Jeff replied and the duo gave muffled giggles that Clay ignored. Then Jeff smirked, looking a bit full of himself. "Though he was absolutely right about one thing.

Clay looked at him dubiously, not even trying to hide the fact that he was skeptical of what he was saying. Jeff gave him a sly smirk. “You've got great taste.” Jeff gave him a wink and smile and with a small wave, he turned to go, leaving Clay feeling a little winded.

“Later!” He called over to Clay over his shoulder.

“Bye!” Clay remarked with a small wave of his hand, along with most of the table as he watched Jeff make his way over to his friends, taking the free seat next to Monty who greeted him instantaneously. Now he would never admit to it...but he was sorta, kinda, maybe. . . looking at his ass as he left the entire time. It just looked so good in those jeans!

He knew he’d been noticed however because the girls were trying, not that hard though, to stifling their obnoxious laughter. Clay cut them another look of annoyance while Jess only shrugged indifferently and Hannah wagged her eyebrows suggestively.

Ryan let out a long whistle, shaking his head. “Grade-A cringe there sweetheart. I feel embarrassed just having to watch. Good try saving it at the end there though.”

“Thanks,” Clay grumbled with a sigh of defeat and Ryan hummed pleasantly in response, going back to his phone. Movement out of the corner of his eye caught Clay's attention and he began watching the jock table as discreetly as he could without drawing the attention of his companions, just as Skye began to give her two-cents on the matter and start up a conversation.

Bryce was standing directly behind Justin, his tray on the table as he joked around. Clay watched as Justin’s muscles tightened considerably and in a noticeable fashion once Bryce's hand clamped down on his right shoulder from behind and gave it a tight squeeze as he continued speaking to the other people sitting around them. Justin stared straight ahead at Alex, keeping deathly quiet with a stony face as the blond watched the entire exchange with open anxiety, seeming to be the only person at the table to actually notice Justin’s deteriorated mood change.

Bryce finally turned his full attention to Justin, staring down at him and giving his shoulder another a small squeeze to let him know he was waiting to be properly acknowledged. Justin left him waiting
as he got up from his seat, batting Bryce’s hand away from him. A hushed silence fell over the table as he grabbed his tray and made his way over towards Clay's table, unwittingly grabbing the attention of everyone sitting there as a hushed silence too fell over the table at his presence.

Jessica smiled up at him in welcoming surprise, as did Hannah while Sky looked somewhat annoyed and Ryan watched on curiously (and no longer interested in his phone). Clay simply stared at him with an impartial expression, feeling several eyes on them as he waiting to see what Justin was going to do or say.

“Can I sit here?”

Chapter End Notes

In the Next Chapter: Will Ryan have Clay's hair done? Can Clay salvage the rest of his day? Will Jessica get the girls to try out for cheerleading with her? Will Bryce finally stop being a complete ass and show Justin he's the pearl in a bed of oysters by tap dancing on the cafeteria table while singing a show tunes to apologizes?! Find out on the next exciting episode of Office Hours: The Musical of the Video Game.
Chapter Summary

The incomparable Bryce Walker keeps things exciting for the remainder of the lunch period.

Chapter Notes

I’m so excited to finally get this chapter out of the way because after this, I officially get to kick off the Clustin portion of the story in earnest! This chapter and the next were some of the first I wrote of this story, so it’s going to be fun finally getting to post them!

Warning: There’s a bit of homophobic slurring and triggering from the perpetrator to his victim.

I know. I’m sorry.

I will bury you all in fluff after all this drama, I swear!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Can I sit here?" Justin asked, trying to sound and look as casual as possible. Despite the question being directed at the table, his blue eyes bore into Clay's, pleading with him to allow it as he waited to be welcomed and given the green light to sit down.

"Of course, sit!" Clay agreed quickly, feeling a little awkward as he forced himself to stare ahead and not give in to the temptation to look over at the table filled with jocks, feeling several pairs of eyes on them already.

"Why are you asking? Of course you can!" Jess agreed, admonishing her boyfriend with a playful pat of his arm before immediately motioning for Hannah to move down a seat so that Justin could sit directly next to her.

"Well fuck it, let's invite the entire football team to sit here while we're at it!" Skye exclaimed in annoyance and Jessica threw her a quick dirty look as if that was the most absurd thing she'd ever heard, ignoring the harsh glare of warning Jess threw her way.

Just as Clay didn’t help but agree privately that Justin did have one hell of a smile, even now as he was forcing it, recalling the one he’d received earlier in the day. It made Clay return a smile of his own, albeit not nearly as impressive and far more awkward before he went back to eating his food.

"What's wrong? In need of more intelligent conversation?" Ryan smirked and Skye snorted as if that was the most absurd thing she'd ever heard, ignoring the harsh glare of warning Jess threw her way.
Justin once again ignored her, only giving Ryan a blank look as he shrugged slightly before clearing his throat and looking back at his tray.

"Maybe I am."

"Then go to a preschool." Skye muttered under her breath and in retaliation, Hannah tossed a couple fries her way. She missing by a few of inches but it was enough to get Skye's attention so that both girls could give her the duel brunt of their evil eye. Skye only looked between them defiantly.

"Come on Skye." Clay sighed, giving her a pleading look when she glared over at him to protest. With a roll of her eyes, she sighed in defeat relenting, stuffing her mouth with food to keep herself from speaking further.

Clay turned his attention back to Justin, cutting a quick aside glance to the table full of jocks and noticed that most of the occupants were staring back. A few were speaking to one another in low voices as they watched, but special mention had to go to Bryce and Monty, whom were watching Justin was such intense interest that it made Clay feel uncomfortable for him.

He quickly looked back at Justin, keeping his face as passive as possible as he hoped the look in his eyes were doing all the talking for him  "Are you gonna be okay?"

Justin gave him the same look he had earlier that morning, clearly understanding what he actually meant by the question. He nodded his head, keeping his eyes trained on Clay to silently warn him that this was not the time to discussion before he stated as casually as he possibly could "I'm fine. I just wanted a break." He even managed to smile at him reassuringly, though Clay assumed he was doing it more for the others sitting with them, as he clearly had to know by this point that Clay could see through the mask. It had to be clear to Justin by now that he knew something, even if the jock was unsure how much and what exactly that was.

"From what?" Jess asked frowning curiously, now looking over at the jock table quickly herself before turning her attention back to Justin. "From your friends?"

Justin's jaw clenched. "Yeah."

"Come on Jess, wouldn't you if you hung out with a bunch of dumbasses that barely know how to spell 'football'"? Skye admonished and Ryan snickered at her.

"You just can't help yourself, can you dear?"

"That was a compliment," Skye reasoned defensively, stealing a carrot stick from Ryan's tray and ignoring his indignant huff. "The fact that he knows he needs a break means he's not as hopeless or as stupid as I thought."

Surprisingly, Justin snorted under his breath and laughed at her, even managing another smile. Clay looked down at his tray. Yep, that was definitely one hell of a smile.

"I didn't know hell could freeze the fuck over so quickly." Justin joked back and Skye arched a brow at him.

"Don't get used to it. I still think there's something in the water." she insisted, glancing over at Jessica who rolled her eyes.

"We told you, it's the smile!" Jessica insisted, smiling playfully at Clay and winking.

"The smile." Ryan and Hannah agreed in unison, sounding almost cult like. Clay fought not to face
palm, only shaking his head slowly and refusing to give them the satisfaction that he did in some ways agree with the sentiment now.

Justin looked between the four of them confused and Clay only sighed. "Don't ask. It will only get weird and make you regret sitting here."

Hannah opened her mouth, ready to give him a comeback but was caught off by an obnoxiously loud declaration of:

"Foley! What the fuck, you dick?!"

The table looked up to see Monty standing up with his hands cupped around his mouth to amplify his voice. Once he realized he had Justin's attention, he gave him a expression that seemed to ask 'What the fuck is your problem lately?!' while gesturing with his arms. Zach discreetly exchanged an uncomfortable glance with Alex while the rest of the table was preoccupied with staring at the lot of them, seemingly waiting for Justin to give a proper explanation for his previous actions.

Clay and Justin exchanged looks again, with the former only looking back toward the table as he realized with dread that Bryce was making his way back over to their table. He gestured for Monty to take a seat, giving the table a cocky reassuring smile as he announced "I've got this," before he turned to face them again, eyes trained squarely on the brunette sitting across from Clay.

“For the love of god, I’m going to eat in the library.” Skye growled threateningly under her breath as she watched Bryce approach out of the corner of her eye and Ryan nodded to the sentiment as he cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"Am...I missing something?" Hannah asked cautiously, nose wrinkled in disdain the closer Bryce got, giving Clay in particular a questioning side glance before quickly gesturing with her eyes at Justin and arching a brow back at Clay to give her some kind of sign. He only stared at her with a blank expression and she frowned, letting him know that he would have to explain himself and sooner rather than later.

"Yeah, what's going on?" Jess inquired directly to Justin in a low voice, taking in his sudden troubling body language with growing concern. Justin didn't respond immediately, keeping his eyes trained on his tray as his right leg began to bounce up and down nervously. He started clenching his fists and opening them on either side of his tray as he kept his mouth in a tightened thin line, controlling his breathing through his nose. Jess gently placed one of her hands over Justin’s, her concerned frown deepening when he flinched away from her lightly, snapping out of whatever trouble thoughts he was having. He instantly relaxed once he looked her way, face softening as he got a good look at how worried she appeared to be.

“What's the matter?” she whispered softly, just barely audible enough for Clay to here her. Justin licked his lips as he looked away from her and she tightened her grip on his hand, stoking it softly with her thumb in an effort to comfort him and coax him into talking. "Justin?"

Justin glanced up at him and Clay begged him silently to tell her whatever was on his mind before the latter cleared his throat lightly as he looked back at Jess, clearly wanting to so say something but keeping silent, simply shaking his head and offering her a weak toothless smile that he was okay, much to Clay's disappointment.

Before anything more could be said, Bryce was clamping down both hands on either of Clay's shoulders, startling him. "Hey buddy!" he greeted him dismissively, patting one of his shoulders as he came to stand directly behind him. Clay scowled up at him in annoyance but Bryce ignored him and virtually everyone else's presence to stare directly at Justin, who was glaring back at him.
hatefully, his hands tightened into tight fists as his nose flared in anger.

Jessica looked between the two in concerned suspicion, giving Bryce an accusatory glare to tell her exactly what the hell was going on. He spared her a quick reassuring smile that everything would be fine before turning his attention back to Justin. However, before Bryce could so much as breath a word to him, Justin quickly got to his feet, bumping his tray and table a little along the way. He mumbled an apology to Jess before giving Bryce a venomous glare over his shoulder as he stormed away from the table, leaving his food and several bewildered faces behind.

There was a tense, awkward silence as the entire table looked around at one another as hushed whispers and soft murmurs from other students began around the lunchroom.

Clay’s mind raced as he watched Justin disappear out of view around the corner. Something else must have happened between this morning and now because while Justin still showed apprehension being around Bryce, his feelings had clearly given way to something more substantially resentful and openly so.

Jessica got to her feet immediately but Bryce gestured for her to hold with a raised hand, having watched which direction Justin had gone in the entire time. He finally released Clay’s shoulders, taking a step back as he began to move around the table to follow Justin. Clay narrowed his eyes at Bryce and gave him an openly dirty look as Bryce feigned an apologetic, guilt ridden look of concern at Jess as he passed by.

“Let me talk to him, Jess.” he offered then quickly departed the lunchroom, going in the same direction Justin had gone, nearly bumping into Tony as he did. The pair shared a glare to watch where the other was going before Bryce disappeared from view and Tony mumbled something in Spanish under his breath as he made his way to the table.

Making up his mind that he absolutely would not let Justin deal with whatever may unfold alone, Clay got to his feet just as Tony was finally taking his seat, looking over at him in cautious alarm.

“Do I want to know that was about?”

“When we figure it out, we’ll be sure to fill you in.” Ryan announced giving him a charming smile that Tony barely acknowledged in favor of eying Clay, questioning what he was up to with just a look and a raised eyebrow.

“I’ll be back,” Clay announced, pausing to share a reassuring look with Tony so he wouldn’t worry. “I’ll be fine. If I’m not back in twenty minutes, send the dogs out.”

With that, he moved as fast as he could to catch up with the pair of jocks, noticing out of the corner of his eye that the trio of Zach, Jeff, and Alex were making their way over to the increasing populated table. He couldn’t bite back the small smile that touched the corners of his lips as he saw in his peripheral vision Alex steal his vacant seat while Hannah took her’s back, the duo immediately leaning in to try and comfort a worried Jessica just as he rounded the corner.

He headed straight for Justin’s locker, frowning when he didn’t see him. He stopped dead in his tracks to look around the hallway and gave a heavy sigh as he realized he had no idea where the pair may have gone. Knowing Justin, he probably left school all together; it seemed to be his go to response for not wanting to deal with his trauma as of late.

His head perked up when then the faint sound of a familiar laugh drew his attention immediately and he made his way down the hall, peering around the corner that lead to the music hall, which at this hour was completely deserted due to lunch. The sound stopped abruptly and Clay strained to hear if
anyone was still speaking as he crept closer to the closed door of an empty classroom.

He leaned on the wall, just behind a row of lockers that should keep his skinny frame out of sight from anyone passing by, making sure to keep out of sight of the small window the door had as well as not to alert the pair inside that he was eavesdropping. He pressed his hand against the wall to steady himself so he could lean in as close as he could, staying as silent as he tried to listening to the conversation happening inside the room, nose wrinkling up as he struggled to hear the pair as they continued their conversation. . .

—//—

Justin made his way from the lunchroom, letting the echo of his footfalls attempt to soothe his nerves as he made his way down the empty corridor toward his locker.

He wanted to concentrate on getting his stuff together and getting the hell out of there before anyone could catch up to him, if anyone had gotten the bright idea to follow him in the first place. He just needed time to calm down and think of a better plan, since trying to act like nothing was wrong clearly wasn't going to work anymore. There was no way he could just keep pretending that everything was fine and that he didn't want to repeatedly punch Bryce Walker in his stupid smug face.

Not after everything he'd done to him that night. Not after everything he'd said in the locker room.

He was so lost in his thoughts that he didn't realize he had in fact walked a hall past his destination. Not until a hand grabbed him by the arm and slung him into the corridor leading to the music hall. He cried out in surprise as he was shoved harshly into a nearby empty classroom, making him stumble back and fall hard on his ass. He hissed in pain, scrambling to get to a knee just as Bryce stood between him and the exit, blocking his way out as he quietly shut—and more importantly locked—the door behind him.

Justin eyed the doorknob distressingly as Bryce moved closer toward him.

“Hey brother,” Bryce leered with a broad smile and a sarcastically chipper tone, barely able to mask the apparent irritation he felt with Justin’s latest antics. He watched as Justin got to his feet, feigning a look of concern that came off looking more spiteful than anything. "Everything alright? You left in such a hurry!"

Justin didn't answer, immediately making a break for the door. Bryce quickly sidestepped into his path to block him and Justin immediately tried to push him out of the way. Bryce only rolled his eyes, chuckling under his breath at the poor attempt considering he wasn't moved very far. Quickly, he grabbed Justin by his arm again and slung him around like a rag doll, switching places with him as he pushed the basketball star against the wall near the door with a hard THUD! before moving in closer.

Noticing that they were only inches apart, Justin tried to instinctively sidestep to his left to keep out of Bryce’s reach as he went for the doorknob. It didn’t go unnoticed and a flicker of mirthful spite danced in Bryce’s eyes while he purposely leaned against the door to put his full weight against it, his body officially obstructing the view of the knob. Justin in turn took a step away from him, looking around the room quickly for another exit and almost stumbling over his own feet in the process.
Bryce only snorted at him in ridicule, crossing his arms haughtily over his chest as he glared at Justin. “What the fuck was that in the lunchroom today, Justin?” He inquired casually with the faint trace of sly sneer, putting emphasis on his name.

“Fuck off, Bryce.” Justin shot back, putting the same emphasis on his name as fought to keep his face neutral, clearly trying to hide his fear behind a facade of angry bravado. “I’m not in the mood.”

“And you think I am? After all the bullshit you keep pulling lately?” Bryce replied with an air of indignation and Justin’s pursed his lips as his fists balled up at his sides, clearly ready to use them if necessary. Bryce eyed his hands for a moment, looking back up at Justin with an inviting look that dared him to try it.

“I’m not pulling anything.” Justin stated curtly, fists only tightening to the point that his nails were digging into his palms.

“You’ve been pulling the same shit all week.” Bryce corrected him dryly, unimpressed by his attempts to skirt the issue.

“If I am, I’m reacting to the shit you did!” Justin countered defensively in anger.

Bryce frowned, clearly annoyed by the implication. “I don’t know why. I didn’t do anything to you, Justin. Nothing you didn’t agree to.” he replied coldly, looking as though he was daring him to keep on that train of thought.

The two glared at one another in a private heated exchange, blue eyes intently watching the other before finally, Justin broke away with an eye roll and a sigh as he shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Whatever Bryce. Just let me out of here. I have somewhere I need to be.” He grumbled, trying to excuse himself.

Bryce was not about to let that happen.

“I’m sure you do.” Bryce replied with judgmental skepticism. “Want a ride?” he offered, opting to play along with his obvious excuse.

Justin took a calming breath, looking at the exit again with raw longing before looking back at Bryce.

“I don’t need shit from you.” Justin replied too quickly, inwardly wincing at how awkwardly stiff he sounded. He almost jumped when Bryce let out a sharp, boisterous guffaw that echoed off the walls of the room, mocking him as it rang in his ears.

“Are you fucking serious? Do you hear yourself?” Bryce mocked with a dismissive snort, his smirk holding malice. “Our entire relationship started because you needed my fucking help!”

He unfolded his arms as he pushed himself off the door to stand directly in front of him which made Justin relieve his pockets of his hands, just in case he need to use them.

Bryce looked calm, almost too calm really, but Justin could tell just by the the way his jaw was set and that hard look in his eyes that he was anything but. “I really don’t get what your problem is—”

“Are you fucking serious?” Justin cut in with disbelief, in sheer amazement and disgust at the audacity of Bryce being so purposely obtuse. “You don’t get why the fuck I would have a problem with any of this shit?”
Bryce cocked his head to the side, feigning as if he were contemplating Justin's words before giving him an indifferent shrug of his shoulders. "No." he stated bluntly. "I don't understand why you're letting one drunk night of fun bother you so damn much. After everything I've ever done for you, after all the shit I still do for you, you should be grateful that's all I wanted."

"No," Justin lashed out bluntly, eyes furious as took a brave step forward, filled with indignation. "Don't you dare tell me how the fuck I'm so supposed to feel about what you did!"

Bryce rolled his eyes and let out an exaggerated sigh then chuckled—fucking chuckled—at him.

"See, this is the bullshit I was talking about," Bryce explained condescendingly, as if Justin were too stupid to understand him before. "This crap right here that you keep doing? Everyone's starting to notice and starting to ask fucking questions." He paused to give Justin an exaggerated sigh. "As usual, I've been saving your ass and covering for you. With Jess, the guys, coach—and look, you know I normally don't mind, but fuck if I'm going to keep doing this all by myself." He gave Justin disappointed, accusatory look one reserved for a small child throwing a tantrum. "You said you would be fine today and would stop with the moody shit. So act like you know how to honor your word and do what the fuck you promised to do."

Justin brows furrowed in bewilderment, barely able to comprehend how Bryce could muster up the balls to pretend this was some sort of run-of-the-mill bullshit going on between them right now. Like it was all some minor inconvenience he was having to put up with. Than again to him, it probably was; he didn’t think he’d done anything wrong. Even if he did, he was almost certain he wouldn't care because Bryce most likely assumed he’d never have to face any repercussions for his actions. Either way, the thought made Justin’s mood worsen and he wanted to be done with this conversation.

"I'm not doing jack shit." he fumed and Bryce looked impatiently annoyed.

"For fuck's sake, stop acting like a goddamn weepy virgin!" Bryce demanded irritably. "It was just a casual fuck, it's not a big deal!"

"To YOU!" Justin snarled in fury, voice finally raising enough to echo off the walls. "It's not a big deal to you! You weren't the one being held down! YOU weren't the one fucking begging for it to stop! YOU weren't the one that had to stand there and listen while you bragged about what you did, making me sound like some goddamn whore when fucking rap—!

He felt all the air leave his lungs as his body was slammed back against a nearby wall with another loud THUD! Bryce placed both of his hands by either side of Justin's face, palms flat against the wall as he effectively trapping him. He quickly glanced back at the door to ensure they still had no audience to their continued unfolding drama. Satisfied that they remained undisturbed, he rounded on Justin, looking furious.

"Keep your goddamn voice down," Bryce warned in a hush tone, still speaking with his usual reserved calmness. The look on his face however spoke volumes of what the consequences would be should Justin not heed his words. "You want to start spouting bullshit, then fine, but not while you scream like a raving lunatic for the entire school to hear! This isn't a goddamn trailer park so try to have some fucking class!"

"F**k you Bryce," Justin seethed through clenched teeth, cursing himself as he felt the sting of tears threatening to fall and expose how truly hurt he was. "I can barely sleep at night! I don't want to eat anymore, I can't be with Jess without thinking about it," he dared to look Bryce directly in the eyes. "I can't stand being in the same room with you most of the time! And you could give less than a shit
because you think this is all some fucking joke!"

For a split second that Justin was almost positive he imagined, the older jock looked taken aback by his words and just how hurt he seemed to be. Then in the blink of an eye, it was gone, instead replaced by that same smug indifference Justin had come to expect.

“It’s like your *trying* to sound like one of those hysterical bitches from a Lifetime movie,” Bryce joked flatly, all but holding back his laughter. With a low growl of disgust, Justin blinked away a few tears as he angrily tore Bryce's arms away from him. He once again made a beeline for the exit, done listening to whatever else Bryce had to say, especially this antagonizing bullshit.

It wasn’t long before he felt a vise like grip take him by the back of the neck. Justin instantly felt his heart plummet and desperately tried to get away, throwing out an uncoordinated blind punch over his shoulder with his right arm that didn’t connect because Bryce managed to pull his face back in time and catch it. He seemed less than pleased with the attempt as he pushed Justin back against the wall, pinning him there face first this time while still holding on to his arm and bending it.

“Stop doing stupid shit so I won’t have to hurt you.” Bryce warned him coldly as he tightened his grip to try and make him stop struggling, all traces of any humor or feigned affability gone.

“What? Again?” Justin inquired with obvious disdain, inhaling sharply as Bryce quickly slammed him against the wall again. His body relaxed as he quickly chose to obey, feeling the first throbs of pain snake up to his shoulder blade and into his neck.

“Oh, that’s right; I ‘hurt’ you!” Bryce gasped sarcastically, tightening his grip even further and making Justin's breath hitch. "So tell me Justy, when exactly did I 'hurt' you that night?" he questioned, making it clear it was a rhetorical question. “Cause you sure as hell didn't seem 'hurt' when you rode my cock like some cum thirsty whore, begging me to pound that tight little ass of yours as hard as I could!”

Justin tried to shake his head in denial, puffing out breaths of strained air as he began to struggle to breath. “I never. . .wanted—” he croaked.

“You gave me a fucking blow job in front of your girlfriend,” Bryce reminded him harshly with emphasis on his words. Justin would have flinched at the words he if could move properly. “You have one *hell* of a way of showing you don't want 'it', brother.”

Justin tried to peer back at him over his shoulder to glare accusingly at him. “You . . .were going. . .hurt. . .Jes—"

“I wasn’t going to do shit to your stupid girlfriend,” Bryce admitted with an almost pleased smirk. "Not when I knew you'd give it up so easily.” He finally released Justin, not allowing him much time before he spun him around and pinned his back against the wall again. He smiled down at him in a smug, predatory like fashion while Justin scowled back, panting heavily as he tried to catch his breath.

“You think I haven't noticed? The way you act around me? The way you look at me?” Bryce continued softly and Justin's frowned in light confusion.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he demanded.

"Come on, I've seen that hungry look in your eyes," Bryce insisted, that smirk of his widening triumphantly. "I've seen how you like to tease me. When you change in the locker room to see if I'm watching. When you wrap those pretty lips of yours around a blunt when you know I'm staring.
"Then you need fucking glasses, cause I never do any of that shit," Justin snapped back as he tried to push him away for the umpteenth time, trying to hid how unnerved Bryce's words truly made him feel as he swallowed down his growing anxiety. When Bryce wouldn't budge and he realized he had no leverage room to try punching him again, he tried moving his leg up to knee him instead, only prompting Bryce to press his body fully against his. Justin's stomach turned as he felt Bryce's erection pressed close against his inner thigh, pulsing with need.

"Get the fuck off of me." he hissed, but couldn't fight the tremble in his voice that made it sound more like a plea. When his request went unanswered, he abandoned all pretenses of his false bravado. "Bryce move, please."

"See? Already begging." Bryce taunted him, breathing into his neck and lapping at the goosebumps pooling there as his hands slipped to the waistband of his jeans, thumbs ghosting over the skin of his stomach. "Stop playing the fucking victim and admit you want me to fuck you, Justin."

He let his tongue trace over the fading mark between Justin's neck and shoulder before he bit down on it without warning. Justin cried out panicked alarm right into Bryce's ear, making him flinch back away from him as he put a hand up to the offended orifice, but not enough to give Justin the room to get away. It did however make Bryce look at Justin with seemingly renewed interest, as if he truly couldn't understand why the brunette was reacting this way to his advances. In return, Justin only stared back wide-eyed and cautious, his body trembling despite his best efforts to keep it as stiff as possible while the fear of whatever might happen next kept his feet successfully rooted in place to the floor.

Bryce let out a long sigh through his nose in disappointment as he finally moved away from Justin enough to give him real space, his quiet laughter laced with cruelty as he watched Justin openly sigh in relief.

"Just because you got fucked like a bitch doesn't mean you have to start acting like one," Bryce mocked with a leer, watching Justin's display as if it were the most pathetic thing he'd ever witnessed.

Justin opened his mouth to refute him, trying hard not to let on to the fact that he was seconds away from sobbing when an all too familiar voice could be heard from the hallway.

"Hey, Justin?!" the voice of Clay Jensen all but screamed out in the hall, making Bryce turn to glare at the door. Justin let out another shaky sigh of relief through his clenched teeth before taking in gulps of air in a vain attempt to calm himself. He took several steps away from Bryce just as Clay jingled the doorknob, checking to see if it was locked.

When the door refused to give way, the jimmying of the handle stopped before Clay sternly threatened. "Open up or I'm going to find a teacher!"

With an almost dramatic show of rolling his eyes and a heavy sigh, Bryce took the few steps to the door and unlocked it before swinging it open wide. Clay quickly stepped across the threshold into the room before stopping dead in his tracts. He stared first at Justin, then between the two of them wearily before his eyes began to linger on Bryce in unspoken disgust with knitted together brows and a slightly wrinkled up nose that spoke volumes.

"What's going on in here?" he asked curiously, focusing directly on Justin, eyes searching his in an effort to read him and unintentionally showing once again that he was more than a little aware of everything that was possibly going on between the two jocks. Justin was far too distraught to hide
behind a facade, openly letting Clay come to any conclusion he wanted to with the hurt and fearful look he gave him as he slumped to the floor by sliding down the wall.

“Are you okay?” Clay asked him with a carefully even tone, trying to sound impartial.

"He's fine, just fucking around to get my attention," Bryce explained smoothly, glaring back at Justin and quietly daring him to contradict him. Justin looked from Bryce, to Clay and back again before slowly nodding in agreement as he put his head down, keeping his eyes steadfast to the ground. However, once he could tell Bryce was no longer looking his way, he looked up at Clay and shook his head as discreetly as he possible, shooting a worried look at Bryce before staring back pleadingly at Clay.

“Do you mind, Jensen? We were kinda in the middle of something.” Bryce ordered cordially with a clear of his throat, watching their new arrival with open annoyance now as the lithe teen openly continued to look over and study Justin.

Clay glared over at Bryce in defiance.

“I would...except I'm not.” he started curtly, ready to intercede on Justin’s behalf. “I promised that I would tutor him," he paused to point "enough in math to improve his grade point average.” He quickly looked between the pair again, then fixed Bryce with an under-eyed look, scowling openly at him. “I take my tutoring very seriously. My time is valuable and Justin already missed one session this morning by being late because of you.”

“Jesus Jensen,” Bryce snorted skeptically, though offered him an almost admirable smirk at his tenacity. He glanced at the clock on the the farthest wall before finally moving to make his exit, brushing past Clay while eying him the entire time. Clay meanwhile, kept his gaze on Justin, jaw clenched in restrained anger as he took in how shaken up he looked.

“At least you got the subject right this time.” Bryce mocked him with a widening, knowing smirk of malice just as he finally disappeared around the corner of the doorway.

In the blink of an eye, Clay had shut the door behind Bryce and was hurrying over to Justin’s side, looking him over to make sure he hadn’t been hurt. He carefully touched Justin's arm as gently as he could in the hopes of not spooking him, though Justin still flinched away from him before catching himself. He looked up at Clay with red rim eyes, unable to control the few tears that escaped as the fellow brunette's breath hitched at the sight.

“Did he—?” Clay prompted in concern but Justin only gave a disinterested shrug in return.

“How much did you hear,” he demanded softly, refusing to stare Clay in the eyes out of sheer humiliation, feeling every bit the filthy whore Bryce implied him to be.

“It doesn’t matter,” Clay advised him, giving Justin a reassuring but all the same serious look. "It doesn’t make anything he did now—or then—right.”

Justin only nodded despondently, choosing not to focus on the implication of Clay's words now as he hugged his arms around himself and buried his face out of Clay's view. He tried hard not to think about what may have happened if Clay hadn't decided to make his presence known. A part of him wanted to believe that Bryce had only been toying around with him, that he cared that he had hurt him, even if he knew better.

The room fell silent, save his hiccups every now and then as he allowed himself to cry, not giving a damn that Clay was there or possibly judging him. Minutes seemed to float by, melting into each
other before Clay sunk down to squat in front him, looking somewhat uncomfortably awkward as
the two continued sitting there in silence and Justin let his mind go numb.

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Monty wasn’t as surprised as the rest of the guys he sat with when Justin Foley got up from the table
and went to sit with Jess.

Foley was in the midst of a bitch fit, throwing tantrum after tantrum over the little ‘rough housing’
Bryce had done with him a weekend ago.

So it was no further surprise when he got up from Cory’s table and stormed out of the lunchroom in
a fit of anger once Bryce went over to retrieve him. Nor was it when Bryce gave chase soon after.
The pair had a close relationship after all, so the latter was to be expected. Monty knew better
though; this wasn’t so much about their friendship as it was about Bryce saving face and protecting
his ‘investment’.

Monty had his attention pulled away briefly when he felt a hand squeeze his under the table. He
looked over to see Jeff giving him a look, letting him know that he wanted to go over to Cory’s table
with Zach and ‘Fagex’. He gave him a partial eye roll, annoyed that he was once again choosing to
spend time around that Cory guy, especially now that he was aware he had some kind of a crush on
Jeff. However, he returned a squeeze of his own and released Jeff’s hand, giving the sign that he
was okay with him going.

Jeff smiled that special smile he reserved only for him as he got to his feet and Monty couldn’t help
but to feel an ease to his jealousy as he watched Jeff and the others make their way over.

That jealousy completely evaporated when Cory unexpectedly sprung to his feet with an excuse and went
after Bryce.

The abnormality of the act gave him enough pause to watch as the lithe teen slipped out of the
lunchroom and jogged out of sight down the hall. Then with a roll of his eyes at Cory’s blatant
stupidity, Monty went back to his lunch.

If that dipshit was going to keep snooping around and getting involved in business he had no right
being a part of in the first place, then he should at least try to be more discreet about it.

As it were, he had his intentions more than little obvious to the wrong person already and, well, for
such a nerdy little fag, he wasn’t nearly as smart as he’d given him credit for. Not if he was going to
continue to try getting in the way of Bryce and Foley’s budding ‘arrangement’.

Though as Monty looked back over to the table, watching Standall sit down with Jess and start
yapping it up, a part of him couldn’t help but feel bad for Cory.

He was blindly jumping into shit headfirst with no idea of what he was playing at. All because
Foley wanted to act like such an ungrateful, weak-willed bitch. Pretending his predicament was so
bad that he was in need of being rescued when in reality, Foley was possibly one of the luckiest
bastards he knew.

He was Bryce Walker’s best friend.

While it was true that Bryce was a good friend to a number of people, no one had it quite as good
with him as Foley did.

Bryce pampered and showered him with gifts regularly. He constantly gave him a safe place to stay that wasn’t his mother’s drug invested house or the likes of a nearly condemned warehouse. He always had his back when shit went down and was forever looking out for his best interest. Hell, he’d even taken Foley on family vacations with him before and had gotten his dad to bail out Foley’s meth whore of a mother from jail once.

All of that and more, for years, and all Bryce wanted in return was a bit of gratitude and a little play on the side for his efforts. Sure, maybe his idea of ‘play’ was a little fucked up, but he thought Bryce had more than earned it.

Not that he, again, was surprised to see Foley acting like a selfish little shit. Bryce had waited a long time to collect on his ‘debt’ and Foley had become spoiled and let himself get lulled into the false security that he would never have to repay it.

The thought made Monty snicker, reveling in how stupid he thought Foley was being. Given their similar backgrounds, he should already know nothing in life was ever free. Not money or friendship. Not even love or loyalty. Somebody always wants something, and when fucking around with someone as privileged as Bryce Walker, Foley should have known the price would be steep. When just about everything else was literally at his fingertips and with him being too broke to ever offer much of anything of value, of course whatever Bryce wanted would be something unusual.

So he just didn’t find himself feeling too sorry for Foley’s ‘plight’. Not when that asshole didn’t understand how easy he was getting off and how lucky he truly had it.

After all it could much worse: Bryce could completely abandon him and leave him to fend for himself against the likes of his mom’s bullshit and her abusive shit-for-brains lovers.

Or he could have been unlucky enough to have a father who would let his friend abuse him again because he was ‘too weak’ to fend him off the first time. All while drunkenly berating him on how he “deserve what happened” because he was acting like too much of a “little faggoty bitch” that brought the attention onto himself in the first place.

Monty stabbed his fork into his food at the invasive memory, startling Scott. He gave him a concerned once over as Monty pushed his tray away across the table.

“I’m done eating.” He replied flatly, scowling at the subpar food.

“Clearly. You good?” Scott replied openly concerned and the exchange gained the attention of a few of the other jocks sitting around them.

“I’m good. Just tired. I get a lot of sleep last night.” Monty gave as an excuse, only partially lying. Scott eyed him a moment longer before he went back to his conversation with a fellow teammate, Carlton Jones.

Monty took the cue to try and collect himself, realizing that he was once again letting his shitty past rile him up and get the better of him. He instinctively looked over at Jeff speaking with Tony, disturbed by how easily he was calming down just by watching him, even if he understood why.

Maybe even more so because he did understand why.

“You want me to get your tray?” Scott offered quietly regaining his attention. With a nod of approval, Scott was off, carrying two trays to the trash can while he continued his conversation with Jones.
Monty gave a little smile after him to himself.

He may not have it as good as Justin yet, but his life was getting better. He had his friends like Scott. He had Jeff. And here recently, more of Bryce’s attention thanks to some of Justin’s ‘luck’ unintentionally rubbing off on him.

It was Justin’s fault by way of supplying him with weed while they were hanging out at Bryce’s pool house. It made him forget his baseball stuff and when he went back to get his bag, he caught Justin and Bryce still ‘hanging out’. If trying not to choke on a cock was ‘hanging out’ nowadays.

Justin hadn’t seen him (he was, after all, a tad preoccupied) but Bryce had, as he learned when his teammate confronted him the next morning at his locker.

Monty knew how ‘the game’ was played and more importantly, how to handle himself properly. Part of his ongoing strategy was knowing when to take advantage of a good situation when it presented itself.

He gathered quickly that pretending he didn’t see anything (because he was high or otherwise) was futile. And trying to blackmail Bryce with the info was a short term benefit that would only end in his downfall in the long run.

So instead he appealed to Bryce’s nature, never denying what he saw but simultaneously reassuring Bryce that he had no intentions of ever spilling it to anyone else. That he would be complicit in whatever was going on and that he was someone Bryce could rely on and trust in the future.

As a result, the two had grown closer over the last few months and Bryce now seemed to trust him with his more of his...interesting secrets and deeds.

Like the extracurricular activities that went on in the Clubhouse. And the needlessly complicated bull he had going on with Foley because he wanted to continue to be stubborn. Bryce seemed to enjoy breaking down his resolve little by little however, and Monty had to admit that it was interesting to watch unfold from afar.

A familiar form in a varsity jacket came back into the lunchroom snapping him out of his thoughts and gaining his undivided attention. He spoke with Jess briefly, before he returned to the table flanked by Zach and Jeff.

The trio of varsity clad jocks reclaimed their seats, with Jeff sitting next to Monty while Bryce took the seat directly across from him and Zach took the seat between to Scott and Jones.

“So what’s up?” He asked openly, looking between the three of them while feigning innocent curiosity, making sure to express the right amount of concern to fool the others around him that were also listening in with intense interest.

Bryce gave a heavy sigh, propping his elbows on the table and making a real show of being intrenched with how worried he was about the situation. “He’s still pissed at me.”

“What for?” Scott inquired, frowning slightly.

“Over some shit that went down a little while ago,” Bryce admitted vaguely.

Before anyone could pry further into what he meant, the bell for their next period rang.

Like a wave, the group got to their feet and Monty shared a secretive look with Bryce that told him everything that actually just transpired with Justin through facial dialogue alone. Then with a pivot
on his heel and a tonal change to an upcoming game, the king lead his subjects out of the room with Monty acting as his shadow.

Unbeknownst to them, their wordless exchange was witnessed by the quartet still sitting at the table a few feet away. They exchanged look of their own before one of them withdrew their cellphone, determined to get to the bottom of this.

Starting with a questioning text to ‘Cory’ from one Hannah Baker.

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Clay hesitantly reached over and carefully began patting Justin's back, pausing instantly when Justin's body seemed to stiffen underneath his touch. After a few seconds, his muscled relaxed again and Justin allowed him to continue with his form of comfort as he continued to cry. Clay let out an inaudible sigh as he watched the jock with guilt.

He could kick himself for not coming in sooner, but he'd been trying to hear exactly what the two were discussing, even going so far as to try and record part of the conversation with his cell phone. That ended up being a bust as the small playback sample he listened too before he tried coming into the room sounded like garbled garbage. A fact he should have considered when he could barely make out bit of what was being said aside from some laughter and Justin's more emotional outbursts.

Clay looked up when he heard the bell for next period ring, looking back at the door nervously when he heard the familiar sound of students shuffling around nearby. He scrambled to think of any excuses he could come up as to why he was squatting on the floor near a sobbing Justin as the minutes ticked by, even ignoring the vibration of his cellphone in his pocket. He was pleasantly surprised to find that by the following bell to begin the next period, no one had ventured into the room, not even a teacher.

A hand took hold of his left forearm, grabbing back his attention. He looked over to see Justin had finally lifted his head and as expected, looked a little worse for wear: his hair was a tad messy, his eyes looked puffy and were almost as red as his cheeks were now from all the crying.

Clay felt a pang if sympathy course through him as his back patting became a smooth rub in a circular motion instead. He offered Justin the best comforting smile he could once their eyes met and Justin quickly looked away, seemingly ashamed.

He gave a soft clear of his throat before he spoke to Clay finally.

“There are no classes during the first two lunch shifts,” he explained, as if reading Clay’s thoughts on why they hadn't been disturbed. He wiped at his eyes with the back of his free arm as he gently pulled back from Clay, avoiding eye contact as he did before pulling himself to his feet almost knocking Clay off balance and flat on his ass in the process. Justin immediately caught him before he could fall, quietly apologizing as while pulling him to his feet by the arm. He made sure he was steady before he brushed past him and moved to exit the room, pausing just before he walked out.

“We should go. Mrs. Liberworth comes back early from lunch and is a real bitch if she finds out anyone is in here without her knowing it.”

With that Justin was gone and Clay all but scrambled to follow him, closing the door behind him on the way out.
“You have choir?” He asked in confusion as he caught up, making his attempt at small talk and a change of subject obvious.

Justin snorted lightly as he gave him an aside glance. He clearly didn’t look as though he felt particularly up to it, but looking as though he weighed his options, decided to go along with it, at least for now. “No. I smoked pot in there once and she caught me.” He admitted, looking somewhat grateful for the temporary distraction from his current thoughts.

“That makes much more sense.” Clay admitted and Justin gave him a curious look as he cut him another aside glance.

“What, you don’t think a have a purdeh voice?” He joked with a half-assed twang, his heart clearly just not that into it.

Clay admired the effort none the less and cast him an amused aside glance of his own. “I find it surprising you don’t sound like a grizzly bear that gargled thumbtacks with how much I’ve heard you like to smoke.”

“Cigarettes fuck up your voice, weed just makes you look cool and think more smarter.” Justin proclaimed and Clay outright laughed at that.

They made their way to Justin’s locker first and he grabbed his gym bag and book bag, closing the metal door quietly.

Clay frowned as he looked at the bags and Justin shrugged. “I’m not staying here. I can barely function normally on one of my better days but after Bryce’s bullshit...I need to get the fuck out of here.”

He should have expected that; Justin previously attempted to leave school right before lunch because of Bryce’s shenanigans, so after that confrontation it seemed all but inevitable that he would want to now.

“Alright then, I’ll take you out to eat.” Clay proclaimed and Justin looked over at him in surprise before it gave way to suspicion.

"Wait...you want to skip with me Jensen?” Justin replied, still eying him as if he was being deceived and Clay rolled his eyes a little.

“Well not if you keep announcing it to the whole damn school.”

“And you’re sassing me back? A couple minutes alone with me and I’m already a bad influence.” Justin joked lightly with a crooked grimace of a smile and Clay felt good about seemingly making him at least somewhat better.

"Just the worst,” Clay agreed with feigned solemn then took a moment to look a bit more serious. "I need to keep an eye on you.”

Justin’s scowl was instantaneous. “I don’t need a babysitter.”

'And I'm not ready to talk about it,' Clay could decipher by the look in his eyes. “I just want to go and make sure you’ll be alright,” he reassured him. Justin opened his mouth to protest but Clay quickly added, “Let me do it for Jessica.” before he could.

Justin leveled an annoyed glare at him. “Stop invoking her like she's god or something.” he demanded before with hand through his hair he added, albeit reluctantly, "Let's hurry up before we
"You care about getting caught?" Clay asked skeptically and Justin shrugged.

"Right now? Hell no," he admitted truthfully as he adjusted the bags over his shoulder and began following Clay to his locker. "but you do."

Clay didn’t deny it as they reached the metal compartment, which naturally refused to open because it flat out despised Clay, he was sure of it now. Justin gently brushed him aside, yanking on the door. When it refused to budge, he fumbled with the handle before with a grumble of "Fuck it", punched it one good time. The locker sprung open and he smiled in triumph, looking over at Clay with a smug ‘now that wasn’t so hard’ kind of look before turning on his heel to walk away.

“You’re welcome. Now grab your shit and let's move.” He called back over his shoulder as he made his way down the hall. Clay hurriedly stuffed his things in his book bag and shut it as quietly as possible.

He ignored the second wave of vibration from his pocket as he quickly made his way for the nearest exit following Justin, shifting his book bag on his shoulder as he took to a brisk pace to keep up.

Chapter End Notes

Hang in there Clay. Your locker will stop being a dick to you eventually.

I admit, I have no idea what (if anything) we'll learn further about Monty's backstory but I already loath his father so fuck him, I'm going for pure scum bucket with this. He'll (Monty, again fuck his dad) get better-ish, but that's for another time!

Because Next Chapter: You guessed it! Clay and Justin finally have their long awaited talk! Basketball, Monet's, Math. . .things might be finally looking up for the guys bad day!

End Notes

More to come! Thanks for reading thus far!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!