when you get there you'll know

by biblionerd07

Summary

Ian gets out of prison 352 days before Mickey does. They do their best to make it through.

Notes

I have not watched a single scene of Shameless without Mickey since season five and I tried so hard to read some recaps of what's been going on but the yikes factor was so strong I gave up. So. I tried to make it canon but idk how successful and I was and let's face it, the writers aren't going to remember what the characters have been through either so whatever. I'm annoyed at the prison story line altogether, especially because Mickey would not BE in a state prison in the first place--he rolled on a Mexican cartel so he'd either be in witness protection or a federal prison and I cannot think of a prosecutor in the world who would let him be in GENERAL POPULATION at any prison when he's going to be a witness in prosecuting a drug cartel (he's going to get stabbed!!!!!!!) but whatever, it's Shameless, let's just go with it I suppose, and at least they were together for some time and maybe will be together after if the writers don't let us down. I'm getting out in front of this and writing what I want but do not really expect for a resolution to this plot. I also wrote this while listening exclusively to Patty Griffin's "Coming Home to Me" on repeat, if you want to really get in the mood while listening.
After the first shock wears off, after they’ve reacquainted themselves—not that Ian could ever forget Mickey’s body, not really, though he does note some new scars and tattoos—Mickey pushes at the dark hair on Ian’s head and frowns. “The fuck’s this about?”

Ian shrugs. “Didn’t want to end up anyone’s bitch.”

Mickey snorts. “What’s your hair color gonna do about that?”

Ian can feel himself blushing now. It had seemed reasonable, when Mickey was in another country, when this was a thought in the back of Ian’s head, but now, with Mickey looking at him, Ian feels kind of silly. “Thought I’d look tougher,” Ian says.

“Why?” Mickey asks, and Ian huffs a little. Mickey’s really going to make him say it.

“I was scared,” Ian admits. “Thought about what the toughest guy I know would do.”

Mickey absorbs that with a little smirk. “Oh, I’m flattered,” he teases, though there’s a hint of sincerity in his eyes. Ian’s probably the only one who’d ever be able to see it. “But how ‘bout you let it grow out and don’t dye it again, huh?”

“Only room for one dark-haired guy in this cell?” Ian guesses.

Mickey laughs a little. He shrugs. “Just want you to look like you.”

It’s practically a declaration of love, not that Ian needs anymore after Mickey showed up here for him. Though they’ve done that, too, with actual words, even. Ian’s not sure how long it’ll take for that to come back. Ian puts his hand on Mickey’s face and Mickey closes his eyes and leans into it. “Whatever you want, Mick,” Ian murmurs. Mickey doesn’t say anything. He opens his eyes, though, and there’s so much in them, so much feeling, and Ian knows exactly what Mickey’s saying.

Ian storms into their cell. “Won’t give me my meds,” he says.


“Guy at the pharmacy window thing,” Ian says. “He said I didn’t have a prescription on file.”

Mickey doesn’t say anything. He gets off the bunk and grabs Ian by the wrist, towes him right back out the door and down the hall to the pharmacy. He shoves a few guys out of the way and plants himself in front of the window.

“Where’s his meds?” He demands.

“He doesn’t have—” The guy on drug duty starts.

“Shut the fuck up,” Mickey interrupts. “Where’s his fucking meds?”

“I can’t—”

“What’d I say?” Mickey interrupts again. “Shut the fuck up. It’s a rhetorical question.”

Ian’s pretty sure that’s not what rhetorical means, and he’s probably the only person alive who could
correct Mickey on that and stay that way, but he keeps his mouth shut. It probably means there’s
something wrong with him, but there’s always been a part of Ian that gets off on Mickey’s badass
thug routine. A million years ago, back when they were kids, he used to jerk off thinking about
Mickey shooting that gun while Ian did his obstacle course.

“He needs his fucking meds,” Mickey says. He lists them out clearly and easily. “Lithium, Zyprexa,
and Lamictal are the ones he’s used to, but it’s got to be a mood stabilizer, an antidepressant, and an
antipsychotic.” He looks at Ian. “You need any benzos or you been taking your meds all along?”

“I’m good,” Ian says on autopilot. “No benzos.”

Mickey turns back to the pharmacy guy. He makes a little shooing motion with his hand. “You
waiting for a fucking tip or something? Get a move on. He has to take this shit with food so you
better not make us miss fucking breakfast.”

The guy must know Mickey already, or at least his reputation, because he scurries off. Ian stares at
the side of Mickey’s face long enough for him to look over. “You remembered,” Ian says softly.

“Yeah,” Mickey says. He looks at Ian for a second, and then he looks away. “Yeah, I remembered.”

Ian wants to kiss him. He wants to press him up against this ugly wall and kiss him forever and
breathe the same air until they pass out. He can’t, though. Mickey already laid down the law about
that. “Ian, this ain’t me being a pussy like before,” he’d explained patiently. “But guys in here find
out we’re fags for real, all the time and not just in here, it’ll be bad for us. We can do whatever we
want in the cell, but when other dudes are around we gotta stay cool.”

“You don’t think your dad told anyone?” Ian had asked. They’re in a medium security place, so
Terry will never be here himself—with his record, he gets to sent to max every time, regardless of his
charges—but Terry has plenty of guys spread throughout the system. There are guys in here who
know Mickey by name, guys with big swastikas on their arms who’d probably be happy to send him
any message Terry might have.

Mickey had snorted. “Won’t want anyone knowing his son’s a homo,” he’d explained, almost
proudly. Then he’d added, “Besides, he’d be pissed if one of them killed me. Saving it for himself.”
He said it like it was nothing, like it didn’t bother him, but Ian could see the little tremor in his hands.

Ian had agreed, as much as he hated to. This is Mickey’s domain. Mickey is the one who knows the
rules here, who knows which guys to let cut in front of them in line at breakfast and which to
threaten with a spork if they try to sit by Ian. So Ian makes himself hold back, keeps his face neutral
and doesn’t let himself give into the ache in his chest.

The guy comes back with a little paper cup of meds. Mickey won’t let Ian take them until Ian
inspects them to make sure they look like his usual meds. Maybe he thinks the guy would try to pull
something on Ian. Ian swallows them dry and the pharmacy guy says, “You’re gonna have to get in
with the doctor here. They won’t let you have the meds full time until they’ve done an evaluation.”

“So put him on the doctor’s schedule, Secretary Barbie,” Mickey says.

“It’s pretty full.”

“Did I ask?” Mickey demands. He raises his eyebrows. “Put him on the fucking schedule.”

The pharmacy guy makes a face like he just sucked on a lemon and he jabs at the computer keyboard
like he wishes it were Mickey’s face, but then he says, “Four o’clock. I’ll tell the guard over your
block.”
“Thank you very much,” Mickey says with a dangerous smile. “You’ve been so helpful.”

Ian nudges him to get out of the way so the line can start up again. “Thanks,” he tosses over his shoulder to the pharmacy guy, far more sincerely than Mickey’s threatening gratitude before. “Let’s go eat.”

“Yeah, I don’t feel like watching you with the runs,” Mickey says. He lowers his voice a little and says, “That shit ain’t sexy.”

Ian snorts. “You’d fuck me anyway.”

Mickey shrugs blithely. “Yeah, obviously.”

Ian’s chest is all warm. He bumps his hand against Mickey’s while they walk. He wishes he could hold on for real, but this is enough.

Ian’s getting out today. Mickey’s not getting out for a year. Rolling on the cartel and giving up that information did a lot for shortening his sentence, but he does still have that escaping during his first sentence problem. Ian got parole the second it was available, because it was his first offense and he’s clean-cut and has media sympathy. They won’t even give Mickey the option of parole. So now Ian’s getting out, and Ian and Mickey are trying to act normal, trying to pretend they didn’t stay up the entire night last night just fucking and kissing and holding each other and trying not to let the other see them cry, but Ian feels like he’s going to fall apart.

“I could get in a fight,” he says desperately.

“Fuck you will,” Mickey snaps. “You’re getting out.”

“Yeah,” Ian breathes. He can’t stay, really. Fiona’s gone, Lip and Debbie have kids now, and Carl and Liam are still in school. They need Ian. Liam does for damn sure. Fiona left Debbie some money, apparently, but Ian’s not holding his breath on any of that being left.

“Gotta go play daddy,” Mickey says, echoing Ian’s thoughts.

Ian snorts. “Thought you said you’d never call me daddy.”

Mickey huffs, but it doesn’t turn into a full laugh. He gives a little sideways look and says, “You gonna find someone to help out with all that?” He asks so, so casually, but Ian can see the way his hands are clenched into fists.

“Yeah,” Ian says, but he doesn’t give heartbreak time to spread across Mickey’s face before he adds, “Know this guy I want to come help, but I gotta wait a year for him.”

Mickey shakes his head. “You’re such a fucking asshole.”

Ian pulls him close. “Stay out of trouble, okay? I’m waiting one year and not a second longer.”

Mickey finally laughs, because Ian showed his hand; Mickey knows, now, that Ian’s planning to come back for him. Ian thinks it’s only fair. Mickey went to prison the first time for Ian, and then he busted out and came back for Ian. Ian left him at the border, in that dress with all that hurt on his face, and even still, Mickey came back for him again when Ian was scared and sure he was going to end up getting knifed or worse. Now it’s Ian’s turn to come back. To let Mickey know he’s going to come back.
“I’ll do my best,” Mickey promises.

“And—” Ian has to take a deep breath before the next part. “And do whatever you gotta do to stay safe, okay?” Ian gives Mickey a significant look. “If you need protection, go get it.” He’s essentially telling Mickey to go find someone to fuck, but whatever. Ian would rather have a safe, alive Mickey who got his dick wet with someone else than the alternative. This prison isn’t as bad as where Mickey was before, so it might not come up, but Mickey’s younger than most guys here and Ian wouldn’t be surprised if some of them tried it. Ian has a whole list of guys he’s pretty sure want to go after Mickey in one way or another.

Mickey frowns, but at least he doesn’t shove Ian away like he would’ve done once upon a time. “I’m not doing that.”

“Mickey,” Ian says, and he’s practically begging now. “You piss a lot of people off. And you ratted on a fucking cartel. Plus we can’t be sure your dad’s not sending anyone after you. Please just tell me you’ll stay safe.”

Mickey sighs, but he relents. “Alright,” he says. “But I’m not gonna go out looking for it. And I won’t fucking like it.”

Ian laughs a little, eyes prickling with tears. “Fine by me.” They can hear the guards coming down the line, gathering up anyone who’s getting out today, and Ian can’t breathe. He pulls Mickey even closer, trying to pull him in under Ian’s skin so they can walk out together. “I love you, Mickey,” he says firmly. He watches Mickey clench his teeth and hold his breath for a second.

“I love you,” he echoes. His voice is steady but Ian can see the way he’s starting to crumble.

“I’m coming next week to visit,” Ian promises. He had to get special permission from the warden, since he’ll be on parole. But he’s always kept his nose clean, and he may or may not have threatened to bring the media into it, so he’s on Mickey’s visitation list.

“Okay,” Mickey says.

“Gallagher,” the guard says outside their cell. “Let’s go.”

Ian steps away from Mickey, feeling shaky and sick. A year’s a long time in here. A year’s a long time without being able to kiss Mickey. Ian’s gone that long before, more than once. He’s not looking forward to doing it again.

“Do me a favor?” Mickey blurts before Ian can leave. Ian turns back to him.

“Anything.”

“Find Mandy,” Mickey asks. “I don’t know where the fuck she is.”

Ian nods, feeling guilty when he thinks of how long it’s been since he knew where she was, either. He had a lot of time before he got locked up when he could’ve looked for her, and he didn’t. “I’ll find her,” he promises. Mickey nods back.

“And—” Mickey bites his lip.

“I’ll find her,” the guard snaps, annoyed now.

“Can you check on the kid?” Mickey asks quietly, not meeting Ian’s eyes. “You don’t gotta talk to either of them if you don’t want. Just…make sure he’s okay?”
Ian’s heart clenches in his chest. He remembers watching Mickey changing Yevgeny’s diaper, when he finally started doing stuff like that, when he could finally look at Yevgeny without shaking, cooing nonsense at him and laughing delightedly when the baby babbled back at him. It’s Ian’s fault Mickey lost that. He swallows hard and nods again.

“I’ll take care of him.”

“Thanks,” Mickey breathes, more air than word.

“Gallagher.” The guard sticks his head in. He’s Ian’s absolute least-favorite in this whole place; he must’ve had a brush with Mickey before, or maybe with Terry, because he takes every opportunity to punish Mickey that comes his way.


He looks back over his shoulder once at Mickey as he leaves the cell. Mickey’s sitting on the bottom bunk with his head in his hands. Ian digs his fingernails into his palm and stares straight ahead as he walks out.

“You got a car?” Ian asks Carl.

“I can find you one,” Carl answers. “Why?”

“Legally?” Ian checks, because it’s instinct to check.

Carl laughs a little. “Hey, I’m almost completely above the table now.”

“Right,” Ian says. “I gotta go see Mickey.”

Carl tips his head. “Really? You’re…” He shrugs. “I mean, you were just there. And you’re going back already?”

“Mickey’s still there,” Ian points out.

Carl looks uneasy. “Is it such a good idea…” He trails off because he can already see that Ian is not going to take part in this conversation.

“I love him,” Ian says evenly. “And he loves me. That’s never going away. So if all I can have for the next year is a few hours, once a week, in a room that smells like piss where everyone else is crying over missing their family, then that’s what I’ll take.”

“Okay.” Carl looks a little ashamed to have questioned it. “When do you need it?”

“Wednesday,” Ian says. “Every Wednesday. I didn’t want to ask Kev for his truck every single week.”

“Every week?” Carl asks incredulously. “It’s like a three-hour drive.”

Ian shrugs. “Yeah.”

Carl shakes his head a little. “Alright. I’ll take care of it.”

“Thanks, Carl.”
There’s no way Ian can get his EMT job back, not with his record, not when he lied to get the job in the first place. He gets a job at the Kash N Grab again. Linda doesn’t own it anymore; Ian doesn’t know where she went or when she left. But the guy who took over remembers that Ian worked here, once upon a time, and he knows Linda trusted Ian. He doesn’t even blink at Ian’s parole status. If people didn’t want to hire parolees around here, they wouldn’t have anyone to hire at all.

“I can’t work Wednesdays,” Ian tells him right away. “Not ever.”

“There some religion that keeps Wednesdays free?” The guy asks.

“Nope,” Ian says. “Just personal stuff.”

“Whatever,” the guy says. “Work the other days.”

Work is work. Ian wakes up early every morning, heads over to the store to open while the sun’s still thinking about coming up. It’s impossible to be in here and not think of Mickey. It’s been a lifetime, practically, since they worked here together, but Ian keeps looking around the corner like Mickey’s going to show up in that vest with a sneer on his face.

He buys Liam new school clothes and helps Debbie pay for Franny’s shots and makes sure Carl has some cash for spending money while he’s away at school. Everything else goes to the Illinois Department of Corrections. Mickey never asks, never mentions the money, but Ian makes sure he always has money in his commissary. Mickey likes the shitty Cup of Soup stuff that’ll put him in an early grave from all that sodium and he likes candy and gum and buying the last of whatever that asshole from D block wants just so he can’t have it. If he always has money, he can bribe guys if he has to, buy stuff from the commissary for them in exchange for protection from the guys who don’t want to fuck. He’s not going to waste money on soap or shampoo or anything like that, but Ian wants him to have the choice. He needs money for phone calls, too, and Ian’s sure as hell not going to let that fall by the wayside. Fifteen minutes of Mickey in his ear is the best part of Ian’s day, even knowing it’s going on a tape somewhere.

“You want more hours?” Kadir, the guy who owns the store, asks incredulously. “You already work all the hours.”

Ian shrugs. “I need the money.”

“You’re a single guy,” Kadir points out.

“So?” Ian asks. “I gotta take care of my family.”

Kadir doesn’t actually care all that much; he’s a rich Northside guy, and he hates coming out here to check on his slummy business. Besides, if Ian’s willing to work all the time, he doesn’t have to hire and train someone new. He gives Ian all the hours he wants and doesn’t complain about it again.

A little pit of dread fills Ian’s stomach when the prison comes into view the first time he goes to visit Mickey. In all honesty, he didn’t have it very rough in there. Mickey made sure of that, made sure no one got too close to Ian unless Ian didn’t mind them sitting by him, made sure Ian stayed out of fights, jumped in and took the heat from any guards, kept Ian safe with his fists and with his kisses and his stupid jokes. Still, Ian spent a year in there. Even with Mickey taking care of him, and having Mickey there with him every day and every night, it wasn’t exactly fun.

“Gallagher,” the guard doing body searches says when she sees him. She rolls her eyes. “Couldn’t stay away?”
Ian just shrugs. He doesn’t have to explain himself to any of these people, not anymore. She sneers a little when she sees he’s on Mickey’s list, but Ian ignores that, too. He’s so close to finally seeing Mickey again.

He sits down while a guard goes to grab Mickey. Ian bounces his leg. It’s only been a week, but it feels like so much longer. He got too used to their setup here, to having Mickey at his side for everything. He’s jumpy without Mickey, always looking over his shoulder since he doesn’t have Mickey watching his back. And then the door buzzes, and there’s Mickey. He’s pale and glaring, but when he sees Ian his face goes all slack and soft.

Ian springs up out of his chair. “Can I hug you?” He murmurs when Mickey’s close. His fingers are itching to touch Mickey, to push through Mickey’s hair, to trace across his skin. Mickey nods his assent, moving closer right away, and Ian breathes him in deep. Mickey smells like stale sweat and the harsh, industrial laundry detergent all the inmate uniforms get washed in, but Ian doesn’t care. He has to close his eyes for a second. Remembering that this is all he’s going to get for the next year almost makes him cry.

“How are you” is a stupid question for someone in prison—he knows that now. Ian doesn’t really want to talk about what he’s doing now, not when he’s free and Mickey’s still locked up.

“I haven’t found Mandy yet,” he decides to open with. Mickey’s brow furrows with worry. “She’s not answering when you call?” He asks.

“Her number must not be the same,” Ian says. “It was out of service when I tried it.”

“I don’t give a fuck if I’m not,” Mickey says, voice going tight. “Need you.”

Ian nudges his foot against Mickey’s under the table. “Then I’ll be here,” he says softly.

Mickey rubs his eyes. “New cellmate fucking snores.”
“They put you with someone new already?” Ian feels, absurdly, a little jealous. Someone else is already sleeping in his bed. Not that he slept much on that top bunk; he and Mickey wedged into the bottom bunk pretty much every night, or they’d throw the thin cushions that count as mattresses in this place on the ground and wrap up together down there. Ian’s more jealous at the thought of someone sharing that space with Mickey than the actual bed itself.


“That’s not my type,” Ian says, rolling his eyes. Mickey’s never going to let him live that down.

“Yeah?” Mickey asks, voice going syrupy sweet. He only talks like this with Ian, and Ian can never get enough. Mickey’s running his foot up and down Ian’s leg and it’s driving Ian a little wild. “What’s your type, then, Mr. Picky?”

“Hm.” Ian pretends to think. “I like dark hair and blue eyes, stupid tatts, bad attitude, filthy mouth in every way possible…” Mickey’s cracking up too hard for Ian to keep going.

“Fuck you, I have an incredible attitude,” Mickey says.

“Incredible ass-itude,” Ian says, and then they’re both laughing at how stupid that was.

“Fuck,” Mickey says, looking down at the table. “Fucking miss you.” Ian can’t help but remember the first time he visited Mickey while he was locked up, a sheet of glass between them. He said he missed Mickey and Mickey threatened to rip his tongue out. But Ian had seen him hide a smile, and it’d kept him going for months. He doesn’t have to hide it anymore. Mickey’s coming right out with it, plain as day, and Ian doesn’t even feel giddy over stuff like that anymore because it isn’t new, it isn’t secret. Though it still does make his chest go all warm.

“I miss you, too,” Ian says. “I keep turning around to tell you shit and you’re not there.”

Mickey laughs, but his eyes are starting to look a little shiny. He shakes his head, biting his lip until he gets himself under control again. “What’s going on at the shithole?”

“By shithole I assume you mean my house?” Ian guesses.

Mickey snorts. “Yeah. With all the rugrats.”

Ian sighs. “Franny’s getting new teeth, so no one’s been sleeping. Liam’s school’s having a bake sale and I gotta make like fifty cupcakes.”

Mickey’s laughing at him. “Look at you, Betty Crocker.”

“I can’t fucking bake,” Ian protests.

“Buy a box, then,” Mickey says. “Don’t be a pussy. Do it for the kid.”


Mickey takes a big breath. “Yeah?” He sounds almost hopeful, but kind of worried.

“Lana said I could bring him to see you,” Ian tells him softly.

“No, she didn’t,” Mickey shoots back right away.
“Mick, I promise,” Ian says. “She did.”

A lot of emotions pass over Mickey’s face; excitement, apprehension, worry, fear. “You think it’s a good idea?”

Ian knows what he’s asking. He’s asking if Yevgeny even wants to see him, if Yevgeny will even know who he is. Yevgeny’s five now, and Mickey hasn’t been around since he was about five months. It hurts Ian’s stomach.

“He saw the background on my phone and said that’s my dad,” Ian tells him.

Mickey bites down on a smile. “He did?”

“Yeah, he did,” Ian confirms. “Svetlana must show him pictures.”

Mickey darts a look up at Ian and then away again. “You got a picture of me on your phone?”

Ian’s chest is going to burst. “I never got rid of the ones I had from…you know. Before.” Before Ian left him, before Sammi shot at him, before he got locked up. The summer everything was good, until it was all horrible. The summer they were a family.

Mickey’s blinking hard. “Wow.”

“Oh, and I sent you a letter with my number in it,” Ian tells him. “So fucking put me on your list and call me.”

“New number?” Mickey asks. He rattles off Ian’s number. “Or still that one?”

Ian blinks at him. “How do you remember all this shit? And my meds, too?”

Mickey knew Ian’s meds that he’s on now, not the stuff he was on that summer when Ian first got meds and Mickey ran himself ragged looking after him. Mickey shrugs. “Checked what was in your shit when I came for you last time,” he says. “ Needed to know what to steal when we got to Mexico.”

Mexico. In the year they spent together here, neither of them brought it up, not for an actual discussion. It was too hard to talk about when they had to temper their reactions, keep themselves neutral around everyone else. And they certainly can’t talk about it now, not really, but Ian still feels guilty when he thinks of Mickey’s face when he realized Ian was leaving him there.

“I’m sorry,” Ian murmurs.

Mickey shrugs. “Okay.”

“No, Mickey, I am,” Ian says. “I’m sorry I didn’t go with you.”

Mickey looks down at the table. There’s a weird stain that could be a watermark but is probably blood. He looks up and shrugs. “No, probably better you didn’t. Stability and all that shit, right?” He shrugs again. “Hard to get on the run.”

Ian slides his hands across the table, wanting to hang onto Mickey, but he stops and pulls back. Mickey presses his foot against Ian’s leg again. That has to be enough for now.

“Staying out of trouble?” Ian checks, trying to make his voice sound normal.

Mickey huffs. “I am a fucking model prisoner.”
“A model, sure,” Ian cracks, and relishes in Mickey’s laugh. They just look at each other for a second, taking in each other’s face. “DePaul giving you any trouble?” It’s the guard who hates Mickey. Although he’s certainly not the only guard who hates Mickey. Most of them do. Mickey’s never learned the value of not running his mouth. It’s like the second he got away from Terry, he stopped biting his tongue about anything ever.

Mickey rolls his eyes. “Guy’s a pussy. Couldn’t hurt me if he tried.”

It’s a lie, because Mickey can’t fight back. Not if he wants to get out on time. Fear seizes Ian’s heart. “I know I said stay out of trouble, but fight back if you have to,” he says urgently. “Don’t just let him hurt you. Anyone else, either.”

“Nah, man, it’s okay,” Mickey promises quietly. “He won’t give me any trouble, not like that.”

“How do you know?” Ian asks suspiciously.

“I squealed, Ian,” Mickey points out. “State’s witness. He can make my life a little shittier, but he can’t actually hurt me.”

Ian thinks that over, realizing Mickey’s right—DePaul’s thrown a lot of insults and privilege losses at Mickey, but he’s never actually touched him. None of the guards have, come to think of it. “Good,” Ian says. “I hope that really pisses him off.”

Mickey laughs. “You’re vindictive,” he says fondly.

“Only for you.”

“Well, I know that’s not true,” Mickey says, grinning now. “That dick pastor had nothing to do with me.”

Ian rolls his eyes. “I don’t think it’s fair to hold my manic episodes against me.”

The smile Mickey’s giving him is so soft, so warm. Ian can’t believe he’s not going to be able to touch Mickey for a year. How did he ever survive this before? “God,” Ian huffs. “This fucking sucks.”

Mickey laughs quietly. “Yeah.”

“Why was being in prison better?” Ian asks.

“Maybe it was that institutionalization thing,” Mickey says.

“What?” Ian asks.

“Guys get out, they can’t make choices or anything. ‘Cause they get overwhelmed. You get used to wearing the same shit, eating whatever they give you, that kind of thing.”

Ian tilts his head. “That something that happened to you?”

Mickey snorts. “Well, every time I got out of juvie, I had my dad around, so I still didn’t get to make choices. And then when I got out last time, I was on the run, so I couldn’t really have what I wanted anyway.”

It makes Ian sad. He always wants Mickey to have what he wants. He can’t really do anything about it, though. Not in a big way. He can do it in a tiny way right now, though. He nods toward the vending machines. “Want something?”
Mickey shrugs. Ian raises his eyebrows and Mickey raises his right back. “I want something. Not what’s in there. But I guess I’ll take some fucking chips or something.”

Ian can’t help a little smile. “Me too,” he says. He gives Mickey’s shoulder a little squeeze as he stands up to wait in line, and Mickey lets his hand brush against Ian’s hip, just for a second. Ian uses his time at the vending machine to calm himself down. It’s going to be a long year if all he thinks about is what they’re missing.

So he comes back to the table with chips and licorice and a Coke and thinks, instead, about what they’re getting. He knows where Mickey is all the time and where he’ll be when he gets out. He knows the guards won’t do anything to him. He knows Mickey’s working hard to get out on time. They don’t get kisses and late-night talks and fucks anymore. But they get smiles across the table, feet brushing together. They get to share a Coke. Ian used to get giddy over sharing a beer, because he knew it was as close to a kiss as he was going to get.

He tries to channel that kid again, the one who soaked up every second with Mickey and wanted more but was ecstatic over every touch. Mickey brushes his fingers against Ian’s as he hands over some candy, and Ian presses his knees into Mickey’s under the table.

Mickey sputters a little when he takes a drink of the Coke. “What is this?”


Mickey makes a face. “I’ve never had this shit without whiskey in it.”

They look at each other for a second, and then they both crack up laughing. Like Ian told Carl—this is what he gets. So this is what he’s going to enjoy.

“…and then fucking Benny jumped in, too,” Mickey winds down a story of the latest gossip on C block. They’re on the phone, so Ian can’t see Mickey’s face, but he can imagine the eyebrow work he’d be getting if he could.

“Benny,” Ian says disappointedly. “His fucking mom has cancer! He needs to quit getting in fights and just get home.”

“That’s what I told him,” Mickey says. “He wasn’t really in the mood to talk, though.”

“What about you?” Ian asks. “You getting in fights?”

“Would I have phone privileges to talk to you if I was?” Mickey points out.

“Good,” Ian says. “Keep it that way. You need to get home, too.”

“Not like I even really have a home,” Mickey says. He sounds so casual, like there’s nothing painful about that. “Can’t go back to my dad’s house, that’s for fucking sure.”

“Excuse me?” Ian shoots back. “What, I’m just keeping your side of the bed warm for nothing?”

Mickey huffs, a little rustle in Ian’s ear. “Keeping my side of the bed warm, huh?”

Ian blushes a little, which is stupid for multiple reasons. For one thing, this is Mickey, and it’s pretty ridiculous to be embarrassed about anything with a guy you’ve touched every inch of. Not to mention a guy who loved him so much he went to prison for him twice. Besides all that, Mickey
can’t even see him.

“Yeah,” Ian says, resolutely not embarrassed. “Keep a pillow on the side of me ‘cause I’m not used to having a whole bed to myself. It’s weird being able to actually use a blanket without it getting stolen in the middle of the night.”

Mickey laughs a little. “’S what happens when you shack up with a petty thief.”

“Yeah, you’re definitely petty,” Ian says, making Mickey laugh harder. “Funny that all your stealing never landed you in jail besides juvie.”

“That’s ‘cause I’m fucking good at it.”

“You’re pretty good at murder, but look where that got you.”

“Attempted murder, fuck you very much,” Mickey corrects. “And that’s a dumb conviction anyway. If I’d wanted that bitch dead, they never would’ve found her body.”

“Well, you did want her dead,” Ian reminds him. “You just didn’t want her dead yet. But you made the classic mistake of underestimating a Gallagher’s pill problem.”

Mickey laughs again. “You busting my balls about defending your fucking honor?”

“Never,” Ian promises. “You’re a knight in shining armor.”

“Oh, sure, so that makes you the king, huh?” Mickey scoffs. “I’m off doing your bidding? Not like you got a big head or anything.”

Ian laughs out loud. “How do you know so much about knights and kings?”

There’s a little pause, and Ian can’t see Mickey but he can imagine the embarrassed way his eyes are cutting away. Ian didn’t mean to imply it’s silly for Mickey to know that. It’s just a little out of place. He can’t picture Mickey paying much attention in history class.

“My mom…she used to read us this book of fairy tales,” Mickey finally says quietly. “When I was real little. All about knights and quests and princesses and shit.”

Ian stills. Mickey’s mom OD’ed while Mickey was in juvie, one of the first times. He never, ever talks about her. But Mandy’s told Ian some stuff, and he knows before she got really into drugs, before she started shooting up every day, their life was a little better. Not great, still, but better. Mickey didn’t used to be so dirty and grubby all the time, and he’d gotten to play Little League that one summer, actually registered and paid and everything. Their mom would disappear sometimes on a bender, but only for a few days, and then she’d go long stretches where she stayed at home and took care of them. But by the time Mickey was about eleven, she was too far gone, and now he keeps his happy memories of her locked up tight and safe.

“That sounds nice,” Ian says softly.

“Yeah,” Mickey says. “It was.”

They’re quiet for a minute, and Ian wants to hear Mickey laugh again. “Maybe I’m not the king,” Ian says. “Seems more like I’m always the damsel in distress with you.”

Mickey does laugh at that, and Ian smiles at the sound. “Gotta get on my fucking horse and come rescue you from a dragon?” Mickey asks.
Yeah,” Ian says. “Hurry up and get here, okay?”

There’s a smile in Mickey’s voice. “Coming as fast as I can. Promise.”

Ian wakes up to the snuffling sound of someone crying. He reaches blindly for Mickey, wondering if it’s a nightmare about Terry or something else, and startles when his hand hits the wall. He opens his eyes and has to blink a few times before he remembers where he is and why Mickey isn’t beside him. It takes a second to reorient himself, and then he realizes the person crying has to be Liam.

Ian doesn’t technically have to share a room with Liam anymore. Lip finally moved out, Fiona’s gone, and Carl’s off at school. Debbie moved Franny into Lip’s old room, but Fiona’s room still stands empty. None of them have had the heart to take it over. He doesn’t mind sharing, though. He’s literally always shared a room, his entire life. Besides, it’s not like Liam won’t benefit from some extra attention. Liam didn’t even complain when Ian moved back in, even though Debbie said he put up a fuss about getting his own room before Ian got out.

“Hey, buddy,” Ian whispers, getting out of bed and leaning over Liam’s bed. “What’s up?”

“My legs hurt,” Liam whimpers.

Ian can handle this. He knows this. He had terrible growing pains when he was a kid, probably around Liam’s age. He still remembers what to do.

“Hang on, okay?” Ian says. “I’ll be right back.”

He grabs the heating pad out of the bathroom and roots around the cabinet for some regular old Tylenol. They don’t use that very much, but they don’t have to hide it in case of Frank appearances like they do the stronger stuff. He takes them to Liam and hands him a water bottle from the nightstand. Liam swallows the pills while Ian gets the heating pad situated.

He rubs at Liam’s calves and his knees. “Right here?”

Liam grimaces. “It hurts.”

“I know. Used to happen to me, too. Just growing pains.”

“So I’m growing more?” Liam asks.

Ian laughs a little. “Not really. I mean, probably, but turns out growing pains don’t actually mean you’re growing. Don’t know why they call them that.”

He brushes a hand over Liam’s hair. He remembers when Monica first showed up with Liam; none of them had even known she was pregnant. It was the first time they’d seen her in close to two years, and she’d stayed about a week. Fiona wouldn’t even let her breastfeed because they had no idea what kind of shit was in her bloodstream and they didn’t want to risk her screwing up a tiny baby. Liam had always had those big, watchful eyes, looking around at everything and everyone.

“Ian?” Liam whispers.

“Yeah?”

“Do you miss Mickey a lot?” Liam doesn’t really remember Mickey from before, but everyone’s filled him in on the story and he knows Ian talks about him a lot. He hears Ian talking to him on the
“Yeah,” Ian says. He huffs. “Hard to sleep sometimes.”

“Why?”

Ian sighs. “I’m used to sleeping with him in the bed, too. It’s kind of hard to sleep alone now. I miss him there. I worry about him.” He spends a lot of time looking at the shadows on the ceiling, hoping Mickey’s okay. Wondering if he got enough to eat or if his stomach’s rumbling and keeping him awake. Wondering if he’s sleeping or if he’s looking at the top bunk above him missing Ian as badly as Ian misses him.

“So you love him?” Liam asks. Ian remembers Carl asking him that, all those years ago, and Ian hadn’t been secure enough in Mickey’s feelings to give him a concrete answer.

It’s certainly not a problem now. “Yeah, I do,” he says easily. “A lot.”

Liam thinks that over. “Are you going to go back to jail because he’s there?”

“Nope,” Ian promises. “I’m here with you. Mickey’ll be out soon.”

“Is he going to come live with us?”

“Yeah,” Ian says. “That okay with you?”

Liam rolls his eyes. “Not like I get a choice.”

Ian frowns. He doesn’t know all the details of what happened while he was gone, but he knows Liam got lost in the Gallagher shuffle. It’s always been tough for their baby brother; Fiona took over as parent, Lip and Ian had each other, Carl and Debbie had each other, and Liam was the baby. Once he started growing up, no one really knew what to do with him.

“I mean, I don’t want you to be mad about it,” Ian says. But Liam’s not wrong, necessarily; Mickey’s coming home to Ian. That’s not changing. Ian can’t even think about any other possibility.

“I’m not mad about it,” Liam says softly. “But no one ever cares what I want.”

“I care,” Ian says. “I’m sorry things got so shitty.”

Liam sniffs. “Fiona didn’t even come find me. She didn’t even say goodbye.”

Ian’s heart sinks. Fiona was the only parent Liam ever knew, and he’s right—she just took off on him. The rest of them are used to that, and they’re old enough to get why Fiona did it and be happy for her, mostly. But Liam’s still a kid. He didn’t really have to worry about Frank and Monica popping in and out of his life, because he always had Fiona.

Ian leans down and gives Liam a hug. “I know. I’m sorry. But I’m here now, okay? I’ll be the new Fiona.”

Liam shrugs. “Until Mickey gets here.”

“No,” Ian protests. “Mickey knows when he gets home, we’re here to take care of you. He’s got a kid, but I don’t know what’s going to happen there. His ex-wife won’t be handing Yev over anytime soon, so it’s going to be all about you.” He gives Liam another squeeze. “We’re going to stay here with you, okay? I promise. Cross my heart and hope to die.”
Liam cracks a smile at that. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Ian echoes. “Your legs feeling any better?”


“That’s what big brothers are for,” Ian tells him. He gives Liam’s leg a little pat and turns to go back to his own bed.

“Hey, Ian?” Liam says. “You can—if you want, you can share my bed. So you’re not alone.”

It makes a little lump rise in Ian’s throat. Obviously, there’s a big difference between sharing a bed with his baby brother and sharing a bed with Mickey. Liam won’t smell like Mickey, won’t grunt and snore the way Mickey does, won’t wake him up with teasing little kisses along his jaw and down his neck.

But Liam’s reaching out here. He wants Ian to be okay. And he might need a little comfort himself. Ian smiles at him. “Okay,” he says. “Scoot over. Don’t hog the blanket, okay?”

“It’s my bed,” Liam huffs.

Ian laughs. He curls his arm around Liam and listens for Liam’s breaths to steady while he falls asleep. Ian tugs the heating pad away and throws it on the ground. He watches Liam’s chest rise and fall. He wonders if Mickey’s sleeping okay. He wonders if Mickey’s new cellmate is doing a good job of watching his back.

Ian falls asleep thinking of Mickey, like usual, but at least this time he isn’t alone.

“Okay, Yev, you ready?” Ian asks as they get out of the car. Yevgeny still has to sit in a booster seat, which is a brand new thing to Ian. No one in his family ever used one. But Yevgeny’s very adamant about buckling and unbuckling the seatbelt himself, and Ian doesn’t know anything about booster seats, so he leaves Yevgeny to his own devices.

“Ready,” Yevgeny reports. He looks at the prison as Ian locks the car. “Is this my dad’s house?”

“No,” Ian says firmly. “He’s just staying here for a while. He’ll be out soon, though, and then he’ll be home with us.”

“Really?” Yevgeny asks. “Is he gonna share a room with me?”

Ian laughs a little. “No. He’s gonna share a room with me.”

“Okay.” Yevgeny accepts this easily.

“You have a kid, Gallagher?” DePaul’s working the fucking check-in desk. Ian purses his lips. He doesn’t really want to tell DePaul anything, but it doesn’t matter; he looks down at the paperwork and sees Yevgeny’s name. “Milkovich has a kid?”

“Yeah,” Ian says, ignoring DePaul once he gets waved through. Yevgeny starts to cry when they’re searching Ian. It makes Ian’s stomach drop. “Yev, it’s okay,” he soothes. Yevgeny doesn’t have to be searched, luckily. “They’re just making sure your dad’ll be safe in there.”

Yevgeny doesn’t say anything. He has a habit of not talking around people he doesn’t know. Ian’s been hanging out with him at least two days a week for the past month, and Yevgeny only started
talking to him last week.

“Look!” Ian cries when Mickey comes in, his own heart leaping at the sight of him. Going six days
between visits always feels like forever. “There he is!” Mickey’s got a huge grin on his face, so
beautiful it makes Ian’s stomach flutter.

He was expecting some nice reunion; Yev running into Mickey’s arms, Mickey finally getting to hug
his son again. Instead, Yevgeny shrinks back against Ian and turns his face away. Ian doesn’t turn his
face away, unfortunately, so he sees every drop of the disappointment that floods Mickey’s eyes.

“Yev,” Ian says. “Go give your dad a hug.”

Yevgeny shakes his head, lips pressed tightly together, and Ian’s chest hurts. Mickey’s still standing
over by the door, face blank now. He’s fighting his emotions hard. The guard isn’t even pushing him
to go sit down; the guy’s new, and he must still have some sympathy left in him. Ian gestures for
Mickey to come over and Mickey just shrugs at him. Ian knows Mickey thinks he’s helping, holding
back until Yevgeny wants him to come over, but what he actually needs to do is act normal.
Unfortunately, normal isn’t something Mickey’s ever been.

“Mick,” Ian finally hisses, exasperated. “He’ll warm up once you come over and start talking.”

Mickey’s got his jaw clenched hard, but he comes over slowly. “Hey,” he says.

“Hi,” Ian says, trying not to sound as unhappy as he feels. Mickey’s been so excited for this visit.
Yesterday he spent the entire fifteen minutes on their phone call asking Ian what kind of stuff
Yevgeny likes. He got special internet time and looked up Yevgeny’s favorite show so he’d have
something to talk to him about. Ian wants to cry just thinking about it.

“Let’s sit down,” Ian suggests. Now everyone’s just miserable, and Ian feels like it’s his fault. It’s
not; he knows that, logically. But maybe he rushed them all into this. Maybe he should’ve spent
more time with Yevgeny, talking about Mickey. Maybe he should’ve asked Svetlana to bring him.

“Hey,” Mickey says again, quieter this time. He gets his arm around Ian’s shoulders and gives him a
squeeze, and Ian can’t help the way he turns his body to nestle into Mickey’s. He
misses Mickey’s body. Not even in a sexual way—well, okay, not only in a sexual way—but just the closeness he got
so used to. He misses Mickey’s arm around his waist while he sleeps, Mickey’s shoulder pressed
against his while they eat, Mickey’s fingers on the inside of his wrist when they’re telling secrets in
the dark.

They sit down, and Yevgeny climbs into Ian’s lap. He sticks his thumb in his mouth and rests his
head against Ian’s chest, staring wide-eyed at Mickey.

“He sucks his thumb?” Mickey asks. “Isn’t he too old for that?”

“Kinda, yeah,” Ian admits. He’s not going to tell Mickey Yevgeny only does that now when he’s
scared. He looks down at Yevgeny and jostles him. “Hey. Tell your dad about school.”

Yevgeny shakes his head, not taking his thumb out of his mouth. Mickey stares back at him, and
neither of them blink for a minute. It’s kind of freaky. Yevgeny does not look like Mickey. He’s got
thick, curly blond hair. He kind of looks like Colin, actually, and Ian is choosing to believe that’s just
a normal genetic sibling thing and not a sign of potential paternity. Svetlana told him a few weeks
ago Mickey sent her money every month while he was on the run and he sends Yevgeny presents
every year on his birthday. If he’s not Mickey’s son, Ian won’t be the one to bring it up.

Yevgeny has blue eyes, at least, so that could be from Mickey.
“Hey, kid,” Mickey says, kind of tentative. “Sorry I’m not around.”

Yevgeny takes his thumb out of his mouth. Ian and Mickey wait for a second, but he doesn’t say anything. Ian sighs. “Well,” he says with a little shrug. “He’s kinda shy, Mick. He didn’t start talking to me until last week, remember?”

“Yeah,” Mickey says, but he looks so downcast it hurts Ian’s heart.

“Hey, guess what?” Ian says. “Mandy’s coming next month.”

Mickey’s head snaps up. “No shit?”

“No shit,” Ian promises. “She’s going to stay with me from Tuesday to Thursday.”

Mickey smiles. “She sound okay?”

“Yeah, she’s got a job waiting tables in Sheboygan,” Ian says. “Every time I talk to her she complains about how cold it is.”

Mickey huffs. “She fucking hates snow. Don’t know what she’s doing in fucking Sheboygan.”

“She says she’s trying to save up to move to California,” Ian reveals. “But I don’t think she’d go that far.”

“She should,” Mickey says. “Go to the beach. Stop looking like a fucking vampire.”

Ian shoots him a little smile, because Mickey lived in Mexico and spent time at the beach, and he still looks like a vampire. Mickey clicks his tongue at Ian and Ian’s grin gets bigger. “Lip says hi.”

Mickey makes a face. “No, he fucking doesn’t.”

Ian laughs. “Okay, he doesn’t. But Carl and Debbie do.”

“His kid talking yet?” Mickey asks.

Ian shrugs. “Just mama and baba.”

Mickey nods. He glances down at Yevgeny again. “Uh, hey, kid, you like, uh, the Pokémon thing?” The word is clunky in his mouth. He hadn’t even known what Pokémon was until Ian explained it, and then he asked why the fuck people don’t complain about the whole premise of catching wild animals in balls, and Ian hadn’t had any answers. He’d never been into Pokémon, either.

Yevgeny tips his head back and looks at Ian. “Pikachu,” he whispers.

Ian nods encouragingly at Mickey. Mickey licks his lips. “Yeah, Pikachu. Cute little fucker, huh? And the one, uh, like the dragon guy? Char—Charzar?”

“Charizard,” Yevgeny corrects. “He’s Charmander when he’s a baby.”

Mickey shrugs. “Okay.”

“But my favorite is Squirtle,” Yevgeny says, and Ian can see Mickey fighting not to make a sex joke out of that.

“Squirtle,” Mickey echoes, and the look he shoots Ian has Ian laughing into Yevgeny’s hair. “Okay. He’s…a turtle?”
“He looks like a turtle,” Yevgeny says. “But he’s not.”

“Sure,” Mickey agrees with a shrug. But then it’s like he runs out of things to say; he opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. He cuts his eyes up to Ian.

“Hey, Yev, are you having a birthday party this year?” Ian prompts.

Yevgeny hesitates. He tips his head as he examines Mickey, apparently weighing if the Pokémon discussion was enough of an ice breaker that he wants to keep talking. He goes for the middle ground; he doesn’t say anything, but he nods.


Yevgeny nods again. He’s staring at Mickey again. Ian knows that stare can be kind of unnerving; he’s been on the receiving end plenty. And Mickey has not, traditionally, handled being stared at very well. Ian’s pretty sure he won’t blow up at Yevgeny, but it’s not a chance he’s willing to take. For anyone’s sake.

“Yev, should we go get some snacks out of the vending machine?” Ian suggests. “Your dad likes Twizzlers.”

“You like licorice?” Mickey asks.

Yevgeny shrugs. “The red one?”

“Yeah,” Mickey says, face lighting up at Yevgeny talking again. “I don’t like black licorice. It’s fucking nasty.”

“Okay.”

Ian leads Yevgeny over to the vending machine and lets him push the buttons. He laughs pretty loudly when the snacks fall, and Ian sees a few guys jump a little. He gives this guy he was on okay terms with, Jeffrey, an apologetic smile. Jeffrey just kind of shrugs. Kids always get a special pass.

Mickey and Ian pass their Coke back and forth like they do every week. Yevgeny takes a bite of licorice and wrinkles his nose. He leans across the table and hands the rest of it to Mickey. “Here,” he says. “I don’t like it. You can have it, Dad.”

Ian watches the emotion on Mickey’s face when he hears Yevgeny call him dad. Mickey blinks hard. “Thanks,” he says, taking the licorice. Yevgeny doesn’t notice anything, just goes back to eating cookies. Mickey meets Ian’s eyes, his smile blinding. Ian presses his ankle against Mickey’s under the table and smiles right back.

“How’d you get more phone minutes?” Ian asks when the call connects. “Thought you were out for the month.”

“Cashed in a favor,” Mickey says nonchalantly. With Mickey, someone owing him a favor can mean a lot of things. It can mean he carried out an act of violence on someone else’s behalf and threatened more violence if they didn’t grant his favor. It can mean someone wronged him and he threatened violence or a favor to make it right. It can mean he just threatened violence in the first place and the favor was the way to get out of it. Those are the “favors” Ian’s most used to with Mickey.

But at some point while he was locked up the first time, Mickey added charm to his arsenal. There
was a time when Ian was the only person charmed by Mickey, by his smirks and his bad jokes and his irritability, but Mickey figured out how to bite his lip just so, how to look up through his lashes in a very compelling way. Seeing it in action the first time almost stopped Ian’s heart. Mickey’s preferred conflict resolution style is still violence, but Ian’s seen him stop and calculate more than once, deciding if he can talk his way out of something. That must be what growing up is.

Ian sighs. “Wish we could at least have phone sex.”

Mickey laughs. “Well, you can go ahead and I’ll listen.”

“I’m not doing it alone!” Ian protests.

“Come on,” Mickey says, voice dropping. “Let me hear it. Please? Don’t you still have some pictures of my dick somewhere?”

Ian does. He has two from that summer after Mickey came out, and two more from the ill-fated Mexico trip. Ian took them all himself, and Mickey complained about every single one of them until Ian told him he wanted to make sure he could always see Mickey’s dick, no matter where either of them were. That shut Mickey up pretty quickly. The hand Ian wrapped around Mickey’s dick for the pictures probably didn’t hurt, either.

“Mick, they’re recording this!” Ian reminds him.

“So?” Mickey asks. “They’re not gonna actually listen to it unless I give ‘em a reason to.”

“Coming in your pants isn’t going to make anyone suspicious?”

“Fuck off, Gallagher, you think you can do that over the phone?”

Well, now it’s a challenge. Ian knows Mickey said that specifically because he knows Ian can’t back down from a dare like that, but he doesn’t care. Ian gets up and locks the door. Liam’s at school, Debbie’s at work, and Franny’s at daycare, but Ian learned a long time ago in this house, safe’s better than sorry.

“I’m waiting,” Mickey sing-songs.

“Shut up,” Ian says. “God, always running your fucking mouth. Need to put something in it to shut you up.”

Mickey makes a delighted little sound. “Oh, yeah? Like what?”

“Like my cock,” Ian says. “You remember how that feels?”

“Yeah, I do,” Mickey says. “Think about it every goddamn day.”

“You better,” Ian says. “I’m here thinking about yours.” He puffs out a breath when he gets a hand on his dick. Mickey’s breath in his ear speeds up a little.

“Know that sound,” Mickey says, starting to sound a little breathless. “Good?”

“Not as good as your ass,” Ian tells him. Mickey clears his throat, and Ian can picture him trying to keep his cool, standing at the bank of phones, a guard a few feet away. This is stupid, and if they get caught they’ll get in big fucking trouble—Ian probably won’t get to visit Mickey anymore. But it’s hard to think about that with the sound of Mickey breathing in his ear.

“Fuck,” Ian grits out.
“Uh huh?” Mickey asks, voice all strangled. “How’s that going?”

Ian laughs a little. This is mean. Ian gets to jerk off, but Mickey’s got to keep his cool. It’s making this hotter, though, and Ian doesn’t know if that means he’s really fucked up. “God,” Ian moans out. “Got my eyes closed, thinking ‘bout you doing this for me.”

“Oh, yeah?” Mickey says, but his voice breaks a tiny bit. He’s trying so hard not to attract attention. The thing is, most people wouldn’t even notice that crack in his composure. He only lets Ian see it, and only Ian knows how to read it.

“Come on, talk to me,” Ian says. “Want to come hearing your voice.”

Mickey makes a little sound in the back of his throat. “Miss you,” he says. “Sure wish I was there to help. Four hands are better than two, right? You know I’ll always give you my hands. Anywhere you need ‘em.”

Ian laughs a little at Mickey’s creative version of dirty-talk, but honestly, Mickey could read a fucking phone book and Ian would eat it up. “Not gonna last long,” Ian tells him. “Miss you so fucking much.”

“Bet I miss you more,” Mickey says. “I do that sometimes, too, and I always think about you. Wondering if you’re doing it. Think we should try to time it so we can be doing it at the same time. Can pretend I’m—” Mickey breathes out, a little shakily. “Um, pretend we’re helping each other.”

“Yeah, Mick, fuck,” Ian says. “Dying without you, God. No one’s ever sucked my dick as good as you, you know that? You’re the best at it. Don’t know if your mouth is that good or if I just love you so much it’s the best.”

“Fuck,” Mickey mutters. “Maybe it’s both. I spend a lot of time thinking about doing that with you. Can’t wait until I get out. We can do that all day.”

“God, yes,” Ian moans. “Come on, Mick, almost there.”

Mickey groans so quietly Ian almost doesn’t hear it. “Gonna go back to my cell after we hang up and get right to work,” he says. He lowers his voice and adds quickly, “Thinking about your hands and your mouth all over. You know what that looks like, when I do that. Think about that, think about me doing that for you.”

Ian moans when he comes, and he hears Mickey’s bitten off curse that means he’s pissed he can’t come, too. Ian’s teased him enough over the years to know that sound. Ian just pants for a second, because he knows that gets Mickey hot.

“Mm,” Ian says. “Well. This was a good call for me.”

Mickey huffs. “Oh, you know I’m glad to help.” His voice is still strained. “You, uh…you having fun with the other guys you do that with?”

Ian’s confused. He has no idea what Mickey’s talking about for a second. “What—Mickey. There’s no one else.”

“There isn’t?” Mickey asks, surprised.

“No,” Ian says, feeling a little insulted. “Of course not. You thought I’d go find someone? I told you I wouldn’t.”
“You said you weren’t gonna find someone to play house with,” Mickey says, like he’s being all logical. “You didn’t say—I mean, what, you’re gonna go a whole year without fu—without getting any help with that from anyone?” Now Ian gets what Mickey means. Mickey didn’t mind if Ian went out and found someone to spend a night with, a random hookup to take the edge off while Mickey can’t be there.

But what Mickey was most afraid of was Ian finding someone else to have feelings for. Mickey could explain sex away as a base need, as long as he thought Ian was saving up all his feelings for Mickey. He was mad when Ian cheated on him with the random guys at the club, back before, but he wasn’t ready to break up over it. It’s not like Mickey likes the thought of Ian fucking anyone else, but while he’s locked up he sees the necessity in it. No, to Mickey, the only unforgivable kind of infidelity is the kind with hand-holding and kissing and inside jokes, the stuff he held himself back from for so long. He doesn’t share that lightly.

“Only half a year now,” Ian points out, wondering how to explain himself to Mickey. “Mickey, I’m not fucking anyone else for the rest of my life. I don’t want anyone else. Ever. In any way.” He swallows hard. “Hope that’s okay with you.”

There’s a beat of silence that goes on long enough Ian’s afraid they got cut off. There’s a one-minute warning, usually, but he wouldn’t be surprised if he missed it this time.

“Yeah, that’s okay with me,” Mickey finally chokes out. Ian wishes they were in person, wishes he could give Mickey the kind of slow, deep kisses Ian dreams about most nights. He thought he’d be having a lot more sex dreams about Mickey, but honestly, most of his dreams are just him and Mickey lying in bed, talking. Ian’s had years and years of sex with Mickey. It isn’t that he doesn’t miss that, because he very much does. But the comfortable intimacy, the closeness—that’s what he craves most, and he can see now Mickey feels the same way.

“You staying safe?” Ian asks, thinking about why that might be on Mickey’s mind.

“I’m fine,” Mickey says. Then he must remember their conversation the day Ian left. “Hey,” he says. “Nope.”

“No?” Ian asks, equal parts worried and happy. “But it’s okay?”

“It’s fine,” Mickey promises him. “I can handle myself, man. Don’t worry about me.”

“Well, I can’t promise that.”

“Why not?” Mickey asks plainly.

“Because I give a shit what happens to you, Mick,” Ian says softly. “Sometimes I can’t even sleep because I’m so worried about you.”

“I’m a Milkovich,” Mickey reminds him. “Prison is my natural habitat.”

“No, it’s not,” Ian counters. He knows he’s being so ridiculously sappy right now, but he can’t help it. He doesn’t want to help it. “Your natural habitat is with me.”

Mickey huffs, but Ian can hear a smile in his voice when he says, “Well, that’s fucking gay.”

“Yes, it is,” Ian points out.

Mickey laughs. “With you, huh?”
Ian pats his chest, just over his heart, the spot where Mickey’s got Ian’s name tattooed on his own chest, even though Mickey can’t see where he’s touching. “Right here in my heart.”

Mickey snorts hard. “Okay, that was just fucking stupid.”

“I don’t care,” Ian says stubbornly. He channeled that dumb kid who fell in love with Mickey, and this was always the kind of thing that dumb kid wanted to say. Now he can, and he’s going to take full advantage.

Mickey’s quiet again. When he finally speaks, his voice is soft, gentle. “Alright,” he says. “If you say so, Dr. Doolittle.”

“If I’m Dr. Doolittle, you’re an animal, right?” Ian asks. “So does that mean you want to fuck me like an animal?”

“Oh my God,” Mickey groans, pained. “Ian. You’re killing me. You want me to fucking embarrass myself in front of everyone.”

Ian can’t help but grin smugly. “I have that effect on you, huh?”

“Yeah,” Mickey says, smile in his voice. “You sure fucking do.”

Ian and Mandy don’t say much on the drive up to the prison. It’s kind of awkward, and it makes Ian’s stomach hurt because Mandy used to be his best friend. They weren’t awkward together. But it’s been so long since they’ve been in the same place, and now there’s so much unspoken between them.

“How often do you go?” Mandy asks. It’s the first time either of them have spoken in over an hour. Ian has to clear his throat before he can talk.

“Every week,” Ian says.

“Every week?” She echoes.

“He gets seven visits a month,” Ian tells her. “No one else is coming. I’d come more than once a week, but I have to work.”

“I’d come more if I lived closer,” she says defensively.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Ian says. “I just mean…” He shifts. He meant it like that, kind of; he’d meant it as a rebuke, really. Ian’s siblings came to visit all the time while he was inside. Mickey didn’t have a single visitor the entire year they were there together. Ian knows the Milkovich kids view incarceration as no big deal, but it was tough seeing Mickey pointedly ignore the guards coming in to take guys who had visitors day after day while they were in there.

Though it could be a rebuke meant for himself, too. He can’t stop hearing the raw pain in Mickey’s voice when he complained about Ian never visiting him the first time he went away.


“I have to see him,” Ian says. “I can’t—even a week is too long to be apart.”

Mandy doesn’t say anything for another twenty miles or so. “Well, I’m glad he has you, then,” she finally says softly.
She submits to her pat-down with practiced ease. Ian wonders how many different correctional facilities Mandy’s visited throughout the state of Illinois. Maybe Indiana, too; Kenyatta ended up locked up, at some point, if Ian remembers right. That’s how she finally got away from him.

Mickey’s already smiling when he comes into the visitation room. He pauses when he sees Mandy. “Hi,” he says.

“Hey,” she says.

Neither of them move toward each other.

“Hug,” Ian prompts. He knows they both want to, but affection between them has always been a weird, stuttering thing. Sometimes it’s easy, sometimes it’s impossible, and figuring out which it’s going to be on any given day can be something of a minefield. In this case, though, Ian thinks they can both suck it up and deal.

Mickey opens his arms, and Mandy walks into them automatically. Mickey sucks in a breath as he hugs Mandy, and Ian has to look away so everyone in the whole fucking building doesn’t see how in love he is. Mickey gets so few good things, and Ian can tell he’s been missing Mandy.

Mandy pulls back, eyes a little shiny, and Mickey’s got his jaw clenched. He clears his throat and turns to Ian. “What, I don’t get one from you since I got one from her?”

Ian rolls his eyes, but he doesn’t waste any time getting into Mickey’s arms himself. Mickey presses his face in Ian’s neck and Ian can’t help but clutch a fist into the back of Mickey’s uniform. He wants to put his hands on Mickey’s face, touch his hair, touch his waist, but he can’t. All of that would be too intimate for two old cellmates. Honestly, visiting every week is already a red flag, but neither of them will be able to handle anything less.

“Well, seems like my hug wasn’t as good as that one,” Mandy teases.

Ian snorts. “Don’t be too hard on yourself. You’re missing some equipment Mickey finds highly valuable.”

It makes her laugh out loud, and something clicks back into place between them. There’s a special kind of ease right now, with the three of them together. If Ian blocks out the guards, if Ian doesn’t look below Mickey’s face to see what he’s wearing, if Ian ignores all the other families in this room, this could be a hundred different days from when they were all teenagers, passing a joint and a beer and making up stories about people walking down the street.

Ian’s chest hurts when he thinks about those days, remembers the kids they used to be. They had so much hurt inside them, but they were, relatively speaking, so carefree. Ian wishes they could go back. Even just for one day, to go sit in the fading sunlight from a summer day before all this shit happened.

“Got your thinking face on, Einstein,” Mickey cuts into his thoughts. “You good?”

Ian smiles at him. “Yeah,” he assures Mickey. “Highlight of my week, right here.”

Mickey ducks his head, smiling down at the table, and then Mandy says, “I don’t think that’s the ankle you’re looking for, assface. Try again.” Mickey goes all red, and then the three of them are laughing. Mandy shoots Ian a look and Ian laughs harder.

“Shut the fuck up,” Mickey grumbles.
Ian finds Mickey’s ankle under the table and hooks his foot around it. “Don’t worry, Mick,” he jokes. “I got you covered.”

“I hate you both,” Mickey says, shaking his head. Ian and Mandy exchange an eyeroll, because they both know Mickey’s I hate yous are actually I love yous in disguise.

Ian’s good mood lasts for about half an hour down the freeway, and then it fades, just like every week. He gets high off seeing Mickey, but the comedown is as painful as any Ian’s ever felt. Sometimes he cries, alone in the car, before he gets back to the house and takes care of everyone else’s shit. It’s hard leaving Mickey like that, watching him saunter back to the hallway that Ian knows will take him back to the cellblock and then his cell, alone, alone, alone. It’s hard knowing he won’t see Mickey for another week, won’t know for sure if he’s okay or if he’s hiding any injuries.

“Rough, huh?” Mandy asks, experienced in reading his mood changes.

Ian rubs one eye, focusing straight ahead at the road. “Yeah.”

“He looks good, though,” she offers. “Doesn’t seem like he’s getting any shit in there.”

Ian shrugs. “Hard to tell with him, most of the time.”

“Yeah.”

Ian lets out a shaky breath. “I miss him all the time. Even when I’m sitting there looking at him, I already miss him ’cause I know I have to leave him soon. And I can’t touch him, and I can’t even kiss him, and I—” Ian’s voice breaks.

“Six months, right?” Mandy asks.

Ian laughs a little, but his eyes are filling up with tears. “Six fucking months.”

With his siblings, Ian has to be Mr. Positivity. They’re all already wary of his relationship with Mickey, and if they see him breaking down over missing Mickey, they’ll all just think it means Mickey’s bad for him. He keeps his brave face up and acts like six months is almost nothing. Even with Mickey, Ian tries not to show any cracks. Mickey has it rough enough already—he’s the one still locked up, after all. He doesn’t need to worry about Ian crying his eyes out, too.

But Mandy knows. Mandy knows sometimes life is just shitty, even if it’s less shitty than it used to be, or shitty in a different kind of way. Mandy knows how much he and Mickey love each other, and she’s not going to tell him a clean break might be easier, or to watch out because maybe Mickey’s going to change his mind when he gets out. Ian knows that isn’t happening, and Mickey knows that isn’t happening, and Mandy knows that isn’t happening, but no one else seems to.

Mandy isn’t going to tell him to quit crying and date someone else. Mandy isn’t going to tell him six months is nothing and they’ll be together again before he knows it. Mandy isn’t going to say anything, actually. Mandy reaches over and holds out her hand. Ian gives her his, and they hold hands quietly for the rest of the drive.

“You have a collect call from an inmate—”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Ian says, even though he knows it won’t go through until the recording finishes. He has to wait for the beep and repeat himself. “Yes!” He wishes there was a way to bypass that stupid warning. He knows it’s a call from the prison. He knows they’ll be recorded. He doesn’t care. He
hears it connect. “Hi, honey, how was your day?”

“Shit, what’s wrong with your voice?” Mickey asks. He always sounds tinny and weird on the phone, but Ian’s used to it by now. It’s November—seven months down, five to go.

“I’m sick,” Ian croaks. It’s kind of unnecessary, since Mickey can obviously tell. Liam went to a sleepover and two days later this cold ripped through all of them. Of course, Ian’s getting it the worst, because his meds lower his immune system.

“You take something?” Mickey asks, concerned. “Wait, can you?”

“No,” Ian reveals miserably. “I mean, if I went to the doctor they could probably give me something that won’t mess up my meds, but.” He shrugs even though Mickey can’t see him.

“Can’t get to the doctor,” Mickey sympathizes. “Fuck, man.”

“I’ll be okay,” Ian says.

“Doesn’t sound like you will,” Mickey mutters. “Sound like fucking death.”

“Thanks,” Ian deadpans. “It’s okay. V brought me some soup and Debbie’s got me drinking tea every hour. I’ve never peed so much in my life.”

Mickey huffs a soft laugh. “You all cold and achy?”

“Yeah,” Ian admits. “Got like four blankets on me now.”

Mickey makes a little noise Ian can’t parse. After a second, he mumbles, “If I was there I’d take care of you.”

Ian’s going to blame being sick and not being allowed to take anything for the tears that spring into his eyes. “Wish you were,” he says.

“Well, shit, don’t cry about it,” Mickey says, sounding panicked.

“Fuck off, I’m not,” Ian protests. He sighs. “Just miss you.”

“I know,” Mickey says softly. “Miss you, too.”

“Hey, only five months to go,” Ian says, trying to be optimistic. “We’re over the halfway mark now.”

Mickey’s sigh is like a gust of wind in Ian’s ear. “Yeah,” he says. “Five months.”

“It’ll be over before we know it,” Ian says robotically, the same thing he tells himself over and over again to keep from screaming.

Mickey laughs a little, but not happily. “I don’t know about that.”

“You get to go outside today?” Ian asks. If he doesn’t change the subject, he’s going to break down, and he’s decided again and again he’s not doing that. He’s not putting that on Mickey, not right now. He has to be strong right now.


“Snow?” Ian echoes. “Wow, we don’t have any.”
“Really?”

“It snowed last night a little, but it didn’t stick around long. How much is there?” Ian asks. “Doesn’t there have to be like six inches for them to keep us inside?”

“I don’t know,” Mickey says. “You’re the one who took the college classes.”

Ian snorts, because that has nothing to do with knowing the rules of the prison they were at. He’d pushed Mickey into taking the GED course at the prison. Mickey had complained, but he’d passed the test easily—he scored better than Ian did when he took it. But Mickey’d put his foot down when Ian wanted to go to some of the college classes they offered. He said Ian should go, but he didn’t see the point. Ian hadn’t fought him too hard. They didn’t fight much while they were in there. It was hard to want to when they already felt like it was just the two of them against everyone and everything else.

“There’s like a foot out there,” Mickey says. “Cold as fucking balls inside, too. You know they only keep the heat on at night until Christmas.”

“You got your extra socks?” Ian asks. “You better not have bought just Pop-Tarts and gum with that money I put in your account.”

Mickey huffs. “What are you, my nagging wife?”

There’s a pause while they both sit with that. The guys in prison used to call Mickey Ian’s wife sometimes. Mostly just because he hovered at Ian’s elbow when he took his meds and always made sure to snag him an extra piece of toast at breakfast.

“Maybe I am,” Ian says.

It makes Mickey laugh. “I had a wife,” he points out. “No fucking thank you.”

“Alright,” Ian says, “Not a wife, then.”

“Maybe something else,” Mickey says, voice suddenly so quiet Ian almost can’t hear him. His heart leaps at the implication.

“Yeah, maybe,” he says nonchalantly, but he’s smiling so hard it hurts.

The next morning, he’s way sicker; he’s drenched in sweat, but he’s shivering so hard he can barely move. Lip looks down at him and frowns. Ian doesn’t even know when Lip got here. Maybe Liam got freaked out at how sick Ian is and called him.

Ian tries to sit up, but Lip puts a gentle hand on his chest to keep him down. “Man, you’re way too sick to get out of bed.”

“Mickey,” Ian says, because it’s Wednesday.

“They’re not going to let you in like this, Ian,” Lip points out. “I don’t think you’d even make it there.”

“No,” Ian moans. “Mickey. Mickey—Mickey needs me. I gotta see Mickey.”

“I’m sorry,” Lip says, and he actually sounds like he is. “No Mickey this week.”

Ian doesn’t cry about it. He doesn’t. He might whine a little, but he’ll blame the body aches for that. “Someone has to take Mandy,” Ian says. “She came down last night so she could go see him today,
but she can’t drive.”

“Wow, not fucking it,” Lip says.

“Lip, someone has to,” Ian says, clutching his brother’s sleeve. “Mickey can’t have no one.”

“I’m not even on Mickey’s list, am I?”

“No,” Ian admits, because there’s no point beating around the bush about it. “But Carl is.”

“Is it weird that I’m kind of offended Carl is and I’m not?” Lip wonders aloud.

“Probably,” Ian says. “Carl’s just on there because I was afraid he’d go back to his old ways. I thought Mickey might have to scare him straight.”

“Well, I’ll call him,” Lip says dubiously. “But I don’t know if he can do it.”

“If he can’t—someone has to at least drive Mandy,” Ian says desperately. “If no one shows up…” Ian shakes his head. “Mickey needs someone.”

“He won’t last one week?” Lip asks skeptically.

“Lip, you don’t know what it’s like,” Ian says. “There’s snow up there right now, so he can’t even go outside. It’s—you’re fucking trapped. At least when I was there we had each other, but now he has no one.”

“Hasn’t he made friends from all his many trips inside the state’s correctional system?” Lip asks, rolling his eyes.

“It’s not a fucking joke,” Ian snaps. “You can’t breathe in there.”

Lip looks concerned now. “I didn’t know it was that bad.”

“It wasn’t for me,” Ian says. “Because Mickey made sure I was okay. So now I gotta make sure he’s okay. Me and him—Lip, we take care of each other. I have to take care of him.”


Ian lets his body relax back into the pillows. “Thank you.”

Lip hesitates on his way out the door. “Hey,” he says. “If you ever want to talk about it…”


Lip nods. He knocks on the doorframe once and then he leaves.

Ian wakes up out of a doze because his phone’s ringing. He answers it before he’s even fully awake, and the canned voice is halfway through the spiel about being recorded and accepting the charges before Ian realizes what’s going on.

“Yes!” He yelps when prompted. “Mick?”

“Hey, patient zero,” Mickey says.

“Did Mandy come?”

“She was coming anyway,” Ian points out.

“Yes, but she told me you made sure someone drove her,” Mickey says. “And why is Carl on my fucking visitation list? I don’t remember signing that.”

Ian laughs. “I did for you. I thought you’d need to teach him a lesson or something.”

Mickey hums. “He hasn’t had any slipups.”

“No, he’s fine. But I’m glad they came.”

“You sound worse,” Mickey says. “You sleeping all day?”

“I wanted to come,” Ian tells him right away.

“I know that,” Mickey promises. “I know you couldn’t. Carl told me you had a fever of 104.”

“Did I?” Ian asks. “What? He must’ve made that up. We don’t even have a thermometer.”


“How the hell do you know that?” Ian asks, wondering if this is some kind of fever dream. Except what a shitty dream—why would he dream a phone call from Mickey and not Mickey just showing up?

“Carl just told me today.”

It makes Ian laugh a little. “I don’t remember him taking my temperature.”

“Yeah, he said you were real out of it.” Mickey’s quiet for a second. “Don’t croak on me, okay? Need you too much for that.”

Ian’s sweaty and achy and shivering and can hardly breathe. But Mickey saying that makes him feel better than any medicine ever could.

Three months to go. They’re coming down the homestretch now, but it’s not making Ian feel better. He’s just more antsy now. So close, but still so far. Sometimes he has to get up in the middle of the night and pace because he can’t handle it. He’s going crazy. He gets up to the counter and hands over his ID. He doesn’t know the lady doing intake today.

“Sorry,” she says. “Milkovich lost visitation privileges this week.”


She shrugs. “Disciplinary.”

“For what?” Ian demands, voice getting louder. “What did he do?”

“You don’t have a right to know that,” she tells him, voice all snotty. Ian hates guards like this, the kind that immediately go on a power trip when questioned.

“I want to know why I can’t see him,” Ian says, trying to calm down. “I need to see him.”
“You’re not. Going. In,” she says flatly. “Keep pushing and I can get you knocked off his list altogether.”

“I am his list,” Ian hisses. He pushes his hands into his hair, trying to take deep breaths. “Please, can’t I know what happened? Can you at least tell me—is he in solitary?”

She shrugs. “You don’t have a right to know that either.”

Ian’s got tears in his eyes now. He can’t help it. He only gets to see Mickey once a week, only gets to look him over and make sure he’s okay once a week, and now they won’t let him in. “Please,” he mumbles. “I need to—I just want to know if he’s okay.”

“You’re not family,” she says bluntly.

“I am family,” Ian snaps back before he can stop himself. He takes a deep breath. His hands are shaking. “How long are his privileges gone?”

She shrugs at him again. “So far just this week. We’ll see if he does anything to make it longer.”

Ian’s going to lose his temper if he looks at her fucking face for another second. He clenches his teeth together and leaves. He sits in the car smoking for a while, willing himself to calm down. It’s one thing if Mickey just lost visitations; that’s shitty, and it hurts, but it’ll be okay once he gets them back. But if Mickey’s in solitary—God.

Ian went to solitary for a day once, because he was manic and prison psychiatrist is a fucking idiot who thought solitary was a good idea. He said it was for Ian’s own good, to keep him from hurting himself or anyone else. Ian did not handle it well. He’s pretty sure it should be extra illegal to put mentally ill inmates in solitary, but no one really cared when he yelled that a few times. No one cared when he yelled anything. There was no one around to hear him, let alone care.

When he got out, Mickey had bloody knuckles and wild eyes and didn’t leave Ian’s side even for a second for a solid two days. Later, Ian found out Mickey stood toe-to-toe with three different guards before they’d let him talk to the psychiatrist, and no one had any clue what Mickey said or did, but Ian was out an hour later. Mickey still won’t tell him what happened, so Ian thinks Mickey might’ve blown the guy or something like that. Ian wouldn’t be mad at him if he did. He wasn’t going to last another day in solitary, and Mickey had to have known that. Mickey did what he had to do to get Ian out.

If Mickey’s in solitary right now, there’s not a fucking thing Ian can do about it.

“You’re back early,” Debbie says as Ian bursts through the door. She’s got the baby monitor next to her, so Ian knows he needs to calm down, take a beat, not wake anyone up, but he’s buzzing from the adrenaline and the anger.

“Wouldn’t let me see him,” Ian seethes.


“I don’t know,” Ian says. “They wouldn’t tell me. Said Mickey lost his visitation privileges this week.”

“Does that mean he did something?” Debbie asks. “Hopefully he doesn’t get any time added to his sentence.”

She says it innocuously, goes back to the book she’s reading, but Ian can’t breathe. “They’re trying
to keep him in longer,” he says breathlessly. “They’re—they’re framing him.”

Debbie looks up at him, alarmed. “What?”

“I know those guards,” Ian points out. “They’re targeting him. They don’t like Mickey.”

Debbie huffs. “He must be used to that.”

“No,” Ian says. “No. Oh my God. They’re going to keep him longer.” He’s going to be sick. Debbie stands up and puts her hand on his back.

“Ian?”

“I can’t fucking take it if they keep him longer,” Ian says. “I need him back. And he needs to come back. He needs to get out.”

“It’s going to be okay,” Debbie says, rubbing his back soothingly. “It’s probably just Mickey running his mouth.”

“No,” Ian says. He shakes his head. “He promised me.” Debbie looks skeptical. But no one knows Mickey like Ian does. They all think Mickey’s some kind of idiot who can’t control himself, who never thinks of anyone but himself. It isn’t true. “He’s not going to do anything stupid that’ll keep him away from me longer,” Ian insists. “Mickey always comes back for me.” He can see Debbie melting a little. She still goes for romance stuff like that, no matter how hard she tries to be cynical.

“So what are you going to do?” Debbie asks.

Ian’s about to say he doesn’t know, but he stops. “I’m going back,” he decides. “Tomorrow. And the next day. As long as it takes until they let me see him again.”

“Ian…” Debbie hesitates. “Wouldn’t it better to just wait until next week and try again?”

“Not better for Mickey,” Ian says. “If they think nobody cares what happens to him, they’ll try it. They’ll think they can get away with it. But I’m not letting that happen. I care what happens to him. He has me.”

Debbie doesn’t look very placated, but Debbie doesn’t know. Ian knows how the guards work. He knows how the system wants to punish Mickey, and he’s not letting them get away with it. Not without a fight.

When he shows up the next day, DePaul is working the intake desk. He looks at his list and frowns at Ian. “Gallagher, Milkovich doesn’t have visitation today.”

“They wouldn’t let me in yesterday.”

DePaul raises his eyebrows. “How’s that my problem today?”

It takes everything in Ian not to slam his fists down on the counter. “I want to know where Mickey is.”

“You know you’re already on thin ice with the visitations, right?” DePaul points out. “Getting that privilege when you’re on parole is a big deal.”

“I just want to know if Mickey’s in solitary. And if so, I want to know why.”

DePaul makes a face. “Why would I tell you that?”
“He’s not some nobody,” Ian says lowly. “You can’t just hide him in a corner and no one will miss him. I’m coming back every day until you let me see him or until he calls me and tells me himself he’s okay.”


“Fine,” Ian says. But he doesn’t leave. He parks himself in a chair in the foyer and waits. DePaul keeps giving him dirty looks, but Ian’s not leaving. He stays until they kick him out when visitation hours end, and then he shows up the next day, too.

“Milkovich doesn’t have visitation today,” the guard at the desk says. Ian raises his eyebrows and goes back to his chair.

It’s four days before Ian’s phone finally rings. It’s morning, just as he’s about to leave to drive up to the prison, and he gasps when he sees the number. “Yes,” he snaps at the automated lady. “Mickey? Mick? Are you there? Mickey.”

“Hey,” Mickey says. Just one word.

Ian lets out a long breath. “Are you okay? What’d they do to you?” Mickey doesn’t answer. “Solitary?” Ian asks worriedly.

“Yeah,” Mickey says.

“Tell me it wasn’t all four days.”

“Yeah,” Mickey says.

“Mick,” Ian breathes. “Talk to me. You okay?”

“I don’t know,” Mickey admits. His voice is rough. “I was…” He huffs something that might be a laugh but sounds more like a sob. “Fucking sucked.” That’s the understatement of the year.


“I didn’t do anything, Ian. I swear I didn’t. You know I wouldn’t—I want out of here. I’m not gonna do anything to stay longer.” Mickey sounds plaintive. Tired. Scared. Ian’s heart plummets. He’s pacing, grabbing at his hair and tugging.

“I know,” he assures Mickey. “Shit. They’re jobbing you, huh?”


“I know,” Ian repeats. “I know you’re keeping your head down.”

“What’s the point?” Mickey asks, dejected. “I’m doing what I’m supposed to and they’re still fucking hitting me with this shit. Might as well go punch some assholes and have a good time if they’re gonna punish me anyway. I try to be good and follow their fucking rules and this is what I get.”

“They add to your sentence?” Ian asks, dread filling his stomach.

“Don’t know yet,” Mickey says.

“We’ll fight, Mick,” Ian says fiercely. “I’m not letting them do this to you.”
All Ian hears for a second is Mickey breathing. Then he says, voice small and hurt, “I just want to come home.”

Ian has to close his eyes and lean back against the wall for a second. His legs feel weak from how much longing is in Mickey’s voice. “I want you home,” Ian says.

They just breathe together for a second. Mickey’s breaths are coming easier now, slowing down so they’re not so frantic, but Ian’s heart won’t follow suit. It’s slamming against his ribcage like a trapped bird. He’s not letting them get away with this. He knows Mickey’s word against the guards means nothing to anyone else, but it’s everything to Ian. He knows Mickey didn’t do anything wrong.

Just after the buzz that tells them time’s up, Mickey says, “Think I’m running out of my minutes this month, and they’ll probably take some away from me, so—you know, if I don’t call—Ian, I lo—” but then they get cut off. Ian sits down with a pad of paper and starts making a list of what he needs to do. He has to make sure Mickey is okay. He’ll do anything he can.

When Ian gets to see Mickey again, two days after he finally heard Mickey on the phone, he can’t help himself. He grabs onto Mickey, hands on Mickey’s hips like two buddies would never do. Mickey doesn’t look around, doesn’t pull back, doesn’t tell him to stop. Mickey presses himself up against Ian tightly and buries his face in Ian’s shoulder.

“Can’t go that long without you again,” Mickey says after they pull apart.

“Don’t worry,” Ian says. “I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen.”


“Oh, I’m fucking peachy,” Mickey says sarcastically. He turns his head and Ian sees a sickly-yellow bruise healing on his neck. Ian’s blood runs cold.

“What is that?” He demands. It looks a whole fucking lot like fingers. Mickey used to show up with bruises like that around his neck a lot, back when Terry was ruling things. Ian knows the shape of that bruise.

Mickey hunches his shoulders. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Mickey, what fucking guard did that?”

“Ian, don’t,” Mickey says. He lowers his voice. “It’s taken care of, okay? It’s—” Mickey glances over his shoulder. “Jeffrey did it for me. Harder to justify punishing me if other guys are beating the shit out of me.”

“What?” Ian asks, taken aback.

“Looks real bad for the warden if they’re writing up a twenty-two-year-old fag who keeps getting bashed,” Mickey says.

“You—Mickey, you told people?” Ian asks. That should make him happy, but instead fear grips at his heart. He never gave Mickey enough credit for how terrifying Terry was. Ian was always pushing, pushing, pushing when it came to Mickey defying his father. But Ian gets it now, older and wiser and all that, and the thought of anyone hurting Mickey because of him—well, he’s already dealt with that. He doesn’t want to deal with it again. He’s half a second away from punching a guard just to land himself back in here and help Mickey.
Mickey huffs. “Jeffrey’s idea. He’s already in for life, right, so he figured he could cut me a solid. Gave me some of his toilet hooch and I—” Mickey snorts. “I might’ve gotten a little carried away.”

Ian thinks of Mickey pounding on a table at the Alibi, Terry’s hands around Mickey’s throat, beer bottles flying and chairs crashing and the stunning rush of joy in Ian’s chest. “What’d you do?” He asks, unsure if he should be worried or excited.

Mickey rubs at his nose. “Drew your dick from memory. Told everybody an awful lot about it.” He quirks an eyebrow and grins at Ian. “Got myself all hot and bothered thinking about it. Jeffrey was supposed to just knock me around a little, but I got so into it a bunch of the other guys got pissed and beat the shit out of me for real.”

Ian’s not smiling. He doesn’t think this story is funny, not when he can see the bruises on Mickey and wasn’t there to have his back. Ian’s practically shaking just thinking about it, chest burning with rage. He’s pretty sure he knows just who jumped in to hurt Mickey, and he’s not completely positive he wouldn’t charge them if they were in here right now. “Mickey.” He can hear how tight his voice is, and it’s nothing to how he feels; like a wire pulled taut, ready to snap any second.

“It’s okay,” Mickey says. He gives Ian a soft little smile. “So how ‘bout a fucking kiss, huh?” He’s mostly joking, but there’s a little undercurrent there. It’s need. Ian thinks of him sitting in the dark in solitary, four fucking days of nothing, all alone with his terrible memories and fears, and he can’t even care that it’s dangerous for Mickey. Ian comes around the table and puts his hands on Mickey’s face, pulls him in gently and kisses him.

It’s the first time they’ve gotten to kiss in nine months. Ian feels drunk off it, off the feeling of Mickey’s lips against his and Mickey’s hands in his hair, so achingly familiar Ian thinks he’s going to start crying. Mickey tastes like gum and hash browns and his lips are chapped enough that Ian knows he hasn’t been spending any money on Chapstick like Ian told him he should. They stand there kissing way longer than they’re allowed to, way longer than is safe, definitely, but Ian can’t stop, can’t hold back from finally letting himself have this again, touching Mickey’s face and his arms and his hips.

“Hey,” the guard says, but he sounds uneasy. They’re all too afraid to look homophobic to enforce the rules the same way they do for straight couples.

Ian laughs breathlessly. “Finally, a break for being gay.”

Mickey snorts, but he does pull back. He brushes a hand through Ian’s hair again and sits down at the table, across from Fiona. “What are you doing here?” He asks. He rolls his eyes at Ian. “When did you learn to forge my fucking signature, anyway?”

Fiona shrugs. “I was here visiting. And it’s a long drive. Don’t like Ian doing it alone all the time. Makes me worry.”

Mickey doesn’t even get defensive. He just nods. “Good,” he says. “Me too. Thanks.”

Fiona looks floored. This is not the Mickey anyone from the neighborhood remembers. They caught glimpses of this Mickey that golden summer, but Ian’s the only one who got the full image of him.

“Mick, you think this will be enough?” Ian asks, still feeling anxious about Mickey sitting in solitary. “What if they get mad and retaliate? Or they could put you in solitary and say it’s for your own protection, if guys are jumping you.”

“Then I fucking call the free lawyer people and tell ‘em I’m being discriminated against for being
“homo,” Mickey says with a careless shrug.

“How can you do that if they won’t let you use the phone?” Ian asks.

Mickey shrugs again. “Alright, if I don’t call for two days, you call the free lawyer people.”

Ian’s fretting hard, bouncing his leg and tapping his fingers on the table. Mickey looks at him for a second, then looks over at Fiona. Ian doesn’t know what Mickey finds on Fiona’s face, but then Mickey turns back to him, arms crossed. “You taking your meds, Ian?”

“Of course I am,” Ian says distractedly.

“Been to the doctor lately?” Mickey asks.

Ian pauses. These are pointed questions. “What are you asking me?”

“You got some crazy eyes going on, man,” Mickey says bluntly. “You’re on a fucking tear right now. You manic?”

“No,” Ian scoffs. But then he stops. Sure, he hasn’t been sleeping very well lately, but he thinks that’s understandable with what’s been going on with Mickey. And sure, he’s kind of obsessed with all this right now, but again—understandable. He starts to feel a little uneasy, though. He wrote like four pages of notes yesterday about what to do to keep Mickey safe. What did he write down? He can’t remember any of it. He opens his mouth to say something, but then he snaps it shut. There’s an itch under his skin, a pull that has him wanting to move, do, act, no time to stop and think, just get shit done and deal with the fallout later. Ian hasn’t even been to work in a week, and he didn’t call Kadir to tell him he’d be gone, either.

Mickey reaches across the table, palm out, and Ian takes it without a second thought. Mickey taps his thumb against Ian’s hand. “Go to the fucking shrink, huh?”

“I’m fine,” Ian says.

“Ian,” Fiona tries to cut in, but Mickey holds up a hand to silence her.

“You’re not sleeping,” Mickey points out. He nods toward Ian’s face. “See it all over you. Fucking bags under your eyes. You just came in here fucking vibrating. I remember this shit, okay? I know you’ve been dealing with it more than I have, but this is in my fucking nightmares, Ian.” He gives Ian’s hand a little squeeze. “You’re s’posed to be protecting my natural habitat, remember? Don’t fucking burn down my…my rainforest or what the fuck ever.”

Ian can’t argue. This is so many levels of Mickey caring—bringing up a dumb, too-intense declaration of love from months ago, reminding Ian that he’s been around him when he’s manic, and asking Ian to take care of himself for Mickey. This is a masterful argument for Ian going to the doctor, and Ian can’t think of a single reason to say no.

“It feels different,” he mumbles, looking down at the table. “On the meds. I swear it feels different every time.” He feels like a fucking idiot. This is his own brain and he can’t even tell when it’s not working right. How’s he supposed to be the adult in the house, take care of the younger kids, if he can’t even take care of himself?

“Hey,” Mickey says. “Quit. You’re fine. Maybe it’s just a short one and the meds are handling it, right? So go make sure your meds are fine and you’re fucking good to go, yeah? Just don’t put it off.”
He nods. “Okay,” he says quietly. He looks over at Fiona. “You’ll take me tomorrow?”

“Course I will,” she says. There’s some fear in her eyes Ian recognizes from all the times this has happened before, but Fiona gives Mickey this assessing look. “Shit, I had no idea you’d be able to do that.”

Mickey shrugs. “Yeah, well, we love each other.” He’s not even declaring it boldly; he’s just saying it, like it’s a fact of life or a comment on the weather.

“We love each other, too,” Fiona points out. “He’s my brother. I changed his fucking diapers, you know.”

“Yeah, okay,” Mickey says, kind of annoyed now. He’s always felt like Fiona didn’t like him, always told Ian Fiona wanted him out of the picture. Ian never had the heart to tell him he’s right. It doesn’t matter to Ian. “But we fuck a lot, too, so that makes it different.”

“Well, we don’t fuck a lot these days,” Ian points out, trying to regain some semblance of normalcy.

“Sure do in my dreams,” Mickey tells him. “Shit, Gallagher, even from a million miles away you keep me hard all night long.”

Ian cracks up laughing. Fiona makes a face. “God.”

“Hey, this is why you came with me, isn’t it?” Ian realizes. “You were worried about me being manic. Did you think I was just going to take off or something?”

“I don’t know,” Fiona says honestly. “Just didn’t want you to be alone. I was already planning this visit and then Debs called me a few days ago, said she was worried. Knew what she meant as soon as I saw you.”

Ian shakes his head a little. That’s the kind of thing that would’ve annoyed him, even just a year ago. But it doesn’t now, not really. “Guess that’s not the worst thing.”

“Wow, look at that fucking growth,” Mickey breaks in. “Last time I tried talking to you about your meds you decked me and then fucked me with no lube.”

“Jesus, that was like a million years ago,” Ian groans. “And it wasn’t even the last time you talked to me about my meds. You totally took over my meds in here.”

“Yeah, well, you still haven’t made it up to me yet,” Mickey points out. “But don’t worry, you got like forty years to do it now.”

“What happens when we’re sixty?” Ian asks. “Then I’ll have made it up enough?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Mickey asks. “No way I’m living past sixty. Get real, bitch.”

It makes Ian laugh. “We’ll see,” he says. “Gonna start making you eat broccoli when you get home. Make sure you grow big and strong.”

Mickey rolls his eyes. “Whatever, man. You never had any complaints about how big I am before.”

“Jesus,” Fiona mutters, but there’s a different look in her eyes now, a lightness that’s been missing since she got off the plane.

Ian can’t stop smiling at him. Mickey’s in prison, locked up for another few months, but he’s never going to stop looking out for Ian. It’s an important feeling. It’s overwhelming, a little, but it’s good.
Ian has to make sure he returns the favor.

On a Tuesday in the middle of April, Ian makes the same drive he’s made for the past 11 months and two weeks. He could make this drive in his sleep, probably. He won’t; today, especially, he won’t risk anything bad happening. Today he’s finally getting what he’s been dreaming about for a year.

Ian parks and checks his hair in the mirror. It’s kind of stupid to even bother; the likelihood of Mickey immediately messing up Ian’s hair when they get outside is basically 100%. Ian doesn’t care. He wants to look good when Mickey sees him. He walks up to the fence and waits. It shouldn’t be long; right now, Mickey’s going through processing, filling out the forms that say he got everything back he went in with. Ian wonders what Mickey came in with, what he’ll be wearing when he comes out.

He thinks of the only other time he waited outside a locked gate for Mickey, that summer after they first start hooking up and Mickey went to juvie. He remembers throwing his arm around Mickey and Mickey shrugging him off, giving him one of those looks like Ian needed to get himself under control before Mickey beat some control into him. That’s not going to happen this time, that’s for sure.

The door buzzes. Ian stands up straighter. The gate opens up and a few guys come strolling out. Ian doesn’t need to scan the guys coming out; he’ll know the second Mickey’s feet touch outside ground. The pull between them will drag them together.

He’s not anxious. He’s not wondering how the future’s going to shake out. He knows what’s going to happen. They’ll go have sex in the car right away. They’ll hold hands on the drive back, probably kiss more times than is safe. There’s a high chance Mickey will blow Ian while he’s driving, which is going to be supremely stupid considering it’s illegal and he’s literally being released from prison right now. Neither of them are going to care. Then they’ll go home, and Mickey will shower, and Ian will make him eat, and they will do whatever they want. They’ll do it just how the want, which is right at each other’s side. They won’t have to be apart anymore. Mickey will get a job, and the two of them will go to work, go out for beers after work, make friends, whatever. At the end of the day, they’ll slide into bed together, just like Ian’s wanted since he was fifteen fucking years old.

Something tugs at Ian’s chest, some kind of instinct talking to him. He looks up. He smiles. Mickey walks out into the bright sunshine, a smile on his face and a swagger to his step that Ian sees in his dreams. He walks directly into Ian’s open, waiting arms, and then they’re finally home.

End Notes

my tumblr

The phone sex part is extra ridiculous because they absolutely would be monitoring Mickey’s calls specifically when A. he is, I would assume, a very important witness in a very important case, and B. he already has a prison escape under his belt, but I had to scrap a conjugal visit I wrote between them because Illinois doesn't allow conjugals and I just wanted them to have
SOMETHING, okay??

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