As a seasoned security expert, Mickey has protected all kinds of high-end merchandise, but he never thought his cubicle, or his heart, would need protecting too.

I'll post a chapter every day until completed.

This originally began with a comment from Olga a year ago. It has since moved in unexpected directions, so I hope it in some way still resembles her original idea.

Lastly, I wanted to thank so many wonderful people for leaving comments and sending me messages over the last few months because they are always inspiration to continue when sometimes you'd rather not. Support is magical actually.
F**k! Mickey cursed under his breath having lost count of how many times he’d rolled his lower lip between his teeth to really emphasize how frustrated he was feeling.

One goddamn thing after another was going wrong on this security detail. First, their usual driver, Tico, called in sick and they had to bring in a pubescent newbie named Nelson Fong to cover his ass. Then, an emergency services vehicle stalled on Roosevelt partially blocking traffic, which ultimately put them behind schedule. Now, the manager of this upscale jewelry shop was fucking around with the safe trying to get his goddamn password to work.

The hairs on the back of Mickey’s neck were standing straight on end. That was too many coincidences for his liking. Hell, one anomaly was too many. Three was a fucking neon sign that shit was going to go south, but all Mickey had to go on was his gut telling him something was off. Nothing had actually happened though, and that was why he continued to chew his lip rather than call command centre and get Liz to send a back-up vehicle.

They just needed to get some fancy ass necklace and matching earrings to a rich bitch who decided she needed something shiny to brag about at a political fundraiser tonight. The job was to deliver the jewelry to her house, escort her to the event at Navy Pier, keep an eye on her while she hung on her politician husband’s arm, then escort her home.

Basically, they were dealing with Security 101. A job Mickey had done countless times over the last three years, logging over 50,000 miles as a protection agent. Sometimes they were protecting jewels, sometimes art, sometimes humans, one time a thoroughbred racehorse named Babe. Whatever people found valuable, he was hired to transport and protect, and his track record was pristine. He planned to keep it that way.

Tonight’s event was a three-man job, even though one of their men was a fresh-faced baby. That left him and his partner, Slava, with the experience. Apparently though, the kid had been hired by Elite Security because he was some sort of street racer, and he had ultimately gotten them to the rear parking lot of Morgan Jewelers on Michigan Avenue in record time despite the traffic jam. They’d parked the Escalade, leaving the baby race car driver in the SUV with the job of keeping an eye on the back alley.

At the moment, Slava stood at the reinforced rear door of the store monitoring the exit, his hand on the gun holstered to his chest and half hidden beneath his dark suit jacket. They were all in dark suits and white dress shirts because tonight’s gala was black tie, and they needed to look professional although Slava couldn’t contain the tattoos that crept out from the neck of his dress shirt and the cuffs of his jacket. A thug in a monkey suit was still a thug.

Mickey knew his own tattoos and overall demeanor were part of what made him a successful armed escort. He looked like he’d rather shoot you than look at you. With Slav at his side, you’d think twice before fucking with them.

Typically, Slava provided back-up while Mickey was in charge of the physical transportation of the goods, which meant he would be handcuffed to the briefcase once the goods were officially transferred to his possession. Then Tico got them wherever they needed to go, with additional vehicles as back-up if the job was big enough.

Mickey watched the uptight store manager run a hand over what had to be a fucking toupee as he took a deep breath, readying himself for another go at the safe. To encourage the dude to get his ass
in gear, Mickey opened the steel enforced briefcase and laid it on the cherrywood desktop.

It was hard to tell if the manager was more nervous about releasing 2.2 million dollars worth of diamonds or about being in the same room with two ex-thugs strapped with Glock 19 semi-automatics. However, they had Elite’s reputation behind them, so they were going to walk out the back door with a necklace containing 55 carats worth of Forevermark diamonds and matching round solitaire diamond earrings...worth enough for Mickey to retire to a seaside town where sandals, shorts and a taste for tequila were the only requirements.

In another 30 years, maybe.

Glancing over his shoulder at Slava, he watched him lift his wrist unit to his mouth to check in with Nelson and, a moment later, give Mickey the all clear signal followed by a couple of hand pumps indicating he should hurry the fuck up. In response, Mickey gave him the hand gesture to go fuck himself. They shared a quick grin, then he turned back to the store manager, who had finally gotten the safe open.

He brought the velvet jewelry roll to the padded display in front of Mickey, gently unrolling the pouch for his approval. Ironically, Mickey wouldn’t know a piece of fucking glass from a 20-carat diamond, but he nodded at the guy like he picked out jewelry for a living. As far as he was concerned, once the release was signed and the manager’s thumbprint was scanned into the biometric device on the briefcase, whatever was locked inside with the GPS tracking device was his responsibility. He couldn’t care less what it was, and he sure as shit couldn’t believe than anyone else would pay that kind a dough for a chunk of fancy glass.

The manager slid the jewelry roll into one of the pouches in the briefcase, then returned to the safe for a small box containing the earrings, which he exhibited to Mickey with a flare completely unnecessary as Mickey was unlikely to be buying them. Eventually, they made their way into a different pouch, and the briefcase closed with a click.

They scribbled their signatures on both copies of the release form, and Mickey placed his in the inner pocket of his suit jacket. With the paperwork complete, he snapped the handcuff around his wrist and wrapped four fingers around the handle. The store manager’s eyes widened at the sight of the four letters tattooed across Mickey’s knuckles, then he glanced at the knuckles of the other hand.

“Scare tactic?” he asked Mickey.

“Poor decision making.”

With a ghost of a smile, he offered Mickey a final “good luck” and turned back to the safe. Stage one complete, Mickey moved across the room toward Slava, who ran his thumb almost lovingly over the grooves in the pistol grip before removing his hand from the gun to unlock the back door and push it open. Glancing around the quiet lot, he lifted two fingers signalling to Mickey that the coast was clear. With unease still crawling along his spine, Mickey unsnapped the cover on his own holster giving him quicker access to his weapon. He’d shoot first and ask questions never.

The rear end of the SUV was about five feet from the door, and he and Slava split up so they could each access a car door intending to sit together in the backseat. Mickey reached the driver’s side backdoor and squinted to see through the tinted glass, but the sun was deep in the horizon making it impossible to see inside the vehicle. He heard Slava’s door open. “All clear, Mick.”

Glancing left and right one final time, he tugged on the door handle with one hand, gripping the briefcase in the other. His eyes met Slava’s when the door fully opened, and he hefted himself into the backseat, the leather warm under his ass from the residual heat of the day. Placing the briefcase
on his lap, he let out a breath, relieved when the door closed.

“Nelson,” Mickey snapped at the back of the dark head in front of him, rolling his eyes once at the ridiculous ponytail, “you waiting for a fucking invitation to start the car?” But his question came from a throat that was suddenly drier than desert sand. He tried to swallow around the dryness, but the effort didn’t seem worth it.

Just as the realization came to him that something was fucking wrong, the snick of all four door locks engaging filled the Escalade. “What the fuck?” He coughed a little to clear his throat while he watched Slav pull on the door handle, but the child safety mechanism prevented the door from opening.

"Blya." The Russian curse coming from Slava sounded like it was traveling through water.

Mickey reached a hand to Nelson’s shoulder to shake him out of whatever stupor he was currently in, but when his hand touched the soft material of his suit jacket, the kid’s head slumped to the side.

“Try the front,” Mickey said hearing the slurring in his words while he hit the window button repeatedly. But neither he nor Slava ever made it to fresh air, whatever they were breathing in zapped all their strength. The last thing he remembered before blackness took over was the sound of the locks disengaging.
2 years later

After a long winter, the bustle of Downtown Chicago was in full swing. Suits moved from skyscraper to skyscraper carrying cell phones and coffee cups, avoiding eye contact and stressing over their tight schedules. It was just another workday for the thousands of drones punching the clock. Up on the 16th floor of the Capital Building, the employees of Elite Security Consultants were used to tight schedules and high stress environments.

Seated at her desk in the midst of a sea of cubicles, Mandy Milkovich watched the perfectly sculpted lips of her Director’s administrative assistant, Annette, as they formed words that were going to ruin the day of her perpetually pissed off brother. While Mandy’d gone out of her way in the past to torment him, she wasn’t getting any pleasure out of being the bearer of this particular bad news. But Mickey was a big boy, she thought, rolling her desk chair backward in preparation for her task. He’d survive.

Strutting past the pod of intern cubicles, she smoothed her hand over the hip of her denim, high-waisted pencil skirt. The stack of bangles on her wrist clanging as that same hand stretched up to rake through newly lightened hair. Her 3-inch wedges stopped at the entrance to her brother’s cubicle. “Hey, Mick, gotta talk to you.”

No response or acknowledgment at all.

As usual, he was lounging in his swivel ergonomic office chair like he was the Call of Duty World League Champion. The first thing she saw was his worn black leather lace up boots crossed over the top of his L-shaped desk. She followed his legs covered in black fitted trousers to the keyboard in his lap, then past the tight, navy t-shirt emblazoned with "ELITE SECURITY" until her eyes rested on his belligerent face.

“Sometimes I look at your face and wanna punch it,” she offered, knocking the edge of his keyboard with that same hip she’d caressed for the benefit of a bunch of nerdy wannabe cyber-security experts.

“Sometimes?” he muttered eyes still on the two oversized screens in front of him. “I’ll try harder in the future.”

She reached across his legs and stuffed her burgundy painted fingertip into the power button of his computer.

“Hey, bitch, what if I hadn’t saved that?” he snarled, dropping his feet to the floor.

“Teach you a lesson. No one ignores me, loser.”

“What the fuck do you want? I’m working here,” he whined finally looking up at her.

“Come.” She turned abruptly throwing her hair over her shoulder and leaving his cubicle. “I got bad news for you.”

“Try not to sound so happy about it.” He pushed out of his office chair to stalk after her as she moved toward the far corner of the large, open office space. Eventually she stopped in front of the poster-sized layout of the employee seating plan for the Chicago branch of Elite Security.

Once Mickey arrived at her side, those same burgundy painted nails reached up to the laminated
"Mickey Milkovich" name card and ripped it unceremoniously off the poster. The Velcro backing making a quick tearing noise.

"Why you doin’ that?" He tried to grab the little 2-inch name card from her hand to return it to the square which symbolized his cubicle, his little haven from this office nightmare he’d found himself in five years ago.

But his sister was too quick for him, anticipating his grabby fingers. "You are being moved."

"No, I ain’t!"

"Yes, you is."

"Where?"

They both looked at the layout: 34 cubicles in total surrounded by four actual offices, three boardrooms, a lunchroom, a copy/supply room and the reception area. Only a handful of those cubicles had a window as part of the wall and only one had a window and was out of the way of foot traffic.

His!

Scanning the cubicles, his eyes landed on the only square without a name card affixed to it.

"No!"

Mandy's bangled arm looped through his arm. "Come on," she said regretfully as she squashed his name card to the offending cubicle. "I'll help you move. The new guy will be here soon."

"Wait, so my cubicle is going to the guy we’re gonna be working with?" he complained following her down the narrow aisle between rows of grey partitions and the tops of assorted heads. Four sets of eyes appeared over the edge of a grouping of partitions.

"Only until his office is ready. And technically, brother, we are working for him not with him."

"Not if I have anything to say about it," he snarked, turning his little fighter's body toward the group of twerps who had all but fallen out of their cubicles as his sister walked past. He flicked a finger at the Captain America bobblehead sitting on the cubicle ledge sending it into the forehead of the dickbreath closest. "You fucking wish," he growled at the nerd.

With the release of a sliver of his aggression, Mickey’s step became a little lighter. His gaze moved around the room, and he imagined flicking bobbleheads into each of his co-worker's faces. Smiling, he arrived at his own cubicle, which mocked him in all its gloriousness.

He reached out to the bonsai tree sitting on the window ledge, running a loving finger over the smooth leaves. How was his baby gonna survive in a windowless cubicle?

“I’ll grab you some boxes. Oh, and I should alert I.T. to move your computer,” Mandy offered and headed to the supply room, while Mickey looked around at his cubicle with mourning.

He’d been working at Elite for five years as a security consultant and the last couple months as the temporary coordinator for his division. He figured he’d be a shoo in for the permanent position but was informed his goddamn lack of official education didn’t look good on paper to the suits in corporate headquarters. Mickey was convinced it had more to do with the one fucking black mark on his record.
The Forevermark diamonds.

He could feel fucking hives form on his skin every time he thought about the humiliation of waking up in the back of the Escalade empty handed, Slava and Nelson as bewildered as him.

Now they’ve gotten some outside hire to fill what should be his position. Some outside hire with an MB-fucking-A. Yeah, well, let’s see a piece of fucking paper stop a bullet. The job was about finding the perfect balance of intuition and planning. It wasn’t about impressing corporate drones with your fucking study habits.

“What are you doing?” Mandy’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Petty shit,” he replied continuing to empty all the leads from the mechanical pencils. Mandy watched for a moment then picked up the stapler, opening it over the garbage can. When he glanced up at her, she winked a thickly mascaraed eye at him.

Twenty minutes later, they had Mickey’s shit stuffed in a couple of packing boxes.

“Let’s get you set up so we can go up to the roof for a smoke. You’re gonna need it,” she said picking up the perfectly manicured jade tree. “I’ll carry your boyfriend.”

“Keep your voice down, woman,” he hissed lifting the two packing boxes.

“Please, everyone knows you’re gay. It isn’t a secret,” she replied quietly.

“Only cause you got a big fucking mouth.”

“How many times do I need to apologize for that?” she asked heading toward the bowels of the office where his new cubicle was located. “I had too many Fucks in a Graveyard.”

“I’m sure that’s true in every sense of the meaning.”

“Ha ha. They’re delicious, taste like grape pop.”

They arrived at cubicle 34 stopping a few feet from the entrance to take in Mickey’s new real estate.

“Yeah, well, next time we’re drinking with the team, share your own fucking secrets, not mine.”

“No one cared, did they? Doesn’t it feel good to not have to hide?” Mandy asked, moving into the tight space and looking around for a spot to sit the plant.

“Wasn’t fucking hiding, Mandy. None a their business who I—” he paused for the right word, “date.”

“You been dating?” she asked, eyes wide with interest.

“Go away,” he grumbled setting the boxes on top of the filing cabinet so he could take the bonsai from her. “Don’t you got work to do or something?”

She narrowed her eyes watching him sit his precious plant on the corner of his desk. “Who is it?”

“Fuck off,” he snarked but she pushed the lid closed on the box he was trying to open, making it perfectly clear she was going nowhere until he fessed up. “Fine, woman! That coffee guy is kinda, um,” again he paused and waved his hand.

“Oh my god, Paolo? He so totally is!” Came a bubbly voice from the next workspace. Mickey recoiled at the blonde bob and huge smile, feeling acutely the loss of his cubicle. “I’m so excited to have a work buddy. It’s been lonely around here even though I get to chat with everyone as they enter the lunchroom or go to the restroom.”

The new guy was now at the top of Mickey’s shit list.

Just before lunch, his computer was hooked up, his papers were scattered just how he liked them, but his plant was still sitting on the corner of his desk. It needed sunlight to thrive. Grabbing the twig shears from the top drawer, he nipped a minuscule shoot forming on a branch then peered closely at the branches feeling a wave of nostalgia.

He’d spent most of his teenage years in juvie, locked up and crowded in the dank dorms. Near the end of his final stint, some woman got a grant to teach juvenile delinquents how to grow a fucking garden in the middle of Chicago’s concrete jungle.

In keeping with his natural inclination to be a shit, when she’d asked him what he was interested in, he’d told her bonsai trees. He’d seen Karate Kid and figured getting her hands on one of those little fuckers would be impossible. She’d shown up the week he was being released with a jade plant and Mickey still had it, 10 years later. He was well aware that caring for that plant had been his first step to rehabilitation. He wasn’t gonna let some job stealing college grad kill his plant.

“Hey, Mick. Heard you were being sent to Siberia,” Slava joked as he leaned an elbow on the edge of Mickey’s cubicle wall while running a hand over his newly buzzed blonde hair. “I was passing by on my way to the lunchroom to freshen up my coffee.”

“You and every other fucker in Chicago,” Mickey grumbled glancing at Lucy’s big brown eyes over the top of the next cubicle. They disappeared behind the partition when he lifted an eyebrow.

“We need to get you out in the field asap,” Slava concluded, a tinge of his Russian childhood in his words. “Speaking of, you hear about the Sotheby’s contract up for grabs?”

“No, I’m kinda out of the loop now. What’s the detail?”

“Handley gun auction in a couple weeks. Dozens of the old guy’s high-priced firearms need transported from El Paso, Texas to the Chicago auction house. I heard Gabe talking about how the new guy’s credentials are going to impress the client and secure the job.”

Mickey bit his bottom lip to keep the rant forming in his mind from escaping through his mouth, but some of it slipped from between his lips. “That a fact? They like zero street experience? They wanna put their expensive shit in the hands of a fucking student? What’s he gonna do, write a fucking essay?”

Slava chewed on his knuckle as he assessed Mickey with eyes that had seen their share of bullshit. “Still got a hard on for the guy, Mick?”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean, Slav?” He glared at his partner taking in the quirk of his full lips and the lift of a thick, blond eyebrow. “Is that another fucking gay joke?”
“It’s a suggestion that you lighten up cause this guy is about to arrive, and he ain’t going anywhere, my friend. He’s the current golden boy of global security. The suits are jerking off to some paper he published about immediate reaction protocols.” Slava uncrossed his tattooed arms from Mickey’s cubicle ledge and pushed away. “Who knows, man, he might be a welcome addition to the team.”

Two sets of icy blue eyes met, and both men burst out laughing. They’d seen corporate types try and fail to run a security team, but suits liked other suits to be in charge.

When Mickey’s phone buzzed, Slava gave him an exaggerated thumbs up and headed to the lunchroom.

“What?” he barked into the receiver.

“Glad to see your mood has improved,” Mandy said. “Building security just let boss man up. You coming to meet him? Face him like a man, or you gonna hide in your cubicle for the next few years?”

“I’d pick option B if my cubicle wasn’t a shithole.” He leaned back in his office chair, his eyes on the two sheets of paper he’d tacked to his cubicle wall. An aerial view of Isla de Coral in Guayabitos, Mexico, his dream. And a professional shot of the Forevermark diamonds that slipped through his fingers two years ago, his nightmare. “I’m on my way.”

Mickey arrived at the reception area to find Mandy chatting up the receptionist, Kyle, while simultaneously applying a fresh coat of dark red lipstick. He scowled at her as she smacked her lips together then ran her tongue over her front teeth. “Gross,” he said curling his lip. “He here yet?”

“Any second.”

*Ding.*

The Elite Security logo was etched into the metallic elevator doors. Mickey watched the engraved sword and shield separate as the doors slowly slid open.

He heard his sister gasp lightly when the man inside the elevator stepped out, his shiny outrageously pointed shoes silent on the plush carpeting. Mickey swallowed as his eyes traveled over the longest pair of legs he’d ever seen. The faintly pin-stripped blue suit looked like it had been painted on, by fucking Van Gogh himself.

But it was the face that Mickey knew was going to be the problem.

“Fuck sake,” he muttered under his breath.

“You can say that again,” Mandy whispered then stepped forward hand extended. “Hi. Mr. Gallagher?”

“Yes, but call me Ian,” said that face which lit up when he smiled at Mickey’s idiot sister who was practically tripping over herself to get to the interloper. Mickey took in how his green eyes softened when he captured Mandy’s hand in his. “Nice to meet you...?”

“Mandy. Mandy Milkovich, your assistant and the team’s admin support,” she purred leaving her hand in the redheaded giant’s longer than was professional in Mickey’s opinion. “Welcome to Elite Security Consultants, Chicago’s Protective Services Division.”

“That’s quite a mouthful,” Ian chuckled and his eyes slid over to Mickey, who was busy imagining his mouth full. Fuck sake.
“Hi,” Ian said lifting his hand while his gaze took in Mickey in one swift movement.

“Mickey,” he offered in a monotone looking at the hand like it was a snake. “Milkovich.”

Finding no plausible excuse to not shake hands, Mickey grit his teeth and placed his palm against the other man’s. It was about a thousand times worse than he thought it would be. The grip was firm but the skin was smooth. Warmth spread up his arm and his throat went dry. Fucking hell.

“Security consultant,” he added freeing his hand from his boss’s.

“Mickey,” Ian repeated quietly, butterflies forming in Mickey’s gut at the sound of his name on the man’s generous lips, as they curved upwards just a little like the two of them were sharing a private memory, except one where Mickey had amnesia. “It’s a pleasure to officially meet you.”

“IT IS?” he asked, frowning in disbelief. But his unenthusiastic response only increased the guy’s smile, and his gaze moved slowly around Mickey’s face and down to the lettering on his t-shirt before coming back up to his eyes.

Then he just stared at Mickey, who tried to maintain the eye contact thinking this was some sort of power struggle or some shit. But the heat building up in his groin from being the object of this guy’s attention was making it impossible to maintain anything, much less his cool.

“Well, Ian, let me show you to your cubicle,” Mandy said a little too loudly.

“My cubicle?” Ian repeated clearly confused as he finally shifted his attention away from Mickey.

“Yes, your office is under construction. We had a water line break earlier this month.”

“I see,” Ian said distractedly looking around the reception area. “Could you point me toward the men’s room first?”

“Of course. The visitors is right here,” she replied moving toward a set of doors near Kyle’s desk, while smoothing her skirt again. Mickey shot a glance at the redhead to see if he was going to have to teach Gallagher a thing or two about respecting his sister like he did most assholes, but Ian’s eyes were on Mickey instead. When he lifted his eyebrows a little in challenge, Ian looked away quickly, nodded once and followed Mandy to the restroom.

“Woah, your boss is intense,” said Kyle from his perch behind the mammoth front desk.

“Yeah.”

Mickey swore under his breath as he headed back toward his workstation. As he passed Nerdville, one of the little shits grabbed the bobblehead before Mickey could reach it, pissing him off royally, but he kept on moving because he had bigger issues to deal with. Fuck sake, he thought punching the air in front of him. He had a goddamn hard on for his boss all right.
As the men’s room door closed with a click behind Ian, he released the breath he’d been holding since stepping out of the elevator into the Elite Security reception area. His sigh of relief drew the attention of a well-dressed older gentleman washing his hands at the double sink. They shared a look when Ian just continued to stand in the middle of the bathroom unmoving. He offered the guy a tight smile and a nod, then made a quick turn into the first stall.

Safe inside the narrow walls, he dropped his leather bag on the floor and rested the back of his head against the metal barrier, closing his eyes. He was fucked. Completely fucked. Whatever just happened was not part of the plan. In less than a minute and after one touch of their hands, his life had veered off its path. The self-destructive adolescence he’d fought so hard to shake reared its head, like it always did when he doubted his decisions, doubted his capabilities, doubted himself.

Nearly ten years later, the universe was still trying to fuck with him, this time with a blue-eyed brunet, who was completely off limits to him. Really, really fucking off limits. Mickey Milkovich was going to mess with the plan, of that he was sure.

Ian straightened his shoulders and pushed away from the wall, exiting the stall to an empty bathroom. No, he could handle this. It was a moment, that’s all. He didn’t believe in soulmates or whatever the hell that was back in the reception area. Just because he had no idea what it felt like to fall for a guy, didn’t mean he was naïve enough to think it was anything magical.

Calm the fuck down, he told the reflection in the little mirror above the sink, focus on the job. That’s what he’d been doing for years now, focusing on his work. Running his hands under the tap, he splashed water on his heated cheeks and gave himself another stern look, smoothing his already smooth hair and straightening his already straight tie.

Mandy was waiting for him in the reception area, a big smile on her face when she saw him. She was alone, and Ian relaxed a little. “Come on, boss,” she said. “Let’s get you settled in. You’ve got a meeting with the Director scheduled for this afternoon, and you’ll want to prepare to meet the team tomorrow. Mickey is the unofficial lead, so you should hook up with him soon to discuss our current clients.”

Ian slowed his steps. “Um, right.” In that moment, it really sunk in that he’d be working with the guy. A lot.

Mandy looked over her shoulder at him with a little concern in her dark eyes. “It’s just a meet and greet. No one bites. And you’ve already met me and my brother, so you’re well on your way.”

“Milkovich,” Ian said. Damn it, why couldn’t they be married?

“Okay, here’s where this Milkovich sits.” She pointed at a cubicle as they passed it. “I’m available for all your administrative needs.”
“I have a feeling I’m in good hands.” They shared a smile and Ian did not think about being in the other Milkovich’s hands.

“Here’s where your Protection Unit sits. They’re in a training session all day but will be ready to meet first thing tomorrow.” They paused to look at the half dozen cubicles clustered together with maps and print-outs stuck to tack boards. Mandy swept her arm toward the corner space. “That’s you.”

“Wow, great view,” he commented absently as he walked toward it. The Chicago skyline was bright and sunny, the street below busy with life. He was here looking out at his city from his—cubicle. That made him smile a little.

“It’s one of the best views from the whole office,” Mandy responded coming up to stand beside him. She leaned into his shoulder lightly and lowered her voice. “Word of wisdom though. Don’t mention that to Mickey.”

Ian flinched at the mention of the man. “Why?”

“Long story. For another day. Gabe wants me to bring you by his office this afternoon. How about I give you time to get your bearings before you visit the big boss?” she suggested. “Can I get you anything?”

“Files on the team?”

“Top drawer.” She pointed to a locked file cabinet tucked under the desk. “Here’s the key. Anything else?”

“Chocolate?”

“Consider it done,” she nodded, not asking why a grown ass man needed candy to get through his first afternoon on the job.

Alone in his cubicle, he sat down at the desk and pulled the notepad out of his bag intending to quickly skim the files on each team member before meeting with Gabe, so he’d feel a little more prepared. A bunch of mechanical pencils were stuffed in a metal cup, and he reached for one clicking the little eraser a couple times with the pad of his thumb. Empty. As were the next four he tried.

Mandy arrived as he was clicking the final pencil, a small pile of duds sitting next to his notepad. “Oh,” she said handing him a bag of chocolate M&M’s, “let me show you where the supply room and lunchroom are located.”

Following her 3-inch heels, Ian tore open the bag and stared at the colorful candy in his hand. The pile of little M’s mocking him with each bite.

“Lunchroom,” Mandy recited pointing to the right. “Coffee, fridge, microwave, the usual.”

Ian looked into the room as they passed it, noting the line of coffee urns and a half-eaten birthday cake.

“Here’s Mickey’s cubicle.”

He nearly ran into Mandy as he peered over the edge of the partition, but the cubicle was thankfully empty giving him a moment to take in the tidy space, the precisely trimmed plant, the photos tacked to the wall. He took a step toward them.
“HI!” A voice startled him out of his thoughts.

“Hello?” Ian responded when a blonde head bounced out of the next cubicle followed by a hyper body covered in a flowered blouse.

“Ian Gallagher?”

“That’s me,” he smiled back at her, and she held out her hand.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Lucy, like from the song, you know,” she explained, keeping a firm grip on his hand and an even firmer one on the conversation. “Lucy in the sky with diamonds. Do you know it?”

Not waiting for Ian to respond, she continued, “My parents love the Beatles. They met at Woodstock! Oh, ha ha, my parents, I mean, not the Beatles. In fact,” she paused for a second to frown, “I wonder where the Beatles did meet.”

She started to expand on her parents’ wild youth, until Mandy wedged herself between them.

“I’m sure Ian’s delighted to meet you, too, Lucy, but he’s a busy guy.” She nudged his arm with her shoulder encouraging him to escape.

“Bye, Ian!” Lucy called out as they walked away.

Just as they arrived at the supply room, Mandy’s phone jangled. “Oh, sorry, Ian, I have to get this.” He waved her off figuring he could handle picking out his own pencil leads.

“Fuck sake. Every fucking time.”

Ian paused in the doorway, heart rate increasing at the sound of that voice. A small smile formed on his lips at the continued muttering coming from the mostly dismantled photocopier. Mickey was crouched down trying to yank some wayward white paper from the bowels of the machine.

“Bastards.”

Before Ian could make his presence known, Mickey stood up slamming the front panel closed as the machine hummed back to life. “You better work, bitch.”

Then he bent over to remove a ream of photocopy paper from the box beside the machine. Ian knew his interest in the events had moved into dangerous territory, something along the lines of sexual harassment if he was honest with himself. When Mickey bent over a second time to aggressively shove the stack of paper into the paper tray, he forced himself to turn away.

Making as much noise as possible, Ian started opening and closing cupboards. “Pencil leads,” he mumbled pretending his was engrossed in his search.

“Can you read?”

Ian glanced over at the question. “According to the Chicago school system, yes.”
Mickey nodded at the labels affixed to the front of each cupboard door. “Pretty straightforward.”

“Right,” Ian laughed, tapping the first black and white label he could reach. “Pencils. Helpful.”

Grabbing the copy that had finally found its way through the photocopy process, Mickey headed toward the door. “You might wanna grab some staples while you’re here.”

With a belly full of M&M’s, Ian found himself in Gabe McCarty’s corner office looking at movie posters from the late 80s, none of which Ian had ever even heard of. During the intense interview process and background check, he’d met the man as well as the co-ordinators for the other units of the Chicago branch. However, this was the first time he’d been in his boss’s office. If the shrine on his walls hadn’t given it away, Ian’s background check revealed that Gabe had started out as a stunt double in low budget action movies before making his way into security.

“Well, Gallagher, I’m delighted you settled on Elite. I thought I was going to lose you to the Navy Seals at Blackwater, and don’t get me started on those so and so’s at G4S.” He motioned to the chair across the desk from him.

“Elite was always my first choice,” Ian admitted, settling in and adding, “Great reputation.”

Gabe narrowed his eyes assessing Ian, then nodded. “I’m sure you’ve done your homework and know that we pride ourselves on the long-term partnerships we’ve created worldwide with clients in helping them plan for and respond to high risk and crisis situations.”

“Yes, sir.” Ian had read the New Employee Handbook front to back.

Running a finger over his thick mustache, Gabe reclined in his chair. “Basically, I oversee all the projects around here, so you’ll report all activity to me directly. However, you’ll need to work with and share resources with the co-ordinators of the Investigations division and the E-division regularly as there’s a lot of cross-over. Do yourself a favor and get off on a good foot with them. As far as your own team is concerned, Milkovich basically runs that show and can get you up to speed. Best of luck getting off on a good foot with him,” he laughed and Ian forced a smile. “I suggest shadowing him for the first couple weeks. He can show you the ins and outs, take you on rides. You’ll be in good hands.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied, once again inappropriately imagining being in Mickey’s hands and feeling a flush creep along his neck and attack his cheeks. Running a hand up and down his tie, he tried to keep up with Gabe’s overview.

“You’ll oversee protective escort security, driving mucky mucks around,” Gabe was saying. “You feeling okay, Gallagher?”

Ian nodded as another layer of red covered his face. This time from embarrassment.

Gabe continued, sliding a stack of files across the desktop. “You also cover private security and corporate event security. Top file there is top priority, Gallagher. And I do mean top priority. We want to keep this client, and I’m leaving it to you to get it done. Pull out your big guns.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied feeling like a broken record, but sliding the files into his lap to read the top
“Good ol’ Chaz died a few months back and his daughter, Sadie, is looking to off-load his world-renowned gun collection at the next auction here in Chicago. Our Texas branch has handled Handley’s security for years, but his daughter is shopping around for transportation services. Because Sotheby’s holds their annual gun auction in Chicago, she needs to get the firearms here. I’m sending you and Milkovich to El Paso to woo the hell out of her. Well, you’ll do the wooing. Mick’ll be the muscle. How’re your wooing skills, Gallagher? Looks like you could sweep a few ladies off their feet.”

“Uh,” he hesitated as his helpless brain scrambled to catch up with the idea of traveling with Mickey, “I’ll watch a few rom-coms this weekend to get my game back up to speed.”

“Good man,” Gabe laughed then turned serious. “The auction is less than a month away, so I’ll expect to see the signed contract on my desk when you return.”

“Uh, okay,” Ian stammered not expecting to be thrown into the ring so fast.

“That’s all for now.” He waved toward the door. “Oh, and tell Milkovich I said he’s to give you everything you ask for.”

Yes, sir.

Back in his cubicle, Ian inserted a sleeve of staples into the stapler and randomly stapled a couple of sheets of paper together, thinking of jamming the stapler against his head to stop the loop his brain was stuck in. On the ride up in the elevator, he’d been on his A-game: all confident, master of his world testosterone type shit. Now he was having trouble remembering his damn name. What he needed was to conjure up those vibes again.

Well, he could start by reading the stacks of files that had piled up in front of him. Client files, employee files, the Handley file. Getting lost in data, sorting and organizing and finding patterns, solutions, weaknesses was his thing. The skill had fast tracked him through university and gotten him employment.

Deciding to start with the employee files Mandy had copied for him, he slid the first Milkovich file to the bottom. Not a good idea to start there. Next up was Yaroslav Volkov. Mickey’s partner. He glanced at the photocopy of the man’s driver’s licence taking in the defined cheekbones and hard eyes. He looked like he could snap Ian’s neck without breaking a sweat. The rest of the file confirmed it: control tactics, self-defence, martial arts, street fighter. 4 years with Elite. One blemish, The Forevermark Diamonds.

Ian read the details on that quickly. An ether-chloroform combination was inhaled on April 16 at 5:57 PM causing temporary unconsciousness. The handcuffs were cut from the briefcase. No sign of the diamonds to date. Mickey and the driver, Nelson Fong, were also mentioned, and Ian could see his file on the top of the untouched files, which were fanned out on his desk. Flipping through them produced nothing out of the ordinary, just long-term, dedicated employees. The youngest of the group, Fong’s credentials focused around defensive driving and various motorcade protocols. Tico had similar overall experience to Nelson, only it looked like the guy had been with Elite for nearly
twenty years. Lastly, Liz had obviously been hired for her criminology degree, which she’d completed in South Africa before moving here.

Opening the second to last file, Mandy’s photo rivaled Slava’s for fierceness. Her hair was much darker than it was today, and her eyes were rimmed in thick liner. She’d started three years ago, moving up quickly from receptionist to admin assistant.

A total of six people on his team, half a dozen individuals to meet with tomorrow morning.

The mechanical pencil between his finger and thumb was tapping the desk rapidly, and he felt a little raw now with the final file open and Mickey’s eyes staring up at him from the black and white printout clipped to the inside of his file. Dropping the pencil, he pushed back in his chair to read more thoroughly. The vital statistics said he had recently turned 27 and had been with Elite since he was 20, starting out as a basic security guard. From the couple dozen pages of clearances, training, awards, it seemed his specialty was firearms. He appeared to be a model employee with only the one entry to mar his perfect employee status.

Ian chewed on his lip until it ached slightly, then he returned to Mickey’s photo studying the handsome face. The slightly narrowed eyes clearly a little put out at being forced to have a photo taken, the lips pursed just enough to accentuate the bottom lip. Ian snapped the folder closed and tossed it on the desk. He’d focus on the Handley file instead, but that just reminded him that Gabe was sending him on an out of town assignment with Mickey.

He stuffed his final two M&M’s in his mouth, crunching loudly when his cell phone buzzed, and his older brother’s name popped onto the screen, along with a short text prompt of “Well? Did you nail it?”

Jesus, Ian moaned, literally every phrase had sexual overtones to it. How had he never noticed that before?

He swiped his finger across the screen, typing: “I need to review the firm’s policy on sexual harassment in the workplace.”

Lip’s reply was instant: “You getting hit on already? Fuck can’t take you anywhere.”

Ian hesitated, unsure how to explain whatever it was that was happening. His pause gave Lip time to type another teasing comment: “Just tell me it ain’t your boss.”

As much as he knew his brother only meant to tease him when he brought up shit from his past, this particular angle still had some power over him.

“No one hit on me,” he typed, ignoring the older man comment.

“Huh? You hit on someone?” Then another text immediately: “Must be hot to turn your head.”

“Nothing happened. Nothing will!” He added the exclamation mark for his own peace of mind. “Gotta work. See u at home.”
Know Thy Enemy

“I thought you’d bring us coffee, Mick.” Slava smiled playfully as he sat across from Mickey at the conference room table, nodding hello to Nelson and Liz before returning his attention to Mickey. “Since you’re so close to the lunchroom and all.”

“Yeah, asshole, I get it. No need to fucking explain it.” Mickey swiveled his chair back toward the table so he could glare at his partner, marveling not for the first time that the guy looked like a trained killer but had the soul of a fucking class clown. “The only way I’ll bring you coffee is if you hold a gun to my head.”

“It’s like you two have been married for 20 years,” Mandy interrupted, sitting next to Tico and motioning for one of the e-dweebs to join her. “Try to get along for a few minutes. New boss is on his way.”

Mickey could feel his face pinch into a combination of a scowl and a pout, while Slava sat up straight and pasted a huge smile on his face. Then winked at Mickey as Ian walked into the conference room.

He’d dressed down from yesterday’s goddamn suit, which had kept Mickey up half the night imagining getting him out of it. Unfortunately, a more casual look only made matters worse. Dark jeans, lightweight black V-neck sweater and blazer. All of it cut to fit his body exactly, and by the looks of it, he spent time making sure his body was worthy of the clothing covering it.

That just made Mickey loathe him even more. Couldn’t the dude dress like a normal fucking person? He glanced down at his own navy cargos and t-shirt. They looked clean if slightly wrinkled. When he looked back up, Ian was standing at the head of the table, smiling at the group gathered around, giving each person a moment to bask in the sunshine that was his stupid face. When his 1000 watts hit Mickey, they locked eyes and held. Mickey immediately forgot how to breathe normally. First, he felt his chest rise more rapidly than it should and thought that might give him away, so he held his breath hoping to hide it, but that sent his heart into overdrive. Mercifully, Ian’s eyes continued to his sister, who welcomed Ian to the team on all their behalves.

Nodding at her, Ian babbled something pointless and Mickey returned to his annoyed state. Until Ian reached for the lapels of his blazer exclaiming over the temperature in the room. Once the jacket was off, he turned away to drape it over the back of his chair, and Mickey wanted to lay his forehead on the cool table top.

Of course, he would look good in jeans and a tight fucking sweater. His gaze moved up the long, lean body, stopping at the play of muscles along his shoulders evident through the dark material. An involuntary swallow forced its way along this throat, and he tried to cover it by rubbing a knuckle over his lips.

Look away, he commanded himself. Straight into Slava’s line of sight.

Mickey’s eyes widened in surprise but not nearly as much as his partner’s before they shot back to Ian then returned to Mickey. The asshole smiled happily, and Mickey sent him mental death threats.

“So, Ian,” Slava began, scratching at the side of his neck where the tattooed head of a snake poked out, “that’s a great sweater. Looks really soft. Is it cashmere?”
Surprised, Ian ran a hand down his chest and along his stomach, stopping when his hand connected with a silver belt buckle. Mickey’s eyes followed the movement. Slava chuckled quietly.

“Oh, well, yes,” Ian replied. “I believe it is.”

“You hear that, Mick?” Slava asked, eyes still on Ian. “You’re into cashmere.”

Ian was looking between them now, clearly confused by the interaction.

“What the hell are you talking about, Slava? I bet Mickey’s never even heard the word cashmere before,” Mandy piped up.

“I heard a cashmere.” He shot her a dark look. He had no idea what it was or what it felt like, but he’d heard of it. The urge to get his hands on a black cashmere sweater had just made his bucket list.

By this point, the entire room was wondering what the fuck was going on, and Ian clearly felt like he should rein in the fashion discussion because he jumped right into business, spreading his hands wide. “I understand that Elite Security follows C4i protocol: command, control, communication, computers and intelligence and that my role in the Protection Unit is to organize, direct, co-ordinate and control our resources…”

Mickey listened with half an ear as Ian told them all about his Georgetown education and eventual return to his hometown of Chicago. Through it all, Mickey avoided looking at any of Ian’s clothes or making eye contact with Slava, whom Mickey knew had that smug look on his face that was basically just his face most of the time.

A half hour of round table introductions later, they were finally released from their prison, and Ian had confirmed for Mickey that he was an academic playing at security, throwing around fancy words and fucking research. Probably get lost trying to escape from a paper bag. But look great doing it, his traitorous brain added.

As they all began to stand, Ian called out to him, but the last thing Mickey needed was to be alone in this room with the redhead and his fucking sweater. Cashmere or not.

“What?” he responded, knowing he sounded hostile but figuring the guy needed to understand he wasn’t going to be getting friendly.

“I’ve been reviewing files, and you have a few details underway that I would be interested in tagging along on. Get out in the field…” he trailed off as Mickey continued toward the door. A little more forcefully, he added, “Could we talk about this?”

“You know where my desk is,” Mickey replied and walked out, using the image of his desk as fuel to keep his feet moving. Something weak was trying to escape from his body and that something wanted to smile at the guy and agree to shit. “Fuck,” he hissed under his breath.

“That much was obvious.”

Mickey’s head snapped to the left. Fucking Slava. “You are such a dick.”

Slava threw an arm over Mickey’s shoulders. He wasn’t much taller than Mickey, making the movement awkward, but he locked his elbow when Mickey tried to push him away. “You still love me.”

“Still? I never loved your dumb ass.”
“Speaking of loving asses—” he grunted when Mickey landed an elbow to his rib, but it didn’t slow him down. “Come on, Mick. I’m just trying to help you out. See if Gallagher plays for your team.”

“Shut the fuck up,” he hissed glancing around the office. “Jesus, fuck. He’s our boss and a wannabe security expert. No thanks.”

Punching Mickey in the arm, Slava continued his argument, “You gotta admit, Mick, the dude knows how to wear clothes. Day-am.”

“You need to go away now.”

“Hush. Seriously though, he sounded like he knew what he was talking about.”

“What’s talkin’ got to do with anything? Talking usually just gets people in fucking trouble. Action is what matters.” Mickey stopped walking because his cubicle was ahead, and he could see Lucy’s halo of blonde hair bobbing around. “This conversation is over. No, this conversation never happened. Never. Fucking. Happened.”

“Fine, grumpy,” he replied and Mickey thought he would finally leave him alone to kick is own ass over how much of a pussy he was being about the new guy. But he should know Slava better than that by now. Leaning in so he could lower his voice, Slava’s breath tickled Mickey’s ear. “My gaydar is going crazy.”

“Holy shit, I might actually kill you.”

“No, seriously, Mick,” he backtracked, holding up his hands like a peace offering. “That guy was doing everything in his power not to look at you.”

“You are no longer my partner. I’m filing for divorce, and I never wanna see your fucking mug again. Good-bye.”

Slava followed him right up to his cubicle entry. “I love you too, Mick.” he said loud and clear. Lucy’s big brown eyes darted between them, lashes flapping in interest. “I’ll meet you in reception at 5:30. We’ll go for a drink. Talk about boys.”

He waved gaily and sauntered away with images of Mickey’s finger to keep him warm for the afternoon.

Of course, it didn’t take long for Ian to make his way to Mickey’s cubicle, where he was reviewing some HD CCTV footage from a pharmaceutical distribution warehouse. When an assortment of expensive brand name drugs had gone missing, the parent company, Helix Pharmaceutical, had contacted Elite since they did a lot of business together. While loss control typically went to the Investigations Division, Mickey was in charge of the company’s corporate event security, so they came to him when their in-house security was unable to find the source of the theft. Now Mickey was wondering if he was still in charge, or if that redheaded, sweater-wearing, paper-pushing…

A light knocking interrupted his internal rant and pulled his eyes away from the black and white video footage of a rear loading bay. He was met with jeans, then a sweater, then that face.
Hitting pause on the screen, he pushed back in his chair before turning toward the latest thorn in his side. “Gallagher.”

“Hi, um, Mickey.” Ian stepped into Mickey’s cubicle, leaning forward at the waist so he could see the computer screen better. “Is this the Helix Pharma footage you’re reviewing?”

Now that face, and that sweater, were hovering just above Mickey’s shoulder. The guy was wearing some kind of cologne or maybe aftershave that practically strangled Mickey with its goddamn sexiness. In some parallel universe, he could see himself pushing his nose into the clean-shaven skin along the strong jaw and inhaling until he died.

“Yeah,” he managed putting as much hardness in the syllable as he could muster. No way was he getting sucked in through his nose. Or his eyes. Or any body parts, for that matter.

“ Anything pop out?”

“Jack.”

“Jack?” Ian turned his head but smiled immediately. “Oh, Jack Shit.” He laughed lightly, crinkling his eyes, and Mickey slid his chair away because this was simply too much. Ian must have gotten the hint because he stood up and moved back to the cubicle entrance. He looked a little hurt or chastised or something, and Mickey felt a pang of regret, which was stupid as hell. Gallagher needed to know he had boundaries. Solid, impenetrable, non-negotiable boundaries.

“You can watch the feed yourself if you’re bored. It’s on the shared network,” Mickey’s mouth explained, apparently it needed to see pleasure on Ian’s face again.

It worked. Green eyes softened in delight. “Oh, yes, I love looking for patterns.” Another laugh followed this. “I sound so boring, don’t I?”

“Everyone’s got their kink, man,” Mickey’s mouth continued, under the impression that discussing kink was a good idea. He looked around his cubicle for something to stuff in his mouth before it opened again, but the fucking thing wasn’t done. “Wednesday nights are Helix’s big shipment, so I’m gonna surveil the place tomorrow night if you, whatever, wanna come.”

“I do, Mickey.” Ian smiled at him. “We should probably get comfortable with each other anyway since we’re heading to El Paso together soon.”

That was not news Mickey wanted to hear.

“Handley gun auction,” Ian explained when Mickey just stared at him.

That shouldn’t surprise him since he’d figured Gabe would send him on this particular job. “Sure.”

Finally, his mouth was done yakking.

After a moment of awkwardness, Ian waved his hand in the general direction of his cubicle. “Okay, I’ll get caught up on that then. Along with all the files piling up on my desk.” He spread his hands wide indicating a huge stack. Mickey just nodded at him refusing to feel anything, especially warm fuzzies.

“Are you free first thing tomorrow?” Ian asked. “I’ll book a boardroom and we can get to work catching me up on everything.”

“Sure,” he repeated, wondering how he was going to hold on to his animosity. He wasn’t expecting to actually like the fucking guy. Facing the computer screen once again, Mickey decided the
A quiet “bye” floated down to him and he screwed his eyes shut. Yes, go, he wanted to snap. As the temperature in his cubicle dropped without the other man’s body heat swamping him, Mickey rolled his chair to the edge of his space, then tipped back until he was leaning into the aisle just slightly. Enough to watch him walk away.

The jeans were dark, a gun metal grey, with oversized back pockets that shaped the swell of his ass and denim that molded to his thighs. Letting out a swoosh of air that was either a sigh or a groan, Mickey averted his gaze as Ian rounded the corner.

Beady little eyes covered with dark rimmed glasses met his gaze, and in response, Mickey slowly slid his index finger across his throat until the eyes disappeared behind the grey panel. A hand shot up protectively grabbing the Wonder Woman bobblehead.

For the second night in a row, Mickey had a shitty sleep, tossing, turning, alone in his one-bedroom apartment thinking about cashmere, for fuck sake. He was groggy and wired, not a great combination for someone who was going to need all his strength to make it through the long ass day and night ahead.

The phone on his nightstand flashed to life when his finger touched it.

5:12 AM, it read.

Groaning, he also saw a couple of incoming messages from Slava. Fucking guy. They’d had more than a few after work drinks, and Mickey’s griping about Ian had ended with his partner declaring he was going to get to the bottom of his “investigation”. Mickey had reached across the table and finished Slava’s beer in one long gulp. Slava had retaliated by asking Mickey what he thought Ian might wear tomorrow.

And that had set off Mickey’s one-track mind for the rest of the night. It was probably a good thing that he wasn’t a fashionable guy because his imagination was pretty limited in concocting outfits, but the shit he did come up with caused him to bury his face in his feather pillow and his groin in the mattress.

Fed up, he brushed his teeth, grabbed an energy bar and made his way to the office intending to get in a mind-numbing workout before the day began. What he wanted was a smoke, but he’d decided to cut down, hoping that would ease him into quitting. Why couldn’t someone invent a smoke that had all the magical qualities he’d come to love but didn’t fucking kill him?

A short while later, swiping his employee card into the key card slot, Mickey was surprised to see light coming from the Elite employee exercise room. It wasn’t even 6:00 AM yet and the world was trying to piss him off. Whoever the fuck it was didn’t want a haggard, sexually frustrated Milkovich to deal with this morning.

As the door opened, the sound of leather hitting leather met his ears. It was fast and furious. Tap, tap, tap. And Mickey knew without having to turn the corner into the gym who it was going to be. He paused in the hallway, chewing his cheek and talking himself out of leaving even though every instinct he had told him to flee. Well, all but one instinct, the one that never let him back down from a
challenge, even a personally designed one.

Bring it on, Universe, he snarled and turned toward the tapping.

A sweaty, red-faced Ian was bouncing from foot to foot and beating the shit out of the lone heavy bag, his fists and feet a blur of action. While Mickey stood there like a moron, clutching his gym bag in one hand and his half-eaten energy bar in the other, Ian dropped to the ground, balancing on bright red boxing gloves to do a quick dozen push-ups, then jumping back up to continue his onslaught against the bag.

His silky black shorts and sweat soaked white tank top were about as plain as gym gear went, but somehow he made them look sexy as fuck. Mickey released the first of what he was sure would be many long-suffering sighs and that seemed to get Ian’s attention.

“Oh, hey,” he panted, smiling at Mickey while jogging in place. Was he gonna start doing fucking jumping jacks next? “I was just about to stretch, then the place will be all yours.”

Could he tell that Mickey was not used to sharing his shit? Waving vaguely, Mickey made his way to the change room, tossing his bag and hoodie in the first locker like he was preparing for battle. He was going to focus on his workout not on his sweaty, panting redhead boss.

Back in the exercise room, he kept his eyes locked on the line of treadmills, hopping onto the first one and balancing on the edges while he programmed in his run. When his sneakers hit the moving tread, he put Ian out of his mind.

For a minute, maybe two. His eyes simply refused to ignore the movements in the mirror. The guy was on the ground, resting on his forearms, one leg up near his shoulder, the other stretched behind him in a deep lunge. Then he bounced back to plank and reversed feet. From there, he stuck his ass up in the air like an upside-down V in some sort of yoga pose. It was almost mesmerizing, watching the smooth long line of his body effortlessly moving into whatever position he told it to.

Every damn thing about the guy was a wet dream for Mickey, except the part where he was the job stealing goddamn boss who currently resided in Mickey’s cubicle.
Ian held the Perk’s Coffeehouse door open for Mandy, following her to the end of the line. The place was buzzing at 8:00 AM. Every table was occupied, people stared at phone screens while waiting for their beverages and a handful of people were ahead of them. The morning’s workout had left him starving, and Mandy had offered to escort him to the coffee shop on the main floor of their building.

Now he was staring at the chalkboard of drink options wondering what Mickey would order. Ian had Conference Room C booked for 8:30 and figured it wouldn't do to show up with an oversized coffee and a muffin for himself and nothing for the other man. He was not entertaining thoughts of winning Mickey over by offering him treats.

When he’d gotten home last night to the apartment he shared with his brothers, he’d tried talking about Mickey with them, hoping they’d knock some sense into him, remind him that he was Mickey’s boss and Elite most definitely wouldn’t appreciate their new employee trying to get it on with one of his team.

All Lip could come up with, though, was a suggestion that Ian go out and get laid, wondering aloud how long it had been since Ian had banged someone. Carl had tapped his forehead thinking and decided that, in the three months since Ian had been back in town and living with them, he hadn’t mentioned a single booty call. This had prompted Lip to shudder in horror and declare a state of emergency. Ian had wandered into his bedroom at that point, ignoring his brothers as they started shouting out names of all the gay guys they knew.

Mandy tapped his shoulder lightly as they moved to the front of the line. "Deep thought over your coffee options?" She’d inserted a small diamond into the side of her nose today, and it sparkled at him.

"Sorry, yes," he shook himself out of his thoughts. "Well, not mine actually. Do you know what Mickey drinks? We have a meeting shortly, and I don't want to arrive empty handed."

"Mickey!" The barista interjected, his enthusiasm getting Ian’s full attention. The guy was probably a couple years younger than Ian and definitely a couple degrees hotter. His name tag said "Paolo" and somehow that shot his hotness up another notch. "Americano. Extra large."

Ian frowned, certain the guy had injected those last two words with something more than cup size.

"Right," Ian replied. "You know everyone's coffee orders, I suppose." Maybe he did need to get laid if he was already battling jealousy over some glorified cashier’s interest in Mickey’s beverage choices.

"Some more than others," the guy added smiling slightly to himself while his big brown eyes and thick lashes turned to Mandy when she leaned across the counter.

"So Paolo," she returned his look. "What are you doing Friday night?"

Before he could answer, a purple-haired chick working the espresso machine piped up. "What's up next, Paolo? We're making coffee not plans for the weekend."

Paolo gave her an exaggerated eye roll but took note of the line forming behind Ian. "Sorry, right. Did you want an Americano for Mickey?"
Swearing the name came out of his mouth a little to breathy, Ian resisted the urge to order Mickey something completely different just to prove some ridiculous point. Instead, he nodded adding a request for a cappuccino and two chocolate chip muffins. Before Ian could turn to Mandy to ask what she would like, Paolo continued his helpful comments, “Mickey prefers the berrlicious.”

Pressing his lips together, Ian nodded again.

Paolo was right. After a suspicious narrowing of his eyes, Mickey relented sitting down at one end of the long conference table to sip his coffee and peel back the paper surrounding his muffin.

“Lucky guess?” he asked holding up his coffee cup and muffin.

Paolo’s sun-kissed skin intruded on Ian’s private thoughts. “Not exactly,” he muttered but Mickey continued to stare obviously waiting for an explanation. “The guy downstairs knew your order.” No way was he saying his name.

“Paolo?” Mickey apparently didn’t have the same reservations. “Hm.”

Hm? What’s that mean? God, Ian would empty his bank account, all his bank accounts, right now to know what Mickey was thinking. “Yeah, you go there a lot?”

“Nah, overpriced shit ain’t my thing.”

Not the answer Ian was hoping for. “He seemed to know exactly what you like.”

Mickey just shrugged. “We doing this?” He gestured to the client files Ian had laid out on the table, reminding Ian not for the first time since he started working here that it was a global security company not a junior high prom. Feeling a moment of pragmatism, he decided the best thing that could happen is for Mickey and Paolo to get married and adopt a dozen kids, firmly putting the guy out of Ian’s reach.

Mid-morning, they neared the bottom of the stack, having covered all the major clients including Elite’s history with Helix Pharmaceutical in preparation for the surveillance job that night. The drug company hired extra security periodically, especially when they were dealing with sensitive material or stemming the leak of confidential information. However, Ian’s team would typically only be involved in event security or protective detail.

They left the Handley contract till last, and Slava joined them to discuss getting Sadie Handley to sign on Elite for her father’s firearm transport.

“Gabe wants the two of us to head to El Paso week after next to, and I quote, woo Sadie Handley,” Ian began waving a hand between himself and Mickey.

“I don’t woo,” Mickey replied peevishly.

“I’ll vouch for that,” Slava added. “It’s like watching a pit bull hit on a bunch of kittens.”

“The fuck you ever seen me hit on anyone?”

“Hm,” Slava said, leaning back in his chair thoughtfully, “that’s what I thought you were doing at
Murphy’s last time we were there. What was that, then, Mick?”

Ian watched Mickey press his tongue into his bottom lip, then chew harshly on the flesh but it didn’t seem to phase his partner, who just shrugged and turned to Ian, expectantly. “Continue Ian.”

Ian didn’t want this conversation to turn quite yet. Not that he wanted to hear about Mickey hitting on anyone. He wanted to hear the gender of these alleged pick ups, but neither man spoke, so Ian moved on. “Okay, maybe I’ll take the lead on the wooing end of things.”

“Probably a good idea. Right, Mick? You’d be okay with Ian doing the wooing?” Slava asked but kept his icy blue eyes on Ian, who shifted his gaze between the two men wondering again if he was missing something. They seemed to be having a second conversation that Ian couldn’t quite follow.

Mickey remained silent, so Ian opened the Handley file, fanning out the photos for the three of them to review. “I was thinking we should make it clear that we know guns not just transportation security. According to your personnel file, Mickey, you are the expert in that area.”

“You looking at my file?” He sounded hostile.

“Well, of course, I’m your—” Something stopped him from finishing that sentence. “It was an efficient way to get familiar with each person on the team.”

“You look at the whole thing?” Now he sounded angry.

Ian nodded, and it clicked. The diamonds. Shit, Ian felt a wave of unease pass over him, like he’d been dunked in cold water. They stared at each other, Mickey daring him to comment, Ian wanting to soothe.

“Let’s get this shit over with, Mick.” Slava’s words washed over them but they seemed unable to break their staring contest. “Yeah, we lost some damn diamonds. Two million dollars worth.” Mickey flinched noticeably. “Two years ago. It sucked. Hard. We have literally no idea how the heist went down because no one knew our transportation plan. Whoever did it must a been a goddamn mastermind cause Mick and I are fucking good at what we do.”

Mickey sighed and Ian could see his body moving slightly to the rhythm of what must be his knee shaking. It’s like the guy was a constant swirling mass of energy, emotion, life that sucked Ian in. He wanted so badly to be at the center of it, to have all that intensity directed straight at him.

“Feels good to clear the air,” Slava continued then loudly cleared his throat. “Hello? Guys?”

Snapping out of it, Ian looked down at the table, then randomly picked up one of the 8 x 10 printouts scattered about, determined to change the subject and redirect his wayward thoughts. If he was this overcome on day 3, he was loath to know what day 30 or day 300 would look like, feeling certain it would not be pretty.

“Colt holster model Paterson revolver.” Mickey took the photo from Ian’s hand. “First ever repeating firearm using a revolving cylinder.” He smiled a little as he gazed at the photo before tossing it back on the pile of photos. “5 shot, .28 caliber, effective to 50 yards, it was the shit in the 1830's.”

“How much?” Ian asked.

Mickey shrugged. “Quarter of a million, my guess.”

Ian picked up a second photo, turning it toward Mickey.
“Wilson Combat 9mm Classic Supergrade. Measly ten grand and only cause of the engraving along the slide release.”

“Well, says here Handley has 6 of them,” Ian added.

“Shit. Wilson Combat barely produces them and only sells to select buyers like some sort of old boy’s club bullshit. Handley’s a rich fuck. They usually get whatever they want.”

Ian felt disgust so familiar to him he almost welcomed it and the consuming anger that usually followed, but this time, the anger didn’t come. Instead he felt a sort of sadness, grief maybe. And definitely regret, so much fucking regret.

“Probably bought one from each production.”

Mickey’s voice called Ian back to the present, so he moved on to a third photo that he slid across the polished table surface toward Mickey. The way Mickey’s eyes lit up just a tiny bit when he glanced at a new photo, the way the information about each gun came so easily to him, the way Ian’s lower belly fluttered every time he described the weapon, he wasn’t going to get tired of showing him gun photos any time soon.

“Fuuuck,” Mickey groaned down at the photo. “Look at that goddamn grip. Jesus.”

Ian slid the photo back toward himself slightly. “Beautiful,” he breathed. He’d handled weapons, even learning the basics back in Cadets before his mother helped him ruin every plan he’d ever made for himself. But he’d never become any kind of gun connoisseur. It didn’t, however, take any special skill to know beauty when you see it.

“Desert Ironwood.” Mickey’s “K” finger ran along the line of the gun’s grip then up to the barrel. “The finish is called Black Mirror. Fuck that’s sexy.”

Ian was officially a mess now, having ricocheted through basically every emotion over the last couple of minutes. He seemed unable to stop watching the clipped nails and tattooed fingers slide over the other photos.

“Well, I think you two make a great team,” Slava said brightly. “Ian in charge of wooing. Mickey in charge of gun porn.”

Ian reached for his cold coffee and swallowed some of it despite its bitterness.

Eventually, they wrapped things up and Ian headed to Mandy’s desk to request she book flights, rooms and a rental car for their trip to Texas. He still had a catch-up meeting with each of the other members of his team and a conference call with head office before the day was over and he tagged along with Mickey on the Helix Pharma surveillance. This called for more caffeine.

On the return trip from the lunchroom with his cup of coffee, he stopped at Mickey’s cubicle to pick up the Helix Pharma file. He’d told Ian it would be on his desk if he wanted to review what information they had on the thefts before their outing that evening. Slowly, Ian slid the yellow folder off the desk, while he took in anything personal, anything that would give him a peek inside Mickey’s mind.

The jade plant looked extremely well cared for, definitely not an afterthought. He wondered how the delicate plant thrived without any direct sunlight. Above the plant were two photos, and he frowned at the Forevermark diamonds but paused at the aerial view of an inlet with blue water, white sand, palm trees. Written in black felt below the photo: Retirement Plan Guayabitos, Mexico.
Once again feeling like an intruder, Ian backed out of the cubicle guiltily.

“Hi again!”

“Lucy,” he exclaimed startled by her sudden appearance. “I was just, um, getting this file.” He held it up as proof.

“Were you looking at his pictures? I asked Mickey about them, but he’s kind of private about stuff. I’ll wear him down though!” She smiled brightly up at Ian. “If he loves a great view, he must be really disappointed to be over here with the payroll gang.”

It dawned on Ian then that Mickey’s cubicle wasn’t with the rest of the team. “That is weird. Why is his desk so far away from his colleagues?”

“Well, because you needed a desk, of course.”

“What?”

“You’re in his desk. He had the nice desk because he’s been with the unit for, like, ever. At least, five years.”

Shit. He gave Lucy a small nod and excused himself.

Standing in his cursed cubicle looking out over the city, Ian imagined millions of people living their individual lives and somehow, of them all, he was falling for the one person who absolutely wouldn’t want his affection, especially when his plant was cramped into a dark corner and Ian was enjoying his view.

Regardless of all the obstacles, though, it didn’t stop his hormones from screaming “woo him” while his mind was warning “leave him alone”. It was like a war raging inside him, but the two sides were not equally matched.

The Handley file was on top of the stack he’d left on his desk, and several photos had slid partially out. Picking up the first one, Ian looked at the sleek black firearm, knowing he would never feel the same way about guns ever again. The bone-deep passion that Mickey had displayed gave Ian a glimpse into his world that felt voyeuristic somehow, suspecting that Mickey had not consciously allowed Ian to see but that he simply couldn’t help himself.

Dropping the photo, Ian looked back out at the Chicago skyline accepting that he was never going to be able to stop himself from wooing Mickey, no matter the consequences.

At 8:00 PM exactly, Ian arrived in the underground parking beneath the Capital Building. He’d been told to meet Mickey at the North entrance on L3 and they’d walk to the Escalade together. Helix Pharmaceutical’s distribution warehouse wasn’t far, still in Downtown Chicago, but closer to the waterfront district so the drive would be a short one.

“Shipment is scheduled for 10:00, but I wanna get set up well ahead of time. Scope shit out.” Mickey crossed the parkade, moving toward Ian and pulling a black hoodie over his head. “You bring the file?”
“Yes, I finished looking at it. Brought my tablet too in case we want to look up something.” Ian motioned to his leather shoulder bag, smiling extra wide. “Snacks too.”

Hoping to smooth the whole cubicle situation a little with chocolate, he’d almost cleaned out the lone vending machine in the lunchroom.

“Sure,” Mickey said looking doubtful. He clicked the key fob and the sleek black SUV came to life. “As long as you’re not a fucking chatty Cathy, we’ll be fine.”

Ian mimed zipping his mouth and throwing away the key, then he smiled again. This time it wasn’t manufactured; he genuinely felt happy to be spending the evening together.

As they silently made their way through the still busy Downtown streets, Ian blocked any negative thoughts brought on by memories of nighttime in Chicago. He studied the street front signs until Helix Pharmaceutical appeared and Mickey turned into the alleyway behind.

Moving slowly past the delivery bay they were going to be watching, Ian could see two overhead bulbs illuminating the area and the rolling door that was currently locked up tight, then they looped around the block so Mickey could back into the tight space between two dumpsters and cut the engine.

The narrow, cramped back alleyway was actually perfect for snooping without being noticed because the area was a cluttered mess of not only dumpsters but also parked delivery vehicles, empty pallets, a collapsed metal fire escape and enough graffiti he’d need a week to read it all. The place looking like the morning after a zombie apocalypse.

They sat in silence staring ahead with almost an hour to kill until the scheduled delivery. While he had no idea what impact sitting next to him had on Mickey, it was having all kinds of impact on Ian, so he shifted his attention outside the vehicle to the colorful painted messages covering cement walls and dumpsters.

Ian broke the silence. “Some of this graffiti belongs on the permission wall in Logan Square. Serious talent.”

“Most of this shit is gang related,” Mickey replied pointing out the front window. “Ashland Vikings, Two Two Boys. Not sure they want gangs hanging out in Logan Square, even if the do-gooders think that’s what they want.”

Ian studied the blue and black crowns sprayed on the wall and slipped back into his childhood. “I don’t miss seeing King Cobras everywhere. Used to have nightmares about them. Fucking hate snakes now.”

Mickey twisted around to look at him for the first time since he’d wrangled the SUV into their parking spot. “When’d you see King Cobras’ paint?”

“On every fucking street corner my whole childhood. I don’t know why they scared the shit out of me when the Satan’s Disciples were a hell of a lot worse.”

“You grew up on the South Side?”

“Sure. Where’d you think I grew up? Forest Glen?” He laughed.

“Yeah, Mr. Cashmere, I did.”

“Well, I—” he paused because Mickey wouldn’t want to know the whole story. “I got out.”
Mickey was still watching him, eyes narrowed slightly, head tipped.

“Assuming you ever really get out,” Ian added. “You grew up there too?”

A shrug was the only response he got as Mickey was back to staring out the driver’s side window, watching absolutely nothing happen in the delivery bay rather than look at Ian. Deciding to follow that lead, he opened his bag to retrieve the Helix file. Might as well have another look through it, pass the time.

Chocolate could only make this go smoother, he decided, and grabbed a Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup from the bag too, which he sat on the dashboard, so he could open the file in his lap. He’d had a look at the dates that the drugs had gone missing, hoping to see more of a pattern than either Mickey or Helix security had found, but nothing had jumped out at him. There were also bios on personnel from the warehouse that he’d skimmed earlier but wanted to take a closer look at now.

Picking up the chocolate bar, he started tearing it open, the crackling noise echoed in the confines of the vehicle. Mickey glanced over at him and Ian smiled again, holding up the bar.

“Wanna share?” he offered getting the little orange bag open and sliding two cups onto the palm of his hand. He held his palm out in Mickey’s direction but got no response. “Suit yourself.”

Setting one of the cups on the console between them, he tore back half of the paper cup holder and sunk his teeth into the chocolate and peanut butter, releasing an almost imperceptible moan. Savoring the sticky sweetness, he looked back down at the photo and bio on top of the pile. Jaron Little, late 20’s, employed for two years as night supervisor of the warehouse.

Ian slid the rest of the peanut butter cup into his mouth, licking his thumb slowly lost in thought now. Jaron wasn’t so little, guy looked to be easily 250 pounds and a head taller than Ian based on the single photo. Tapping the Reese’s bag, the remaining cup slid onto his palm, and he tossed the wrapper into his open bag while taking a healthy bite. Sucking on it to make it last longer, he flipped Jaron’s photo over to reveal the next employee.

“For fuck sake,” Mickey snapped and angrily snagged the peanut butter cup off the console. In one motion, he removed the wrapper and stuffed the thing in his mouth. Ian could see his throat muscles working as he swallowed, and his tongue came out to swipe his lips once.

“I have another one,” Ian said quietly like it was a secret between them. “Happy to share.”

Again, Mickey just watched him with the same head tilt. “See anything in the file?”

“Not really. This Jaron guy is hard to miss though.”

“Yeah, I did a quick background check on him but came up empty. Figured so since Helix ain’t gonna hire anyone without doing their own check. He seems clean.”

Ian nodded. “What led you to thinking it was related to the evening delivery?”

“Last resort. Followed every other angle I could find.”

Just then headlights flashed along the pitted and crumbling pavement of the alley. The sun had set but the moon was big and bright giving off plenty of light. “Fifteen minutes early.”

“Yeah.” Mickey sat forward, slipping a thermal camera from its case. “Get your tablet out. I’ll send you pics from the camera.”
“Wi-fi or cord?”

Mickey tossed him the cord, which Ian hooked up to the USB on his tablet, offering the other end to Mickey to attach to the camera. By then, the 15-foot truck was making a loud beeping sound as it backed into the bay. The passenger door of the truck opened, and a tiny Asian dude jumped out to push the buzzer on the building. From their position between the dumpsters, they could see him move to the back of the truck to unhook the rear lock and slide up the door.

Mickey was shooting pictures and Ian clicked on each one briefly as it arrived on his tablet, making sure the quality was decent enough to see them clearly. “Pictures look good. What are we looking for?” His eyes were scanning each one hoping something would click.

“Stupidity.”

This made Ian smile a little. “Oversights.”

“Yeah. There’s always something. Well,” he paused and his voice hardened. “Not always.”

The diamonds. He didn’t need to say it because Ian heard it.

By now, Jaron had the bay door open and was reviewing the sheet on the clipboard the Asian guy passed to him. The truck driver cut the engine and opened the door to hop out. Mickey clicked a series of shots of Jaron, then one of the truck door opening. A hefty guy with a wild mane of dreadlocks jumped down and slammed the driver’s side door, adjusting jeans that were riding low and offering the world a view of his crack. Mickey got a close up shot of that and Ian laughed, quickly glancing to see the smirk on Mickey’s face.

“Thanks for that visual,” Ian said looking at the top of the guy’s ass as it filled his screen.

“Thought you’d like that.”

Pants in place, the driver made his way around the back of the truck, stopping next to Jaron to watch his partner piling boxes on the ledge of the truck bed. “Apparently, the muscle is gonna watch the little guy do all the work,” Ian observed.

“I don’t know how much of him is muscle, man.”

“I was being generous,” Ian explained then sat forward narrowing his eyes to see in the distance. “Hey, take a close up of their faces, would you?”

“Who? The big dudes?”

“Yes. Please.”

It arrived seconds later. “Hm, look at this.”

Mickey leaned over the console slightly to see Ian’s tablet screen better. “Shit. They gotta be related.”

“Right? Um, did you notice if Jaron had a Facebook account when you did the background check?”

Mickey nodded. “I skimmed it but didn’t dig deep.”

Ian was swiping around his screen, quickly locating Jaron’s page, then clicking on his pictures. It didn’t take long to find photos of the two men together. Hovering over one of them, the tags read Jaron Little and Jason Little. He read that aloud to Mickey.
“Sound like fucking twins.”

“They sure could be, not identical but close enough,” Ian agreed. “Looks like we found our stupid.”

“Well, fuck.” He continued to click the camera until the boxes were offloaded and the truck drove away. “I guess we contact Helix tomorrow, so they can make the call about how to handle this.”

Ian disconnected the camera cord, passing the end to Mickey. “Solving stuff is quite satisfying, isn’t it?” It was made even more so by the fact they had solved it together. “Hey, I’m, uh, sorry about your cubicle.”

Mickey looked at him, studying his face for a moment. Again, Ian would clean out his bank accounts for even a flash of what the other man was thinking. He was so hard to read, at least for Ian, because it felt like intense disinterest, which were contradictory states and pulled Ian in both directions. Like Mickey wanted passionately not to be interested in Ian.
Slava let out a sharp whistle getting everyone’s attention. The seven members of the Protective Services Unit, dressed in workout gear, gathered around the edges of the athletic mats in Elite’s gym waiting for Slava’s instructions. “Okay, let’s pick up from last month’s session. Where’d we leave off?” He crossed his arms, tattooed skin dark against his white tank top, as he waited for a response.

“The haymaker,” Nelson said pretending to throw a wide punch at Mickey, who pushed a hand into the punk’s forehead and pursed his lips in annoyance. “Come on, Mickey, play along,” the kid complained, his goddamn ponytail bobbing as he bounced from foot to foot practically vibrating with youthful testosterone.

Ignoring him, Mickey turned toward his partner. “Let’s get this self-defense bullshit moving along, Slav.” He didn’t need any fucking training in beating people’s asses. It was his God given talent. Suddenly though, Mickey was hit with an urge to see Mr. Cashmere in action. “But,” he began smiling evilly, “maybe everyone needs to get up to speed. Hey, Gallagher, why don’t you have a go at Mandy?”

“What?” Ian looked appalled at that idea, which Mickey knew was going to royally piss off his sister.

“What do you mean what?” Mandy lifted her hands to her hips, wildly painted nails in sharp contrast to the black leggings strangling the lower half of her body. She squared off facing Ian. “You think you could take me, Ian?”

“Oh, no, I mean, you’re a—” Ian saw the trap just as it was about to close in on him. Either fight a girl or be called sexist. Mickey smiled happily.

“Well, Ian? Shall we?” Mandy was tapping her bare foot now.

“Um, sure?”

Ian moved into the middle of the blue mats, looking briefly at Slava for guidance. Signalling Mandy to join him on the mats, Slava motioned toward Ian. “Okay, Ian, get Mandy in a chokehold like you’re taking her hostage.” He stepped slightly out of the way and Ian came up behind Mandy, wrapping his arm around her neck but so softly that Mandy started complaining again.

Mickey was enjoying the obvious discomfort on Ian’s face, not to mention that he was now free to stare at his boss freely. His eyes traveled over Ian’s tight grey sweatpants and fitted t-shirt to his bicep which was flexing to hold his sister in place. For a split second, Mickey felt something akin to anger at Mandy, but he shook it off quickly.

“Ready?” Slava asked them and before Ian could do more than murmur yes, Mandy brought her left leg forward then twisted under Ian’s bent arm, pushing off his chest and bouncing back onto her heels in triumph.

“Woah,” Ian managed, holding up his hand for a high five. “Nice.”

She winked at him and smacked palms. From there, they tried a few more moves with Ian grabbing at Mandy from different directions and his show-off sister deflecting one after the other. The group was catcalling them, whistling as Mandy faked a few roundhouse kicks and Ian pretended to fall to
his knees.

When they switched positions and Mandy got Ian in a chokehold, Mickey decided he wasn’t having fun anymore. He crossed his arms and glowered at his sister as she mauled Ian.

“Okay, thanks Mandy,” Slava said moving back to the mat as Mandy removed her grabby hands from Ian’s biceps. “Ready to take on someone else, Ian?”

“Oh, sure,” Ian responded agreeable as ever.

Mickey watched Slava smile and, after years as his partner, recognized it for what it was. Devious pleasure. He didn’t have to turn toward Mickey for him to know what was coming.

“Hey, Mick, you wanna show Ian some of your wrestling moves?”

Even knowing it was coming didn’t prepare him for the way those words charged through his body. Ian looked at him so briefly that he thought he might have imagined it, except that he had a slight tinge of red along his cheekbones.

“Sure.” His fucking mouth getting him into trouble again, and his feet joined in his downfall, moving him onto the mat where Gallagher was adjusting his t-shirt over his goddamn abs. Does the guy own any shirts that aren’t skin tight?

“Ian, have you done any wrestling?” Slava asked.

“Briefly in college, but it didn’t go anywhere serious.”

Slava patted him on the back, nodding and Mickey could see the fucker’s mind working. “So you’re familiar with the backdoor position then?”

Mickey was going to kill him.

While Ian choked on his tongue, Slava continued. “It’s where the top, that’s the wrestler in the upper position, is between the bottom’s legs and—”

“We fucking know, Slava.” Mickey was going to use the wifebeater his partner was wearing to strangle him the minute this fucking mockery was over.

“Oh, great. I’ll just leave you to it then.” He clapped Ian on the back one more time and walked off the mat, while the opponents stared at each other unmoving.

There was some kind of shit happening in Ian’s expression that sent a surge of lust through Mickey, nearly strangling him. Adrenaline was pumping through his body, and every impulse was buzzing at the idea of touching Ian in such an aggressive way.

They turned to directly face each other. Mickey let his eyes travel down and back up Ian’s body until their eyes met again. It felt to him like the entire world had shrunk down to the size of the blue mat they were standing on. Ignoring Slava’s whole backdoor suggestion, he threw a jab in the general direction of Ian’s face to see how quick his reflexes were, all the while knowing the guy had moves based on the time they’d spent in the gym together. Sure enough, Ian moved left, lifting an elbow to Mickey’s inner arm and knocking it easily away.

Mickey smiled slightly, then without warning grabbed Ian by the neck with his left hand. Neither of them moved. This was only the second time they had touched, and the same shot of warmth traveled up Mickey’s arm as it did the first time. Ian tightened the muscles along his neck and reared right
breaking Mickey’s grasp where his thumb was pressed to Ian’s tendons.

They were both breathing a little heavily now, and everything around them faded from Mickey’s awareness. He brought a hand up to grab at the soft material of Ian’s shirt, but Ian deflected it easily and Mickey used the moment of distraction to deliver another quick jab that Ian sidestepped. Their eyes met and held like two predators sizing each other up. Mickey’s pulse jumped in anticipation.

They continued to spar moving in a 360 with neither of them gaining ground until Mickey stepped into the circle of Ian’s arms shoving the heels of both his hands into his chest, surprising Ian, who grunted slightly at the impact. Mickey immediately swept his knee up to Ian’s hip and his heel around the back of Ian’s thigh, tightening his leg sharply.

The upwards momentum to Ian’s chest threw off his center of gravity, while his leg remained trapped against Mickey’s. As he fell back, Mickey released his leg and Ian hit the mat with a gratifying thud.

Take that, you tight shirt wearing cubicle thief.

He was on his back staring up at Mickey, nostrils flaring from the sharp breaths he was taking, and his t-shirt was pushed up exposing his stomach, which was tensed beneath the trail of fine red hair disappearing into his sweatpants. Mickey couldn’t take his eyes off it until his ankle gave out beneath him from the impact of Ian’s feet quickly twisting around it. His knees hit the mat, and Ian was up and on Mickey’s back, arm wrapped around his neck. They were panting now from exertion and physical contact.

Mickey shifted his weight to the left moving with Ian’s momentum, hoping it would force the redhead to slide right off his back. Instead of slipping to the side though, Ian’s foot hit the ground and he used the leverage to flip Mickey onto his back, dropping both knees to the mat between Mickey’s legs.

Breathlessly, he felt his legs spread wide as Ian’s thighs shifted open to stop himself from toppling forward into Mickey’s chest, and Mickey brought his knees up to Ian’s waist locking his ankles together around his back, squeezing tight. They froze. Mickey wondered how he’d ended up in the fucking backdoor position despite his plan to not fall for Slava’s goddamn shit.

He was becoming acutely aware of every inch of his body that was in contact with his damn boss. Ian’s hands were wrapped around the front of Mickey’s thighs, and they started digging into the thin camo material of his sweatpants, almost massaging him with the heat from his hands. Ian’s groin was pressed into his ass, and that’s when Mickey smacked his hands down heavily on Ian’s shoulders, preparing to twist out of the bottom position. He’d had enough dicks near his ass over the years to know when one had real potential. Fucking figured Ian was going to be packing something that could make Mickey weak in the knees.

They were breathing hard, panting. All these thoughts only lasted a couple of seconds then Ian shifted forward like he was going to kiss Mickey or something equally as fucked up, and that put him inside the guard, safely tucked into the space between Ian’s arms, giving Mickey the edge.

He let Ian get about a foot from his face, then licked his lips in anticipation of something that he was never going to let happen. In one smooth motion, Mickey pivoted on his lower back, grabbing onto Ian’s forearm and giving him room to wrap his other hand around the side of Ian’s throat and shove him over until he was on the mat with his forearm trapped between Mickey’s thighs. However, it was pressed hard against Mickey’s balls and he quickly released it, rolling onto his hip and away. He came up to his knees looking first down at Ian, who was staring at him wide eyed, then up around the room at all the other wide-eyed stares.
“Ian, my man, that was impressive,” Slava beamed reaching out to help Ian to his feet. “Mickey is a nasty street fighter. He actually seemed a little distracted today. You feeling okay, Mick?”

“Fucking fine,” he muttered as he bent forward to rest his hands on his thighs, taking a long breath through his nose. Slava patted his back, and Mickey shrugged it off.

“Have you had any martial arts training?” Slava asked Ian.

“Not much,” he said and was back to straightening out his goddamn shirt. “I’ve done a lot of boxing though, little kickboxing.”

“And some yoga,” Mickey added smugly glancing over his shoulder at Ian as he made his way off the mat.

Ian’s cheekbones turned a little pink, but he looked Mickey in the eye. “Namaste, Mickey.”

Swiping a knuckle across his nose, Mickey looked down at Ian’s bare feet to hide the smile that wanted to spread across his face. The guy seemed to have some superpower that allowed him to break through every single shield Mickey put up.

“Hey, Ian,” Slava said as Ian joined Mandy on the edge of the mat. “We’re going for drinks tonight to celebrate the fact I’ve survived another year. You wanna join us?”

“Of course,” Ian agreed. “That’d be great.”

“Cool, 8:00. Murphy’s.”

Mickey tried hard to ignore the fluttering in his lower belly, hoping maybe he was coming down with stomach flu.

Murphy’s Tap House was around the corner from Mickey’s apartment. He’d discovered it shortly after moving in four years ago, knowing the moment he’d walked in that he’d be spending a lot of time here. It was dark, a little rundown, with 100 beers on tap and 31 types of wings. They only played music from the 70’s and the space was dotted with games. He could drink, eat and beat people’s asses at pool, darts and foosball then walk home.

Over the years, he’d managed to drag his work buddies here, and it had become their hangout as well. Slava had turned 30 earlier in the week, so they’d planned to celebrate that tonight. Mickey figured his partner would end up on his sofa because it was Friday night after a week that Mickey wouldn’t mind forgetting.

Except that the thing he wanted to forget would be walking in the door any minute.

Everyone else had arrived already. Mandy and Liz were up at the bar planning some elaborate shots in honor of the birthday boy, while Nelson and Tico played a game of pool, and Slava chatted up some chick who’d been eyeballing him since he’d walked in.

Mickey was nursing his third beer and watching the front door from beneath his eye lashes, knowing that one of these times, it would be Gallagher who walked through it. Mickey’s body was like an
elastic band waiting to snap. Every spot that Ian had touched was branded with memory, and he craved more. The alcohol softened everything, his emotions, his limbs, and most worryingly, his resistance.

The door opened and Ian walked through.

Mickey felt his back stiffen and his breath hitch slightly. To cover it up, he gulped the remaining liquid in his glass, as Ian scanned the room eventually focusing on Mickey. He smiled and waved lightly. Mickey lifted his chin in response.

His red hair was brushed to the side, looking freshly washed and soft as fuck. Mickey gave in to the overpowering urge to just look at that face. A bit of scruff covered his chin emphasizing its shape and drawing attention to his lips. His throat was exposed where the checkered button down was open. It fit snugly and Mickey’s fingers tensed around the smoothness of the glass as he attempted to keep his lust in check.

By the time his eyes made it to the faded jeans ripped at the knees, Ian had slowed his approach, blocking the flow of patrons. Gaze raking back up Ian’s body, he knew he was crossing a line that he’d drawn for both of their sakes. This couldn’t happen.

Their eyes finally met, and Ian stopped completely several feet from Mickey’s table, clearly searching Mickey’s face for some explanation as to how to handle the situation.

“IAN!"

Mandy stopped in front of the redhead smiling up at him and offering him a shot glass from the tray she was holding. “Russian cocaine,” she chirped as he accepted a slim shot glass topped with a nasty looking lemon slice. “Come on, Mickey needs alcohol. He’s a grouch. Been biting everyone’s head off since we got here.”

Mickey scowled at her as she set the tray down on their table. “What the fuck is that?”

“It’s lemon covered in sugar and ground coffee. Grab one and we’ll do it together,” she instructed while looking around the pub. “Slava! Get over here. Liz, grab the boys.”

Eventually they were all standing around the table holding up shots and singing a horrible version of Happy Birthday. Ian had ended up beside Mickey, and while they weren’t technically touching, the slice of air between them was like a living thing.

“You ever had a Russian Cocaine, Slava?” Mandy asked picking up the circle of yellow covered in black coffee grinds. “You put the whole lemon in your mouth, right?”

“I’m game,” his partner agreed shoving the thing between his lips, biting into it then slamming the shot of vodka back. His eyes squinted slightly as the sweet, sour, pungent overwhelmed him. Giving a thumbs up, the rest of the table followed suit spitting out the rind. “Round two!”

And they all picked up a second shot glass repeating the process. Mickey slammed his glass down on the table glancing at Ian, at his slightly watering eyes and the sugar granules dotting his lower lip. It looked fucking delicious.

Three beers, two shots and a hit of caffeine were fucking with Mickey’s carefully laid plans. He was having trouble remembering why he was opposed to getting his hands on Ian when touching Ian would so obviously be a good fucking idea. More than a good idea, in fact, a great fucking idea.

“Let me buy a round,” Ian announced smiling brightly at the group then signalling to the server.
Mickey felt his insides soften even more. The guy seemed genuinely nice and that somehow made Mickey feel a wave of protective longing like he wanted to have Ian’s back while the guy went around making people happy with his stupid fucking smile.

To get his mind off smoking, Mickey straightened up preparing to play some pool because continuing to stand here was turning him into some sort of romantic asshole. One table was open and he dropped some coin into the slot, freeing up balls. As he arranged them on the table, not caring if he played alone as long as he didn’t have to breath the same air as Ian fucking Gallagher, a voice interrupted his internal monologue.

“Your New Belgium Flat Tire,” Ian said sitting a tall glass of beer on the edge of the pool table. “Sounds delicious.” That engaging laugh wrapped around Mickey, and he swallowed some amber liquid to stop his mouth from responding or his lips from quirking. “Um, could I play with you?”

That caused an eyebrow lift from Mickey and a lip pursing from Ian. His green eyes crinkled. “Pool, that is.”

“It’s a free country.”

Ian grabbed a pool cue and they took a few turns knocking balls around the table without much interest in where they landed. The shots had hit both their systems giving the game a soft, carefree edge. They had to pause once as Liz called them over for the next round, the Russian Quaalude, which was too liqueur-y for Mickey’s tastes.

“Yum,” Ian said licking his lips. Figures, Mickey thought, while considering buying Ian a second one just to watch him lick his lips in pleasure again.

When Mickey knocked two of his solids into the same corner pocket, Ian stomped his foot and gave Mickey a scowl. “Hey, stop that.”

Smirking, he stepped around Ian to reach the final solid. Bending at the waist, he prepared to lightly tap the cue ball. Just as he pulled his arm back, Ian’s breath fluttered over his ear. “Gentle,” he murmured.

And Mickey shot the cue ball right off the pool table. “Oh, oops,” the asshole practically giggled. “Oops, my ass.”

Ian just nodded at him, and Mickey knew there was no recovering from this night. They were not going to be able to return to any semblance of professional disinterest, but neither was he ever going to let them take it any further.

Sure, the little devil on his shoulder whispered.

“I’ll get that for you.” Ian moved around the pool table, apologizing to a group of women when they had to adjust their chairs, so he could crawl under their table for the white ball. He re-emerged triumphant, returning to Mickey’s side of the table. “I think you should get a re-try.”

His body was way too close and making Mickey kind of dizzy with longing. “Then,” Ian continued, “we should play a second time, but let’s make a wager.”

Ian reached out slightly to drop the ball in the middle of the table, and Mickey let his imagination run free. What would he want if he won?

To knock Ian backwards against the green felt, following him down until his body was literally
buried in Ian’s scent and warmth and strength. His mouth pressing against Ian’s and his hands seeking out skin. Ian would—

“Hi Mickey.”

For a second, Mickey was confused. His name, a familiar voice but not Ian’s. The green eyes he’d been staring into slid away and over Mickey’s shoulder. They narrowed and turned away completely.

Mickey tore his eyes away from Ian’s profile to look over his shoulder.

“Paolo?”

“Yes,” he replied obviously delighted that Mickey remembered his name. “Your sister mentioned that you’d be here tonight and I…”

He trailed off when Mickey only continued to stare not responding in anyway. Vaguely, he recalled thinking the guy was hot as fuck and wondering if it’d be a good idea to work that angle, generally preferring that business and pleasure not mix.

Ian. Fuck sake. Talk about business and pleasure. If Paolo hadn’t shown up, God knows where he would have ended up tonight. As much as he wanted to kick his sister’s skinny ass, he decided to see this as the out he fucking needed to take.

“Good to see you, man,” he finally replied turning away from Ian. Paolo’s smile returned, teeth white against his tanned skin. Mickey already missed pale skin littered with freckles.
“Fine. What’s his fucking number?” Ian flopped back on the sofa, stretching his legs out long.

Carl had woken him up from his position on the sofa around 3:00 AM when he’d gotten home from wherever the hell he’d been to find Ian passed out, still fully dressed, shoes and all. Ian had only rolled over and gone back to sleep. Too wasted to care if he spent Saturday with a stiff neck as well as a hangover. Now it was mid-afternoon, and Ian still hadn’t shaken the headache and slight nausea, so the idea of a goddamn blind date set up by Lip wasn’t going over well.

“He better not be a fucking dick,” Ian added giving Lip a pointed look.

“You might want to rephrase that, bro.”

“Ha ha.” Ian didn’t find it funny, partly because of the hangover but mostly because he was depressed. His Friday night with Mickey had started out so well then had gone to shit. He really didn’t want to ever think about it again. “Ugh.”

Lip sighed dramatically and snatched the cell phone from Ian’s outstretched hand to start a new text thread, then tossed it into Ian’s lap when he finished typing.

“What the fuck?” Ian blurted looking at the phone screen. “Are you fucking serious, Lip? Francis?”

“He can’t help that his name gives us a rash.”

“Does he go by Francis? Cause I am not calling him Frank,” Ian shuddered as memories of his deadbeat dad crawling drunkenly through the dog door invaded his mind. “Ugh.”

Lip sat on the sofa’s arm forcing Ian to adjust his feet. “We call him Frankie actually.”

Ian cracked his eyes open. That was too close to another name he was trying to forget. “Ugh.”

“Come on, send the text, Ian,” Lip prompted him with a foot to Ian’s thigh. “I know you and you’re going to hesitate and all will be lost.”

“Dramatic much?”

“Avoidance much?”

“Shut up.”

“Fuck you.”

“What’d I miss?” Carl asked slamming the front door of their apartment behind him. “Sounds fun.”

“Ian is being a pussy about hooking up with Frankie.”

Carl dumped his groceries on the kitchen table, pulled a tube of Pringles and a Hershey bar from one of bags then sat down in an arm chair across from Ian, tossing him the chocolate bar and propping his feet on the coffee table. “Frankie? Is he the grad student you’re grooming or the mechanic dude working on your beater?”
“Student,” Lip said kicking Ian in the shin again, but Ian ignored him as he tore open the chocolate bar wrapper.

“Cool, they can get each other off by talking about writing boring papers all night.” Carl smiled at him.

“Did you two assholes wanna come along on this date? You seem way more invested than I am.”

Ian still hadn’t typed anything into the little rectangle, so Lip decided to do it himself. He jumped up from the sofa with Ian’s phone in hand, moving into the kitchen while reading aloud. “Hi Frankie, this is Ian. I’m free tonight if you want to go for a drink.”

Ian yelled from his prone position. “No drinking for fuck sake.”

“You guys could go to the library together,” Carl suggested.

Lip returned to the living room waving Ian’s phone. “Done. Just have a club soda or something.”

“What?” Ian asked half sitting up. “You better not have, Lip.”

His shithead brother ignored him as he read the message. “I’d love to hang out Ian. I know where Lip lives so I could pick you up at 8 if that’s okay with you.”

“Aww,” Carl cooed. “He sounds sweet.”

“I can see true love just around the corner.” The pillow hit Carl in the face.

Ian pushed a wonton around on his plate. It looked good, but his stomach just wasn’t cooperating.

“Ian?”

“I asked how you liked living in Washington.”

“How’d you like living in Washington?”

“Ian?”

“I asked how you liked living in Washington.”

“Oh, it was okay. At the time, I needed to get away from Chicago, sort of restart my life, you know? And big cities are very much the same in many ways.”

Frankie was nodding and finishing off the wontons they’d gotten to share. He’d suggested a tapas bar around the corner from Ian’s apartment, so they could have a bite to eat as well as a drink.
Frankie was having a martini, which had made Ian frown a little in memory of last night and make a “Bond, James Bond” joke. Then he’d felt petty and tried to make small talk.

It was just that he was tired, too tired to try to find some sort of spark where the other guy was concerned. In fact, he was having trouble finding even a flicker. Not that he wasn’t semi-interesting and attractive in a button downed sort of way, with tightly curled dark hair and a close-cropped beard. It’s just that he wasn’t—

“Sorry, could you repeat that?” Ian was starting to feel like an asshole.

“I asked what you studied at Georgetown.” Frankie didn’t seem to be all that aware that Ian just wasn’t into him, which made him wonder if Ian was as oblivious where Mickey was concerned. Was he just so goddamn enamored that he couldn’t even see that Mickey wasn’t interested? Shit, his mind started cataloguing their encounters.

“Um, maybe we should call it a night, Ian.”

“Oh, sorry.” He took a deep breath and sat back in his chair. “I’m a little under the weather today. I thought I’d feel better by this evening, but I guess I don’t.”

Frankie sat back in his seat as well, apparently waiting for Ian to make the next move.

God. “Um, I have a Master of Arts in International Security Studies with a specialty in security assessment.”

Frankie sat forward again, body language fully engaged, and Ian couldn’t help himself, he pushed further back into his chair.

“How did you end up in that field?”

The answer to that question would take the entire night, and besides, Ian wasn’t sharing any of his personal shit with this guy. His own family didn’t know most of it. So he went with the canned answer that he pulled out whenever he got this question. “I was in Cadets when I was younger and had an interest in military security. Went the school route rather than enlisting.”

He stopped there but wondered if maybe he could scare Frankie away by telling him all about how he’d fucked up and allowed his mother to stumble back into his life at the exact worst time, sucking him into her destructive orbit that had taken him years to free himself from.

If he thought he’d been tired before, thinking about that period of his life left him completely drained. It must have been obvious because his date pulled the chivalrous card and gave him an out. “You look beat, Ian. How about I walk you home now?” Ian would have preferred to walk alone but figured this was a good compromise. He had agreed to this damn date, after all.

Frankie insisted on paying the bill. When Ian tried arguing, he added that Ian could pay next time, which was never going to happen. But if he brought that up, then the walk home would be awkward, and he just didn’t care enough to care.

It was a beautiful spring night, and they were silent for the three blocks. Frankie managed to rub shoulders with Ian every tenth step or so, and Ian allowed it feeling too depleted to find a way to deal with the situation. When they reached the locked front doors, Ian intended to say good-night, but the guy waited while Ian inserted his key, then he held the door for Ian and followed him to the elevator.

“I’m probably safe from here,” Ian joked.
“Door to door service.”

“Oh-kay.” Ian stood beside him in the elevator. Six flights never felt so long. His key was inserted into the deadbolt of his apartment door before the elevator doors closed on his floor. Frankie’s hand rested on his lower back as Ian turned the key then moved around the side of his waist as he entered the still lit apartment.

Cringing internally, Ian tried to move to the side enough to make the contact difficult for Frankie to maintain. “Well, good night then.”

“Night, Ian,” he said quietly looking all hopeful and smitten, and as equally determined.

Uh, no, thought Ian. Never gonna happen. He placed a hand firmly against Frankie’s chest. “I’m really not feeling well. Good night.”

Frankie looked massively disappointed but was too well behaved to do anything more than pout. “I’ll text you, Ian.”

And Ian was too tired to reply. He’d let Lip send that text for him.

The door finally clicked shut and he leaned into it, smacking the back of his head against the wood in hopes of dislodging all memories from the last 24 hours.

“That doesn’t look like you getting laid.”

Ian started. “Fuck, you scared me, Lip.”

“I guess Carl and I should have gone on the damn date with you cause you seem to have forgotten how a hook up works,” he said holding a bowl of corn flakes in one hand and spoon in the other. “I have it on good authority that he was a sure thing, man.”

Ian frowned at his older brother as he slunk down into one of the arm chairs because Carl was half asleep on the sofa. This was stupid. Ian could get his own hook up when and if he wanted one. It’s just that he didn’t want a hook up. He wanted—he wanted the real thing. Now that he thought maybe he knew what the real thing felt like, he wanted it. Everything else was bullshit. A waste of his fucking time.

He yanked his phone from his jacket pocket and held it up for Lip. “You need to let Frankie down easily. There’s not gonna be a second date.”

Despite his moping, he appreciated his brothers for listening and trying to help. They’d mostly lost touch while Ian had been away, at first because Ian had let his mother influence him and later because he’d been focused on getting his shit together. Lip had put himself through school and Carl had grown up. It hurt to think about all the time he’d lost, but when he’d returned to Chicago, they’d turned their spare room into a third bedroom and Ian had slid right back into the role of middle brother.

“Thanks for trying, you guys,” he said lifting his head from the back of the chair. Carl was fully awake now, and Lip was fucking around on Ian’s phone. “Are you letting him know I’m not interested?”

Lip just shrugged.

“What are you doing?” Maybe he’d been too fast to offer his thanks.
“Nothing,” Lip said sounding shady as all hell.

“Gimme my phone.” He held his hand out, but Lip moved away, sitting on the other arm chair out of Ian’s reach. “Come on, Lip. I don’t trust that smug ass look.”

“You need me to take care of things for you, Ian,” Lip explained avoiding looking at Ian in favor of whatever he was doing with his phone. “You want to get over this Mickey guy, so let’s make that happen.”

“I—” Ian didn’t know how to respond. He really didn’t want that but felt he had no choice.

“Look,” Lip tossed the phone on the coffee table apparently satisfied with whatever he’d been doing. “You said yourself that you need to focus on making a good impression at your new job not on fucking your new employee.”

“Well, jeez, do you have to put it that way?” Ian complained.

“What way should I put it?” They stared at each other. Lip obviously not getting it and Ian reluctant to help him see. “Explain it to me, Ian. Help me see, if you will.”

Ian rolled his eyes. “Never mind.”

“I’m serious. “

“He’s—” Ian looked between his brothers, hoping for an out to this conversation. They were never going to understand because he didn’t even really understand. “He’s different.”

“Different?” Lip asked, waving a hand for him to spit it out.

“I want—”

“Oh my god, Ian,” Carl said. “Just say it. You’re falling in love.”

“What?” Lip spat.

“What?” Ian choked.

“What?” Carl asked, looking blankly at them. “He’s falling in love.” It sounded like he was talking to a couple of toddlers about potty basics.

Is that what was happening to him? Was it that simple, yet that monumentally complex? He thought back to the first hour at Murphy’s, how easy it was to hang out with Mickey playing pool and how he stared at Ian with something like fire in his eyes just before Paolo showed up. And Mickey dismissed Ian.

Mandy arrived then, throwing her drunken arm around Paolo’s shoulders and shoving a shot glass into his hand. He thanked her and lifted his glass toward Mickey in a salute before tossing it back. Liz joined Mandy in fawning over the barista, and Mickey downed the rest of his beer. The five of them stood in an awkward circle between the two pool tables. Paolo was trying to be polite and listen to Mandy’s detailed description of all the Russian shots they’d had so far, but he was clearly here for one reason only.

Mickey.

It was one thing to listen to him brag about knowing Mickey’s drink preferences, like any decent barista would for fuck sake, but it was another to see him checking out Mickey like he was going to
order one of everything on the damn menu. Ian stared into his empty rum and coke glass, wondering if he disappeared into thin air right this second, would anyone notice? Or care?

The anyone he was particularly interested in had started to re-rack the balls on the pool table, and Ian saw an opening. Paolo was still being groped by the girls, too polite it seemed to tear himself away yet.

“How about that wager?” Ian asked, but wishing immediately he hadn’t. Mickey’s shoulders stiffened, and he smacked his pool cue into the white ball. Hard. Balls spread out wildly over the green felt, and that dark head remained bent watching them come slowly to a halt.

Then Paolo came to stand beside him, shoulder to shoulder. “Do you think your sister is trying to get me drunk?” he whispered conspiratorially.

“She’s been trying to get the whole bar drunk, so don’t take it personally, man.”

Paolo laughed, turning to rest his jean clad ass against the side of the pool table, so he could get a better view of the fucking menu. Ian knew he was being a creeper at this point, but for the life of him, he wasn’t able to move.

“Maybe you wanna buy me a drink?” Paolo continued in his sexy indoor voice. He slid his hips along the table until they connected with Mickey.

“Uhh,” Mickey replied and Ian felt his hopes lift slightly. Say no, say no, say no. “Sure.”

Ian was saved from Paolo’s response by the arm Slava threw over his shoulders. “Hey, boss, you need a drink and I need a partner.” The arm tightened a little turning them toward the bar. Slava looked at him briefly telling him something with his eyes that Ian chose to ignore.

“See the two babes over there?” Slava pointed to the corner of the lounge.

“Babes?” Ian had to smile a little.

Slava laughed. “Well, they want to play darts. How’s your aim?”

“I guess we’ll find out.” His arm was still clamped around Ian’s shoulders and guiding them away from the pool tables, which was probably for the best.

“What are you drinking? It’s on me for helping a guy out.”

“Lemon rum and coke.”

“Oh, fancy.”

Three rums and two games later, Ian made his way to the restroom. He’d tried to keep an eye on the Mickey/Paolo situation, but the bar had gotten busy and more often than not, his view of the pool tables was blocked, so he took a detour past them on his way to the toilet.

Both tables were in play by people he didn’t know. Panic surged through him as he scanned the bar, turning slightly to look over each shoulder. The place was packed and his brain was fuzzy, but he didn’t see Mickey at their table, just Mandy, Liz and Tico talking animatedly. No dark hair at the bar or the foosball tables. Shit, he needed to go home before he made a fool of himself and started yelling Mickey’s name over the noise.

The restroom engulfed him in quiet as the door swung shut, and he let out a breath realizing just how
drunk he actually was now that his senses weren’t overpowered by the mayhem of the bar. Taking a
tentative step forward, he froze mid-step. Paolo’s messy crop of brown hair was at the urinal, and Ian
was torn between flat-out fucking relief and a slow boiling loathing that bubbled up from his gut,
stopping when it reached his lip, which he could feel curling in confrontation.

Certain that this wasn’t going to end well but not giving a single fuck, he took the urinal to the right
of Paolo’s with as much fanfare as possible to ensure Paolo broke the code of not looking at your
urinal neighbor. Their eyes met and bounced away, then Paolo’s came back briefly in vague
recognition. Ian took that moment to pull his dick out aiming the stream at the blue puck. He looked
down at himself and in doing so, drew Paolo’s attention there as well. Ian smiled when the guy
sucked in a little air and snapped back to his own far less impressive display. The victory was short-
lived of course because it wasn’t Ian’s dick that Mickey was planning to spend the night with.

Paolo zipped up and Ian made quick work of finishing, so he could join him at the sinks. They
washed their hands, then met at the stack of folded paper towels between them. Paolo nodded when
Ian gestured for him to go first, but he looked a little uncomfortable like he was trying to figure out
what the weird vibe in the room was all about.

Tossing the paper in the trash can under the sink, Paolo turned his attention to the mirror. His
hair was a little long and haphazardly tossed around his head giving the impression he’d just gotten out of
bed and didn’t have to do a thing because he was hot no matter what. That didn’t stop him from
poking his fingers around the mess, rearranging it. Ian looked at his own tidy, almost precise hair. No
one would think he just spent the night fucking then rolled out looking that this. More like he’d spent
the night doing his taxes, but he conceded that he made a decent looking accountant.

Paolo wasn’t finished with his nefarious plot to seduce Mickey. He pulled a tube of lip balm from the
pocket of his jeans, which Ian couldn’t help notice were so fucking tight, he didn’t know how he
managed to fit the lip balm in the pocket. Probably in the space where the rest of his dick should be.

Giving a single swipe to the top and bottom lip, he finished by mashing his lips together. Ian was just
openly staring now, having forgotten in his drunken jealous delirium that when you’re stalking
someone with murderous intent to do it slyly.

“Look dude, I’m kind a with someone tonight, so ya know,” Paolo said surprising Ian not only with
his voice but with the idea that he’d want to “ya know” with Paolo. Read the room, he felt like
saying, but instead his cruel brain rewound the guy’s words.

“Oh, what a shame,” Ian began feeling his lip curl again. “Lucky guy.”

First, Ian asked himself, why are you engaging him about Mickey for fuck sake? Second, does the
asshole not recognize him from earlier?

“Lucky is the idea.”

And Ian surged forward tackling the South American heartthrob to the ground determined to mess up
that pretty face beyond rec--

“Wish me luck,” Paolo said a little nervously as if he were just now getting that Ian wasn’t his friend.
Ian stared at him as he came out of the fantasy he’d been enjoying far too much. Not only wasn’t he
going to wish him luck, Ian decided he was going to put this farce to a stop. He just needed one more
shot of something to get his courage up and his nagging doubts down.

The noise and the mass of human flesh carried him to the bar, where he squeezed between two
giggling girls who harassed him slightly for being rude. Ordinarily, he’d be appalled by his behavior,
but he was on a mission. Instead, he asked them what they were drinking then ordered them three chocolate martinis. This distracted him momentarily as he wondered how he’d never had one before.

“Mm,” he told the women as they moved in close on either side when the drinks arrived. It went down in one long gulp, so he ordered another round giving the bartender his credit card at this point. As they waited for the next drink to arrive, he told them about his dilemma and they confirmed for him that he needed to make his move, even offering to go with him if he needed a posse.

Figuring he could use all the help he could get, Ian took them up on their offer. With his credit card in one hand and his martini in the other, he led them toward the pool tables where Mickey and whatshisname were playing against a couple of older guys. When they arrived, Mickey was just stepping back from his shot to pick up his beer glass from a corner table.

Perfect, Ian could get his attention away from prying eyes.

“Mickey,” he said, wondering if he might be a little too drunk based on how it came out. Blue eyes cut to his, and Ian forgot what he was here to say until an elbow nudged him in the back and the movement sloshed some liquid onto his hand. He tried to lick it up without spilling more of his drink but ended up having to slurp some straight from the glass.

He heard Mickey laugh. “What the fuck are you drinking?”

“Chocotini. Want one?”

“Um, no.”

“Enjoying your Flat Tire?”

“Yup.” He held his beer glass up in a salute, while they continued to stand around looking at each other. Mickey seemed sort of happy to see him and that made Ian completely useless.

“These your friends?” Mickey asked looking on either side of Ian.

“Oh, yeah,” he looked to his right, “Lexi.”

“Haley,” she corrected him.

“Okay, and this is Haley,” he said turning left.

“Lexi,” she corrected him.

He frowned in concentration but shook his head when the effort proved too much. Turning back to Mickey, he caught the smile he was trying to hide behind the knuckle of his index finger. Ian smiled back. Until fucking Paolo showed up.

“Your turn, Mickey.” His chest pressed into Mickey’s shoulder, a hand went to his chest and his head started to dip forward, Chapstick lips all pursed.

“Ay,” Mickey barked pushing back.

“Oh, sorry. We’ll save that for later,” he flirted rubbing the space between Mickey’s pecs.

Ian was done. If he didn’t leave now, he was going to do one of three things: vomit, cry or snap Paolo’s neck. None of which were likely to make a good impression on Mickey.

Lexi and Haley had followed him outside—after they were all stopped by the bouncer for trying to
smuggle chocotinis out—and helped him order an Uber. They’d exchanged numbers and made him promise to meet them for Sunday brunch.

Now it was Saturday night, barely past 10:00, and his weekend had been shit. The guy he wanted didn’t want him, the guy he didn’t want did, his brothers were staring at him like he was an alien in their midst and he had a brunch reservation with his new best friends.
Mandy was enjoying some quiet in the lunchroom on Monday, eating her chicken salad sandwich and scrolling through the selection of ankle boots on Amazon. She’d developed a minor obsession with the UPS delivery guy who frequented her neighborhood and had decided it was time to meet him face to face. Plus she really needed a new pair of ankle boots with summer around the corner.

Ian had come in part way through her lunch break but simply nodded and went about heating some pasta. She glanced up at him a few times in case he was interested in chatting, but he appeared to be either deep in thought or not up for socializing.

Their peacefulness was rudely interrupted by male voices coming from the doorway.

“Do you jerk off to gun websites?”

“Beats the hell out of the shit you jerk off to.”

Slava hooted then waved an apology when he saw Mandy’s scowl. He went directly to the coffee pot, refilling his travel mug and snagging two donuts from the box, while Mickey went to stand in front of the vending machine. Ian stiffened and she caught the movement out of the corner of her eye, making her wonder what was going on that set him off. She’d sensed some weird vibes at Murphy’s on Friday night, but she’d also drank way too many shots and wondered if she’d been imagining things.

The vibes were back today though. Ian looked down into his plastic container of noodles then flicked his eyes up and down Mickey, who was getting into his fighting stance in preparation for doing battle with the vending machine. She could offer to plug in the money and make the selection for him, but it was just too much fun to watch him get frustrated when his treat refused to follow through with the process properly.

“Every goddamn time,” he cursed.

She sat back for the show and to get a better view of Ian’s response to all this. Interestingly, his eyes spent more time on Mickey’s back than on his lunch. Meanwhile Slava had taken up position on the loveseat along the far wall. Biting into a honey dip, he was also apparently interested in watching Ian watch Mickey. How Ian was completely unaware that he was the center of their attention was suspicious as hell.

“Seriously?” Mickey’s foot collided with the front of the vending machine, but his Doritos hung suspended mid-air. “I don’t fucking get it.” He was talking to himself now, clearly offended as his hands landed on his hips and he chewed on the side of his lip.

“Careful, Mick. More people die in vending machine accidents than shark attacks each year,” Slava said helpfully, sipping from his mug.

“Yeah, how many vending machines die each year?” He tried jiggling the machine a little with his palms, but the bag refused to fall. “I just want my damn lunch.”

Ian pushed his chair out and walked over to stand beside Mickey. He shoved a five dollar bill into the feed and punched in A3 causing both bags of Doritos to land in the shoot. Her brother looked down at the top of Ian’s head as he bent to retrieve them.

If she’d been eating her chicken salad, Mandy was certain she would have choked to death from the
intake of breath. Oh shit, she thought. Her brother’s expression was soft in a way she’d never even dreamed was possible. Ian stood up offering both bags to Mickey. As they discussed who should eat the chips, Mandy switched her attention to Slava, who smiled hugely at her. Apparently, this was not news to him. She flicked her eyebrows at him accusingly, and he shrugged.

With two bags of Doritos in hand, Mickey turned to his partner. “You ready or what?”

Slava stood up, wiping his lips with a napkin. “I am. Now thank Ian for rescuing your chips.”

“That goddamn machine is out to—” he stopped after getting only an expectant look from Slava. His attention shifted to Ian who was still standing in front of the vending machine. Nodding once firmly, Mickey ran a finger over his upper lip.

“You’re welcome, Mickey.”

The two men left and Ian returned to his lunch, while Mandy’s brain worked overtime processing. Was this why Mickey had escorted her home on Friday night, claiming she was in no condition to take a cab alone, rather than take Paolo up his obvious invitation to bang? She was used to her brother being evasive when it came to his love life, so she hadn’t really thought too much about it. But now she wondered how much of his decision was because of Ian.

She sat for a moment in indecision, but then remembered that she wasn’t prone to keeping her nose out of her brother’s business, so why start now when she was so clearly needed?

“I’ll wait for the next one,” Mickey announced to the elevator crammed with people. He stepped back, but Mandy reached for the panel of buttons, hitting the “open” icon with determination.

“No, we’ll make room for you,” she declared, giving her brother the look he knew correctly to interpret as “don’t argue cause you’re gonna lose.” She shifted closer to the side of the elevator leaving a sliver of room between her and Ian, and had she been feeling eviler, she would have cackled with pleasure.

Mickey looked horrified and remained rooted to the ground for so long that the elevator’s alarm started bleeping and the other passengers let out a collective sigh of annoyance. All of which was enough to get his feet moving. He tried to keep some space between himself and Ian, but the elevator doors, which had started to close, reopened because he was blocking the way.

“Come on, Mick, squeeze in,” she said grabbing his elbow. Meanwhile Ian tried adjusting his body to make more room for her cranky brother, but they still wound up with only inches between their chests. Ian ran a hand down his shirt front, smoothing his tie, and Mandy watched closely as Mickey followed the motion then attempted to look away, but he was so close to Ian’s chest that he had to crank his neck to see anything else.

The elevator pinged again after moving from the parking garage level to the main floor, and Mickey groaned audibly.

“Oh, hey, guys,” Slava announced to the car in general. “Room for one more?”

Mickey turned away from Ian to face his partner, obviously about to refuse him entry, but Mandy
beat him to it. “Of course, Mickey’s happy to step back.”

“No.”

But Slava ignored him and squished his muscular frame into the elevator. Mickey had no choice but to step back slightly. Right into Ian.

Mandy watched both men stiffen in response. Then Ian closed his eyes and tipped his chin toward Mickey so slightly that had she not been hyper-vigilant to every little movement, she would have missed it. Mickey just stood there, stiff and unmoving, except for his jaw which was twitching. She continued the trajectory of her gaze until she landed on Slava, and they smiled at each other.

She had been stalking her boss and her brother for several days now, determined to find out the extent of their interest in each other. Whenever they were in the same room, Mickey vibrated like he was controlling every possible human emotion, and Ian hovered around like he was waiting for those emotions to finally burst out of Mickey and splatter everything in the vicinity, including and most especially Ian.

Enjoying herself immensely, Mandy acknowledged that being an adept matchmaker takes skill, but that skill can only be enhanced by the intervention of fate. Another ding signaled the elevator’s arrival at the fourth floor. Mickey’s eyes shot up to the red number 4 flashing above the doors, and he released a pained huff through his nose. She could read the thought bubble above his head that bitched about stopping at every fucking floor.

Helpfully, Slava pressed into Mickey’s shoulder to make room for someone at the back of the car to exit. This gave Mickey the options of pressing against Slava, Mandy or Ian.

He opted for none of those options and pushed Slava aside, so he could exit the elevator. “I’ll take the goddamn stairs,” he barked.

Ian wasn’t having any of that apparently. He wrapped a hand around Mickey’s bicep stopping his escape. “No, I will. You take the elevator.”

Mickey looked at the hand and pulled his arm lightly out of Ian’s grip. Neither man realized that the doors were now closing, and the elevator was about to leave without them. Mandy refrained from waving good-bye, thinking that they would either have to wait together for another elevator car or take the stairs; either way, they’d be doing it together.

As the doors slid shut, she heard Ian tell Mickey that it looked like they’d have to take the stairs together. Twelve flights of heavy breathing. She wondered who would be in the lead.

“So,” Slava began, aware of the car full of eavesdroppers, “you finally noticed?”

“Oh my god, I can’t believe I missed it.” They did another round of readjusting to allow half the car to empty on the ninth floor. “When did you notice?”

“Cashmere,” he smiled in memory, blue eyes filled with pleasure.

“Ahh, fuck, it all makes sense now.” She flashed on Ian’s sweater that day. “Day-am.”

“Indeed.”

They arrived on the sixteenth floor, exiting into the Elite reception area where Kyle was tidying up the seating area. Slava continued toward his cubicle, while Mandy stayed to help Kyle.
“Yes?” he asked when she restacked the cyber security pamphlets that he had just straightened. “Can I help you?”

“Nope. Can’t a girl just offer a hand?” She dropped the pamphlets in a haphazard pile when the heavy door to the stairwell swung open. Stepping over to the coffee machine, she grabbed the box of pods from under the table pretending to refill the coffee tray as Mickey puffed his way into reception, Ian right behind him.

“Well, that was invigorating,” Ian said, breathing evenly and smiling at the back of Mickey’s head.

“Sure,” her brother spat over his shoulder. “Anyway, I’ll make you a copy of the dude’s itinerary.”

“When does he arrive?” They’d obviously found something to talk about on the way up.

“Late next week. After we,” Mickey looked distinctly uncomfortable, “get back from El Paso. He’s going on some sort of tour to thank his American investors.”

“He’s here for the big gala? To announce the release of their new drug?”

“Guess they’re releasing it in the U.S. first. Europe next month.”

“Is it point to point or continuous protection?” Ian was snapping questions at the back of Mickey’s head.

“Mostly point to point. The guy wasn’t interested in having someone on his ass all day. Basically just wants driven around the city not babysat.”

“Did you prepare a target vulnerability assessment?”

Mandy could see the pained look on Mickey’s face and he wasn’t even looking in her direction. It was in the way he lifted a hand to the side of his nose. Be careful, Ian, she wanted to warn him.

“Sure, Gallagher. In triplicate.”

Ian smirked. “Do you anticipate any problems?”

“Nothing specific, but he’s the CEO of a pharmaceutical company. Gotta have some enemies.”

“Oh,” Ian said sharply and Mickey shot him another look over his shoulder. “So it might be dangerous?”

“Nah, glorified chauffeur shit only.”

“That’s good,” Ian breathed, and Mandy felt herself smile. Aw, he’s worried about Mickey’s safety.

“But he’ll expect the VIP treatment.”

“Which means what exactly?” They were just about at the edge of reception and out of ear shot, so Mandy had to strain a bit to eavesdrop.

“That we at least pretend that he’s got enemies lurking in every corner.”

That was the last thing Mandy heard, so she shoved the box of coffee pods into Kyle’s surprised hands. “I think you need more decaf.”
Twenty minutes later, Mandy was tapping lightly at Ian’s cubicle. “Um, I just saw Mickey head toward the photocopy room, and I overheard that he was making you a copy of the itinerary for that CEO guy from Helix that he’s escorting while he’s here in Chicago.”

Ian was immediately on high alert, and Mandy kept her face neutral. “Yes, he said he would make me a copy.”

“Well, have you ever seen him in the photocopy room?” Ian was waiting for her to continue, so obviously concerned that Mickey might be in distress that he was tapping his fingertips on the top of his desk. “You might want to give him a hand before he gives the copier a beatdown.”

Ian shot up. “Of course, I know a thing or two about copiers.”

Mandy figured all he needed was a white steed on which to ride into the photocopier room. Watching Ian make his way swiftly toward the back of the bank of cubicles, she knew it might take Mickey a little longer to realize that Ian was exactly what he needed. Before she cornered each of them and browbeat them into submission, she had one more item on her agenda.

Perks was always quiet right after lunch, so Mandy chose that time to saunter into the coffee shop. Her cat eyes scanned the room locking on Paolo, who was bent over a garbage bag, jeans pulled tight across his ass. After tying the ends of the bag into a bow, he made his way toward the back door. Perfect, she thought. They could have a private conversation.

She followed him out the door, quiet while he tossed the bag high, so it would sail over the wooden enclosure and land in the bin. He looked damn good doing it too. No wonder Mickey had him on his pre-Ian radar. She was about to find out if he was on his post-Ian radar as well.

Paolo sucked in some air when he saw her standing in the doorway watching him. “Mandy?”

She gave a little wave wondering, now that she had him trapped, how in the hell she was going to get the intel she needed without tipping her brother off that she’d been digging. It was one thing to invite the guy to their Friday night drinks; it was another to interrogate him with the intention of finding out if he was boning her brother. Mickey had left the bar alone on Friday night, but she wasn’t sure whether the two of them had any other plans cooking.

“Hi, Paolo,” she began. “How are you?” Pleasantries out of the way, she moved on without waiting for a response. “So you got any plans this weekend?”

He looked over her shoulder like he sensed a trap and needed an escape. Sheesh, she hadn’t even started her questioning yet. Crossing her arms, she waited him out.

“I’m covering for Aliya cause she has a baby shower,” he explained running his hand along the back of his neck. She told herself she wasn’t getting distracted by the arrow tattooed in rainbow colors on his tightly flexed inner bicep.
“Mhm,” she prompted letting him know with her eyebrows that she wasn’t interested in his work schedule.

“Um, might go shopping for some new sneakers?” It ended as a question like he was asking permission, which she was happy to give him.

“Alone, I assume?” She couldn’t imagine Mickey joining him at the mall, but her brother was full of surprises this week, so who the fuck knew?

“I think so. Did you want to join me?” He didn’t look pleased at that thought. Apparently, her intimidation game was still strong.

She waved his question away. “No evening plans?”

He shook his head.

“Great!” she announced. “Have a nice weekend.” One interrogation down, two to go.

“You got it bad for my brother, huh?”

Ian’s mouth dropped open, fork halfway to his lips. She’d followed him into the lunchroom, hovering around the pop machine while he fussed over his salad and eventually sat at one of the tables.

He looked at her then away. “I don’t know wha—” But he stopped there, clearly knowing it was ridiculous to deny it because he had done a shit job of hiding his feelings. “It’s that obvious, Mandy?”

She shrugged, sipping her Diet Coke and sitting down across from him.

“God. Does everyone know?”

“Well, I don’t think Gabe knows or you’d hear about it.”

Ian nodded tossing his fork into his container of salad. “I guess that’s good.”

“You’ll need to come clean to him and fill out the disclosure paperwork when things move to the next level, though,” she added knowing their Director needed to know what everyone was up to at all times.

Ian sat forward. “The next level?”

“You know…” she paused widening her eyes and nodding. He just continued to stare at her.

“Dating? Relationship? Sex?”

He tugged at the collar of his dress shirt, loosening the tie slightly. “I think you’re reading more into this that exists, Mandy.”

“You trying to tell me you aren’t a goner?” She narrowed her eyes at him, daring him to lie.
He shook his head. “No, but I’m not sure the feelings are mutual.”

Picking up her pop can, Mandy pushed out of her chair. “Love is blind, Ian.” She patted his back as she passed his chair. “I’m not though.”

Exiting the lunchroom, she slowed as she reached Mickey’s desk. “Come, I need a smoke.”

“I quit.”

“Miiicccccckkkkeeeeyyyyy.”

“You’re an evil fucking genius.”

“Who needs a smoke. Come on, brother, you can enjoy some second-hand smoke.”

They made their way to the rooftop, breathing in something resembling fresh air and admiring the view of their city. She tapped a cigarette into her palm, then held it out for him when he flicked his fingers at her.

“What?” she asked when he frowned at her.

“Why you giving me one of your smokes?”

“Cause I love you,” she began touching her lighter to the end of his smoke. “Oh, speaking of love.”

His eyes shot to hers, and he choked slightly on his intake of nicotine and chemicals.

“Yes, Mickey, I know.”

He turned away from her completely, facing the Chicago skyline. “Dunno what you’re talking about.”

“Sure, okay, we’ll start with denial and eventually work our way toward the truth. I got time.”

Mickey sucked harshly on his smoke, exhaling into the late afternoon sky. “Don’t wanna talk about this, Mandy.”

“I know,” she said softly. They puffed for several minutes, while Mandy decided how far to take it and Mickey likely played out scenarios where she fell off the side of the building. “Can you just tell me how bad you got it? Like, scale from one to ten. One is take him or leave him. Ten is I’m so fucked.”

He dropped his butt to the concrete, grinding it with the toe of his boot. She watched him make his decision to let her in for a split second. He turned toward her, eyes bright blue and slightly tormented. “That as high as your numbers go?”

Mandy had one more task to complete before she could go home for the weekend. Logging into her computer, she located the hotel reservations she’d made the week before, clicked the cancel button and set to work finding just the right hotel room.
Mickey hadn’t been to El Paso, Texas for a couple years, not since the last time Chaz Handley had wanted to off-load a selection of WW2 rifles. He’d liked the old guy well enough since they had guns in common, and he’d enjoyed the southwestern sun. This visit, though, instead of Chaz, they were dealing with his uptight daughter; instead of pleasant warmth, they were dealing with scalding heat that was trying to melt the skin from his body; and instead of hanging around with Slava, he was dealing with Ian fucking Gallagher and his goddamn suit again.

After a three-hour flight which he’d tried unsuccessfully to sleep through, they’d arrived at the El Paso International Airport during the tail end of morning rush hour. Mandy had booked them an SUV, and the air conditioning was pumping as they crawled their way from the airport to Elite’s El Paso office, where they were scheduled to meet with the two security escorts assigned to the Handley contract. Since the diamond heist, the procedure for transport of merchandise over one million dollars had changed to include more personnel. Plus the complexity of moving a truck load of guns 1,500 miles meant they needed help.

Mickey was tired from getting up before the sun, sweaty despite the air conditioning and frustrated that he looked and felt like shit. Meanwhile, the damn redhead beside him looked like he’d stepped out of a goddamn magazine with his—what had Ian called it? Chambray suit. He’d reluctantly asked Ian about it because it appeared to travel well since he couldn’t see any wrinkles forming despite the cramped flight and Texas heat. Mickey, on the other hand, was going to need to change his clothes a dozen times before their late afternoon meeting with Handley’s daughter, so he didn’t look like a fucking tramp that Ian picked up from beneath an overpass.

After parking a block from Elite and adding another layer of sweat walking to the building, they were led to a conference room where the two escorts were waiting for them. Mickey recognized the woman, Cheyenne, but had never met the preppy blond dude, who offered his hand to them. “Axton,” he said.

“That your name?” Mickey asked, wondering when people started putting random letters together and calling it a name.

Ian stepped slightly in front of Mickey, shaking the guy’s hand before the conversation could take a turn. “Nice to meet you. I’m Ian.” He turned immediately to the tall exotic looking woman. “Cheyenne,” she said then turned to Mickey. “Nice to see you again, Mick.”

They got straight to business, eating pastries, drinking coffee and reviewing all the material they had on Handley, both father and daughter, as well as the upcoming auction. By early afternoon, they had a basic plan for product transportation should they get the contract. Cheyenne and Axton were cool with Ian taking the lead where Sadie was concerned since the guns were destined for Sotheby’s Chicago. Plus he was the only one interested in pitching Elite’s services to a middle aged socialite.

With only a couple hours until their meeting with the Handleys, they left the El Paso office and swung by a Burger King on their way to the hotel Mandy had booked for them. As they sat in the parking lot eating a pair of Bacon Whoppers, Mickey tried not to feel either the uncomfortable sheen of sweat or the comfortable presence of Ian. The guy didn’t talk too much but was kind of clever and funny when he did. He wasn’t a slacker or stuck up or even half as fucking annoying as everyone else in the world.
Stuffing the last bite of burger into his mouth, Mickey wondered why he didn’t go for it. As he swallowed and wiped his lips with a napkin, he twisted just slightly in the driver’s seat so he’d be at a less awkward angle to talk to Ian. Bunching up the napkin and wrapper, he was about to ask Ian to pass him the bag, but the guy absently lifted the paper bag from between his feet and held it up for Mickey’s garbage. He dropped the items in, slowly looking up into Ian’s face as his pink tongue poked out swiping the corner of his lip and taking a tiny dollop of mayo with it. As his eyes continued to travel along Ian’s profile, he remembered the first time he’d seen that face. He’d known in an instant that he wasn’t getting out of this unscathed.

When he realized that Mickey was staring at him, Ian stopped chewing his burger and swallowed noisily. Mickey could see his chest rising and falling with each breath because his pale blue suit jacket and tie were draped over the seat behind him and several buttons of his dress shirt were opened revealing a dusting of fine curly hair. Like all his clothing, the shirt fit him perfectly, just this side of too tight.

His lips parted as he inhaled, slowly turning his body toward Mickey, then Ian smiled at him, slowly, intimately, like it was only for him. Like it was because of him.

Mickey hadn’t moved, but some part of him was already on the other side of the center console, already on Ian. He was certain if he ever actually let himself go physically, he’d never be able to reign himself in again. Ian’s goddamn green eyes were waiting for him to make a move, and that scared the hell out of him.

“I need to change clothes before we head to the Handley ranch,” he muttered angry at himself as he turned toward the steering wheel and fought the sudden overwhelming nicotine craving. “You done eating?”

He could sense Ian regrouping and gathering up all their garbage. “Sure, Mickey.”

“You gotta be kidding me,” Mickey hissed. “Fucking Mandy. Thinks she’s got a sense of fucking humor.”

Ian laughed quietly, glancing around the lobby of The Loft by Hilton, some futuristic looking hotel with so much minimalist white furniture that Mickey was sure just thinking about sitting on it was enough to get it dirty.

“Chic,” Ian stated.

“Chic, my ass.”

Ian lowered his eyes, so they could imperceptibly graze the shape of his ass, but Mickey caught him and lifted his eyebrows, feigning enough shock to chastise Ian.

“Um, let’s go check in.” He walked away from Mickey heading for the long, sleek reception desk and the tall, sleek woman behind it. “Reservation for Gallagher.”

Natalie—Mickey noted finally someone had a real name around here—punched shit into her space age tablet then glanced back up at them with a smile so wide, the white rivaled the rest of the lobby. “Congratulations!”
“Uh, thanks?” Ian said looking at Mickey to see if he could add something to the confusion, but he had no fucking idea what they’d done to get this kind of reception.

“We’ve left a bottle of our finest champagne in the mini-fridge, please help yourself.”

Mickey was sure he’d hate champagne, but then again, he hadn’t ever thought that cashmere would cross his radar, so who the fuck knew.

“Champagne?” Ian asked clearly unable to do anything but parrot key words back to her.

“Yes, Mr. Gallagher, the Hilton’s policy is to offer a free bottle to all newlyweds who book our honeymoon suite.” She was back to clacking away, and Mickey watched a red flush rise up the back of Ian’s neck.

“Newlyweds?”

Mickey would laugh at Ian’s inability to formulate a sentence if he wasn’t equally as thunderstruck. The minute they sorted this all out, Mandy was in for a Mickey-style tongue lashing she’d never forget.

“I think there’s been a mistake,” Ian began. “We aren’t—”

Ian fumbled around with his words as well as his wallet, which he’d set on the countertop in front of him.

“Hitched,” Mickey finished for him.

“Oh! I’m so sorry!” She went back to clicking her screen, a bit more frantically now. “I don’t understand then. The reservation came from a third party biller. Did you incorrectly enter information?”

“No, Natalie,” Mickey explained. “My sister did cause she’s hi-larious. We’re gonna need two rooms.”

“I see,” but clearly she didn’t. “Unfortunately, we are solidly booked…” She trailed off letting them piece that together.

The three of them stood in silence unsure where to go from here. “How many goddamn beds in this room?”

“One king, but the sofa is a hide-a-bed so the room can function as a family suite as well.”

“Fine, we’ll take it.” When Ian finally looked at him, Mickey tossed his hands in the air. “I need a fucking shower, and I’m not in the mood to search this steam bath of a city for a couple of available rooms. Besides, we’re leaving first thing tomorrow not moving in together.”

Why’d he add that last part? Jesus, this was going to be a long ass day and night.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Mickey hissed for the second time.
“Oh,” Ian sighed.

It was goddamn ridiculous, is what it was. The hotel room was huge with a view of the Franklin Mountains in the distance. The king size bed was center stage with blood red sheets and comforter, and more pillows than Mickey’d probably owned in his lifetime. He could see the layout of the bathroom from where they were standing at the doorway, and it fit right in with the rest of the suite. Huge and sexy as fuck.

But it was the giant ass motherfucking Jacuzzi tub in the corner of the bedroom that was going to result in his sister’s untimely death because he was going to murder her when he got back to Chicago. First, though, he was going to send her a long, detailed series of death threats.

As Ian sighed again from his position at his elbow, Mickey pulled out his phone to send off the first threat. He selected a gun emoji and hit send. Almost immediately, an emoji of two men holding hands popped up on his screen.

This is war, he texted to her then pocketed his phone, determined to have the final say. At least in his own mind.

“For fuck sake,” he huffed and turned toward the bathroom. “I’m having a shower before we head out.” Slamming the door behind him, he refused to acknowledge the presence of the marble monstrosity in the other room or the undeniable urge he had to take advantage of it. With his clothes in a heap on the white tiled floor and the water turned to ball shriveling cold, he stood in the shower wondering if he should rub one out in preparation for a night that was surely going to test his willpower, but he couldn’t get his hand, or his dick, to co-operate knowing Ian was on the other side of the wall. His body had essentially declared: “oh hell no, not when you got access to that.”

Bending over to pick up the soap, he let out a few foul-mouthed curses when the tiny hotel sized bar slipped from his fingers and sloshed around the shower floor. He banged his head on the tap as he stood up because he was trying to rub shampoo out of his eyes. With burning eyes and a throbbing skull, he just stood under the water breathing and decided the most expedient method to avoid the temptation in the other room was to find somewhere else to spend the night.

In fresh cargos and an Elite Polo shirt, Mickey offered the bathroom to Ian who still looked fresh as a goddamn daisy, standing in front of the giant picture window with the sun haloing his copper hair. The sleeves of his dress shirt were loosely rolled up and his feet were bare, and why the fuck Mickey found that all so damn sexy, he had no idea, but he wanted to pluck his eyeballs out of his head for being so goddamn enamored of some dude’s fucking clothes.

With his bag in hand, Ian disappeared into the bathroom and Mickey turned to the Jacuzzi tub, feeling like he was entering into a showdown of sorts. It would easily accommodate a couple of wet, slippery bodies. Two wet, slippery bodies in particular. He knew exactly what position they would be in as well. He could see himself in the mirror that surrounded the tub, but he avoided his own gaze afraid of what he might see, but pretty sure it would look a lot like desperation. Instead he prowled the room. The mini-fridge was packed with an assortment of alcohol, including the advertised champagne.

With his mouth watering for the taste of booze, he took a moment to continue his retaliation campaign and shot a little yellow emoji face with X’s for eyes to Mandy. She was quick to send back: xxoo. It didn’t seem like she was getting the message.

Frustrated, he found himself in front of the bathroom door. Banging a fist against the wood, he yelled, “I’ll meet you in the lobby.”
Ian mumbled something and Mickey checked his pockets for the basics before heading downstairs for a smoke. One day, life would leave him the fuck alone and he’d be able to quit, but not today. Thanks to that pain in the ass his parents dropped on him 25 years ago.

The trip out to Chaz Handley’s ranch was quiet. Ian spent most of it staring out the passenger window at the Texas countryside, and despite feeling a layer of unease over this behavior, Mickey didn’t question it because conversation, even work related, had the potential to send Mickey back into a spiral of sexual need. So they ignored each other.

Sadie’s son, Lamont—Mickey kept his thoughts to himself—remotely opened the front gate allowing them to enter the long, tree-lined driveway leading to a huge ranch-style house that appeared to be a half an acre long. When they stopped at the main doors, Lamont was waiting on the steps to escort them to Chaz’s study. They followed his too tight Wranglers and cowboy hat through the labyrinth of hallways until they arrived in a typical Texan rich guy office. Lamont removed his Stetson before entering the room and introducing his mother, who was dressed like they were heading to a fancy dinner where people wore pearls as a regular thing. Once again, Mickey wondered if he needed to up his fashion game.

Behind her, though, was the specially built room where Chaz had kept his gun collection. Belatedly, Mickey realized that he was in a world of trouble. All that pent up frustration he’d been trying to stuff down inside was about to collide with over a million dollars worth of world class firepower.

The door to the gun vault was wide open, and even from the entrance to the study where he was standing, Mickey could see the silver scroll engraving on an original Royal Double Barrel rifle that was mounted on the wall. He wasn’t even a rifle kind of guy, but it was a beauty. His fingers itched to feel the back-action.

“We understand the mission specific threats and have developed comprehensive risk management strategies tailored to your unique needs that I’d love to discuss with you today,” Ian had already begun his campaign to win Sadie Handley over.

Not needed for this part of the plan, Mickey made his way into the steel-enforced cedar room and nearly creamed his jeans. He stood in the very center of the 10- by 8-foot room and slowly, slowly turned unable to pick an item to focus on. They were all so fucking beautiful. He got that collectors needed to protect their investment, but it seemed sacrilegious to him to keep them locked up. They needed to be handled and used. That’s why they were created.

By the time Ian and Sadie made their way to the vault, Mickey was studying a pair of Revolutionary War saddle pistols complete with gold and silver inlay. Chaz had the firearms organized roughly by age, giving the viewer a sort of walk through the history of gun manufacturing in America. This would leave the more modern handguns for last, and specifically, the Desert Ironwood. Mickey licked his lips in anticipation of that.

“Yes, of course. Should pre-defined security protocols be violated while product is in transit, our Command Control Center will alert an emergency response team,” Ian was nattering on using fancy words that seemed to be making Sadie happy, and from the way her son was following Ian around like an eager fucking puppy, he was even happier. “However, our protection agents are highly trained to ensure untampered cargo reaches its destination on time.”
Jesus Christ, Mickey thought, had Ian memorized every goddamn manual Elite ever produced?

“Which brings me to Mickey,” Ian said casually.

Glancing left and right at the sound of his name, Mickey mentally cursed Gallagher, but he nodded at the small group as he faced them. Ian with his little smile, Sadie with an expectant look, and Lamont with that dopey ass smirk.

“Mickey has been a protective agent for several years and may know as much about firearms as your late father.” Damn, Mickey thought, he sounded like a proud parent.

“Wonderful,” Sadie agreed. “Tell me more about the risk management protocols you had published in that security journal.”

Suppressing an eye roll, Mickey continued drooling his way around the room. His progress was halted, however, a few feet from the gun of his dreams by the warm body of a tall ginger. Flicking a glance up to the face, he caught Ian studying him.

“Sadie,” Ian said moving away from Mickey’s side. “Would it be acceptable for Mickey to hold the Desert Ironwood? You know these gun lovers.” He laughed conspiratorially.

“Do I ever? I think my father considered everyone of these,” she gestured around the room, “his children.”

Ian murmured his understanding, while Mickey held his breath.

“I don’t think I could say no. Lamont open the display case.”

Mickey could hear keys jingling behind him as Lamont made his way toward the glass enclosure that held the pistol. It was suspended in a thick glass display case by a metal rod inserted into the muzzle allowing the viewer to see the gun from every angle. Lamont slid the key into the lock at the base of the display and both Mickey and Ian stepped closer.

“Well, it is gorgeous. The pictures didn’t do it justice at all,” Ian said unaware his breath was landing on Lamont’s neck as he peered over his shoulder. Mickey saw the fucker light up like a Christmas tree then offer the gun he’d removed from the case to Ian first.

“Oh, no, Mickey wants to hold it,” Ian said waving it away.

“It’s cool. I can go after you.”

Ian looked at him in confusion, but Mickey stood his ground waiting. He was going to take a mental snapshot of this moment as a souvenir. The metallic sheen of his dream gun in the strong, capable hands of his dream man. Neither were his, but for a single moment, he imagined they belonged to him.

Until fucking Lamont crowded up to Ian like he wanted a closer look at a gun he had probably never had an ounce of interest in. Ian finally twigged to the dude’s intent, and he shifted closer to Mickey to carefully pass him the gun. Lamont was temporarily forgotten as the 40 ounces of billet steel covered in black mirror double blued finish landed in his palm. Mickey was sure he let out an involuntary moan as the smooth grip shaped his hand, and he fought the urge to aim it at the bullseye engraved into the wood of the inner door.

Eventually but reluctantly, he passed the pistol back to Lamont and avoided Ian completely because he could feel those warm green eyes drilling into him, and he was fighting the urge to give into a
fucking sexual fantasy where he and Ian had this room to themselves for a half hour.

After Ian finished using every security related word he’d learned in university, Lamont walked them back to their vehicle and stuffed his business card into Ian’s hand. Apparently, the guy was free that evening if Ian wanted to have dinner to discuss anything related to the auction. Ian left him with a vague answer that neither agreed nor disagreed with that plan.

As they made their way back down the long driveway, Mickey drummed a finger against the steering wheel, only stopping when he couldn’t hold his tongue any longer. “You gonna call him?”

“Lamont?” Ian looked surprised. “Of course not.”

“You didn’t say that.”

“I don’t want him crying to his mommy and costing us this contract.”

Mickey pinched his lips together in distaste but didn’t argue.

“Speaking of dinner,” Ian said tossing a bunch of paperwork into the back seat, “do we have a plan?”

“Whatever.” Mickey was starving—for food and other stuff—but this was feeling a little too much like a date leading up to a dip in the Jacuzzi tub before bed. Blissfully, he’d forgotten about their goddamn hotel room while he’d been eye fucking a bunch of antique firearms.

“How about the restaurant in the hotel then?” Ian suggested.
The menu items for the hotel’s restaurant were as pretentious as the hotel itself, and Mickey made it clear to Ian that he’d fucked up in picking the location, by flipping the menu over several times then peering from under his eyebrows at his dinner date.

“Sorry,” Ian offered feeling chastised. He really should have known based on their surroundings that they didn’t want to dine here.

“What the fuck is a massaged fig salad?” Mickey’s aggrieved voice carried over to Ian as he scanned the menu. “Fifteen fucking dollars?”

Surpressing a smile, Ian figured they were here so might as well enjoy it. “Well, if that’s not to your liking, there’s always the acorn and pressed artichoke croquettes.”

Mickey hummed. “It’s only twelve.”

“I think I’ll have the seasonal water and folk kale salad.”

Blue eyes appeared over the top of the menu. “You watching your figure?”

“Unless you’re offering?” Ian kept the menu covering most of his face because he had a hopeless grin on his face. Flirting with Mickey was now the only thing he ever wanted to do with his life.

Mickey continued to eye Ian over the top of his menu before disappearing again. “I’m definitely in the mood for the seasoned chorizo crumble with farm-to-table fennel pate.”

“Will you be getting the fingerling rice with it?”

Ian could hear laughter from the other side of the menu, and he blessed whoever came up with this ridiculous menu. Mickey might be starving when they leave but making him laugh would be worth it.

“Duh, Ian.”

And for the first time since they’d met, he used Ian’s first name.

“Good evening, gentleman. Welcome to Aurelia & Dank. My name is Bronw—”

Mickey dropped his menu to the table and held his hand up. Their server’s bright red lips paused in surprise, and she looked at Ian to see if he wanted her to continue. Ian just smiled.

“Do you have any questions about the menu?” she asked warily.

“Seems pretty straightforward to me,” Ian replied, getting a chuckle from Mickey.

She returned her attention to Mickey. “I’ll get the thing with pork and a Budweiser.” Ian watched him narrow his eyes, daring her to deny him the beverage option, but she nodded and turned to Ian.
“The same,” Ian concluded.

As she left with their menus and a promise to return soon with their beverages, Mickey eyed Ian. “You were waiting for me to order?”

“I just couldn’t decide. Didn’t want restaurant envy.”

“Too late for that shit.”

They were sitting on the patio, an oversized umbrella protecting them from what remained of the sun. Only one other couple had ventured outside, so it was almost like they had the place to themselves. Ian could hear the faint sounds of downtown El Paso traffic in the distance, but otherwise, it was quiet.

“Growing up, I never would of guessed I’d be sitting here right now.” He leaned back in his chair watching Mickey fiddle with his butter knife.

“Yeah, you couldn’t see yourself eating tormented seaweed?”

Ian basically giggled then started to clear his throat to cover it, but Mickey was grinning and trying to cover it with his knuckle, so Ian let himself laugh.

“Ah, no tormented seaweed. In fact, there were days where my siblings and I had to drink water out of season.”

“No shit. That’s rough. Did you always have someone to massage your fig?"

Ian was certain he’d never enjoyed a moment more than this. “Most of the time I had to massage my own fig.”

“You get pretty good at it?”

“I can handle a fig,” he said proudly.

“Good to know.”

Their drinks arrived and Ian tipped his beer bottle toward Mickey. “To the South Side.” Mickey clinked the base against Ian’s.

“You miss it?”

Ian shook his head. “My sister still lives in the old house, so any time I want to reminisce, I can stop by for dinner. But I currently live with two of my brothers near the University, so I don’t get back there often. You?”

“Nah, I’m out, Mandy’s out and my brothers are doing their thing, so I don’t look back. Too many shitty memories.”

Ian felt the all too familiar weight of shitty memories descend upon him, and he looked off into the distance past the smattering of high rises to the mountain range beyond.

“You having some of those shitty memories right now?” Mickey asked as he tipped the beer bottle to his lips.

“Sorry. Regret hits hard sometimes.”
“Ay, man, we all just did what we had to do. Don’t see any point in regrets, myself.”

Ian sat forward in his chair, causing Mickey to widen his eyes in surprise. “You really believe that?”

“I just fucking said so, didn’t I?”

They lapsed into silence, and each time they made eye contact, it felt to Ian like touching his finger against an electrical current.

“Your hand-pulled pork belly with braised artichoke,” the server announced laying two plates on the table.

“Can I offer you some activated pepper?” she asked pulling a long wooden pepper mill from under her arm. Mickey winked at him and they laughed so hard their server left in a huff.

They finished dinner and were polishing off a second beer, when Mickey snuck behind a giant potted fern for a couple puffs on a smoke, and Ian kept watch for the server, whose friendliness had dropped several degrees. She wouldn’t go easy on Mickey if she caught him.

Flopping back into his chair with a sigh, he stretched his arms above his head. “Fucking cigarettes, man. I love ‘em.”

“As much as antique pistols?”

“Shiiiit, that’s a tough one. Nah, that Desert Ironwood is literally my wet dream.”

“You’d just have a smoke after handling it.”

“Yeah,” he agreed sounding extremely happy before sighing dramatically. “But I gotta quit smoking.”

“Have you tried going cold turkey? Worked for me.”

“I think you mean ice-pressed free range turkey, Ian.”

He couldn’t stop his grin. “With seasonal nicotine?”

The served dropped their bill on the table and turned on her sensible shoes as they cracked up.

By the time they squared the bill and sauntered out of Aurelia & Dank and into the hotel lobby, the sun was long gone and so was their easy comradery. Ian felt the shift like a physical jolt to his system. Mickey had pulled away, probably because they now had the damn hotel room to deal with. They should just pull it off like a bandage and talk about sleeping arrangements. Get it over with.

“Good night, Ian. Don’t wait up,” Mickey said nodding once and turning away. “If I make it back, I’ll sleep on the pull-out.”

Ian’s mouth opened but all that came out was a tiny gasp of surprise. Was he saying what Ian thought he was saying? No. No, not while Ian was in the same hotel knowing what was going on.

“Either way, I’ll be ready to head to the airport by 7 am.”

And he walked away, crossing the all white lobby like a dark force taking Ian’s will to live along with him. Mickey turned into the lounge, pulling his cell out of his pocket. Hot on the heels of despair was anger. What the fuck? Ian wanted to shout after him. Was he going to hook up? No, no, no.
Realizing he was standing in the middle of the lobby with his mouth hanging open like a goddamn fish, he stomped his way to the elevator. Fine, fuck you! But he didn’t really feel those words, not in a way that would allow him to move on. It felt more like a pathetic whine than a battle cry.

The elevator ride to their floor was spent mumbling all the things he wanted to say to Mickey. The walk down the hallway was spent flicking through all the icons on his phone, looking for one of the dating apps. He’d get his own fucking hook up.

There were several icons he didn’t recognize, and he frowned in confusion as he entered the darkened hotel room. Clicking on one of them, he discovered not only a user pic and account in his name, but a long list of messages. The same thing happened when he clicked on each one.

Fucking Lip. That’s what he’d been doing with Ian’s phone. He was tempted to stalk into the hotel lounge and shove his phone in Mickey’s face, so he could see all the hook ups that Ian was going to take advantage of the moment he got back to Chicago. That actually made him feel a little sick to think about.

Aaargh!

From the moment he’d stepped into Elite’s reception area less than three weeks ago, he’d lost all perspective and seemed to have only one purpose anymore, to chase some guy who clearly didn’t want his attention. Pathetically, all Ian could think about was being with him, not about the job he was hired to do, not about all the work he’d done to get where he was.

The time on his phone read 8:47. How the hell was he going to make it almost 12 hours not knowing—or rather knowing—what Mickey was doing?

He’d need to keep busy until it was a reasonable time to go to bed. The remote control was sitting on the night stand and the flat screen tv was probably the biggest one he’d ever seen. Three minutes later, he flicked it off. Nothing, not one thing worth watching. He sorted all the items in his suitcase, refolding them neatly. Mickey’s suitcase was open next to his on the long desk, and Ian looked at it guiltily knowing he was going to snoop. Discarded clothes from earlier today were tossed carelessly on top, and Ian ran his fingers over them, feeling immediately like a perv but not enough of a perv to stop.

Lifting the Elite Security polo shirt out of the way, he was rewarded with a pair of navy Joe Boxer trunks. Great, he thought, flipping the shirt back into place. Now he had that image to f**k with his head all night. Figuring alcohol was his only recourse, he selected a mini bottle of lemon-flavored rum from the fridge, swallowing it in one gulp, eyes watering in response. It felt good though, so he grabbed a second and took it to the king size bed. Laying back against the silky red pillows, he stared at the dark tv screen and sipped the rum.

At 9:33, he headed down to the lounge because he needed Mickey to know. Please let him still be there, he prayed.

It was slightly less modern than the rest of the hotel, with comfier looking chairs and dimmer lighting. Ian stood in the entrance, unsure if his sudden decision to declare himself to Mickey was actually as brilliant as it seemed back in the big, lonely hotel room. Spotting the back of Mickey’s head across the lounge brought back the reasons it was a terrible idea, but spotting the dude sitting at the table across from him erased every thought from Ian’s head.

Except the one screaming “keep your fucking hands off of him.”

The guy was older than them, maybe even pushing 40, with glasses, longish hair and an outdoorsy...
mountain climber vibe. Clearly all wrong for Mickey. Was he so desperate to not be with Ian that he’d bang anyone?

The bartender was just finishing up at Mickey’s table, and he nodded at Ian as he returned to his spot behind the bar. “You can take a seat anywhere.” He motioned to the line of empty bar stools.

Ian nodded vaguely. “Thanks, just, um, deciding.”

“Cool, lemme know if you want anything,” he added tracking Ian’s line of sight to Mickey’s table. “Anything from behind the bar, that is.” He snickered as he started restocking the top shelf from a box on the floor.

If his emotions weren’t in such turmoil, Ian would be embarrassed by his behavior, but the fact that Mickey was going to bang this old man was far more of a concern to him than whether the bartender thought he was a pathetic loser.

He needed more liquid courage, he decided. Pulling cash from his wallet, he asked for a chocolate martini much to the bartender’s amusement.

“Chocolate rim?” he asked, a bright white grin breaking up the dark stubble covering his lower face.

“Oh,” Ian said surprised. “Yes, please.”

“Take a load off, man.”

It didn’t look like the object of his affection or the object of his derision were going anywhere, so he plunked down on the bar stool closest to the door, not taking any chances.

“Salim.” The bartender offered his hand across the bar top.

“Ian.” The guy had a firm grip, pressing the ridge of several rings into Ian’s palm, one of which was the silver class ring of Ian’s alma mater “You went to Georgetown?”

Salim looked at the engraved eagle with a scroll in its mouth. “My dad’s. Got it when he passed. You go there?”

“Yeah. Definitely didn’t get anything from my old man.”

“Not an academic?”

“In his own mind,” Ian replied. “Probably would’ve been if he wasn’t married to the bottle.” His attention was diverted by the sound of Mickey laughing. He ground his teeth together in frustration.

“You wanna talk about it, Ian?” Salim asked over the sound of ice hitting the metal martini shaker.

“No thanks.”

“I’m a good listener. Bartender and all, you know? Plus I got seven sisters.”

Ian gave him a look to see if he was somehow lumping Ian into a group with his sisters, but he was focused on rubbing the rim of the martini glass in a plastic container of cocoa.

“No, I’m good. Just here to have a drink.” Ian glanced at Mickey’s table to see mountain climber smile hugely. “I’m his boss and stuff.”

“Stuff?” Salim slid a round coaster toward Ian then set the martini glass on top of it, the rim dark with
chocolate.

“Like situations and circumstances, what have you,” Ian began, waving his hand vaguely. “Also I stole his cubicle.”

This must have intrigued Salim because he rested his elbows on the bar top near Ian’s drink. “How does one steal a cubicle?”

Ian licked the rim of his drink. “Not literally.” He finished half the drink in one gulp, wondering why martinis came in such small glasses. “It has a great view. Bonsai plants need sunlight, right?”

“How many chocotinis have you had?”

“My first one. I might have had some lemon rum in the hotel room before coming down here.”

“Right, okay, so I’m piecing this together. You’re the dude’s boss and when you showed up, you got the good cubicle and the poor shmuck had to take his plant to a shitty cubicle.”

“Woah, you are good.”

“Yup. That doesn’t sound like insurmountable odds you’re dealing with there.”

Ian took another long gulp. “There’s…”

“Stuff?”

“Yeah. Stuff he doesn’t know. About me.”

“Ah. Is it stuff he should know? Cause, man, who doesn’t have stuff?”

“He’d definitely wanna know this stuff.”

“Deal breaker stuff?”

He turned away from Salim to finish his drink, wishing they hadn’t started this conversation because he didn’t want to think about the answer to that question.

“You want another?” Salim asked, nodding at the empty glass Ian was gripping like a lifeline.

Ian toyed with the idea but memories of the last series of chocotinis surfaced, and he wasn’t in a rush to relive that. “No thanks,” he said while his eyes swept over Mickey’s back, shoulders and hair, slowing his gaze when it landed on his cheek.

“Which dude?”

“Dark hair. His back to us.”

“Thought so.”

“Oh? Why?”

Salim shrugged as his dark eyes stared in Mickey’s direction for a minute. “The other dude just doesn’t look like he’d inspire such devotion.”

“But Mickey does?” Ian asked thinking maybe that was why he seemed to be in constant competition for his attention.
“Oh yeah, intensity and confidence with a touch of vulnerability. Sure,” he concluded picking up Ian’s empty glass and giving the bar top a swipe with his cloth, as though he hadn’t just defined for Ian why he was sitting at the bar like a fucking stalker. At Ian’s amazed look, Salim added, “I’ve been a bartender for a long fucking time, Ian.”

“Okay, then, what should I do?”

“Well, I guess that depends on how he feels about you.”

“I thought he liked me,” Ian whispered mostly to himself. “I think he tried hard not to. Maybe he still is and that’s why—” he waved his hand in the direction of their table, “that’s happening.”

“Does he know how you feel?”

That gave Ian pause. “I haven’t told him straight out or anything, but his sister figured it out. I don’t think I’m terribly, um, subtle.”

Salim smiled hugely at that, and Ian noticed for the first time in the midst of his self-absorbed pity party that he was quite good looking, about the same age as mountain climber. Maybe he was gay and could take the dude off Ian’s hands. “Maybe you’re not,” Salim said, “but sometimes the other party is the last to figure it out.”

“What if he doesn’t want to date his cubicle stealing boss who—” Ian paused when Mickey’s “friend” got up from the table, making his way toward the exit. Any excitement Ian might have felt over the thought of him leaving, alone, was shut down by the sight of the guy’s jacket draped over the back of his chair.

Salim and Ian watched him exit the lounge, then they both looked at Mickey who was still leaned back in his chair tapping the coaster against the table top. He was wearing the same navy Elite t-shirt he usually wore, the material tight around his shoulders and biceps, and even from across the dim room, Ian could see the muscle along his forearm flex with each tap.

“Well, Ian, I guess you’re walking a fine line, but it couldn’t hurt to follow the guy. Do some reconnaissance.”

Ian almost laughed at that, once again reminded he was more than just Mickey’s suitor. In fact, he was a supposed security expert.

Nodding a farewell at Salim, he hopped off the bar stool and followed the guy across the hotel lobby watching him start swiping at his phone. Was he was calling his boyfriend to make excuses for why he wasn’t in his hotel room or some shady shit like that? Ian was going to find out!

The men’s room was directly across the lobby and obviously where they were headed. Ian caught up just as they reached the door. The guy sensed Ian behind him and held the door, so it didn’t swing back in Ian’s face, which did nothing to endear him to Ian.

Pressing the phone to his ear, he smiled slightly at Ian. “Mom? Did I wake you?”

MOM! The guy was calling his mom? What the fuck?

“How are you feeling? Having a good night?”

Ian unzipped at the furthest urinal, while the guy remained near the door trying to speak quietly.

“Okay, good. Um, I might bring someone home tonight. Just a head’s up.” He laughed a little
awkwardly.

He lives with his mom? His sick mom? Ian nearly dribbled on his shoes attempting to look over his shoulder casually.

“Thanks. Yeah, he seems like a great guy.”

But not the guy for you! Ian yelled internally as he yanked the zipper closed on his jeans.

“Okay, call if you need anything. Night.”

Fuck. Ian was at the sink now, while the guy pocketed his phone, gave Ian a friendly nod and did his business at the same urinal as Ian had used.

Defeated, Ian walked back to the elevators. Mickey was a great guy and probably deserved someone who cared for his sick mother not someone like Ian, who’d watched his mother O.D. on meth. He deserved someone who climbed mountains not someone who got drunk and confronted another man’s dates in the bathroom. Every chance he got apparently.

By the time he arrived back at the room, Ian was trying to remember where he’d thrown Lamont’s business card and if he could somehow conjure up a thing for slightly overweight, suburban cowboys with mommy issues.

Chapter End Notes

I left the first comment on this chapter. ;)


Conquest

Chapter Notes

Just dropping in to say hi and thank you for all the wonderful feedback. Day-am!

Also if you are handling this slow burn/angst thing, then carry on! As you were! If you would prefer a little reassurance (not quite a spoiler) then continue reading. Okay, so you're still here? Are you sure you want to read????? Stop looking right now because I'm going to start saying things lol. All I actually wanted to say was to brace yourself for two more chapters. Wee bit more to get through but good lord it will never have anything to do with other guys. Ewww. They might be hanging around but ain't no one got time for them. We just gotta wait for Mickey to calm the hell down.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mickey dropped his key card while trying to fit it in the card reader and gain access to the hotel room. Shit, must of drunk more than he thought. He touched his index, middle and ring finger starting to count how many drinks he’d had since getting back to the hotel from the Handley meeting, but he lost track quickly, deciding it didn’t ultimately matter. Knowing how many whiskeys he had wouldn’t undo the damage.

The lock’s green light appeared on his second try and he was in.

Immediately, a blast of ice cold air hit him, which would have been welcome earlier today but now only covered his body in goosebumps. What the hell was Gallagher up to?

Tentatively, he made his way into the room, noting the fully made bed and dimmed lighting. The only part of the room blocked from his view was the Jacuzzi tub, and the splashing sounds gave him a clear idea what was happening in the damn thing. Chewing his lip, he reviewed his options. Face whatever was happening here, but that seemed like a dangerous fucking idea. Take Matt up on his offer to spend the night at his place, but he’d known before the dude had arrived in the lounge that he wasn’t going to take advantage of anything the guy had to offer. Or sleep in the lobby, but the furniture in the hotel was barely suitable for sitting never mind sleeping.

Clearly, he had only one option and one deep breath later, he strode purposefully into the hotel room until he reached the giant ass tub where Ian was apparently soaking his cares away. His eyes were closed, and the back of his head rested along the ledge. The dim light coming from a single lamp highlighted the shape of Ian’s cheekbones and made his pale eyelashes look like little feathers—and Mickey frowned at himself, shaking his head to dislodge any more stupid thoughts.

He couldn’t see anything other than Ian’s head because there were fucking bubbles everywhere. Attached to his head were a pair of fluorescent green ear buds, the wire plugged into his iPhone, which must have been pumping music into his ears because he was singing quietly under his breath. Mickey smiled because it was probably a good thing he was singing quietly.

As he continued to stare, Ian’s hand appeared from beneath those bubbles and slid along the side of the tub obviously looking for the opened bottle of champagne. When his fingers couldn’t find it, his
eyes opened and connected with Mickey’s. They had a mini staring contest, then Gallagher turned away, so he could complete his search for the wine bottle.

Reaching out for one of the earbuds, Mickey broke the ice, so to speak. “Why the fuck is it so cold in here, man?”

“I wann-ed a hot bath,” he slurred. Obviously, Ian had been spending the evening drinking as well.

“So you turned the air conditioning up?” Mickey tried not to smile at the information.

“Too hot in here.”

“Makes sense, I suppose.”

“Thanks, yer ‘proval means the world t’me.” He snickered after saying that.

“You getting out any time soon cause I’m freezing my nuts off here.”

“ Nope!” He drew that out to two separate sounds, focusing extra attention on the final syllable. “Yer nuts are gonna have to suffer.” With that declaration, he tipped the bottle back, glugging noisily.

Mickey watched him, feeling the frown on his face deepen because he knew that the booze in Ian’s system had a lot to do with Mickey’s abrupt end to their budding romance. In fact, it had a lot to do with the booze in both their systems.

“Yer welcome t’warm up in here. Plenty o’room.” Ian’s big hand swept the other half of the tub that was indeed plenty big enough for a second person, just not big enough for him. The tub would need to be Olympic size before he’d get in it.

“I’ll pass.”

“Suit yerself, Mickey.” He draped himself backwards again, closing his eyes and reattaching the ear bud. When his hand popped up from the suds, it scratched the tip of his nose and left a stripe of bubbles along his upper lip, like a mustache. He must have felt it because he started twitching his nose in response. Then his hand came back up to swipe at his face, leaving more suds in its wake.

Mickey liked that face. A lot. And somehow the bubbles just made him too fucking cute, so he reached out for the ear bud again.

“That’s a fuck ton of bubbles, Ian.”

“Never have ‘nough bubbles.”

“Uh, I don’t think that’s true,” he laughed.

Ian’s face got all pinched up. “I forgot the jets would make the suds go crazy.”

“Amateur.”

One more time, Ian’s hand appeared through the bubbles, but this time, it shot a palm full of suds at Mickey’s chest. He looked down at the wet spot on his Polo shirt then back up to Ian, who was reclining again but with a big goofy grin on his face.

The air conditioner kicked in again and Mickey shivered. “Fuck sake.”

“Gawd, don’t be a pussy. Jus’ get in,” Ian said lazily. “Feels gooood.”
It did look inviting, especially since the hotel room was like the North fucking Pole. But, seriously, who bathes with their goddamn boss. He hadn’t read the Elite Employee Handbook, but he was pretty sure this was crossing a professional line not to mention a sexual one.

On the other hand, if he left his underwear on, it’d be like they were in a hot tub together, and people did that. Disgusting as it seemed, strangers put on bathing suits and got into pools of water together all the time. Theoretically, this wasn’t any different. Right?

He shivered again and decided the only way he’d get out of this without hypothermia was to get in that tub. But the thought of undressing right here where Ian could see him, if he opened his eyes, was not going to fly. Instead, he headed over to his suitcase, safely away from Ian’s gaze, leaving his discarded clothing on the desk beside it.

Down to his underwear, he made quick work of crossing the room. “Fuck, man, it’s goddamn freezing in this place.”

“Were you one o’ those fancy families who’d heat all winter growin’ up?”

“What do you think?”

“Then quit yer belly achin’.”

Mickey blinked in surprise but not much else because he’d stuffed his foot into the water without thinking and nearly scalded it. “Fuck, hot.”

Ian started laughing and opened his eyes. They traveled down Mickey’s body, which was perched on the side of the tub as he acclimatized to the temperature of the water, and Mickey saw way too much on Ian’s face.

Now he was mostly naked, about to soak in a tub and spend the night in the same room with Ian. And it was as plain as the little mustache dissolved on Ian’s upper lip that he would welcome Mickey with open arms. All he had to do was give Ian a sign.

With a sigh and a heave, Mickey dropped down to his side of the tub facing Ian. The ungraceful movement caused a bit of a wave that sent some sudsy water over the edge and splashing up into Ian’s face, which surprised him and his foot came up connecting with Mickey’s leg, rubbing silkily along his thigh.

Fuck sake.

But he managed to get himself sorted across from Ian without any regrets although he wasn’t entirely sure how he resisted when every impulse in his body was screaming at him to jump on Ian. His fingers and thighs were almost vibrating with the need to wrap around the guy. Instead he relaxed against the tub, releasing a long breath as the warm water slowly sucked the tension from his body.

“Feels good, right?” Ian’s voice floated over to him.

“Mm.”

Unsure how much time passed and whether he’d nodded off a little, Mickey blinked open his eyes to stare up at the ceiling as Ian spoke again. “Why you here?”

“My hotel room too, man.”

“Y’know what I mean.”
“Is it any of your business?”

“No, thanks for reminding me.”

It was quiet for a bit after that, and Mickey felt more than the tips of his fingers shrivel. The whole hook up plan had been ridiculous, a last ditch effort to keep his fucking sanity, but he hadn’t even picked a guy he would find irresistible under normal circumstances. Mickey was starting to wonder if there was anyone on the planet who could have stopped him from returning to this hotel room.

“Not my type,” he explained unable to prolong Ian’s misery.

“Oh,” Ian’s voice sounded so hurt. “Okay, good to know.”

“Jesus, not you. Matt, the dude I arranged to meet.”

“Oh.” Ian’s voice sounded less hurt. “Not a love match?”

Mickey snorted. “Not on my part, but I was getting serious ‘I wanna bring you home to meet my mother’ vibes.”

Ian laughed loudly at this, which seemed a little more than the situation warranted, but Mickey was too happy to hear his laugh again to wonder about it.

“What is your type?” Ian asked and doing a shit job of sounding like this was just chit chat.

“Guys who don’t ask questions.”

Ian glanced at him, then mimed zipperin his mouth. This time instead of throwing away the key, he shifted forward enough to hand the imaginary key to Mickey. He even waited until Mickey held his hand out then dropped it in, pressing his closed lips together when they tried to smile.

They lapsed into relaxed silence again for a bit.

“Paolo is everyone’s type,” Ian said.

Again Mickey had to suppress a desire to laugh at the obviousness. “That a question, Ian?” he asked sternly.

“Nope, just commentary.” He was quiet for about a minute. “What, with all that bronzed skin and all.”

“I guess.”

“Probably all soft and silky and shit.” He didn’t sound happy about that prospect.

“I wouldn’t know, man.”

Ian sat up like a shot. “What?”

Keeping it casual, Mickey opened one eye. “Is that a question, Ian?”

He shook his head.

“You finish our bottle of champagne?” Mickey asked, changing the subject.

Ian swung the bottle left and right to see if any liquid remained. “Oops.”
“That was our congratulatory champagne, Ian. Not cool.”

Ian looked a little worried that he’d messed up and braced his hands on either side of the tub. “Sorry, I’ll grab you something. The lemon rum is also all gone.”

“No!” Mickey all but yelled. “I’m good.”

The suds were sliding down Ian’s body and dissolving quickly. Random patches of skin were starting to appear. Bicep, belly, hipbone and a tiny sprinkling of fiery pubic hair. “Sit.”

He dropped back into the water, adjusting into the contours of the tub. Ian’s feet were moving near his hip and the slight sloshing caused the suds to part giving him a clear view into the water. Mickey’d fallen for that face fast and now he had a sneak preview of what was under his clothes. The guy was fucking beautiful. Everywhere.

Maybe most especially on the inside.

“Well, this was fun,” Mickey announced getting out quickly, not once looking at Ian. He couldn’t see that look on Ian’s face again. It was way too clear to him how much Ian wanted him, and it was making Mickey's brain swim with too many thoughts.

He left a river of wetness on the carpet as he stomped his way to the bathroom. With a door between them, Mickey released a curse of frustration. That had been a close fucking call. The urge to crawl up Ian’s body to straddle him was blinding him to common sense. Everything about it seemed right, too right, perfect in fact, and that freaked him the fuck out. He knew he’d lose himself in that guy if he let anything happen.

Tossing his wet underwear over the shower ledge, he realized belatedly he had nothing to change into and cursed again, wondering how the hell he got himself into this mess. A couple of weeks ago, he’d been living life in his cubicle, carefree and redhead free. The good old days, he decided dramatically. Now he was locked in a hotel bathroom terrified to leave.

A stack of fluffy white towels sat on the ledge under the sink and his toiletries were piled on one side of the vanity: toothbrush, paste, razor, deodorant. The basics. As he wrapped a towel around his waist, he checked out Ian’s toiletries lined up neatly on the other side of the sink. The basics along with little bottles and tubes of shit. Mickey picked up a spray bottle tipping it to read the label. Organic Ayurvedic Men’s Aftershave and Balm.

Seriously?

He spritzed the air in front of him and angled forward to sniff. Fuuuuck. Ian smell drifted around the room, and he hardened in response. For just a second, he closed his eyes and inhaled, letting images of Ian drift through his mind. How he unconsciously smooths the tie twisted around his neck whenever he seems nervous or unsure, how that damn black cashmere sweater is the still the sexiest thing Mickey has ever seen, how intimate it had felt to see him standing in the hotel room in bare feet, how his eyes had almost begged Mickey not to leave him alone for the evening.

All of it overlaid with that smell, of things you’d find in the earth nothing fake or perfume, just the kind of things that made him think of men. Well, that shit might smell good, but it was not fucking helping his decision to go to bed. A-fucking-lone.

Tightening the towel around his waist, he gave the room one more spritz, then left before he started jerking off to Ian’s toothpaste.

The guy was bent over the tub ledge pulling the plug when Mickey got out of the bathroom. His
long, lightly haired legs were poking out from beneath the towel he’d twisted around his waist.

“All yours,” Mickey muttered hoping Ian would head to the bathroom and not come out until Mickey was asleep. With the number of tubes of shit Ian had brought, his bedtime ritual must take hours.

“Thanks,” Ian said straightening up and adjusting the towel. His cheeks were rosy and his chest hairs contained little droplets of water, and Mickey needed some cold water. “I turned the air conditioning down to normal.”

Mickey nodded as he passed Ian on the way to the little kitchenette area. Twisting the cap on a bottle of water from the mini-fridge, he leaned back against the counter and guzzled. Between the warm day, the booze and the Jacuzzi, he was dehydrated as hell. He grabbed a second bottle and one for Ian just as the bathroom light went out and Ian made his way toward Mickey, bare feet padding quietly on the thick carpet.

“Better hydrate,” he said holding the bottle out. Ian accepted it, his throat working overtime to keep up with the speed of the liquid going down it. Mickey watched that in fascination since the guy was standing way too close. So close he thought he could smell him.

His nostrils flared a little. Aftershave.

Mickey’s eyes shot up to Ian’s just as he lowered the plastic water bottle and smirked. It was a self-satisfied, all knowing kind of smirk that let Mickey know that Ian knew exactly what he’d been doing in the bathroom. Shit. Mickey looked away. At the tub then the big red bed then back to Ian. Fuck it, he thought. He licked his lips and released his pent up need straight at Ian, who visibly relaxed.

“Oh, thank god,” Ian whispered and stepped forward, not giving Mickey the opportunity to second guess his decision. His hands cupped Mickey’s face, thumbs running along his cheekbones, as they stared at each other. He was going to drown in those fucking eyes, feeling his breath shorten with anticipation and a healthy dose of panic. His brain was trying to send out warning signals that were very different from the signals his dick was sending out. Meanwhile his heart was beating in his chest like he might have a stroke. All this because Ian was touching his goddamn cheek and studying Mickey's face like it was a mystery he needed to solve.

Whatever was showing on Mickey's face was starting to rub off on Ian's and his thumbs paused their caressing, which kicked up Mickey's panic another notch. He might not know exactly what he was doing here, but he knew he didn't want Ian to stop.

“You gonna stare at me all night or you gonna get on me, Gallagher?”

Ian’s eyes didn't let up. If anything they got more intense, searching, demanding. “Can I do both, Mickey?”

There was no mistaking the emphasis he put on the last word. He was drawing a line, trying to force Mickey’s hand. Trying to force him to meet Ian in the middle.

Jesus, he felt like he was running a fucking marathon, the way his heart was pounding in his chest. He licked his suddenly dry lips and drew Ian's attention, breaking the eye contact for a second. But they were back almost immediately, so Mickey lowered his lashes to leer suggestively at Ian's bare chest. “You can do anything you want as long as it involves getting on me?”

Ian dropped his hands to his sides, nearly giving Mickey that heart attack. But he didn't move away,
just stood there resigned and Mickey felt that travel through his body. He raised his eyes and released
the breath he'd been holding.

"Ian," he whispered.

Then Ian was there. Mouth against mouth. Heart against heart. Body against body. His hands were
back on Mickey's face keeping him locked in place as Ian’s mouth moved on his. Kissing him long
and hard and full of tongue, just how Mickey wanted it. As far as kisses went, Mickey realized he
had no clue up until that moment why people got off on kissing. He wasn’t sure he’d care if they did
nothing else for the rest of the night.

The kiss continued until they needed air. Ian pulled away enough to breathe harshly through his
mouth but not far enough away to give Mickey a chance to think clearly. Then he was back, mouth
mostly closed this time, kissing Mickey’s lips and crowding his head against the microwave mounted
on the wall behind him. The softness of the kiss was almost antagonizing, making Mickey push
against his lips looking for more.

Before his tongue could fight its way back into Ian’s mouth, his lips were gone again earning a grunt
of disapproval from Mickey. But Ian was looking down at the path his hands were taking over
Mickey's neck, chest and abdomen, and that look was back on Ian’s face. It was fucking enchanting
and lit up Mickey’s lower belly like wildfire.

A bubble of anxiety followed hot on its heels though causing him to squeeze his eyes shut and block
out Ian’s earnest, open emotions. Instead, he’d concentrate on the soft pads of Ian’s fingers moving
over his skin and how the size of his hands and the pressure on his waist were so obviously that of a
man’s. He just needed to focus on the physical, nothing else but the way Ian was pressed against
him, his arms snaking around his waist, mouth sucking at Mickey’s throat, the feel of silky hair
between his fingers and not on the way his heart was pounding with affection.

He twisted his fingers sharply in Ian’s hair eliciting a moan that vibrated along the column of
Mickey’s neck sending shivers down his spine. His head fell to the side to give Ian more access, and
Ian’s teeth sunk into his skin. The sharp sting was fucking perfect.

“Yeah,” he groaned holding Ian in place and shoving his pelvis against him.

Ian started moving faster. Mouth licking a trail to his shoulder, hands tugging Mickey’s hips closer
and hefting his ass up onto the cupboard. He pushed his way between Mickey’s spread legs,
dislodging the towel. They both stopped moving to look down at Mickey’s body, foreheads bumping
together.

“Jesus,” Ian breathed when Mickey grabbed Ian’s towel and released it from his hips. They were
frozen for several more seconds taking in the sight, how similar yet different they were. Then Ian
was on him, yanking him forward harshly and nearly devouring him with his lips. The impact forced
Mickey’s head back and into the microwave, which started humming behind him. Ian pulled away,
chuckling. Eyes all crinkled in pleasure, pupils dark and dreamy. Goddamn, Mickey thought.

“Turn that shit off before I get fucking brain cancer,” he groused attempting to tamp down on the
swirling Ian bubble that seemed determined to consume him.

Ian kissed him lightly while his fingers randomly hit buttons until the microwave shut up.

“Why am I on a fucking kitchen counter?” Mickey asked shoving a hand lightly into Ian’s bare
chest. “When we got that thing?” He waved his other hand in the direction of the bed.
A strangled sound came from Ian’s throat, and Mickey tightened his legs around Ian’s waist, in an invitation to carry him the half dozen steps to the bed.

They hit the silky red comforter with a soft thud, Ian pressed into him awkwardly. Mickey’s legs were hanging over the edge and Ian was still mostly standing but focused on keeping their erections attached like Siamese twins. Mickey smiled at him running a hand tenderly along the back of his neck and getting his attention.

“Just feels so good,” Ian confessed easing himself to a standing position as his fingertips caressed Mickey’s thighs. “Okay, scoot up.”

Mickey smiled again but he also scooted to the center of the bed. “Might as well grab stuff while you’re up.” He nodded in the direction of their suitcases then watched Ian walk toward them. It was hard not to admire his graceful ease. The walk back toward Mickey, however, was even better. No part of Ian Gallagher disappointed Mickey.

Tossing the wrappers above Mickey’s head, Ian resumed his position and they caught back up to where they’d left off. Panting, kissing, rutting.

When the panting took a slight turn toward groaning, Ian slipped his hand between Mickey’s legs, exploring and lingering and ultimately coaxing one of Mickey’s legs up so he had better access to his ass. His finger circled the rim, slowly, round and round, and Mickey had to release Ian’s mouth in favor of breathing deeply and concentrating on the sensations. Ian hadn’t even penetrated yet, and Mickey was already starting to lose it.

A sudden chill in the air swept over his body when the solid warm weight of Ian disappeared, taking his anchor with him. He opened his eyes to see Ian kneeling between his legs, working to open a packet of lube with his teeth, so he didn’t have to stop what he was doing with his other hand. His eyes crinkled again in happiness as he spit the edge of the packet across the bed. They watched as Ian drizzled liquid over his erection, which was now demanding Mickey’s full attention. His fingers slid down Ian’s chest and abs until they found the silky length. Ian sucked in a breath and rocked easily into Mickey’s palm. Once, twice, a third time. They were breathing in sync, and their eyes kept flicking toward each other’s then away. It was pretty overwhelming for Mickey, and he ended up having to close his completely.

Only to open them a moment later to a pillow being stuffed under his ass cheeks. What the hell? He wasn’t some girl who needed pampering. But Ian was looking so softly at where they were about to be joined that Mickey figured he’d act like a girl for Ian. His hand paused on Ian’s length, and when Ian looked up at him, he parted his lips wetting the bottom one with his tongue. It was all the invitation Ian needed to bring his own moistened lips down to replace Mickey’s tongue, while his now wet finger pressed inside. Over and over, until Mickey was doing most of the work, pushing himself onto Ian’s fingers, and Ian was busy murmuring shit into Mickey’s mouth. Shit that Mickey was trying really fucking hard to ignore because he wanted to hear those words so bad it ached inside him almost as much as Ian’s fingers.

Panting heavily, Mickey tugged at Ian’s shoulder. “Now or never, Ian.” He was going to explode the second his hand made contact with his cock, and Ian was going to have to hurry the hell up if he wanted to come along for the ride. It didn’t take long for a condom-tipped Ian to replace the fingers he’d been fucking like his life depended on them. Those slippery fingers found other parts of Mickey to explore.

Ian was moving so slowly inside Mickey though that he shoved his hips upward to get him going, and the pillow under his ass made it easier to control some of the action, forcing him to rethink his stance on being pampered. Then there wasn’t much thinking going on. Just the force of Ian’s thrusts,
the sounds of their breathing mingling with the sounds of their bodies meeting and that same
overwhelming feeling of losing all control.

Opening his eyes in mild panic, Ian’s were there to meet him. Soft and sexy, a combination that
Mickey wasn’t aware until this moment had the power to destroy every last ounce of his will. He
returned the look because he was couldn’t do otherwise, then pulled Ian down to kiss him through
his orgasm.

They didn’t come simultaneously, but it was damn close and that synchronicity did almost as much
to freak Mickey out as the last twenty minutes had.

For several breaths, neither of them moved, then the still chilly room left its mark on Mickey’s skin
and he shivered. Ian pulled out and murmured a quiet, “Stay there.”

He could hear water running in the bathroom, then a cleaned-up Ian reappeared with a wet
washcloth in his hand. Turning his head to watch his approach, Mickey prepared to take the cloth,
but Ian returned to his position between his thighs. He swiped once over Mickey’s belly, then folded
the cloth in half. Before he could protest to having Ian clean up his ass, he covered Mickey’s mouth
with his own, nearly suffocating him with the kiss. Meanwhile, the still warm washcloth pressed
between his ass cheeks, rubbing softly. The area immediately relaxed, and his legs fell open in relief.

Pulling an inch away from Mickey’s mouth, Ian whispered, “I put some soothing balm on the cloth.
Feels okay?”

It felt fucking great. Now he was going to need a goddamn pillow and balm in order to ever have sex
again. Not to mention soulful green eyes and strong hands. Feeling agitation shoot down his spine,
he tossed the damn pillow over the edge of the bed before replying, “Fine.”

If Ian noticed the clipped tone, he didn’t let on. Instead he moved away from the bed, tossed the cloth
in the tub and grabbed from the mini-fridge water and a Toblerone, which he tucked somewhere in
the mound of pillows before rolling Mickey over with a chuckle. When he rolled Mickey back, the
comforter was out of the way.

“Under you go,” Ian said patting the red satiny sheets.

“Yikes,” Mickey barked when he shifted onto those sheets. “Fucking cold.”

Ian slid in beside him, fluffing pillows and getting them all comfy and warm, while Mickey sucked
back another bottle of water. Tearing open the chocolate bar, Ian worried his lip. “Gonna need to pay
the king’s ransom on these mini-bar purchases before they process the room.”

“Mandy can pay for this shit,” Mickey groused. Ian had stuffed at least half the bar into his mouth
already. “What’s with you and fucking chocolate?”

Ian looked guiltily at him, offering the stick of little pyramids. He waved it away. “I’m more of a nut
man.” Ian’s eyebrows shot up. “Don’t fucking say it. Just go get me some fucking nuts.”

Happily, Ian popped out of bed returning with a tiny bag of honey roasted peanuts. By then, Ian’s
mouth was free. “When I was little and our parents left us in the car or on a street corner or wherever,
my older sister, Fiona, always had chocolate for some reason and she’d slip us tiny pieces every now
and then, calmed us down.” Ian slid another pyramid into his mouth, shoving it into his cheek. “You
can probably figure it out from there.” He smiled and Mickey shook his head at the pointy freckled
cheek, refusing to get sucked into the image of a little redheaded kid needing chocolate to feel safe.

They finished their treats in silence, then Ian stretched out toward the lamp. “I set the alarm on my
phone for 6:30. That should give us enough time to get to the airport.”

While he said this, he molded himself to Mickey, almost absentmindedly taking the big spoon position.
Settled in, Ian sighed into the feather-like hair along the back of Mickey’s neck and slid his fingertips
along his hip following the slight dip at his waist. Then he reversed the path, eventually resting his
palm across the plane of Mickey’s stomach and hugging slightly. “I, um, guess we need to figure out
how this is going to work back in Chicago.”

Mickey’s heart stopped beating then kicked into overdrive. He remained silent and Ian yawned
loudly in his ear, which would ordinarily get under Mickey’s skin in a bad way, but as with all things
Ian apparently, it just made him want to snuggle in closer, luxuriating in the obvious care Ian seemed
determined to bestow on him.

“We’ll figure it out,” Ian concluded and Mickey laid awake listening to his even breathing.

At 6:34 am, Mickey got the text. He was sitting in the airport terminal, head throbbing from lack of
sleep and ridiculous overhead lighting. His mouth was dry from two cups of Americano, but his
tongue still tried to moisten his lips as he swiped into his phone.

*I’ll take the evening flight.*

That’s all the text said, and it was exactly what he’d expected Ian to say. He didn’t know if that was
better or worse than what the message should have said though. That Mickey was a coward and a
total asshole for sneaking out while Ian slept peacefully unaware he’d be waking up alone. That it
was a dick move and Ian deserved way more respect than that. That he’d fucking hurt him.

It wasn’t like he’d imagined Ian stalking his way through the airport until he reached Gate 47 and
demanded attention, overriding all of Mickey’s doubts and fears and taking the decision making out
of his hands.

Mickey pressed his fingertips into his forehead then his eye sockets, fighting the sick feeling that he’d
fucked up royally and Ian would never forgive him. But that’s what he wanted, he reminded himself,
for Ian to stop looking at him like he was something fucking wonderful because anymore of that and
Mickey was going to find himself hung up on the guy, needing him, needing his fucking smile to be
happy. He ignored that quiet voice in the back of his mind.

*Too late.*

Chapter End Notes

Ian was listening to *When the Night is Over* by Lord Huron in the hot tub when Mickey
arrived. <3
Me again. I just have a story to share. I had a meeting with my boss this morning, and due to changes in contracts and what not...I will no longer have a cubicle! They are taking away my cubicle! I nearly fell out of my chair. They’ve graciously said I can use the communal computer station and/or work from home. Karma, you crazy bitch. :)

So my next fic is going to be about Mickey and Ian winning the lottery! And when I win the lottery I’m gonna buy the biggest cubicle the world has ever seen! Okay gotta go empty some pencil leads.

Ps my favorite admin just scored me a drawer to store my shit. So I dedicate this chapter to all the admins who keep workplaces around the world from falling apart...including Mandy

Mandy was leaning against her kitchen cupboard watching her hot UPS guy back his van into the loading zone in front of her building. He was here most mornings, and she timed her Keurig coffee maker around his delivery, so she could start her morning right by watching his ass in that hideous brown uniform. Today though, he was in shorts which displayed some fine calf muscles for the first time since she’d started this morning ritual.

She wasn’t sure why it was taking her so long to find a way to meet him, probably because she didn’t want to ruin her fantasy of the perfect man by letting him open his mouth. It was the last day though because the ankle boots she’d ordered from Amazon were scheduled to be delivered tomorrow, and she’d find out not only if he had brains to match that ass but also get a look at his face. It was always partially covered by the brown UPS cap, so all she got to see was a strong jaw shaved smooth.

Just as her delivery guy jumped down from the back of the UPS truck with a heavy looking package and headed to the apartment across the street, her phone lit up with an incoming text message distracting her momentarily.

Ian.

She hadn’t heard from him since they’d left for El Paso, but assumed by her brother’s passive aggressive attempts to laughingly try to intimidate her, that they’d sorted out the arrangements and, hopefully, made it work in their favor.

Swiping into the messaging app, she frowned as a little wave of dread creeped up her back.

_Mickey is on his way home. Please change my plane reservation for this evening if seat available._

While the message sounded pleasant enough and gave no indication that anything was truly amiss, Mandy was too seasoned in dealing with shit to believe nothing was up. She sucked back a swig of scalding hot burning her tongue and amplifying the nagging feeling that she might have fucked up.
Three hours later, it was more than just a nagging feeling she was experiencing when Mickey walked past her cubicle. She expected him to scowl at her or shoot a couple insults her way about sticking her nose in his affairs, but he didn’t even look at her, just kept walking until he disappeared around the corner.

“Oh shit,” she whispered. Worse than she thought.

As much as she was dying to know what went down between them, she was equally dreading her brother’s bitchy mood. Deciding to give him space, she poked her head into Slava’s cubicle hoping to find some support, but he wasn’t around. She chewed her lip for moment then decided to let it be for now. Mickey would come around. He always did. But, she reminded herself, he’d never shown any real interest in a guy before and whatever he was feeling for Ian was going to be unfamiliar territory. Damn it, maybe she’d shoved him too hard, too soon.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

She opened Google calendar, scanning Mickey’s timetable. He was going to be heading to the airport soon to pick up Clive Janssen, the Helix CEO, then he would essentially be chauffeuring the guy around town for the week, and barely be in the office. She’d arranged for Ian to fly in tomorrow morning, and when she’d texted him the new flight itinerary, he’d responded that he’d come straight to the office from the airport. That would give her a few days to straighten out whatever had happened in El Paso. First, she needed to get her hard-ass brother to talk to her though.

At lunchtime, Mickey once again walked past her cubicle without acknowledging she even existed. Ignoring her internal warning system which was yelling “too soon”, she followed him to the reception area where he was waiting for the elevator.

“Mick?”

Nothing.

“Everything okay?”

The ping of the car arriving caused a jolt of panic, and she bounced a little on her toes. The doors opened and Mickey stepped through, turning slightly to hit one of the buttons on the panel. Then he straightened up, meeting her eyes and she took a step backwards.

Fuck, he was mad at her.

She squinted at him, tipping her head a little in apology, but he looked away and the doors closed.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Kyle looked up at her from behind the reception desk, drawing her attention toward the elderly lady sitting in the waiting area. Mandy smiled apologetically at the woman then got out of there.

Okay, she needed a plan, which would require knowing what the hell happened. Mickey didn’t want to talk to her, but maybe he’d be more open with his partner. She stormed into Slava’s cubicle, grabbing at one side of the black on-ear headphones he was wearing.

“Slava,” she said leaning toward his ear then releasing the headphone.

“What’s up?” he yelled.

She waited for him to remove the headphones. “I might have fucked up, Slava.”
“This have anything to do with your brother’s pissy mood?”

Tugging the sleeves of her sweater over her thumbs, she bounced from foot to foot again. Guilt wasn’t her thing. Her thing was to do what needed to be done.

“Come on then,” he offered. “My coffee mug is empty. You can tell me all about it while I recharge.”

“Holy fuck,” he said ten minutes later from where he was leaning against the lunchroom counter. “You got balls, girl.”

“I won’t for long. You should of seen his face, Slav.”

“I did.” Slava raised his eyebrows at her looking way too much like a blond version of her brother. “I figured it had something to do with boss man.”

“Could you try to find out what happened?” she asked.

“What, like, ask him about his love life?” Slava threw his head back in hilarity, nearly sloshing coffee over the edge of his mug.

“We need to fix this.”

“We?”

“Yes, we.” She tightened her fingers on her waist and gave him the look she’d been honing since birth. “You’re as guilty as me of pushing the two of them together.”

He stared her down. “I didn’t set them up on a sex getaway.”

“Only cause you didn’t think of it,” she countered.

He nodded agreeably. “True.”

“You’ll talk to him?”

“Sure, I’ll track him down tomorrow before he heads out to pick up Janssen, but nothing’s gonna come of it, Mandy.”

Late the next morning, Mandy was frustrated because her ankle boots hadn’t arrived, and she didn’t get to meet her guy or wear the outfit she’d had planned, plus Ian was scheduled to arrive any minute. She would have been pacing her cubicle if it were larger than a coffin, which she hoped it wouldn’t become when her boss walked in. She was able to justify her matchmaking scheme where her brother was concerned because she knew he needed her help, but she wasn’t sure if Ian did or not. She didn’t know enough about him to be able to form an opinion, other than the fact he was a guy and most likely needed a woman’s help just by default.

On her return from the supply room, she could see the top of his red hair above the cubicle ledge, and she made her way there reliving the memory of the last time she’d been sent to the principal’s office before she’d dropped out of high school to run off with shithead.
“Good morning, Ian.” She stood just outside the entrance, feet braced, eyes slightly narrowed, prepared for battle.

“Good morning, Mandy. Thank you for making the flight change. Could you make an appointment with Gabe for me?” He clicked the print button on the file open on his monitor.

“Of course,” she replied. “For this morning?”

“If he’s free.” He finally looked at her and for the first time since he started at Elite, he looked like her boss and only her boss. Their conversation was surface level pleasant, but the genuineness of their previous encounters was missing. She supposed this was better than some of the alternatives that had filled her head since yesterday.

“Can I tell him what it’s regarding?”

“I got the Handley contract, have the paperwork to finalize but everything is signed. Just printing some of the documents now.”

“Oh, good for you,” she smiled genuinely happy for him. “Gabe’ll be delighted. He was dead set on getting that account.”

He nodded, the pencil in his hand tapping against the desk top impatiently. He looked as tired as Mickey and his eyes were sort of cold, almost empty. Something had gone out in them, she thought ominously. When you’re used to seeing so much spark, it’s damn noticeable when it’s gone.

“Is there something else, Mandy?” he asked and this time his eyes were challenging her to overstep her bounds yet again. So…she wouldn’t be bringing up Mickey just yet.

“Can I grab your print out for you?”

“I’m fine. Let me know what time Gabe is free.” He returned his attention to his computer screen.

The remainder of the day was uneventful. Mickey didn’t come in, just emailed her an updated copy of Clive Janssen’s itinerary with the changes highlighted, requesting she forward it to Ian. When she delivered the printed copy to Ian’s cubicle, he wasn’t around but his trash can was pulled out from under his desk and filled with every imaginable M&M’s wrapper. Peanut, pretzel, nutella, even plain!

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Thursday morning was shitty for all three of them. Mandy was dragging her ass in part because she felt like shit over how miserable her brother was, but mostly because her parcel had been delivered by a middle-aged woman whose ass did nothing for Mandy.

Now she was at work, ready for battle. Today was the day, she’d decided. Since all her pent-up determination to make some sort of move on her UPS guy had gone sideways, Mickey and Ian were getting the brunt of that. She just needed the right opportunities.

Mid-morning, Mickey’s angry voice carried all the way from the photocopy room. Planning to go fix
the copier for him, she stood up from her desk at the exact same time as Ian. For a second, her heart soared thinking he couldn’t resist a chance to save Mickey from himself, but Ian strode past her cubicle toward the reception area.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

By the time she stopped gnawing at her cheek and fidgeting with her ballpoint pen, Mickey was back in his cubicle, and she sunk into her desk chair. Jesus, this romance shit was for the birds.

Mid-afternoon arrived along with a serious dip in her energy. She was starting to wonder if any work was getting done around here, but her mind was on the chocolate bars in Ian’s trash can, so she decided to score one for herself. Mickey wasn’t in his cubicle as she passed it on the way to the lunchroom, and she offered up a thank you for that small favor as she needed a hit of sugar and caffeine to face his wrath.

Ian, however, was in the lunchroom staring at the orange wrapper of a Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup, and his face was so fucking sad, she wanted to punch herself in her own face for doing this to him. Slowly, he ripped off the top of the chocolate bar wrapper and slid a cup into his palm. It was mesmerizing to watch. Whatever he was thinking about was causing his shoulders to slump and a smile to form. Then he stuffed it in his mouth and pulled his phone from the front pocket of his jeans.

“Jesus,” he muttered, tipping his head back in frustration.

“Everything okay?” Mandy asked lightly. He turned toward her voice, then shrugged but didn’t look away.

“Just my brother.” He waved the phone a little.

“Yeah, I have some of those,” she said, wanting to punch herself again for reminding him she had a brother, like he could forget. Instead she moved toward him. “Um, is he okay? Your brother?”

“He wants to set me up with his mechanic,” he explained, not looking happy at the prospect. “I guess I should say yes.”

He looked down at his phone like he was going to do that very thing at this very moment, and Mandy’s hand shot out knocking the phone from his grip.

“Oops, so clumsy.”

Ian didn’t appear to be buying that, but he just bent down to pick it up checking the screen for damage.

“Damn it, Ian, I’m so sorry,” she blurted as he stood up. “I thought you and Mick—“

He held up a hand. “I told you I’m fine, Mandy.”

“Yes, but the reason—” She stopped talking when his attention shot to the doorway behind her. Oh god, the look on his face could mean only one thing.

Twisting slightly to look over her shoulder, she wished she hadn’t. Mickey was standing in the doorway, and as always, his emotions were on his fucking sleeve. He was shit at keeping things bottled up. It wasn’t always the right emotion for the situation, but some emotion was always erupting and the last two days she’d had to tippy toe around, which was not her style.

With one nervous swipe at his nose, he retreated from the lunchroom, and Ian was back to staring at
his goddamn peanut butter cup barely noticing when Mandy excused herself. She walked sedately out of the lunchroom, then jogged past Mickey’s cubicle which was empty. The little jade plant sitting in the middle of his desk, tiny scissors beside the pot. Jesus, the pair of them were clearly miserable, and with that the weight of the situation dissolved from Mandy’s shoulders. The two idiots belonged together; they just needed some guidance to get there.

Kyle looked up when she practically ran into reception.

“Mickey?” she barked at him.

“Stairwell.”

Before she could respond, the elevator doors slid open, and Slava stepped out carrying two large to-go cups of coffee. “Hey,” he said when he saw her staring at him. “I was just about to butter up our boy with some coffee and special time with Slava.”

“He’s gone up for a smoke,” she said pointing at the door to the stairwell.

“Damn, he’s been really good about quitting recently, and I’ve seen him head up there hourly.”

“Well, I’m going to corner him now. Why don’t you have that special time with Ian?” she suggested nodding at the coffees.

“Shit, woman, you want me to have a heart to heart with my boss about his fucking sex life?” He shook his head and lowered his voice. “His sex life with my best fucking friend?”

“No, just go hang out with him for Christ’s sake.”

He downed about half a cup of coffee then rolled his eyes at her. “Blya. I guess I’m getting what I deserve.”

They parted ways like soldiers who feared they’d never return home.

Two flights later, she exited into the afternoon sun blinking rapidly and scanning the rooftop for her brother’s dark head. He was standing at the edge, looking down at the city below, a cigarette dangling from his fingers. When the door banged shut behind her, that dark head turned in her direction. The smoke went sailing across the cement, and he stormed toward the exit, but she pressed her back to it.

“Move,” he very nearly yelled.

“Not until you tell me,” she very nearly yelled back.

“It’s none of your fucking business, Mandy. In fact, it never fucking was.”

“You’re wrong.” She held up her hand when he inhaled his retort. “You’re wrong because I’m your sister, and you saved me. Big time.”

“Don’t,” he said more quietly now. She watched him lick his lips and stare off into the horizon, avoiding anything that might smack of feelings.

“Well, they say when you save someone’s life, you owe them. Should a thought of that before you saved mine then.”

He frowned at her, obviously trying to work out if that was a real thing. “That’s dumb. Should be the other way around.”
“No, I’m pretty sure I got it right.”

“Why the fuck would I owe you if I saved you?”

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll google it. The point is you saved my life. I was letting that prick beat on me, giving up my—”

He cut her off. “Stop. Hate that shit.”

“Sorry, that’s not why I came up here,” she said regrouping. “What I’m saying is that you can’t have it both ways, Mickey. You can’t stick your nose in my business if you aren’t prepared for me to do the same. Now talk.”

“Nope, good bye.” He tried to physically remove her from the doorway, but she dug in her heels, literally pressed them into the door frame until he stepped back. “Move, Mandy.”

“Not until you tell me.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

She actually snorted. “Please. You might as well be wearing a flashing neon sign. Come on, just tell me. You’ll feel better and maybe we can find a solution.”

“How many ways do I gotta say no?”

She crossed her arms over her chest, and he released the sigh that she recognized as her opening, so she grabbed on it before he changed his mind. Lowering her voice to a near whisper, she asked, “Did you guys fuck?”

“Jesus!” He was pacing in front of her now, and she could feel his agitation like waves rolling off him. “No, we didn’t fuck.”

“Oh, I would have bet money you had sex,” she countered not entirely convinced he was telling the truth.

“I said—” he stopped pacing to stare at her, hard. “I said we didn’t fuck.”

She started to complain about his inability to make sense, until it hit her.

“Oh,” she squeaked. Then quieter, “Ohhh.”

He huffed out a breath, running a hand through his hair.

“You,” she stepped closer so she could whisper, “made love?”

“Arrghh!” He sounded like he was dying, and her heart squeezed with affection.

“Okay, but why are you guys avoiding each other like this?”

“Are you paying attention, for fuck sake? I just said that I let a man make love to me!” By the end, he was back to yelling, and she was grateful they were having this conversation alone on a rooftop. “And that’s not all! It gets worse!”

“What’s worse than that?” she asked, in awe of her brother by this point.

His hands were on his hips and his eyes were on fire. “I fucking liked it, that’s what.”
She pressed her fingertips into her abdomen to stop herself from touching him, which she knew would not be a good idea at this point because he was vibrating with so many emotions. “Mickey, I know you’re scared.”

"Fuck you," he spat with absolutely no conviction, so she touched him. Just her fingertips on the back of his hand where it hung clenched at his side.

"It’s okay, though. You can let someone love you.”

He didn't react, but he also didn't tell her to fuck off, so as far as she was concerned, it was over.

“I know it's scary, but you deserve it. More than anyone I know.”

"Are we done?"

"No."

He glared at her.

"I'm sorry I pushed you too far before you were ready." He nudged his nose and she felt a bizarre urge to hug him. "I've learned my lesson."

Their eyes met and they both lost it.
Surrender

After a long fucking week, Mickey dragged his ass onto the elevator at 6:30 AM on Friday morning intending to hit the gym and hopefully interrupt the loop his brain had been stuck in since El Paso. Avoiding his usual 5:30 slot might mean he could avoid meeting a certain someone in the gym he’d rather not face yet and simply focus on relieving some tension.

Mandy’s words had echoed in his head all night intensifying the goddamn loneliness he was afraid might be a permanent fixture in his life now. Why did his damn sister have to complicate things? Tell him shit he didn’t want to think about. Accuse him of being scared. Apologize for meddling! What had his life come to?

As if he was afraid to be loved, for fuck sake. It just made good damn sense to keep your shit separated. Not only should you not bang your boss, you shouldn’t mix feelings in with sex. No good was going to come from that. Case in point, he muttered to himself as he arrived at the floor for the Elite gym thinking about all the fucking feelings he’d been dealing with lately.

Shit, the lights were on again. He stood in the hallway for a good five minutes chewing his lip, then his thumb nail, then running through his favorite curses before shoving his key card into the slot and sealing his fate. If Ian was on the other side of that door, then he was going to cave, he just fucking knew he was done fighting it.

Since Ian had started working here, Mickey had basically spent all his time thinking about being with him. Before El Paso, sexual thoughts about Ian had constituted most of his waking hours; since El Paso, his thoughts had taken a slight turn. They now involved more kissing and cuddling than really made sense because Mickey had actual memories to draw from, but for some reason his brain spent as much time on the lovey dovey shit as it did on the good stuff. That did not bode well for his plan to remain aloof.

The gym was empty, no sign of Ian, which meant if he was here, he was in the change room. It seemed to Mickey like he literally could not get a break, that life just had to fuck with him any chance it got. Of course, Ian would be in the change room, probably naked too.

Fuck, he spat as the sound of water running reached his ears.

Naked and wet.

The change room was empty, and while he tossed his gym bag into his locker, Mickey entertained the idea that it might not be Ian in the shower, which didn’t give him the peace of mind he was hoping it would. It didn’t matter because a perfectly pressed blue suit was wrapped in dry cleaner plastic and hanging from the edge of a locker door. The blue suit Ian had worn his first day of work. Thank fuck, it wasn’t that damn cashmere sweater. The suit was bad enough.

Sweaty gym clothes were left in a pile in front of the locker, and a bunch of Ian’s toiletries were sitting on the narrow wooden bench. The sight of those tubes and bottles triggered every single feeling he’d suppressed since El Paso and almost brought tears to his eyes.

What had he done? Driven Ian away for what? He was trying desperately to remember, to reaffirm his decision but it felt elusive, washed away by the sight of a suit and the memory of a smell. Surprised, he looked down at his hand and found the bottle of aftershave in it. Now he was basically
jonesing for more than a memory, so he spritzed the air in front of him and closed his eyes. Inhaling a
long breath, he pictured that beautiful fucking face looking at him like he—

Mickey couldn’t finish that thought because his chest was fucking hurting.

“Fuck,” he spat and opened his eyes.

Ian was staring at him. Water ran down his face, dripping onto his chest and off the hand wrapped
around the edge of the shower curtain. Mickey started breathing harshly as all the things he wanted
to say crashed through his mind. He wasn’t even sure if he’d be able to grab hold of them, but the
need to suddenly share every single one of them with Ian forced him to take a step forward.

“Could you pass me my shampoo, please?” Ian asked pointing at the assortment of bottles.

Mickey felt like he might have whiplash from how much of a jolt those words were. Ian was asking
for shampoo while Mickey was fucking falling apart? But Ian didn’t know. He thought Mickey
didn’t want him. That was all wrong though. He had it wrong.

“The large white bottle?” Ian prompted. Fuck, how long had he just been standing there staring at the
bottles? Grabbing the shampoo, he tried to decide which of the thousand things he needed to say
first.

As he reached the shower stall, Ian extended his arm palm up, creating a small puddle on the tiled
floor beneath him. Everything suddenly had a surreal quality to it enhancing the feeling in the pit of
his gut.

Fear.

Fear that the lack of interest on Ian's face was a reflection of how he felt. Fear that he'd never again
see those green eyes crinkle in pleasure simply because they were looking at Mickey. Fear that
everything now rested on Mickey's shoulders.

Releasing a breath, Mickey set the bottle in Ian’s hand then met his eyes, figuring there was no time
like the present to bare your fucking soul. “Ian, I’m—” and he fucking choked trying to work the
words past his dry throat.

The shower curtain snapped shut.

Sorry.

Mickey looked down at the little puddle of water, wanting Ian to understand without needing words.
Tears pushed at his eyes and pooled slightly along his lower lids. He could feel them and he hated
himself for being so fucking weak. First for being a dick, then for being a pussy. Too afraid to own
his feelings.

The shower curtain fluttered a little and Mickey wondered what Ian would do if he ripped the
fucking thing from the rod and demanded a second chance. But he hesitated. Again. Fuck. He was
never gonna get this right.

But he didn’t have to because the far side of the shower curtain slid open just enough for someone to
get out. Or in.

Nothing else happened, just that invitation. At least Mickey hoped that’s what it was. Licking his
suddenly dry lips, he ripped his t-shirt off, tossing it in a corner then kicked the rest of his clothes in
that general direction. As he stepped closer to the curtain, he pulled it back a little more so Ian would
know he was about to step inside the shower stall.

A hand grabbed his forearm and yanked him forward into the stall until he collided with Ian’s wet chest. The sound of curtain hooks dragging harshly along the rod faded as Ian’s mouth covered his and hands ran up and down his back. One of them landing on his ass, the other finding its way into his hair. Water was falling into their faces and down between their bodies, but all Mickey was aware of was Ian.

They were hard immediately, and Ian used the hand on Mickey’s ass like a vice keeping them locked together while he thrust harshly against Mickey but kept the focus on their mouths. He wanted to let go completely, with wild fucking abandon in fact, except he had shit in his head that needed to get out. That he needed Ian to know.

Releasing the hold he apparently had on Ian’s tongue, he moved his mouth to Ian’s neck for a second to gather his thoughts, and maybe a little courage. Just because Ian was willing to offer his body again didn’t mean he was taking any chances with his heart. The thing was that Mickey needed both. Equally.

“Ian,” he sighed into the soft slippery skin beneath his lips, but he didn’t get any further. Ian pulled back enough to look at him, blinking water from where it gathered in his eyelashes. Mickey didn’t get a chance to decipher the look because Ian flipped him around and pressed him into the shower stall. The white tiles were warm beneath his palms and cheek and momentarily distracted him from his mission. Ian’s hands covered the backs of his, locking their fingers together and sliding them along the tiles above their heads. Then he pressed himself into Mickey’s ass cheeks, gliding slickly between them over and over.

Mickey’s head fell back a little as the heat from the shower and Ian’s body weakened him. The words were still waiting, but first he needed more of his body touching Ian. A tongue swiped along his lobe and he groaned tilting his hips forward and back adding more pressure to where they were connected. Ian was panting into his ear now sending a jolt of desire down Mickey’s spine with each puff.

He was desperate to rub himself against something, anything, but the tiles were too unforgiving and his hand was trapped beneath Ian’s. Words weren’t even possible because his chest was pinned between the wall and Ian’s chest. He felt helpless. Yet instead of panic, relief poured through his body and he relaxed completely, head lolling against Ian’s mouth. He felt teeth scrape along his jaw and fingers disengage from his right hand. Anticipating the destination of Ian’s hand, Mickey let his now free hand fall back until he could grab harshly at the back of Ian’s head, earning him a bite to his bicep as he yanked at Ian's wet hair.

The second Ian’s palm touched his cock, Mickey thrust forward pinning the hand between his body and the wall. Then he pumped into it with as much force as he could still muster, feeling Ian adjust his movements to the pace Mickey was setting. The only thing missing was Ian’s mouth. One tug at that red hair and their tongues met awkwardly, momentarily separated each time Mickey’s hips shifted forward. Then back together in a messy attempt at a kiss.

Their bodies found a rhythm, building toward a finale that Mickey wasn’t sure he’d be able to keep himself upright for, and yet the words were back along with three more that he thanked God were trapped in his body. He wasn’t fucking ready for that.

Ian’s tongue slipped out of his mouth, lips landing on Mickey’s temple and vibrating with the groan he released in preparation for his orgasm, and fuck if that didn’t send currents to Mickey’s abdomen cutting off his breath as he came. It rocked its way through his entire body tightening every muscle
along its path. By the time it was over, his forehead was pressed to the tiles and his knees were like Jello. It was so intense that he wasn’t even sure if Ian ended up coming because he hadn’t been able to process anything happening around him. But Ian wasn’t thrusting anymore, and his breathing was as jagged as Mickey’s.

The drop from such a high left Mickey feeling vulnerable or needy or some fucking thing involving the excess of emotions that Ian seemed to evoke just by being alive. Before he could figure out what to do about it though, Ian maneuvered them around so that Mickey’s body was under the shower head then he turned him until his face was pressed into Ian’s chest. One hand cradled the base of Mickey’s skull, the other ran down his spine slowly and his lips pressed into Mickey’s forehead.

As he adjusted his breathing to match the in and out of Ian’s breath beneath his cheek, a washcloth found its way into Ian’s hand and it rubbed a few circles over Mickey’s lower back wiping him clean, then it softly worked its way over his ass, lightly massaging where Ian had been rutting against him.

Eventually the washcloth hit the floor of the shower stall, the water started to turn cool and everything they were doing took on more awareness. All the unsaid things and shit they needed to figure out had crowded into the stall with them. Moving a hand from Ian’s bicep to his chest, Mickey prepared to take the first step, but voices carried into their space.

"And, honestly, no one should go into a DC movie expecting a Marvel movie, anyway!"

"DC’s best modern-day hit movie is about a female lead. Tell me that’s not revolutionary.”

“Wonder Woman this, Wonder Woman that.”

“All these years, and Marvel is only just now in pre-production for a Black Widow film.”

Fucking e-dweebs, son of a bitch. Ian stiffened slightly against him but didn’t release his hold. While they waited to see what would happen, Ian covered the back of the hand Mickey had resting on his chest and his fingers closed around Mickey’s.

A couple of locker doors banged shut and one of them commented that it must be Ian in the shower because his suit was hanging on the locker door. Then silence. They both relaxed, and Mickey pushed lightly into Ian’s chest, so he could finally make eye contact. It only lasted a second because they pressed together in a kiss. He snaked his arms around Ian’s neck and held him tight.

When the water turned to ice, Ian’s hands shot out twisting the taps and ending the torture then he stretched an arm out to the edge of the shower, bending away from Mickey to grab the towel he’d left on a hook.

“Oh, hey, Slava,” he said smiling and waving the white towel in greeting.

“Morning.” Ian started to pull back into the shower stall, but Slava wasn’t finished. “Good, um, talk yesterday, man.”

“Yes, yes, it was. Good.”

They seemed to be locked in an awkward loop, and Mickey wondered why Ian didn’t just shut the fucking curtain in his partner’s face. No way did social niceties apply when standing fucking naked in a shower while your balls shriveled into prunes.

“If you wanna talk again, just say the word, but whoever this dude is, he’d be a fucking idiot to pass up a chance to get to know you.”
Mickey twisted the little hairs on Ian’s lower belly, giving a good yank. He yelped and tried to clear his throat to cover it. “Right thanks,” he said and punched the air with his towel again like a salute. “See ya.”

Slava’s chuckle settled on Mickey’s ears like nails on a chalkboard. He fucking knew, the shithead.

Ian closed the curtain and looked at Mickey with big eyes. They couldn’t hash anything out because the men’s change room of the Elite gym had become Grand Central fucking Station. The towel made a swipe of Ian’s face and hair then wrapped around Mickey’s shoulders warming him immediately. He raised up to his toes slightly and planted a kiss on Ian’s lips then dried quickly and snuck out of the shower.

Deciding he’d rather die than be stuck in the gym with Dumb and Dumber and the smirking mug of his partner, Mickey tore open his gym bag and dressed for work, while Ian waited in the shower, so they wouldn’t be caught together naked. It might be one of the only locations where that would be acceptable, but Mickey felt sure anyone with eyes in their head would be able to see they were more than boss and employee. He grabbed the clothes he’d tossed aside before getting in the shower from where they’d landed. In the fucking middle of the change room.

Sure enough, the trip through the gym was like a walk of fucking shame. Slava looked at him like that fucking cat with the shit eating grin and the pair of fuckheads stopped lifting weights to stare at him, their scrawny, X-box arms hanging at their sides as Mickey stomped across the mats and out the door.

An hour later, he found a legit excuse to visit Ian. The confirmed guest list for the upcoming Helix gala arrived in his inbox and he sent it to the printer immediately, not even bothering to review it first. Ian was definitely going to need a copy as well. When he saw the single sheet sitting in the out-tray, he realized he should have requested two copies because now he needed to make a copy for himself and that shit never fucking worked.

Stuffing the copy into the document feeder, he punched the copy button and a message popped up telling him to insert a document into the feeder.

“Are you fucking blind?” he asked the photocopier. “It’s right fucking there.”

He yanked it out and stuffed it back in, getting the same message. “I’m gonna get my gun.”

“A photocopier is like a lover, Mickey, you have to handle it gently?” Ian said quietly biting his lip to keep the grin from taking over. “How about I show you?”

Mickey gave him the side eye, raking his eyes up and down that damn blue suit and itching to grab him by the silky yellow tie. “Maybe I like it rough.” It came out like a growl and Ian ran his hand down that fucking tie. He rolled his shoulders and returned his attention to the copier buttons. “Sure, if you think you’re a fucking photocopy machine whisperer.”

Ian came up behind him and tipped forward until his chest touched Mickey’s back and his hand pulled the sheet of paper from the feeder. Mickey pressed back into the solid weight and a puff of air hit his ear. “Lift the lid,” Ian whispered.

“What?” Mickey asked unsure what those words meant as his focus was on the fingers digging into his hip bone.

Ian’s chest rumbled behind him. “Lift the lid, Mickey.” This time the words formed a coherent sentence, and he flipped up the cover on the copier. Ian kissed the tip of his ear then placed the paper
face down on the glass and shut the lid.

Mickey hit the print button and the machine hummed to life.

“When can I see you?” Ian asked just as Lucy’s voice bubbled from outside the supply room door. Ian moved away quickly, yanking open one of the supply cabinet doors.

The blonde whirlwind bounced into the room with Mandy on her heels. “I think the paper supply is —oh hey Ian.”

She gave Ian the third fucking degree about his opinions on the current effectiveness of the recycled paper supply, and the guy was back to his agreeable self, charming everyone with his good nature. God help him, Mickey knew he was having a hard time keeping his reactions from escaping through his pores, when his sister’s surprised eyes, which were pinballing between him and Ian, tried to figure out exactly what was going on.

Deciding to ignore his nosey ass sister since he was still technically mad at her, he clicked the end of a Bic pen sitting on the ledge of the photocopier and scribbled something on the back of the photocopy. Mandy craned her neck trying to see what he’d written, but he passed it to Ian.

“Here’s the information you were looking for.” Before Ian could respond, Lucy moved toward the boxes of copy paper and Mickey saw his opportunity to leave Ian with a parting gift. Putting every single thing he felt for the guy into one look, he whispered, “Sir.”

Not sticking around for a response or to see if his damn sister saw any of that, he got out of there.

Fifteen minutes later, he was trying to not smoke a cigarette while staring out at his city from eighteen floors above it. Ian should be walking through the fire door any second and half the fucking building had decided that the first real summer day demanded they join him on the roof. So much for his plan to get Ian alone and alternate between mauling the hell out of him and getting some of those pent-up thoughts out of his head.

Sure enough, the door swung open at the exact time Mickey had scribbled on the back of the Helix guest list. The surprise on Ian’s face at the sight of half a dozen other people milling about the rooftop made Mickey smile. He did not look impressed, but his natural inclination to be friendly forced him to smile and nod the whole walk toward Mickey who had no such inclinations. He sent a scowl at the crowd.

“Well, this is disappointing,” Ian said when he got to Mickey.

“Yeah, shocking how little privacy you get at work.”

Ian threw his head back and laughed. Mickey wanted to bite into the long line of his throat while climbing him like a tree. When he eventually did get his hands on Ian, there might actually be blood shed. Mandy hadn’t gotten all his secrets out of him. She didn’t know that Mickey had held back in El Paso, that he’d been too chicken shit to let go completely with Ian. Considering he was willing to bang Ian right here on the rooftop with half a dozen desk jockeys looking on, he wouldn’t be holding back tonight.

“So I’m leaving soon,” he began in a serious voice that got Ian’s full attention.

“Janssen?”

“Yeah, gotta drive him around for the rest of the day. Listening to him yak on his phone in some foreign language.”
“Dutch?”

“Fuck should I know?”

“Cause he’s from the Netherlands?”

“And?”

“Good point. What time are you done?”

“Probably 9, 10 tonight.”

Ian frowned, not happy with having to go nearly half a day without getting into Mickey’s pants apparently. That made two of them. “The dude has a dinner meeting at 7:00 at some Italian restaurant. Gotta sit around tracking billable hours while a bunch of corporate VIPs get half cut and stroke each other’s egos.”

“Not your first time, I take it.”

Mickey pressed his lips together. “No.”

“You want company?” Ian looked way too eager for someone who was offering to sit around a restaurant waiting for the tiramisu to arrive. But the way Mickey’s chest tightened, he probably looked just as eager.

“Yeah, then we can drop him at his hotel and—” Instead of words, he used his eyebrows, flicking them up twice in quick succession.

“Yes!” Ian chirped making Mickey smile like an idiot.

“I guess it’s a fucking date, Ian.”

“About fucking time, Mickey.”

Then they just stood there staring at each other like a pair of idiots, so Mickey was in good company.

“Well, I guess we should get back to work?” Ian asked, making Mickey laugh.

“You’re the boss, remember?”

Ian nodded and sucked his bottom lip for a second. “Yeah, could you maybe remind me of that again?”

With his back to the others, Ian was looking hopefully at Mickey, who stepped closer, close enough to finally wrap his hand around the yellow tie and tug Ian forward just slightly. “You’re the boss…”

Ian’s eyes darkened and lowered to gaze at Mickey’s mouth in anticipation.

“Ian.” He laughed his way off the rooftop with Ian grumbling behind him for two flights of stairs.
Good morning and thank you for spending the last two weeks with me. <3

Be careful what you wish for, Ian reminded himself from the passenger seat of the Escalade. Once again, the familiar sights of Downtown Chicago at night whizzed past his window as Mickey drove them toward the Four Seasons hotel. Clive Janssen was currently in the backseat yakking in Dutch to someone who must have pissed the guy off, and Mickey was suppressing an “I told you so” grin.

Ian’s eyes traced the fullness of his lips, emphasized by the barely there smirk. He continued his not so subtle examination, making his way along Mickey’s throat, secured with a tie as per the Elite policy when dealing with executive protection, then following the arm of his suit jacket to the hand that grasped the top of the steering wheel.

FUCK. He wanted to kiss each one of those knuckles individually then link their fingers together. This brought back memories of the shower this morning, his hands covering Mickey’s, the feel of his skin, the way he fits so perfectly against Ian.

“Gallagher,” Mickey hissed quietly.

Ian returned his attention to the side window because looking at Mickey was turning into a bad idea. Despite the endless stream of what had to be Dutch curses, he’d forgotten about Janssen for a minute, but Mickey needed a taste of his own medicine anyway. For the last couple hours, he’d referred to Ian as “sir” every chance he got pretending it was standard protocol for Elite employees to show deference to their superiors. But Ian was hard pressed to think of a single instance where Mickey behaved like an employee.

Certainly not at Il Trattoria, the Italian restaurant on Janssen’s itinerary. Ian had arrived just before 7:00 PM and, after Mickey made a round of the restaurant locating any security vulnerabilities, Ian had escorted the Helix CEO into the restaurant where he was meeting several investors for dinner. While Janssen ate linguine and schmoozed, they’d waited discreetly, if impatiently, for their client to finish his meeting. The plan was to deliver him to his hotel after dinner then they’d be free until Mickey was scheduled to drive him to a couple of appointments the next day at noon.

They were going to have the whole night to themselves, and that knowledge was never far from either of their minds. It was in every look, every touch, every unspoken word.

Tucked away at a corner table, they sat sipping what Ian concluded was definitely seasonal water since they were actually being charged for it. Mickey had refused to drink any to prove a point, crossing his arms and pinching his lips like a toddler refusing to eat his broccoli, and Ian had slid his foot between Mickey’s because his body refused to control itself. Even with two layers of dress shoe between them, Ian’s body responded to Mickey’s instantly.

In the tradition of all Americanized Italian restaurants, the tables were covered in thick white tablecloths draped low, allowing for a serious game of footsies to unfold secretly. Or at least that’s
what Ian hoped was happening as he pulled Mickey’s foot closer to his side of the table because he was so enamored that he had lost all sense of professionalism. For the first time in his life, he was gone on somebody, and consequences be damned.

While they leisurely ate Italian desserts so they looked like dudes on a date not undercover cops on a stakeout, Ian asked if Mickey had followed up with Helix security personnel regarding the incident report they’d submitted about the Little brothers, and he replied with a quick “yes, sir.” Ian’s other foot got in the game at that point, trapping Mickey’s foot between his. Then he started peppering Mickey with work related questions that he knew would get a consistent affirmative. Every “sir” out of Mickey’s mouth was sexier than the last. Janssen could have been abducted a dozen times and Ian wouldn’t have noticed...or cared.

By 10 PM, they were back in the Escalade making their way to the CEO’s hotel. After spending the evening knowing what was coming tonight, Ian was more than ready to ditch their client, who was currently on the phone chewing out someone in English about an information leak that happened over two years ago. Ian's ears perked up at that point, but all he could deduce was that just prior to the release of a new drug, someone had fucked up. In addition to courting his American investors, Janssen was here to announce the release of a new pharmaceutical, and whoever he was talking to on the phone was probably shitting their pants over a leak happening again. Ian glanced at Mickey. When he only got a shrug, Ian wondered if this was something that he should be investigating.

A murmured curse drew his attention back to Mickey, just in time to see him shoot a finger at the driver of another car. He rolled his tongue over his bottom lip in frustration, while Ian studied him wondering if that was a nervous gesture or just a habit he’d picked up. The movements continued and became more drawn out, the tongue took longer to make its trip over the bottom lip, teeth got involved. Ian bent closer in concentration, determined to figure it out.

“What the fuck you looking at?” Mickey hissed quietly.

Before Ian could answer, he adjusted his dress pants which were starting to feel uncomfortable then peered over his shoulder at Janssen who seemed to be capable of non-stop talking. “Your lips,” he whispered.

“What?” Mickey glanced at Ian with a quick frown, returning his eyes to the road. A pink tongue poked out. “Well, fuck, now I’m self-conscious.”

“Ohhh,” Ian responded and zeroed in on his mouth.

“Stop it.”

“Am I really bothering you? Cause I’m not sure I’ll be able to stop.”

“Jesus, there’s the goddamn hotel.” Mickey signaled to turn right into the Four Seasons’ driveway. The parking attendant ushered them into the passenger loading zone, making sure that one person would be remaining in the vehicle.

Just as Ian unhooked his seatbelt, Janssen’s close cropped greying beard appeared between his and Mickey’s shoulders and his voice carried toward them, low and husky sounding. “I have the executive suite. The bed is big enough for three.”

Mickey’s eyes turned stormy before he whipped around to face the back seat. “Do we look like a couple of fu—” Mickey began.

“Let me see you to your room, Mr. Janssen. It’s been a long day and I’m sure you need your rest,”
Ian started prattling. His door was open and one foot was on the pavement as he attempted to stop the collision course they were on.

But Janssen didn't shut up. “You guys were giving off some serious vibes all night, especially back at the restaurant. Thought maybe I could get in on that action.”

Ian had the rear door open, and he spoke over all the indignant grunts coming from the front seat. “I hear the Four Seasons has a great concierge service if you are in need of anything to get you through the evening comfortably.” Once the guy and his gut were out the door, Ian tossed his work bag in the back seat. “Mickey will be around to pick you up at noon tomorrow for your appointments.”

It took him almost 15 minutes to get Janssen safely to his room and return to the SUV where Mickey was leaning against the driver's door, shoulder blades pressed against the glass, hips jutting forward slightly, smoke dangling from his fingertips. His eyes were bright even in the dusky night lit only by streetlights, and they watched Ian make his way past the parking attendant's booth. By the time he reached the vehicle, Ian felt naked.

"Undressing me with your eyes?" he teased stopping directly in front of Mickey and doing some of that himself.

"Not for long. Gonna use my hands."

Ian made some kind of noise at that point and Mickey chuckled.

"Gimme a puff," he moaned, grabbing the smoke from Mickey. “It’s not lit?”

“Nah, I quit.”

“Oh, good for you. Since El Paso?”

“Sure, I quit everyday including today.”

Ian pursed his lips to keep them from attacking Mickey. “Can we get out of here?”

“Hell ya. My place?”

Before Ian answered he got his door open, not wanting to waste any time now that they were in the clear. “Yes. Lip and Carl would turn this into a three ring circus.” He slid into the passenger seat, buckling up and leaning back in his seat so he could freely watch Mickey drive them the couple dozen streets to his apartment.

“You're hot,” he said.

“That a fact?”

Ian reached a hand toward Mickey’s neck. “That tie looks tight.” His index finger hooked around the knot and tugged it loose, back and forth he pulled until he was able to slip it over Mickey’s head, tossing it in the back seat carelessly. The top two buttons on his dress shirt were next. “Ah, that must feel better.”

“Actually, it does. Why do you wear this shit all the time?” He gave Ian a quick perusal.

“Part of the job. Get used to it,” he said offhandedly. His fingers made a trip along Mickey’s arm until they reached the hand resting on the steering wheel and he could bring those knuckles to his lips, kissing them individually just like he’d wanted to all evening.
“You some kind of romantic?” Mickey asked eyeing up his knuckles which were now being lightly sucked on as Ian shrugged. “I don’t want no flowers, Ian.”

He looked at Mickey while biting into his ring finger, and the SUV came to a halt at a red light. Mickey pulled his fingers from Ian’s grip and twisted them in the collar of Ian’s dress shirt yanking him forward until their mouths met for a quick, hard kiss that was over way to soon for Ian’s liking. Mickey accelerated and Ian relaxed back into his seat, twining his fingers with Mickey’s where they rested on the center console. They remained liked that until Mickey needed both hands to enter the parkade beneath his apartment building, and Ian let his hand drop to the suit pants covering his thick, strong thigh.

Cutting the engine, Mickey turned to Ian with a sexy smile that Ian hoped no one else had ever had the pleasure of seeing, that it was his alone.

“Let’s get you out of that suit,” Ian said leaning closer as his hand squeezed the muscle of Mickey’s inner thigh.

“In the fucking parking garage?” Mickey leaned in to Ian’s words and his touch.

“How far is your apartment?” They were a few inches apart now, breath already heavy and mingling between them.

“Um.” Ian could feel fingers tangling in his tie and pulling him closer as those beautiful blue eyes slowly closed.

“Mickey.”

“Hm.”

Their lips were grazing each other, barely touching. “Should we go up to your apartment?”

“Yeah,” Mickey agreed fitting his lips firmly around Ian’s bottom lip. But neither of them moved.

Instead their lips pulled together like magnets and Ian sighed in relief and pleasure, letting Mickey suck lightly before pulling away and coming in at a different angle. New, unfamiliar sensations swamped him every time his soft lips pressed between Ian’s. He was so lost in each impression left behind as Mickey dragged his lips along Ian’s, leaving a trail of his taste behind, that he’d forgotten Mickey’s hand was trapped in his tie. Until it tightened around his neck when Mickey’s fist twisted to keep Ian close. The sounds of one kiss merged into the next, and Ian listened to the way Mickey’s breath caught in the back of his throat, wondering if he’d ever heard anything more beautiful. It all lasted less than a minute, but changed them both.

Mickey released his lips and opened his eyes. The memory of the kiss passed between them, and they pulled away completely. Sitting briefly in their separate seats, staring straight ahead. Afraid to look at each other.

“Let's go up,” Mickey said eventually.

They got out of the Escalade, and Mickey waited near the tailgate for Ian to grab his bag and come around. The bleep of the horn sounded in the quiet parkade as they walked side by side to the elevator bank. Mickey hit the up button then turned to look at Ian, and the doors slid open. They stepped inside and Mickey just kept walking until he was pressed against Ian. This time, their tongues met as Ian bent forward trying to cocoon Mickey in his arms. Fingers tugged at the hem of Ian’s dress shirt untucking it enough that warm hands could make their way onto his belly and part way up his chest. Ian sucked in his gut at the sensation.
“That shit you spray on yourself makes me fucking crazy,” Mickey said against his mouth.

“I’ve been drowning myself in it all week. Trying to get you to fall at my feet.”

“I know.” He pushed lightly into Ian’s shoulders. “Ian, I’m—” The elevator doors opened. “Thank fuck.”

Ian laughed as Mickey dragged him by the tie down the hall toward his apartment, leaving behind whatever awkwardness had occurred between them in the van. Before the door swung shut behind them, Mickey had Ian’s jacket off, tossing it toward a kitchen chair and opening the buttons on his dress shirt. It was all making Ian a little giddy because he seemed so focused on Ian, not like he was in his head wondering if this was the right thing to do but like he had decided to go for it.

Needing some real contact between them, Ian tugged Mickey’s hips closer to his, while lifting his chin so Mickey could loosened his tie, pausing once in the process to yank Ian forward into a quick kiss, tongues flicking over each other a couple times before they parted again.

Mickey dropped the end of the tie leaving it in place in favor of working on Ian’s belt. Realizing that he was going to be naked any second and Mickey was still fully dressed except for the tie left behind in the SUV, Ian started working at Mickey’s belt and zipper. They smiled at each other every time their eyes met, and Ian suspected Mickey felt a little giddy too.

“Bedroom,” he said shooting a flirty look at Ian from over his shoulder as he grabbed Ian’s tie yet again and lead him out of the kitchen. They ditched their remaining clothes quickly and pressed together in a hug for a few minutes to soak up every sensation created by skin to skin contact.

Ian sighed a little at how well Mickey fit against him, like an interlocking puzzle piece. He ran his lips along Mickey’s shoulder suddenly wanting to be inside him, so the whole puzzle fit together. Dropping on hand to Mickey’s ass, he cupped the flesh briefly before sliding one finger over his rim to test how ready and willing he was. Without disconnecting any body parts, Mickey walked them toward his nightstand, and Ian got his answer. He chuckled into the skin still under his lips as Mickey tried to blindly reach the drawer handle.

“Hang on,” he said, turning in Ian’s arms so he could bend over the drawer. “Lube…and…fuck.”

“What?” Ian barked not liking where he thought this was headed.

“Fuck,” he spat again, head bowed low over the drawer now and the lube bottle in his hand. “Um…”

“No condoms? Mickey?” Ian leaned over his shoulder to see, squinting through the dark at the various bottles of lube and an impressive assortment of toys. But no little square wrappers. “Shit, I used the only one I had in El Paso.”

“I might have one in my wallet.” He pushed past Ian. “Fuck.”

Ian watched him dig around in his dress pants. “Um, why don’t you have any?” A whole host of green-eyed monsters were battling for supremacy in Ian’s head.

Mickey looked up at the question. “You asking if I’m out because I bring a parade of dudes through here?”

“Um,” Ian felt dumb because Mickey could bring a parade through if he wanted. He just hoped that it was years ago not recently, and that by parade he meant none. “I actually don’t know what I’m asking but my brain is creating scenarios that are very unpleasant.”
Mickey laughed and returned his attention to his wallet. “You may not like this, but I wasn’t a virgin in El Paso, Ian.” Even through the dim light barely peeking through the blinds, he could see Mickey’s grin, and it lightened his heart.

“Are you sure? I think you might be wrong.”

“Halle-fucking-lujah.” He held up a single condom wrapper for Ian to see. “Goddamn close call.”

“Get the fuck over here then.” They fell onto the bed in a heap of arms and legs, rolling around a few times as they playfully battled for top position until Ian let Mickey win and push him back into the mattress. The arrangement allowed Ian to run his hands down the muscles bunched along Mickey’s back, over his ass to the backs of his thighs, squeezing the flesh and pulling his legs apart.

He reached for the lube Mickey had left behind on the bed, and Mickey helped Ian wet his fingers, so he could concentrate on the tightness that was about to be all his. It took less than a minute for Mickey to become impatient with the fingers inside him.

“Condom,” Ian whispered, his breath too ragged to get out more than that. He was afraid to remove his fingers until his cock was able to replace them. Now that he was connected to Mickey, he wasn’t taking any chances. His head pushed back into the mattress at the feel of Mickey’s fingers on him rolling the condom along his length so fucking slowly. Then he felt fingers trace the lines of his abdomen where he’d tensed with pleasure.

Their foreheads came together briefly to watch Mickey spread lube over the condom. “I didn’t have any condoms cause I don’t bring guys here,” Mickey said quietly, and Ian’s heart exploded. “Why?” he whispered as he gathered his heartfelt declarations and stuffed them back down inside, while he lined himself up preparing to push deep inside.

“Hurry the fuck up, Ian.”

It took willpower Ian wasn’t known for having to take it a little easy with his first thrust, but Mickey must have been as ready as he was because Ian slid right in, dragging a groan from the pit of Ian’s gut. While gathering his senses, Mickey started rocking down onto him and Ian tightened his arms around Mickey’s back, pulling him into his chest.

“Let me go,” came a muffled voice near Ian’s ear a moment later.

“What?” Ian asked, loosening his arms.

“If you can’t get your shit together, let me run this fucking show.”

Ian turned his head so he could nuzzle his nose into Mickey’s cheek, grinning happily into Mickey’s eyes when he lifted himself to his elbows to look down at Ian. “I like you so fucking much.”

“The feeling is mutual, Ian.” Mickey patted his cheek twice. “You good to go now, Princess?”

As was slowly becoming the case, Mickey seemed to know how to bring Ian back down to earth, how to keep him in place. “I am.” And they began to move. This was only the second time they’d had sex, but it felt like they had been doing this forever. It felt like they were doing exactly what they were meant to do. Be together. Connected. Ian moving inside Mickey.

With orgasm hovering around them, Ian watched the blue eyes above him disappear as Mickey’s lips parted with the quiet gasp that escaped. He traced the bottom lip with his index finger then pulled him down for a kiss, so he could feel those lips while he came himself.
Mickey slowly slid to the side, collapsing in a heap beside Ian, who glanced at the mess on his stomach and the condom he needed to dispose of. Mickey’s hand squeezed his bicep.

“Ian, I’m—”

He cut Mickey off. “You sound serious. Could we have this conversation after I clean this mess up?” He held the used condom up, smiling at Mickey’s pinched look.

“You seem determined to stop me from fucking apologizing,” he complained but pushed at Ian’s chest. “Fine, let’s go to the bathroom.

They stood side by side cleaning up, eyes meeting in the mirror. “Okay, I’m all ears,” Ian said.

“Well, fuck, now it’s like a spotlight is on me,” he pouted, so Ian reached toward the light switch dousing them in pitch black since their eyes had just gotten accustomed to the bathroom light. “Dumbass.”

They groped around until they could wrap themselves up in each other. “That better, Princess?” Ian teased.

“You’re lucky I’m in a sex haze or you’d pay for that. Only room for one princess in this relationship.” Their hands stilled at that word, and Ian was glad they were in the dark, suspecting eye contact would send Mickey back a step or two in his progress. “Anyway, man, I’m fucking sorry.”

“ Took you long enough to apologize,” Ian said squirming when Mickey pinched his ass.

“Seriously, I hate thinking about you waking up like that. Fuck. It was a total dick move.”

“Yup, it was.”

“You had to be pissed at me.”

“I was.”

“I was such a chicken shit.”

“You were.”

“Well, aren’t you Mr. Agreeable.”

“I am.” By now, their eyes had adjusted enough that they could see each other, and Ian’s grin dimmed a little. “But I felt kinda guilty too.”

“What? Why the fuck would you feel guilty?”

“Cause I knew you were fighting what was happening, that you didn’t want us to do anything, and I couldn’t—wouldn’t—accept that. I feel like I sort of pressured you.”

“With your psychic fucking powers?”

“Yes, and my world class charm.”

“And that fucking face.”

Ian was back to that giddy feeling. Open, flirty Mickey complimenting him basically checked all of Ian’s boxes. They started back toward the bedroom, and Ian gave Mickey’s ass a firm swat.
He jumped a little but looked intrigued more than angry. “What the hell was that for?”

“Leaving me in El Paso,” Ian said and Mickey nodded turning away again. Ian swatted his ass again. Mickey stopped but didn’t turn around. “Paolo.”

Mickey chuckled and Ian decided one more was in order, earning him a glare.

“Mountain climber dude.”

“Huh?”

“The guy in the hotel lounge,” Ian accused.

“Oh him. Yeah, that was awkward.”

“I’ll say.”

“Must a been hard drinking your martini and not doing anything about it.”

Ian’s mouth fell open. “You saw…”

“We gotta work on your surveillance, Ian.”

“I was drunk!”

“Off a one fucking girly martini. Dude, you need to drink more.” He gave a little yelp as Ian tried to tackle him to the ground.

“I’d also had some lemon rum,” Ian added, panting a little as he tried to get his arm around Mickey’s neck.

“Gay, Ian.” He grunted when Ian’s fingers dug into his ribs then relaxed so Ian could maneuver him to the bed. “How ‘bout that backdoor move?”

“Fuck, that was crazy. I wanted in your pants so fucking bad. Pretty sure if you’d been on board, I would have happily followed through in front of the whole team.” He said all this while positioning himself between Mickey’s legs, thrusting lightly against him.

“Wanna have another go on the mats some time? Without the team around?”

Ian’s hand paused where it was massaging the ass cheek he’d swatted. “You think you’ll win, don’t you?”

“We both think that, Ian.”

“What if I use my psychic powers of seduction?”

“I’m toast.”

Ian kissed him then, stroking his ass a couple of times before running his finger tips between Mickey’s legs lightly. The best part, he thought, was that Mickey would be ready to go. Ian could just slip right in and—

“Fuck.”

“Mm?” Mickey tightened his calve around Ian’s thigh stopping him from changing their positions.
“We can’t.”

“We can.”

“Condom?”

“Fuck.”

They broke apart and Ian fell back to the bed beside him, staring up at the ceiling for a minute, then Mickey turned on his side so Ian mirrored his position.

“What?” Ian asked.

“We could do other stuff.”

Ugh. “Do you trust yourself? Cause I definitely don’t trust myself.”

Mickey flopped back over to his back. “Damn it. I barely trust myself while having this conversation. So much for the sexfest I had in mind.”

Their hands met between them and they laid there linked for a bit.

“I need a smoke.”

“Let’s eat chocolate instead.”

“So you’re suggesting I replace one addiction with another?”

“Chocolate doesn’t kill you.”

“I don’t have any chocolate, man. Sorry.”

“Actually, I’m starving. Do you have any food?”

“Probably got some pizza rolls.”

Ian rolled over, pulling Mickey against his chest and nuzzling his neck. “Starving.”

“Me fucking too.”
Mickey heard the shower turn off just as the coffee finished doing its business. He filled two mugs topping them with a splash of milk and made his way to the bathroom where Ian was standing at the sink in his dress pants fiddling with his hair.

“Missed a piece,” Mickey teased as he passed Ian a mug.

“Do you think I look like an accountant?” Ian asked angling to find the non-existent, out of place hair before sipping hot liquid.

“Hmm…maybe I finally get my taxes done right.” He flicked his eyebrows at Ian when their gazes met in the bathroom mirror.

Ian turned toward him, leaning into his body and pressing his bare chest into Mickey’s. “I’ll do your taxes any time.”

They smiled at each other and moved into the bedroom, so Ian could finish getting dressed. “You’re gonna be free in time to meet us at Murphy’s tonight? Not that any of those assholes need a reason to get shitfaced, but they wanna congratulate you on nailing the Handley contract.”

Mickey was concentrating on Ian’s fingers as they fastened the buttons on his shirt, itching to reverse the process. That chest should never be covered up. Unless it’s with cashmere.

“I’m just going to my brother’s Little League game. I’ve been trying not to miss any of Liam’s games or practices since I’ve been back.”

“Between the two of us we could start a team with just our brothers.” Mickey laughed at the idea. “Or not. Be stealing more than bases.”

“How many siblings do you have?” Ian finished with the shirt and picked his tie up off the floor where they’d dropped it last night. The sight of that got Mickey going, and he licked his lips. “Stop that,” Ian warned him.

Instead of stopping though, Mickey got his eyes involved, giving Ian a look so he’d swoop down and kiss the shit out of him. It worked, and they dragged it out as Mickey blindly guided them through the kitchen to the front entrance, slowly and reluctantly accepting that Ian was leaving. He passed Ian his jacket and opened the door, relaxing against the door jam. “Only fucking you would make the walk of shame in a thousand dollar suit.”

Ian leaned into him again, trapping Mickey’s body as his hand rested on the door frame above Mickey’s head. “No shame here. I’m gonna strut all the way home.”

“Wouldn’t mind seeing that go down.”

Ian’s attention was on the trail his fingers were making along Mickey’s bare chest. When they reached the top of his sweats, Ian looked up. “Bye,” he whispered looking disappointed.

“Bye.” Mickey felt the same way, especially when Ian stepped away and out the door.

“See you at Murphy’s.”
Mickey nodded. Ian took one more step backwards fully in the hallway now. “Kay. Bye.”

Hand on the doorknob, Mickey smiled at their exchange. “Bye.” He raised his eyebrows.

“I’m leaving now.”

“Don’t look like it.”

“Shut the door then I’ll go.”

Mickey stepped out of the way of the door, so he could close it partially, never breaking eye contact with Ian who stood in the middle of the hallway with his blue suit, scruffy chin and soft dreamy eyes. Ian lifted his hand in a wave and nudged his chin at the door, so Mickey closed it with a soft click.

Then stood staring at the door feeling something akin to grief at the thought of Ian being anywhere else but here with him. Even if he couldn’t touch him, he wanted to be able to look up and see him.

“Shit,” he cursed himself. He fucking knew this was going to happen, that he would end up needing Ian. “Shit.”

He yanked the door open intending to take the stairs and catch Ian in the lobby, but the redhead was still standing in the hallway, right where he’d been before the door closed. Mickey knew he must look pathetically relieved and that seemed to get Ian moving. He crashed into Mickey forcing him to step back into his apartment. Arms tightened around his waist, lifting him slightly off the ground. The door slammed into the frame as Ian bent him backwards and into the edge of the kitchen table.

Lips and hands were destroying his self-control. His sweats dropped to the floor and Ian kicked at them because Mickey couldn’t focus on freeing his feet when Ian’s mouth was sucking at his throat. For a second, Mickey worried that Ian was leaving a hickey, but the idea of walking around like that horrified him. All he was capable of doing though was grasping the back of Ian’s head as he bit and sucked and licked at the skin of Mickey’s neck while Ian fumbled with the belt and zipper of his dress pants and tried to move between Mickey’s legs, but their position was making it awkward and slightly painful.

“My ass,” he panted into Ian’s ear.

“Gawd, I know.”

“No, man, the table isn’t what I want pressing into it.”

Ian swung him around and lowered to his knees taking Mickey down with him. As the cold tile hit the bare skin along his back, he arched up into Ian rubbing against the smooth material of his dress shirt and feeling the gentle pressure of Ian’s cock pushing into him. Resisting the spine tingling need to thrust against the weight covering him, he relaxed into the floor to ride whatever wave Ian was currently on.

Grabbing at the back of Mickey’s thigh, Ian urged his knee up, spreading him open enough that he could push inside slightly. Mickey pushed back a little, and they both groaned, foreheads bumping together as they breathed. It was tight though. Ian released his thigh and lifted up to one elbow, so he could spit in his palm.

The action was more like a bucket of cold water than a palm full of spit as Ian shot up to his knees. “Holy fuck. Jesus Christ.” He was panting harshly and looked utterly horrified, but worst of all, Mickey’s ass was now empty. “I—fuck, I’m so sorry, Mickey.”
“You better be.”

“I am!”

“I mean you better be sorry for stopping.”

“Jesus, no. I was about to fuck you bareback using spit. Gawd, I’m not fucking 17 and stupidly reckless anymore for fuck sake.” He was basically freaking out and Mickey was starting to get a little concerned.

“Ian, chill the fuck out.”

“No!”

“Yes!” Mickey reached up to grab both of his cheeks and squeezed so he could pull Ian’s face toward his. “I’m fucking fine.”

Ian’s eyes looked a little wet. “Right. I should go.”

“Don’t you fucking dare.”

Ian collapsed onto his chest, his face in the curve of Mickey’s neck. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

Mickey petted his back like he would a distraught dog, feeling the beat of his heart beneath his fingers and against his chest. Jesus, this was a major fucking over-reaction. Sure it was stupid to do it without protection, but they could talk about it like rational dudes. Unless Ian had a legit reason for his behavior, which Mickey didn’t want to think any further about.

“We’re gonna need to have a conversation, aren’t we, Ian?”

Ian simply nodded into his shoulder. “Another time?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“First,” Ian said pushing up to his elbows, “I’m stopping at a clinic and getting same day tests. I’ll pay fucking extra if I have to.”

Mickey nodded, eliminating some sort of disease as the cause of Ian’s distress. “I’m down with that. Also I’m clean.”

“You are?” Ian asked, distracted from his inner thoughts now.

“Yeah, man, I was tested.”

“Recently?”

“Couple, um, months ago.” Mickey knew he was chewing his lip as Ian frowned at him while working at the puzzle Mickey just presented him. “Yes, Ian, it’s been that long.”

All traces of sad Ian disappeared. “For me too,” he replied smiling down at Mickey.

“You grinning cause we’ve both been in a dry spell?” Mickey pretended to be appalled, but he was kind of okay with it too.

“Wish it was longer.”
“Let’s not get carried away,” he countered. Ian’s face was relaxed now. “If the testing doesn’t pan out, get a crate of condoms before you head to Murphy’s cause the rest of this weekend better be a fucking sexfest. Now get the fuck up. You weigh a ton and this floor is freezing.”

“Oh! Sorry. I have zero control where you’re concerned.”

He said that while turned away adjusting his underwear, so he could zip up his pants, and he didn’t see Mickey blush slightly with pleasure.

After dropping Janssen back at his hotel following his afternoon appointments, Mickey ran the Escalade through the car wash and deposited it in the parkade at work, trading it for his own vehicle. Tico would be taking over the Janssen detail for the next few days, and the guy preferred driving a sedan in heavy traffic.

By the time he arrived at Murphy’s, everyone else was there including Ian’s two new girlfriends, who had the redhead holed up in a corner booth talking his ear off. Three empty martini glasses sat on the table in front of them. Maybe the two chicks would keep Ian occupied, and Mickey would be able to act like nothing out of the ordinary was happening in his life.

Except that Ian was wearing his black cashmere sweater. Mickey wanted to take him aside for a stern talking to because that sweater was a bad fucking idea. How was he supposed to act like a normal person when his hormones had basically flipped the fuck out? Meanwhile his feet had forgotten how to walk, so he was standing in the middle of nowhere staring at the guy like a lovesick idiot.

Of course, Ian caught sight of Mickey at that moment before he had a chance to get his shit together, and Ian’s lips parted slightly.

“Shit,” he muttered to no one in particular, but Ian noticed and nodded slightly. It was going to be a long night of keeping his hands off the guy. Not that Mickey was interested in getting handsy with Ian in public, but he was a little worried that the sexual energy the two of them had built up might be leaking a little from the cracks. Mandy and Slava had figured shit out early on, and things had progressed since then.

Shaking off the negative thoughts, he reluctantly joined his sister at their usual table. She was texting up a storm but squeaked a little when she saw him, dropping her phone to the table and slurping loudly at her signature drink, a Fuck in a Graveyard.

Leaning toward him, she tried whispering above the Led Zeppelin song pumping through the sound system, “Did you see what Ian is wearing?” Apparently, she was back to thinking his love life was her fucking business. So much for learning a fucking lesson. Mickey bit down on his upper lip to keep himself from cursing. Long didn’t even begin to describe the night, so he guzzled a few draft beers in record time taking the edge off.

Eventually, the team migrated to their table to congratulate Ian on his successful wooing of Sadie Handley and give them yet another reason to have a round of shooters. While things died down, Ian leaned in a little closer to Mickey and asked if his afternoon with Janssen stayed G-rated.

“Are you asking as my boss?” He lifted his beer bottle to his lips, looking at Ian from the corner of his eye.
“At the moment.” The rest of that thought hung between them.

“Yeah, I think he’d had a few too many last night. He was pretty quiet actually.”

Mickey watched the muscle in the side of Ian’s jaw relax and tried to suppress the stupid satisfied feeling that washed over him.

“So Ian,” Mandy asked from her spot across the table, interrupting their conversation and making Mickey narrow his eyes in challenge just daring her to make an innuendo or some shit. “Have you enjoyed your first couple weeks as our fearless leader?”

“How could I not? I still have a lot to catch up on, but everyone has welcomed me with open arms.”

“I’ll say,” Mandy muttered sticking her tongue out at Mickey. “You think you’re ready for the gun transportation next week?”

Ian nodded. “I think so. And no matter what happens, I’m working with pros.”

“Let’s hope Mickey can keep his hand out of his pants,” Slava began, eyeing Mickey over the beer bottle he held up, “knowing that he’s sitting on over a million bucks worth of hardware.”

From the corner of his eye, Mickey watched Ian’s throat muscles working but the guy kept his cool, not even glancing Mickey’s way.

“Speaking of jerking off,” Mickey nudged the side of nose to hide the grin that wanted to form, “Thanks to Ian,” again he paused for effect and all eyes were definitely on him, “I got to handle the Desert Ironwood.”

“No shit,” Slava spat in excitement.

“Just about gave the Handley chick a show she’d never forget.”

“I hope you didn’t have an accidental discharge,” Slava laughed.

“Only cause he COCKed the hammer,” Mandy added laughing and raising her hand to Slava for a high five.

“Nice,” Slava agreed, smacking his hand against Mandy’s. “That’s part of Ian’s wooing service.”

And the two of them were off and running, trying out all the gun lingo they knew.

“I’m gonna take a piss,” Mickey said, needing to get away from any talk that revolved around sex and guns, especially with Ian sitting next to him and his cashmere covered arm so close to his own.

“Hey, Mickey,” his annoying sibling yelled after him as he headed toward the men’s room. “You carrying a concealed weapon?”

He kept walking.

“I’ll save my joke about your ejection rod until you get back!” His annoying partner yelled.

He shot them the finger much to their amusement.

“Come on, Mick,” Ian snickered and Mickey knew Ian couldn’t resist the lure of a pun. “Bite the bullet.”
He shook his head as he entered the men’s room. A few guys were doing their business in the restroom when he swaggered his way toward a urinal. Staring at the beer ad on the wall in front of him, Mickey decided it was time to drag Ian, and his bad puns, by the hair back to his place. Every minute spent anywhere but his bedroom was a minute wasted, so he zipped up and headed to the sinks intent on letting the redhead know they were finished here.

Ian was idly waving his fingers under the tap and looking at Mickey’s reflection in the mirror. After glancing around the room, Mickey sidled up to the sink beside him activating the tap. They stood like that while the only dude remaining in the restroom exited a stall and started washing his hands at the last sink. Both Mickey and Ian were still holding their fingers under the water and the guy glanced at his hands after briefly wetting them. He shoved them back under the tap for a moment, clearly feeling the pressure to exhibit proper hygiene. Eventually, he decided they must be clean and grabbed a couple sheets of paper towel, looking between the two of them once, then walking out.

Before the door closed all the way, they smacked into each other, lips and wet hands making contact. Mickey got his first feel of cashmere and sighed as he stepped back, dropping his hands and breathing like he’d already gone a round with Ian. “Fuck. Let’s get out of this place.”

“Together?” Ian asked, fingers on Mickey’s waist, concern in his voice.

“No, we’re not ready to come out to the world yet.”

Ian smiled at his words. “You don’t wanna go out there and announce our relationship to all your colleagues?”

“For fuck sake, it’s bad enough two of those fuckers know. Imagine if the whole team knew?”

“We should probably start with Gabe anyway.”

“Whatever. Let’s focus on what’s important now, Ian.”

Ian lifted his eyebrows in question.

“Sexfest, man. Come on.”

“Oh,” Ian perked up suddenly and the hand on Mickey’s waist tightened. “Success at the clinic today.”

“Yeah? You got the green light?”

“Mm,” Ian slipped his fingers from Mickey’s waist to the front of his own jeans. “And my gun is loaded.”

Mickey shook his head. “It’s a good damn thing you’re the sexiest motherfucker I’ve ever met,” he paused to let Ian finish making googly eyes at him. “Let’s get the fuck out of here. I’ll go first. Don’t dawdle.”

“I parked near your apartment. Gotta grab my bag on the way.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll just meet you at my place. It’s only a ten minute walk.”
Mickey tossed his phone on the kitchen table after replying to Ian’s text that he was in the lobby, then he opened his apartment door to wait for Ian to arrive. It had taken Ian 45 minutes to get here, and Mickey could just imagine all the pleasantries the guy had been forced to maneuver whereas he’d simply walked out of the restroom, shot one final salute to his partner and walked out of the bar.

Ian appeared at his door, chest heaving from exertion. “I took the stairs. The elevator was taking too long.”

“Get in here.” He grabbed the duffel bag from Ian’s hand, dropping it onto the table and closing the door with his foot. “Gimme your phone.”

Ian pulled the device from his jacket pocket and Mickey snatched it from his hand. It landed beside the duffel bag.

“Blackout for the next,” he looked down at the phone, “30 hours.”

“Holy shit,” Ian breathed, nodding vigorously in agreement.

Mickey helped him get his jacket off, tugging the black canvas over his shoulders and tossing it toward Ian’s bag. “You ready?”

Stepping forward, Ian cupped his cheek, looking for all the world like he needed Mickey as much as Mickey was fast coming to need him. “Yes. Are you?” He knew what Ian was really asking.

One big inhale and exhale. “I’m all in, Ian.”

They kissed and, while it included tongue and even a little clashing of teeth, it was still tender and didn’t exactly scream sexfest. It screamed relationship and commitment and happily ever fucking after. For a second, that tried to fuck with Mickey until he realized that if he was in fact falling in love then he was fucking lucky it was with this guy.

“Kay, man, cut that out,” he pushed against Ian’s chest, momentarily sidetracked by the soft material under his fingers. “Let’s get that sweater to bed.”

He slid his fingers down to Ian’s hand, pulling him toward the bedroom, but Ian had to push the envelope by linking each of his fingers between Mickey’s. “Gay,” he muttered with a quick glance at the happy looking redhead.

They stopped at the side of the bed, where Mickey had lube on prominent display on the nightstand. “Romantic,” Ian said.

“I was out of flower petals.” Mickey yanked his shirt over his head sending it across the room randomly. It hit the wall and landed on a set of 20 pound weights.

Ian smiled. “Keep going.”

Mickey’s jeans and underwear landed somewhere near his shirt, and finally, his hands were back on Ian’s chest, making a few swipes over the soft material before moving to his shoulders and pulling Ian forward for a hug. His chest rubbed against the cashmere and he sighed.

“Have I found your kryptonite?” Ian asked, a smile in his voice.

Mickey just made some random noises in the back of his throat, too busy burying his face in Ian’s neck and spoiling all of his senses. The softness of the sweater, the pressure from Ian’s hands on his bare back, the taste of Ian’s skin, the scent that made him horny as hell.
“I’m going to buy a lifetime supply of these sweaters,” Ian decided, his hands roaming all the available skin under his fingertips.

“Pants off,” Mickey commanded.

Ian kept one arm looped around Mickey’s waist as he tried to release the button on his jeans with a single hand. It was a little awkward, but he seemed determined to maintain as much contact between them as possible, finally freeing himself from everything but his sweater. “Want me to leave it on?” He was grinning at Mickey, all smug and amused.

Shoving a hand into Ian’s chest, he maneuvered him to the edge of the bed until he landed with a bounce on the mattress, no longer smug or amused. “Have I not been clear about my feelings for this sweater?”

Ian was nearly eye level with Mickey’s cock which was also a big fan of Ian’s sweater, and Ian was making his feelings clear about that, but he looked up at Mickey. “You think the sweater’s sexy, huh?”

Mickey snagged the lube off the night stand, drizzled some into his palm, and fist his fingers around himself, working the moisture into the tight skin slowly. Up and down. Up and down. Watching Ian stare wide eyed. “I only think it’s sexy cause you’re wearing it.”

“Really?” Ian glanced back up at him in surprise.

“What, you think I got some sort of cashmere fetish or some shit?” Mickey tipped the bottle of lube over Ian’s cock and liquid ran down the length, refocusing Ian’s attention where it was supposed to be. On sex. “Turns out that I do got a fetish though.”

“You do?” Ian started to rub the lube into his own skin, matching the pace Mickey was setting with his own hand.

“Yeah, I do.” They were panting already, hands stroking themselves, chests rising rapidly.

“What is it?” He sounded wrecked already and they had barely gotten started. Watching Ian jerk himself off might become a new fetish.

Lowering himself to Ian’s lap, he locked his knees around his hips, leaning in until their knuckles knocked together. “What’s inside the sweater.”

Ian broke the eye contact, so he could press a bunch of kisses to Mickey’s chest. “Yeah.”

Ready to get things moving, Mickey nudged Ian’s hand out of the way so he could wrap their cocks together in his palm, then he shoved the lube into Ian’s hand. He let his head fall to Ian’s shoulder and he nosed at the soft material again, inhaling this man’s scent.

He could feel Ian opening and closing the lube, then Mickey sucked some air in sharply when Ian inserted a finger as far as it would go and slowly rubbed. Oh, yeah, was right. Mickey wasn’t going to need much to be ready to go, especially when he could hear that same murmurs of appreciation near his ear that he’d heard in El Paso. This time, though, he let Ian’s voice wash over him, absorbing the words. Believing them. Needing them.

When Ian slipped his finger out, Mickey released their erections and tried to stand up, but Ian’s hand shot out and grasped his hip holding him in place.

“Where are you going?” he sounded fierce and Mickey tipped his head to press their mouths
together.

"I want you behind me. Deeper that way."

Ian pushed up to his feet taking Mickey with him and kissing him hard, tongue exploring quickly before he released Mickey to crawl to the middle of the bed. Then Ian was behind him, the soft material covering his chest rubbing lightly on Mickey’s back making him arch up into it as Ian guided himself along Mickey’s ass until he could press inside.

One arm was wrapped tightly around Mickey’s waist holding him close as Ian filled him. He wanted to push back and force Ian deeper, but held himself still for as long as he could.

“More, Ian.” He groaned when he felt sure he would explode if Ian didn’t get on with it.

“Okay, yeah.” Ian kissed the nape of his neck then his weight disappeared from Mickey’s back, and he was kneeling in position behind Mickey. “Sure you’re ready?”

“Ian.”

“Yes, Mickey.” He sounded so fucking sweet while kneeling behind Mickey and preparing to pound the fuck out of him.

“I was fucking born ready,” Mickey smirked, curling his fingers around the soft material of the comforter so he was braced for Ian’s first thrust. "Now show me that you're ready, Ian."

The impact would have sent his face into the pillow if Ian hadn't tightened his fingers around Mickey's hips, holding him in place. The second thrust sent him to his elbows with a thud, the comforter still grasped between his fingers in surprise.

"Damn Gallagher."

By the fifth, he was biting into the comforter to stop himself from moaning like a bitch in heat, yet Ian didn't break his pace, just kept hitting Mickey exactly where he needed it, kept his fingers tight around his hips. Over and over. He'd lost count of how many times Ian had forced a moan out him, but the moans were becoming something primal, desperate. Unfamiliar sounds to Mickey’s ears.

He released his fingers from the blankets, in time to pull the pillow beneath his face before Ian's next thrust. It stole the breath from his chest and when the breath returned, it came with what he could only described as a whimper followed by the overwhelming urge to beg Ian. For what he didn't even know at this point. Fuck, maybe he wasn't ready because this was getting out of hand, but now he had no way to tell Ian. No words to beg even.

Except one. He always had one word. The next time Ian entered him, he pushed the pillow away and spat out a desperate "Ian".

"Yeah, okay, okay," Ian had been mumbling things all along even though Mickey was too far gone to process them. "I'll...um...hang on. I just need, oh, damn."

But Ian's hips didn't stop, they kept coming for Mickey and then thank Jesus, his hand released Mickey's hip and grasped his cock. He shoved his face back into the pillow just as his entire body tightened and he cried out with the force of his ejaculation. Unsure what exactly had just happened. How he’d lost it so completely so quickly.

Mickey was, however, able to count the thrusts after that because they nearly sent him through the roof.
Three. Then Ian, and his sweater, dropped back down to his back, and his heart thudded against Mickey's spine.

"I was definitely not ready for that," Ian sighed into his ear.

You and me both, Mickey thought, hoping Ian could read his mind because he had no words. Except one.

"Ian."
“How about I make us some eggs if you got any?” Ian offered lifting his lips from Mickey’s ass cheek then planting them back on the smooth skin. They were more or less tangled in the sheets on Mickey’s bed, and Ian had been trying to maneuver his way out so he could jump in the shower before finding them some food, but his movements had uncovered the rounded flesh and detoured him from his plan.

“No, now or never, man, cause I’m getting hard.” Mickey’s voice was muffled by the pillow under his face.

Ian bit into the cheek hard enough to elicit a squeak from Mickey, then he massaged the slight indent where his teeth had been, his thumb rubbing small circles.

“I just got harder.” He accompanied this with a slight tilt of his hips toward the mattress.

Fuck, Ian wanted to continue nibbling all the flesh on display, the other cheek looked equally delicious and his thumb make a little trip over there anticipating Mickey’s response.

“Ian!”

“Shit, right, I’m going.” He rolled away from all the warmth, untangling his legs enough to free himself from the bed for the first time in hours, only looking back once and taking the warm, tingly feeling with him into the shower. They were starving and still had the afternoon and evening before real life intruded tomorrow morning and brought with it shit Ian preferred not to think about. He would be strong and not return to the bedroom until breakfast was ready.

Ten minutes later, after digging some jeans out of his bag, he started the coffee pot. Inhaling the aroma, he found eggs and bacon in the fridge and a loaf of bread beside the toaster. Mickey must have gone shopping yesterday. He got some bacon going, then started opening cupboards looking for salt for the eggs and found a pile of chocolate bars.

As he spread them out, noting the Toblerone, Reese’s cups and M&M’s, his eyes welled up a little. Had he ever been the center of anyone’s attention? No doubt his siblings cared about him, like he cared for them, but they lived their lives separate from Ian’s, checking in occasionally to offer a hand or an ear. On the surface, it seemed silly that he was making such a big deal out of this, but he knew it really was a big deal because he wasn’t alone any more. Ironically, he felt less of a need for the chocolate than he ever had before.

He closed the cupboard door, returning to his task of scrambling eggs as Mickey padded out in a pair of sweats, a laundry basket under his arm. “Gonna wash the sheets. We did a number on them.”

Memories passed between them. “Sexfest will do that,” Ian said spatula pointed for emphasis.

“Damn right. Anything you wanna throw in here? Like your sweater, for instance. I’m gonna say it
needs washed.” He snickered at that.

Ian shook his head. “Dry clean only, Mick.” But his mind had returned to the chocolate bars in the cupboard.

“That sounds like a pain in the ass.” Mick’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

Ian shrugged. “I like you.”

“Ah, we’re getting mushy.”

Ian shrugged again helplessly.

Dropping the laundry basket on the table next to Ian’s duffel bag, Mickey moved around the little island jutting out from the wall, crowding Ian against the edge of the cupboard and stretching up to kiss him. Ian still had the spatula in one hand and the pepper shaker in the other, so he couldn’t grab onto Mickey like he needed, and then he was gone, walking back to his laundry basket.

“I like you too, Ian.” The door clicked shut behind him.

While the sheets were drying, they played the new first person X-box game, Dirt Rally, taking their off-road Volkswagen Polo GTIs over the uneven terrain of Rally New Zealand. For awhile the only noise in the apartment was the sound of their wheels hitting gravel and engines revving. That is until Mickey kicked Ian’s ass. Then there was hooting and clapping. Ian feigned being pissed off and gave Mickey the cold shoulder. This lead to some tussling and grinding, bare chests pressed together as they rolled around on the couch, stopping to kiss a few times with Mickey squished between Ian and the sofa cushions. Rather than leading to anything more though, it ended in some cuddling and a side of napping. They woke up slightly sweaty with Mickey draped over Ian.

“Should get the sheets from the dryer,” Mickey commented. Ian could feel the movement of his breath where it teased the skin on his chest, and he pressed his cheek more firmly into the top of Mickey’s head.

“Should.”

“Can’t though. Trapped.”

“Yup.” Ian tightened the arm around Mickey’s shoulder.

“Fine. You can get them. Better fucking plan anyway.”

“Yup.” Ian added a leg to the vise holding Mickey in place.

They quieted for a little longer.

“What are we gonna have for supper?” Mickey asked. “I only got breakfast stuff.”

“That’s not all you got,” Ian countered, smiling now into the silky hair on Mickey’s head.

“Yeah? Found the chocolate, did ya?” Soft lips pressed into Ian’s chest then the tip of a tongue made a swirl around his nipple. Ian arched up into the feeling.
“Thank you.”

“Just chocolate.”

Ian wondered if Mickey felt compelled to deflect compliments and gratitude, to minimize them. “Don’t move!” He slid out from under Mickey then jumped up from the sofa in one fluid motion, so he could grab the bag of peanut M&M’s from the kitchen cupboard. On his return to the couch, he tore into the candy, tossing a few pieces into his mouth. The sound of his crunching filled the air as he dropped down to the space between Mickey’s legs, stuffing his knees under his thighs.

“Gonna share?” Mickey asked, hands behind his head as he watched Ian get comfortable and gnaw on more M&M’s.

Ian eyed him pretending to think about it then placed one on the tip of his tongue and bent down to slip it into Mickey’s mouth. He sat up watching Mickey chew it. “Good?”

Mickey nodded an affirmative.

“More?” They repeated the process a few more times, each transaction taking longer than the time before. Ian poured several candies onto Mickey’s chest then arranged them in a straight line from the base of his throat to the top of his sweats. “Chocolate covered Mickey,” he announced and Mickey tried not to smile at the silliness. “Yum!”

Ian started at the top, chewing his way down Mickey’s chest, offering a candy to Mickey periodically. He continued along the smooth skin of his stomach, scooping a blue candy out of his belly button, and thinking he could write a poetry comparing Mickey’s eyes to blue M&M’s. This made him chuckle.

“What are you thinking about, Giggles?”

He snagged the final piece and sat up. “Writing you poetry.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.”

As the final candy dissolved in his mouth, he freed Mickey from the material covering his now full erection. “There once was a boy from South Side,” he began, tapping his lip thoughtfully.

“Ian…” He felt the knees around his hips tighten in warning.

“Who had so much sass and such a great—”

He was cut off by the force of Mickey’s legs pulling him down until he landed chest to chest, and Mickey stuck his tongue halfway down his throat. It turned into a battle of tongues, this time with a side of grinding. Ian broke away, so his tongue could retrace the path the M&M’s had taken until he had Mickey in his mouth.

When his tongue met the slickness he was craving more than he could ever crave chocolate, he swirled it around, sucking lightly then pulling away to glance up at Mickey. At the way his eyebrows were watching expectantly, at the way his tongue always moved over his lower lip, at the way his fingers tapped his chest always so impatient. Movements Ian now associated with Mickey

Closing his eyes, Ian sank down until he felt hardness hit the back of his throat. He paused in that position waiting for Mickey’s impatience to kick in and for him to roll his hips upwards, forcing himself further into Ian’s mouth, then his hips retreated taking half the length with them.
Each thrust into his mouth lit a fire in Ian’s belly, each retreat left him waiting for Mickey’s return. He wished the sofa was long enough to accommodate his body because he really needed to grind himself into something as Mickey groaned and clenched at Ian’s skull with each thrust. He couldn’t fucking wait to feel him come and hear the soft catch in his throat as he let go.

Ian knew for certain in that moment that this was love because he didn’t care if he ever had another piece of chocolate again as long as he lived.

Supper arrived just as they were finishing making the bed, clean sheets pulled tight across the mattress.

“Oh my god,” Ian moaned and threw himself in the middle of the freshened bed. He spread out like a starfish and closed his eyes. Seconds later, a warm chest touched his own.

A buzzer interrupted.

“Food,” Mickey said and the warm chest disappeared, but Ian continued to lay there calling out Mickey’s name periodically as he dealt with the dude delivering Mexican food. Eventually Mickey returned to the bedroom, and Ian held out his arms.

“Help me, Mickey.”

“Your legs broken all of a sudden?”

“Yes, how’d you know?” Mickey was watching him from the end of the bed. “Help me up?”

“No.”

“No?”

“If I get any closer, we won’t end up eating supper.” He crossed his arms even tighter and shook his head.

Green eyes narrowed. “You’re right, Mickey.”

Blue eyes narrowed. “I am.”

“I was just thinking about us on these clean sheets and what we’re gonna do later. After we eat, of course. Like an hour or more from now.”

“Ian…”

“Do you want to be on top or should I?”

“Ian.”

“I’m up. I mean I’m getting up.”

“Then why are you still laying there?”
“Cause I need a hand.”

“If I give you hand, do you promise to get up?”

“If you give me a hand, I absolutely promise to get it up.”

“I never said it. You added that part.”

“Slip of my tongue.”

Mickey shook his head. “Dumbass.” But he held out his hand and Ian got up, kissing him once hard on the way up.

“Let’s eat!”

They ate like civilized human beings at the kitchen table. As Mickey set some cutlery on the table, Ian turned off the kitchen lights and adjusted the shade on the living room lamp to give them some mood lighting but still allow them to see their food.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Mickey commented.

“I don’t kid about romance.” Ian would continue to do romantic shit forever if it meant that Mickey would stand there with that combination of horror and pleasure on his face, so completely unsure which way to swing.

“Fuck sake,” he said pulling open the drawer beside the fridge. From it emerged a single long white candle. “This was from the safety kit in my last car,” he explained obviously embarrassed now.

“It’s perfect.” And so are you.

“Whatever.” He lit the wick and stuffed the end into a skinny juice glass before setting it on the table. “Happy?”

“You have no idea.”

Mickey dropped down to the chair across from him. “I bet I do.”

They parceled out fish tacos, enchiladas and Spanish rice, eating in silence until Mickey grabbed two beers from the fridge. “Sorry, man, I don’t have any strawberry margaritas,” he smirked sitting Ian’s beer in front of him.

“Have you ever had a strawberry margarita?” Ian asked haughtily.

Mickey snorted. “Whadaya think?”

“Don’t knock it then.”

After a long pull from his beer, Mickey sat back. “Actually, I have.”

“Oh,” he said surprised until he remembered the photo tacked up in Mickey’s cubicle. “Your photo.”

“Guayabitos, Mexico. My retirement plan.”

“Looks amazing. You’ve been there?”

“Sure, lots of times. Try to go at least once a year.”
Ian finished his last taco and sat back with his beer as well, feeling a wave of pleasure imagining Mickey frolicking in the ocean or relaxing in a hammock with a beer, skin darkened by the sun. Swaying gently…

“Daydreaming over there, man?”

“Oh, yeah.”

They stared at each other, and it was nothing short of passionate.

“I’ve never heard of the place,” Ian said.

“Cause it’s tiny and pretty secluded.”

“How’d you find it?”

“When I was twenty, I bought my first bike and drove it down south. Ended up crossing over into Mexico and I just kept heading south.”

“You stopped when you got to Guayabitos?” Ian asked, pushing his plate aside so he could rest his elbows on the table and listen more intently.

“Yeah, it seemed perfect to me. On the water, not many people, cheap accommodations. I stayed for a week and on my ride home felt…dunno…freed.”

“Freed from what?”

“My old life.”

Ian waited, wanting more.

“All the shit from the first twenty years. My old man, the South Side, hating myself because I was a thug and gay.”

“Yeah,” Ian agreed with feeling. “Yeah.”

“I was a criminal since I was old enough to walk, Ian. Stealing shit, selling illegal shit, fucking up anyone who crossed our family. Figured there was only one way to live and I was living it. But I got back from Mexico and got the security guard job at Elite. I wasn’t going back to my old life, and I wasn’t letting the past decide the rest of my fucking life.” He was looking at Ian so intently that Ian was sure Mickey meant those words for both of them.

Ian felt his own words pushing their way up and into his throat, a longing to unburden himself, but this weekend had been perfect, and he wanted to keep it that way. Actually, he wanted way more than one perfect weekend. He wanted a lifetime of perfect and the words evaporated in his throat.

“And I had to think of my bonsai,” Mickey added when Ian remained quiet.

“You’ve had that plant since you were that young?”

“Yeah, man, almost ten fucking years.”

“Holy shit, that’s amazing.”

“You’re telling me. The lady in juvie who gave me the plant called it plant therapy or some shit,” he explained screwing up his face comically. “She was trying it out with addicts and having some
success, so she zeroed in on me cause she wondered if it worked as anger management.”

“And it worked?” Ian asked.

“Oh sure, I haven’t been angry once since then.” He grinned.

“It helped though.”

“Yeah, I think it helps to be responsible for something or someone else. To be needed, ya know. It also helped that my old man was doing a long stretch, and right around then Mandy disappeared with some motherfucker who had no respect for women. Needed to get my shit together quick.”

“So you had a bonsai and a sister keeping you honest.”

“Sure,” he replied. A pained look pasted over his face. “According to Mandy, if you save something, you’re responsible for it. For fucking life apparently. Wish I’d know that before I saved her ass.”

“You’re responsible for your sister for life?” Ian hooted at that.

“According to the internet. Last I heard, she’s got the hots for some UPS driver. Gonna need to give him a Milkovich stare down.”

“I think Mandy has that look down just fine.” Although he hadn’t yet been on the receiving end of one of the woman’s pointed looks, he had seen others felled by them.

“Yeah, but it never hurts to give these dudes a heads up in case I need to scare them off, which is like a full-time fucking job.”

“Tell me about it,” Ian mumbled.

“What’s that? You scaring guys off?”

“Never mind.”

“What secrets are you keeping, Gallagher?” Mickey stretched his leg out to tap Ian’s foot with his own.

They fell into silence for a bit, watching the candle burn almost to the top of the juice cup, while Ian tamped down on the constant reminders that things were not resolved between them.

“You enjoy your romantic dinner? The candle ain’t gonna last much longer.”

“I enjoy everything I do with you.”

Mickey’s chair scraped against the tiled floor, then his dark head disappeared beneath the table. A moment later, hands connected with Ian’s shins and shoved hard, pushing his chair a few feet back, so that the dark head could reappear between his legs.

“We only got 12 hours left, time to resume sexfest. Don’t worry, we’ll get the sheets dirty soon enough. Got other plans first.”

Ian watched those tattooed fingers tug at the button of Ian’s jeans and determined blue eyes look up into his.

“That okay with you, Gallagher?”
“Please continue.” Ian waved a hand in the direction of his now open jeans.

“Thank you,” he said yanking denim over Ian’s hips. “Sir.”

“Oh god,” Ian moaned. “Here we go.”

“You enjoy having power over me, Ian?” Mickey asked, eyes on Ian’s cock.

“What? No! I—”

He was cut off by Mickey’s eyes. “I said, you like having power over me, Ian?”

“Um, yeah, I guess.” Ian wasn’t sure if he was walking into a trap, but he also did enjoy having something like power over him. He liked Mickey pliable and willing, but what he wanted to say was that he had absolutely no power over Mickey because he would do anything to keep him. “I like you on your knees.”

Mickey crooked a finger at Ian, while his tongue made a swipe of his lower lip. Ian ran a hand down the back of Mickey’s head and bent forward until their lips touched. He held him in place as they kissed as slow and electric as the kiss in the parking garage. It was one more brick in the structure they were building. One that Ian hoped would withstand any storm.

Mickey’s fingers slipped around Ian’s cock, squeezing slightly and Ian sat back in his chair but left his hand on the back of Mickey’s head, massaging the smooth skin behind his ear as his soft lips closed around Ian and his wicked tongue slid along the length then back up and around the tip.

Ian’s eyes started to close on the sight of his jeans tight around his thighs and dark hair rubbing lightly against his belly. He closed his eyes and gave into the moment, wanting it to last for the next twelve hours.
“Hold the elevator!”

Mickey smiled to himself as he jabbed a finger into the hold button on the panel. It was late Monday morning, and he’d spent the three hours he’d been at work monitoring Ian’s every movement. He’d walked past Mickey’s cubicle approximately 50 times since they’d arrived. The first time, he’d sauntered past on his way to the lunchroom not giving Mickey the time of day, but on his return, he’d left a fresh cup of coffee on Mickey’s desk then carried on.

Lucy had looked over her side of the cubicle at the steaming cup. “Aw! You guys are finally getting along! That’s so great!” Mickey just grunted and sipped his coffee, noting that it had the perfect amount of milk.

After he made several more trips to do God knows what, Mickey couldn’t stop himself from following Ian to the supply room. When he arrived, Ian had his back to the door and his head stuffed inside the supply cabinet giving Mickey a chance to check out his ass in the standard navy Elite cargo pants. His eyes made the trip down his long legs and back up again. He whistled quietly, enjoying Ian’s casual dress as much as his corporate take-over look.

Ian looked over his shoulder, the Elite logo on his t-shirt pulled tight across his chest. “I’m looking for more pencil leads,” he explained.

“That a fact?” Mickey chewed on the side of mouth hard to keep himself from pouncing.

“Yeah, I think someone purposefully emptied every single one of my mechanical pencils.”

“ Weird,” he agreed. “Maybe they had a grudge against you or something.”

Ian snagged a tube of pencil leads from the box on the shelf and turned fully toward Mickey. “Understandable.”

“Suppose. I’m pretty sure they got over it though.”

“I’m forgiven?”

Mickey nodded slightly.

“How’s your plant doing?”

“So far so good.”

“I have an empty ledge if you wanna send it my way for some sunlight,” Ian offered. He looked so earnest that Mickey felt a tightness in his chest that he tried to cover with banter.

“So, shared custody?”

“It’s best for the plant if we work together.”

“I’ll bring it by later.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

They could only stand around looking at each other stupidly for so long before they had to return to
their desks, but Mickey didn’t wait very long to drop off the bonsai.

“Nice place you got here,” he commented from the entrance to Ian’s cubicle, where the redhead was refilling each mechanical pencil Mickey had emptied, what felt like a lifetime ago.

“I got it for a steal.” Ian stood up, smiling in welcome. “Literally.”

“Any word on when your office will be ready?”

“Drywallers are done.”

Mickey nodded thoughtfully, glancing behind Ian at the office, which was currently closed off. “You can see this cubicle from the office.”

“Yup. My view is going to improve, and this spot has a breathtaking view.”

Mickey rolled his eyes but didn’t disagree. Being able to look up and see Ian throughout the day was more than okay with him.

“I probably won’t get much work done,” Ian added.

“Didn’t look like you were getting any work done today?”

“Hey, I refilled all my mechanical pencils!”

“Between casing my cubicle.”

“I thought I was being inconspicuous.”

“Definitely gotta work on your spy skills.”

“Right,” Ian said brusquely and looked at the plant Mickey held up. “Have you worked out a custody arrangement?”

“How about it lives here, and I stop by to visit now and then?”

Ian reached for the base of the plant pot, his fingers covering Mickey’s. “It’s in good hands.”

“I know.”

Now he was holding the elevator as Ian jogged toward him. The second the doors closed, Ian pressed his entire body against Mickey’s forcing him backwards into the side of the elevator. Mickey hooked both arms around his shoulders and planted his lips on Ian’s while his knee slid between those long legs. He shifted forward to basically hump the leg as Ian’s mouth moved along Mickey’s jaw toward his throat.

*Ding.*

They separated. Ian on one side of the elevator, Mickey on the other. Both of them breathing heavily. The doors opened to the parkade where he had been headed before Ian joined him. Instead of exiting though, Mickey stood motionless staring at Ian and trying to catch his breath as the doors closed again. This time when they met in the center of the elevator car, Ian just hugged him. Hard.
“Mickey, I need to—”

Ding.

Once again, they stepped away from each other as the doors opened to the lobby and Mandy’s amused face. She stood there a moment sipping her to-go coffee cup, and Mickey hoped she was waiting for a different elevator.

“Oh, hi, guys.” She got in turning toward the panel and away from Mickey’s frown. “Did you forget to hit a floor?” She looked over her shoulder at them, at Ian’s disheveled hair and Mickey’s chest rising and falling. “Well, let me know when you figure it out. I’m heading to 16 so I guess you’re coming along for the ride.”

Nothing else was said for 16 floors. Mickey stared at Ian wondering how they were going to continue working together, while Mandy sipped her coffee, humming the tune of a vaguely familiar song. As she stepped through the doors into the Elite reception area, her humming switched to singing.

“Make it wit chu. Anywhere, any time.”

She continued to sing the chorus from the Queens of the Stone Age song without looking back at them. Mickey knew there’d be no tolerating her now.

Ian held the door. “Are you heading out somewhere?” he asked exiting slowly.

“Nah, just getting some shit from the Escalade.”

Ian watched him until the elevator doors closed, and Mickey shot off a text immediately.

Come with me to the gun range this afternoon. Cut work early.

Ian’s reply was instant.

Have you cleared that with your boss?

Mickey smiled as he typed, knowing Ian was smiling on his end of the messages.

I’m sleeping with my boss, so we’re good. 3:00?

The elevator deposited him into the parking garage, and he walked toward the Escalade while waiting for Ian’s reply. It came as he clicked the locks.

Lucky guy. I’ll pick you up at 3.

Happily thinking about Ian and guns, Mickey reached into the back seat for the stack of files he’d forgotten after returning the company vehicle on Saturday. The tie that Ian had yanked off him was on the floor, along with another file folder. Stuffing the tie in the side pocket of his cargo pants, he locked up and headed back toward the bank of elevators.

As he waited, he flipped through the assorted file folders looking for the criminal background checks he’d started on the guests attending the Helix gala on Friday evening. Time was running out for him to complete all the checks and get a list of the hotel staff on duty.

Instead of finding his paperwork though, the folder he opened contained a database printout from the Jeweler’s Security Alliance. Along with the 5-page printout of recent jewelry thefts across the U.S., there was some kind of report on SATG, the South American organized theft group, who were
known for stealing high end merchandise, especially jewelry.

While there was nothing written on the tab of the file folder identifying where it came from, he knew it had to belong to Ian because he was the only other person in the SUV besides Janssen, and the pharmaceutical exec wasn’t likely to be interested in jewel heists. It must have fallen out of Ian’s bag in their haste to get to Mickey’s apartment that night.

As he scanned the report on the ride up to the 16th floor, Mickey told himself that Ian was the coordinator of their division, and it made sense for him to look into what went down two years ago. Mickey even admitted to himself that if the roles were reversed, he’d probably do the same thing. But the list of shit he and Ian needed to hash out was starting to need its own fucking file folder. He’d give Ian a few more days to nut up and tell him what the fuck was going on. After that though, Mickey was going to pry it out of him.

Point Blank Indoor Shooting Range was a few blocks from Elite, so they were able to make the trip on foot. The weather was starting to head into summer territory, reminding Mickey that they would be returning to the Texas sauna next week.

“Did you set up a meeting at the auction house to discuss delivery of the guns once we get them to Chicago?” he asked Ian as they waited for the pedestrian crossing light.

“Wednesday. You’ll come with me?” Ian was wearing Ray Ban aviator sunglasses with lenses almost as green as his eyes, making him look like he had giant ant eyes and Mickey laughed not for the first time.

“Yeah, sure, I’ll come,” he chuckled.

As the light changed and they made their way across the street, Ian nudged him with an elbow. “These shades are sexy AF,” he stated adding a little strut to his walk for emphasis.

“No, Ian, these are sexy AF.” Mickey shoved a thumb in the direction of his own black sunglasses which wrapped around his head. “They’re called Predator.”

“Sounds like it’s trying too hard. Not subtle at all.”

“You saying your shades are subtle?” Mickey snorted again when Ian’s big green insect eyes turned toward him, but he was smiling too. “You basically make everything sexy, man.”

Ian’s mouth opened a little.

“Even ant eyes,” Mickey concluded. They were still laughing as the shooting range came into view.

“This is going to be fun,” Ian said holding up imaginary finger guns. “Pew, pew.”

“You ever been to a shooting range, Ian? Cause guns don’t make that sound.”

Ian tried again. “Pow, pow.”

Mickey held up his own finger guns. “More like bang, bang.”
They fell silent for a moment as they basked in how easy it was to hang out together.

“So, have you?” Mickey asked. “Been to a gun range.”

“Um, sure, plus I handled a lot of air rifles in cadets.”

Mickey grinned at him.

“Fuck off.” Ian tried not to grin back. “Not everyone had a Smith & Wesson as their first fucking toy.”

“Oh? You think you know me, Gallagher?” Mickey challenged.

Ian scrunched up his nose a little giving Mickey the once over. “Yup.”

“Oh? You think you know me, Gallagher?” Mickey challenged.

“Okay, smart ass. What do you think you know?”

“Well, let’s see. You definitely had guns around growing up.”

“We’re from the South Side, Ian, that wasn’t much of a leap, man.”

“I wasn’t finished,” he countered tapping Mickey on the lip with his finger, which caused Mickey to rear back slightly out of conditioned panic. “Sorry.”

Mickey waved it off. “Continue.”

“Let’s see,” Ian hummed a little as he thought. “You probably had targets set up under the tracks, down by the old abandoned baseball diamond. Pretty secluded there.”

Shit.

“Really?” Ian clapped his hands in delight then looked at Mickey all serious like. “Guns were like chocolate for you, weren’t they?”

“Guess so,” he agreed, thinking back to his unconventional childhood. “Just to be safe though I had cigarettes and beer as back-up.”

They shared another laugh.

“You have any back-up vices I should know about? Anything other than chocolate?” he asked Ian.

Instead of answering, Ian frowned. “I wish I’d known you back then,” he sighed.

“No, you don’t.”

“I don’t?”

“If you thought I was fighting this now, imagine me at 16.” They glanced at each other, despite the sunglasses that separated them.

“God, I woulda fallen for you so hard,” Ian sighed. “Probably woulda dumped all my fucked up shit on you.”

They had arrived at the main doors to the shooting range, and Mickey blocked Ian’s entrance. “No sad Ian allowed. We’re about to enter a gun range. Shit is sacred.” He nudged his chin at Ian. “Smile, man.”
Ian smiled.

“That’s better.” He removed his sunglasses and smiled back with the full force of his feelings.

“Your smile is my new chocolate,” Ian said continuing to smile.

“Oh my god, good thing we’re here. Come on, Antman, let’s do this.” He ushered Ian through the door toward the front desk, so they could start the check-in process. After showing their ID and firearms cards, they stood in front of the locked wall display of firearm options.

“Gun porn,” Ian said.

“Not bad, but I’ve seen better spreads.” They moved slowly along the display.

“In your toy box as a kid?”

Mickey smirked but kept silent.

“What do you recommend?” Ian asked.

“You could go with the classic. Glock 19 GEN4. That’s my go to.”

“Mm,” Ian agreed. “What about this one?”

“Kahr black diamond. That would disappear in your big ass hand. Need something bigger.”

“This?” He pointed at an oversized assault rifle, the biggest gun in the display. “About my size.”

Mickey could see the smirk pressing at the corners of Ian’s mouth.

“Sure, it’s big, lot of power, could definitely take a man to his knees,” Mickey could hear Ian humming in agreement, “but size isn’t everything.”

Ian raised his eyebrows, giving him the side eye.

“Gotta have some finesse. Precision, ya know?” He shoved Ian lightly in the shoulder to move him along the display. “I’m thinking classic Sig Sauer.”

They stood together checking out the P226 proudly on display in the center of the glass case.

“Full-sized barrel, larger than average. Unparalleled accuracy,” Mickey explained, voice low. “And see that little silver anchor engraved on the slide?”

“Yeah,” Ian said leaning towards the glass. “Military insignia?”

“Official sidearm of the Navy Seals.” Mickey flicked his eyebrows at Ian.

“That’s hot.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sold,” Ian decided.

With ear muffs and safety glasses in place, they made their way into the range finding their assigned lane and laying out their weapons and ammo. Ian stepped back motioning for Mickey to go first. He loaded the magazine on his Glock with 9mm ammo and slid it into the magazine well. After getting into position, he glanced once over his shoulder at Ian, flicking his eyes up and down that body he
planned to destroy tonight.

Fifteen shots later, he hit the gear bringing his paper target toward them. Ian pressed against his arm as he leaned forward to see the pattern of bullet holes concentrated in the center circle. Releasing the clips holding the target, Mickey stepped back giving up the lane to Ian, who followed the same procedure, loading and aiming at the fresh paper target. When it came fluttering toward them, he turned slightly to Mickey with a frown. The spray of holes was decent but nowhere near Mickey’s level.

Determination in every line of his body, Ian reloaded and lifted his arms, aiming at the target. Mickey moved in closer, so he could place a hand on Ian’s back just above the line where his cargo pants rode low on his lean hips, applying slight pressure until he was balanced over the balls of his feet. With his other hand, he pulled the ear protection away from Ian’s left ear. “Nose over toes.”

Instead of stepping back, he remained close to Ian’s ear, watching his index finger slide over the trigger then pause, either waiting for more instruction from Mickey or more body contact. Mickey was happy to offer both. He ran his hand along Ian’s forearm until it was cupping his trigger hand. Ian turned his head, tipping his chin down slightly until their lips were inches apart and they could lock eyes through their safety glasses. When Mickey gently applied pressure to the back of Ian’s hand, adjusting until his palm was flush against the frame of the pistol, Ian returned his attention to the sight.

Slowly removing his hand, Mickey pulled Ian’s ear protection away, only this time, he stretched up so he could press his lips against Ian’s lobe once before speaking, “Maintain firm contact and pressure.”

He gave Ian space to fire safely, and when the target came to a halt in front of them a second time, Ian’s smile spread over Mickey warming his cheeks a little.

“Naked, now.”

Mickey was half undressed by the time they reached his bedroom, but Ian was dawdling as far as he was concerned. The whip of Mickey’s voice got him moving though. They hopped from foot to foot yanking off pants and underwear, leaving everything where it fell. Shoving Ian back on the bed, Mickey kneeled over him lowering his ass until it covered Ian’s dick.

“Ahh,” he sighed, slowly rocking his hips forward and backward. “Mmm.” Ian’s fingers dug into his thighs eliciting a groan from Mickey. “Get the lube, Ian. It’s above your head.”

Ian stretched out his arm, blindly feeling around the sheets for the bottle they’d left there during their early morning session, and what Mickey had sadly called the finale of sexfest. Ian had suggested that they have another sexfest the following weekend and that had gone a long way to soothing Mickey.

Now he was watching Ian fumble around for the discarded lube with one hand, while the other hand continued to claw at the meat of Mickey’s thigh, and his hips kept rhythm with Mickey’s movements.

“Multi-tasking like a fucking pro.”

“Desperate times.” Ian smiled in delight when his fingers hit pay dirt and lifted the bottle in success, immediately squeezing some onto his fingers. “Come here.”
Mickey moved up Ian’s body enough to give him access, dropping down to his hands while Ian prepped him like they’d been doing this for a lifetime already. They were getting so good at it they could probably have a quickie in the elevator at work and be cleaned up before hitting the 16th floor. He was thinking about sharing that thought with Ian, but he looked so damn sweet with his eyes squeezed shut and that determined look on his face that Mickey wanted to give him some pleasure too.

“You ever bottom, Ian?” he asked since it had never come up. Maybe the guy was into that but didn’t have the heart to tell Mickey he’d like to flip things a little, but the sweet look turned into dread.

“Um,” Ian stammered, as his fingers slipped out of Mickey.

“Hey, I’m just asking, not gonna make you do it.”

“I know. Course, I know that,” he agreed nodding a little too much. “It’s just…yes, I have, sort of, but a long time ago.”

“Okay, cool.” Mickey braced a hand on the bed beside Ian’s shoulder, deciding to end this mood killing conversation and get Ian lubed up.

“I will with you.”

“What? Nah, it’s cool, I said.” He flicked open the bottle with his thumb.

“I want to with you.”

Mickey raised one eyebrow. “I don’t think your face got the memo.”

“I’m serious,” he said firmly, lifting Mickey’s leg so he could free one of his own. The movement was rough and nearly knocked Mickey over in the process, but he managed to hook his leg around Mickey’s waist. “Prep me?”

“This feels weird, man,” Mickey said but his hand ran up and down the thigh hooked around him.

“It won’t for long. Kiss me.”

“Ian—” but Ian yanked him down on top, connecting their lips aggressively and rubbing his dick against Mickey’s equally aggressively. “Jesus.”

“Fuck me, Mickey,” he slurred around their battling tongues.

Mickey ran this hand back down Ian’s thigh then up the side of his ribs, feeling each one despite the layer of muscle there. He hooked a hand around Ian’s shoulder and held him in place while he pulled his lips away.

“Your mouth is saying something that the rest of you isn’t fully on-board with, Ian.” He shot his eyebrows up when Ian opened his mouth to disagree, and Ian draped his forearm across his eyes, letting out a long sigh.

“Sorry.”

“For what? You don’t have to bottom. Sure as shit don’t have to cause I need you to. There’s never been anyone more satisfied than me.” He leered at Ian when he peeked out from under his arm.
Ian smiled a little, but immediately returned to serious like he’d failed some sort of test. “I do want to though. With you.”

“So we take it slow, ya?”

Ian nodded, eyes bright in the darkened room. He seemed to relax a little under Mickey’s scrutiny, so Mickey leaned back onto Ian’s left leg, which was still between his thighs, then brought Ian’s bent knee closer to place a kiss on it. All the while, his eyes stayed on Ian’s and he seemed to relax even further, so Mickey ran his palm down the inside of Ian’s thigh until he could cup his balls. That seemed to do the trick as Ian became aroused again.

Filling his palm with lube, he rubbed his hands together making Ian swallowed hard. But before he could start a new freak out, Mickey wrapped one hand around his dick and slowly pumped it. His other hand worked its way between Ian’s legs headed toward his ass, giving Ian time to put a stop to it if he wasn’t ready, but he only dug his fingers into the bedding and stared up at Mickey.

When Ian lifted his hips a little, Mickey continued until he could rub lightly over Ian’s hole applying a little more pressure with each turn. Ian was fully erect now and his hips were responding to the movements of Mickey’s finger. He pushed inside and Ian’s leg locked around his waist pulling Mickey forward slightly.

“Oh, god,” Ian moaned. “God.”

Mickey pushed further, watching Ian’s chest rising and falling with each noise he made. As his fingertip found what it was looking for, Ian gasped, hands coming up to cover his face.

“Ah.” Ian was getting louder and the leg still under Mickey was trying to get free. After a couple more circles of his finger, Mickey pulled out and Ian started to sit up.

“Wh-what?” Ian panted. “No.”

Smiling down into concerned green eyes, he pushed Ian’s leg down and between both of his own, so he could line himself up with Ian’s dick and lower slowly onto him. Ian’s frown disappeared, but Mickey wasn’t finished. Once he was seated, he re-lubed his fingers and held Ian’s eyes as he inserted two into him, bracing his free hand on Ian’s thigh. It made moving his own hips awkward, but the look on Ian’s face was worth the immediate fatigue in his thighs.

“Mickey.” At least that’s what it sounded like Ian said as it was more of a strangled moan. Ian bent both legs a little so he could push his heels into the mattress, giving him better momentum to fuck up into Mickey who was concentrating on matching the movement of his fingers with Ian’s hips. “I-I can’t hold on.”

“Gimme a hand then.” Mickey laughed at Ian’s wide eyes.

“Fuck, right, sorry.” He wrapped his fist around Mickey but still looked mostly dazed, teeth digging into his lower lip, head pushing back into the mattress exposing his neck. And Mickey couldn’t get his mouth on any of it.

“Be prepared,” Mickey warned. “The second I come, I’m gonna kiss the fuck out of you.”

Ian came before Mickey finished that sentence, and Mickey had to cover the hand on his dick with his own hand to keep Ian focused through his shuddering and moaning. Watching that go down was just what Mickey needed to bring on his own climax.

As promised, the second he was coherent again, Mickey carefully removed his fingers then dropped
down to Ian’s mouth, covering it with his own as Ian’s hands cradled the back of his head. Ian flipped them over pressing Mickey into the mattress, tangling their legs.

Eventually, they slowed down and Ian rested his head on Mickey’s chest with a sigh, so he weaved his fingers into the silky red hair, massaging Ian’s scalp.

“We both need some of that soothing balm, Ian.”

All he got was an quiet mumble in response.

“Falling asleep on me, man?” He tightened his arms around Ian’s shoulders, encouraging him to stay put. They’d clean up in a bit. Right now, he wanted Ian to just like this, breathing evenly and fully relaxed.

As he slept, Mickey thought about stuff. He was doing more of that than usual these days, now that a redheaded tornado had torn apart his life, leaving nothing intact. They were going to have to talk sooner or later, and whatever had happened tonight just amplified that fact, but Ian probably didn’t need to add a confession to tonight’s events.

Kissing the top of that ginger head, he nudged Ian’s shoulder. “Hey, sleepyhead, let’s get washed up and crawl back under here with the laptop, watch last night’s Game of Thrones.”

Ian lifted his head slightly, wiping at his chin. “Oh, shit, I drooled on you.”

“I have so many of your fucking bodily fluids on me that CSI would declare me a crime scene.”

Ian turned his head so he could rest his chin on Mickey’s chest. He was smiling but it faded quickly. “Thank you.”

“Say what?”

“For, uh, that.”

“We’re thanking each other for sex now?” Mickey scrunched up his face but kept his eyes locked on Ian’s. “Okay then. Thank you, Ian, for sticking your—”

“Dick,” Ian laughed pressing his lips into Mickey’s. “Shut up and accept my fucking gratitude.”

“Gratitude fucking accepted.”
Camouflage

“You left this in the Escalade on Friday night.”

Ian looked up from his computer at the sound of Mickey’s voice, swiveling his chair to face the entry to his cubicle. He wanted to fully appreciate the view, and not the one of the Chicago skyline.

“What’s that?” Ian asked only half paying attention to the content of the conversation. Mickey was wearing black jeans and a dress shirt and looking rather fancy for his typical work attire, but Ian couldn’t think of any jobs he had today that would require him to dress up. Either way, he wanted to check it out from every possible angle.

A manila folder landed with a light smack on his desk, the corner of a Jeweler’s Alliance printout poking out from the edge. Ian’s heart thudded once almost painfully. His mouth opened and closed as he stared at it, cursing himself for such sloppiness. How had he not noticed that the file was missing? Fuck, what else was he missing? Probably the fact that he was in danger of sabotaging his career. Okay, he thought, calming himself down. He just needed to find a way to balance his two priorities.

Priority one was currently waiting, very impatiently, for Ian to respond. When he finally got up the nerve to meet Mickey’s eyes, they were direct and unflinching because he wasn’t capable of being anything less, and that terrified Ian because he wasn’t able to reciprocate. He got to his feet and stepped closer to Mickey, so they could keep this conversation to themselves.

“Mickey…” he began and searched those hard, blue eyes for anger or disgust, but only found maybe a little annoyance mixed with some arrogance.

“Good luck, Gallagher.”

“I was just…”

“Yeah, I know what you were just. I’m not stupid.”

“Of course, you’re not.”

“You think we haven’t been through this with a fine-tooth fucking comb, like, about a million times. Me and every other asshole who thought the diamonds were their fucking business. You’re gonna come in here and figure it out using your world famous vulnerability assessment protocols?”

Ian watched his eyes turn stormy, but he could tell the storm was directed inwards not outwards and Ian relaxed a little knowing he’d dodged this bullet. For now. “You been reading my research papers?” he teased, hoping to nudge Mickey further off course.

His lips were pressed firmly together, accentuating their shape and fullness, and keeping the smile from forming. “What? As if, man.”

“Oh my god, you have!” Ian hooted a little and Liz looked up from her cubicle next door, so he lowered his voice, bending forward to almost whisper. “Which one?”

“Shut up.”

“No, no, lemme guess! Was it, uh,” he tapped his bottom lip thoughtfully. “Ian Gallagher’s World Famous Vulnerability Assessment Protocols.”
“That shit sounds made up. Anyway, who has time to read long ass essays full of gibberish?” He crossed his arms, daring Ian to argue.

“How do you know they’re long and full of gibberish then?” Ian crossed his arms too.

“Cause you university types think it makes you look smart.”

“Well, I can’t argue with that.” Ian shrugged his agreement.

“Okay, Gallagher, what do you wanna know? This is a one time opportunity, so use it wisely.” That surprised Ian. “Really? Um, wanna get a coffee and talk privately? I can finish prepping for my meeting with Gabe when I get back.”

“Lead the way.” Mickey waved Ian out of his cubicle. Theoretically, this was exactly what Ian wanted. Yet, he felt dirty. It didn’t matter to him whether he was justified or not in prying into something that was clearly a soft spot for Mickey. So much had happened between them the last week that he wished he could continue to ignore his responsibilities and just enjoy what he finally had.

The elevator doors opened to a small group of admins from the law office above them and their spirited conversation about their boss. Despite being disappointed to share the elevator, Ian figured it was for the best that he had to keep his hands to himself, given how distracted he’d become.

When the doors opened to the lobby, the women exited ahead of them ending their discussion about how much of an asshole their boss was, causing Ian to look over his shoulder at Mickey. “How much of an asshole is your boss?”

“Just the right amount.”

They followed the admins into Perks. When the smell of espresso hit his nose, Ian remembered who worked here. Mickey finding that file must have really messed with his mind if he’d forgotten about Paolo. He scanned the somewhat busy coffee shop and located the disheveled dark hair quickly, front and center at the till.

“Shit,” Ian hissed to himself.

“Just play it cool,” Mickey said and Ian could hear the humor behind the words. He was fucking enjoying himself.

They joined the back of the line, and Ian once again focused on the menu like he’d never been to a coffee shop before, frowning over how little control he had over his emotions lately. That didn’t stop him from remembering that Mickey had said he didn’t know what Paolo’s skin felt like, but that didn’t mean that Paolo didn’t know what Mickey’s felt like. Or what his mouth tasted like. Or what

“Ian,” Mickey said quietly, getting his attention. He looked down at Mickey who was giving him an exasperated look. “Nothing happened, okay?”

Ian’s shoulders relaxed, while his cheeks heated a little in embarrassment over both his reaction and the obviousness of it. “Sorry for being so…”

“Jealous?” Mickey laughed when Ian punched his arm lightly. “Hey, man, if the tables were reversed, I’d be jumping over that counter to beat his fucking ass.”
“Mickey!” Paolo sang as they moved to the head of the line. He leaned forward intimately. “Why haven’t you texted? Bad boy.”

“We’d like a large Americano and a large mochaccino, please,” Ian interjected moving his shoulder in front of Mickey’s body. “And two chocolate chip muffins.” Stick your berrylicious where the sun don’t shine.

When Paolo tipped his head to the side trying to see past Ian to Mickey, Ian moved in the same direction. “Thank you, that’ll be all.” He held up his credit card.

Paolo seemed daunted enough to do his damn job rather than come on to Mickey, so Ian tapped his card and they made their way to a corner table with their muffins.

“Liam has a baseball practice tonight that I should go to,” Ian explained as soon as they sat down. He felt guilty for wishing he didn’t have to go since he really did love watching the ten year old play, but at the moment, the only place that held any real appeal for him was Mickey’s bedroom. And bathroom. And kitchen. And living room.

“Yeah, okay. I better hang with Slav or he’s gonna throw a hissy fit.”

“’Kay, I’ll spend the night at home, do some laundry, repack?” The last part came out more as a question when Mickey frowned at him because Ian suddenly realized that maybe Mickey wanted more alone time. Ian had just assumed they were inseparable after work.

“I suppose I’ll survive one night,” Mickey concluded biting into his muffin and setting Ian’s mind at ease as their coffee order was called. Ian returned with their beverages after a short exchange of eye contact with Paolo.

“So,” Mickey said, jumping right into the topic. “You think the SATG had something to do with the diamonds?”

“Well, they are known for all kinds of high end merchandise theft. Jewelry stores are their main focus. Makes sense, right?”

“Yeah, but those Colombian fuckers aren’t sophisticated enough to pull this job. Not only did nobody get hurt, they were fucking invisible.”

“Maybe they’re evolving. Learning new techniques. The longer they’re in the U.S., the better their connections are gonna be.”

“Anything’s possible, but we found no links to them back then. Not a whiff,” he huffed sitting back, coffee forgotten. “Found no connections to anyone, in fact.”

“Any similar jobs reported?”

“You tell me. What’d your printout say?” Mickey challenged.

“The Jeweler’s Alliance has nothing on file.”

Mickey nodded. “Camera in the back alley was out of commission. They used an LED laser to distort the pixels for 58 seconds when they took the briefcase. We watched footage from the weeks prior and following. Nothing.”

“What about the footage from the parking garage where the Escalade was parked?”
“We learned the fucking hard way that the surveillance down there is spotty.” He was warming to the topic now. “Another reason the SATG aren’t high on my list. Why go to all the trouble of loading the air exchange system in the Escalade with timed release chloroform when they could just roll up to the backdoor of the jewelry store and demand the case at gunpoint?” Mickey lifted his eyebrows. “That method has been working for them for years.”

“Well, this method is less risky, quieter.”

“But requires a hell of a lot of precise planning.”

“They’ve branched out recently,” Ian added. “Distraction thefts, different scams. More than just grab and go. They’ve even been developing their own informants.”

“How much time have you spent looking into them?” Mickey frowned. “Sound like you’re building a fucking case for them.”

Ian looked down into his coffee cup.

“Hey, it’s fine, man. You’re the boss, so you do what you gotta do, okay?” They’d finished their muffins and Mickey gathered up the garbage making a neat pile of it, while Ian watched and wondered if he should continue pushing. He had a job to do, but he also had—

“Are we boyfriends?” he blurted out causing Mickey to recoil just enough that Ian wished he’d kept his damn mouth shut. It had been less than a week since they’d recovered from El Paso and here he was trying to tie Mickey down.

Mickey sat forward, leaning his elbows on the table. “What does that mean exactly?” He didn’t look upset, just curious, so Ian leaned forward too.

“I guess we don’t sleep with anyone else,” Ian said quietly, holding Mickey’s gaze.

“Is that it?”

“Well, we’d probably spend Christmas together,” Ian added making Mickey laugh.

“So I don’t bang anyone else and I fill your stocking?” He chewed his lip like he was thinking. “Would we walk down the street holding hands and shit?”

“Only if you wanted to.”

“Would you want to?”

Ian shrugged.

“You so totally would.”

“Just so all the other assholes know to stay the fuck away.”

Mickey sat back in his chair, eyes narrowed, lips pursed. “All right, Ian, sure, we’re boyfriends.”

All Ian could do was nod, unsure if that conversation had happened in real life or just in his mind, but the nagging thought that boyfriends didn’t keep stuff from each other brought him back down to earth. He felt trapped between his past and his future, unsure how to reconcile them with the present.

“We done here? Or you got more questions?” Mickey asked pulling him from his thoughts. “About the jewels, I mean. We can talk more about what you want in your stocking another time.”
Ian wanted to smile along with him, but he couldn’t shake his burdens. He glanced over Mickey’s shoulder thinking about what he’d learned and what he still needed to find out. Paolo was watching them from his position at the till, but he looked away when Ian caught him.

“Who knew you guys were going to be there? In the rear parking area at that time?” Ian asked.

“That’s the question that keeps me up at night. How the fuck did the thieves know?”

Ian was quiet and let Mickey decide where this conversation should go.

“Obviously my fucking colleagues,” he eventually said. “Handful of people at the jewelry store, the buyer and anyone those people talked to. Half the fucking Republicans in Chicago were scheduled to attend the fundraiser that night. They could a been bragging to anyone about two million dollars worth of jewelry she was gonna be wearing. But it would be stupid as fuck to advertise when and where the pick up was going to take place.”

“The cross-examination after something like this is intense. Can last weeks,” Ian began carefully, watching Mickey’s reactions for how best to continue. “Not just from Elite but law enforcement as well.”

Mickey just looked at him, obviously waiting for that statement to become a question. Ian could imagine how humiliated and pissed off Mickey would have been to not only wake up empty handed but to then have to sit through endless rounds of interrogation while everyone either pointed a finger at him or wondered at his inability to do his job. At least, Ian was sure that’s how Mickey would view it.

Technically, even two years later, Mickey remained a suspect, at least to some degree. No evidence pointed directly at him, so Elite hadn’t fired him, or anyone else on the team for that matter. But since a case hadn’t been built against anyone, he had never been completely exonerated.

“I can imagine how hard that was for you,” Ian continued. Mickey shrugged and nudged his nose with a knuckle, alerting Ian to move on. “Okay. One more question cause I know how you feel about guys who ask questions.”

That got a smile.

“Do you have any suspicions? Any at all?”

Mickey shook his head. “No, not really.”

Ian lifted his brows to prompt him to expand on that.

“Fuck.”

Ian’s interested was piqued now. “I guess that means you got some suspicions.”

Agitation was rolling off Mickey now, and the neat pile of garbage was taking the brunt of it as he crumpled it between his palms. “Yeah and no.”

“Hey,” Ian said softly. “I don’t want to pressure you.”

“Nah, you’re not.” Mickey looked him in the eye. “I don’t know who, but I know it was an inside job.”

“You do?” They were staring at each now, locked in some kind of current of trust.
“Okay, you know all this shit.” He touched his left index finger. “One. They had to know we were hired to do the transport. Two. They had to know exactly when it was going down. Three. They had to know the vehicle we were driving. Four. They had to get access to that specific Escalade. Five. They managed to get into the briefcase and destroy the tracking device before we woke up because that’s the first thing I did when I opened my fucking eyes. Track them. That’s a lot of shit they had to know.”

“So it leaves the buyer and store manager out.”

“Yeah. We have strict protocols, as you know, about sharing information, so a leak seems highly fucking unlikely. Possible, sure, but unlikely.”

“And you have no idea who?” Ian asked wondering if Mickey would share even if he had an idea.

“If I did, they’d be dead.”

Ian winced a little at that statement. He could feel eyes on him and looked up to meet Paolo’s gaze again, but this time the guy didn’t look away immediately, and Ian could feel his anxiety spike.

“I don’t like being fucked around,” Mickey added.

Later that afternoon, Ian was sitting at the long table in Conference Room C organizing his paperwork for the Handley transport scheduled for next week. There were still a number of items he needed to confirm, but most of the planning was complete, and his meeting today was to show Gabe that he could handle his first full scale job.

“Do you have everything you need?” Mandy entered the room and sat a printout on the table in front of him. “Gabe likes details, so expect a bit of grilling.”

He tucked the paper between several others in his stack. While he had definitely been distracted since his arrival a few weeks ago, when it came to analysis and planning, Ian did not doubt himself. Like a composer, bringing separate melody lines together to create a elegant harmony, he brought variables and dependencies together to create an elegant strategic plan. It was just the fucking execution of that plan, the actual fieldwork, that he seemed to be struggling with.

With a final scan of the table in front of him, he nodded. “Yes, just need to confirm the guns will be packed and ready for transport. Mickey and I are meeting with the auction house tomorrow.”

Before she could respond, Gabe walked in, phone pressed to his ear as he took the chair at the head of the table. Mandy widened her eyes exaggeratedly and Ian mouthed a thank you just as she pulled the door closed behind her.

“What’s the plan, Ian?” Gabe asked setting his phone on the table near the Handley material neatly spread out in front of him. “Tell me exactly how you intend to ensure over a million dollars in firearms makes it safely to Chicago and into the hands of the auction house.”

Sliding a sheet of paper toward Gabe, Ian began, “In keeping with Elite’s protocol for long distance transportation of expensive merchandise we’ve chartered a private plane, a Cessna Grand Caravan, to take us from El Paso to Chicago.”
Gabe glanced down at the flight details. “Good. What about transportation from Handley’s place to the El Paso airport?”

“Cheyenne and Axton, from our El Paso office,” he paused for Gabe’s nod, “have arranged for an armored cube van big enough to hold all the guns, which are being packed up by the transportation department of Sotheby’s down there.”

“You’ll be equipping the van with MyTrac?” Gabe asked just as his cell phone flashed with an incoming message.

“Certainly, Cheyenne is making sure there’s global tracking in three locations on the van.”

“Where specifically?” He was interrupted by Gabe, who was frowning at the contents of the message.

“Under the hood, in the cab and in the trailer.”

“Thorough,” he commented finally looking at Ian. “I’ll need a diagram of the specific locations. Are you tracking any of the guns?”

“Yes, three will have devices hidden within their cases. A Colt pistol, Civil War rifle and the Desert Ironwood.”

“How will we know which cases contain the tracking devices?”

“We’re using numbered gun cases. I have that list as well and will add it to your package.”

“And the detailed itinerary, so I know exactly where you are at every moment and who is doing what. Tell me your roster.”

“Mickey will be in the van with Axton, who does a lot of the defensive driving for them. I’ll travel with Slava and Cheyenne in a visible support vehicle.”

“Just one support vehicle then? No invisible support?” Gabe was back to concentrating on his phone, typing while he listened.

“The route is too open to offer any invisible escort; however, MyTrac will give us real-time monitoring by central command in El Paso with assistance if we need it. We’ll be using portable radios to communicate between vehicles, but that’s one area of potential weakness as any heavy winds in the lower lying areas of the mountain pass can interrupt transmission temporarily.”

“Have you tested potential penetration points? Where you would most likely be breached?” Whatever was happening on Gabe’s phone seemed to be pissing the Director off.

“We’ve done a preliminary check but intend to follow up when we get there next week,” Ian continued as he removed a second sheet of paper from his pile and placed it on top of the first sheet he had given to Gabe. “That’s a map of the route we’ll be taking. The only real weak spot is a bridge about 10 miles from the Handley ranch. It’s narrow, barely enough room for two small cars to pass. It’s several hundred feet across the creek below.”

“Are there any alternate routes you could take?” Gabe asked looking briefly at the map.

“Only one and it’s noted in the map I just provided,” he paused to draw Gabe’s attention to a specific line on the map. “It’s a completely different route into El Paso, but it would more than double the amount of travel time from a half hour to over an hour. We essentially have to make our way around
the Franklin Mountains, and we’ve determined that the shorter route is still the safest. Given all the factors.”

While Gabe seemed to be considering something, Ian concluded, “Both vehicles have reinforced shells and bullet-resistant glass. It is imperative that all considerations are compliant with DOT and C-TPAT regulations.”

“You know that manual backwards and forwards, Gallagher?”

“Oh, well, sure. Isn’t that why it was written?” Ian had never met a manual he didn’t appreciate. Precision relaxed him. Knowing what was what put his mind at ease. Manuals were the ultimate anti-anxiety pill as far as he was concerned.

Gabe pocketed his phone and slid the paperwork off the table, so he could stand up. “Well, reread the section on engagement and make goddamn sure that everyone under your command next week follows it to a tee.”

“Ah, yes, sir,” Ian nodded. “Of course.”

“To a tee,” he repeated, leaning on the table. “All right, Gallagher, lemme get back to you with any follow up questions.”

After 45 minutes of staring up at the ceiling above his bed, Ian snatched his phone off the night stand. It had been a full day and his brain was buzzing with so much information and the weight of responsibility. He was well aware of his strengths. They’d gotten him to this point in his life, but he was slowly being reminded of his weaknesses.

The kneejerk reaction to prowl the apartment for chocolate had kicked in like it usually did when feeling that vulnerability and insecurity, but it was immediately replaced with a need to talk to Mickey. In fact, he had a moment of panic over the idea that chocolate would never soothe him again.

Instead of calling him though, Ian decided to practice some self-control and text in case Mickey had fallen asleep.

Ian (11:04pm): Mick?

A few minutes went by without a response, and he pictured Mickey asleep. He’d be on his stomach for sure, face squished into the pillow. Ian couldn’t decide if he preferred the image of the comforter pulled over the shape of his ass or if he preferred his ass uncovered. Smiling, he was about to set the phone down and let Mickey sleep because even just thinking about him had soothing properties.

Mickey (11:10pm): brushing my teeth

Now that Ian was talking to him, he realized that he didn’t actually know what he wanted to say. Mostly he just wanted to know Mickey was there.

Mickey (11:11): miss me?
Ian (11:11pm): in a heartbeat

Mickey (11:11pm): How do you think I feel gotta sleep in this bed without you

Ian smiled into the darkness of his bedroom, rereading that a dozen times. He could hear his brothers’ muffled bickering out in the living room and street noises below them, but he felt like he was in a world of his own.

Mickey (11:12pm): Been sniffing your pillow man

He turned on his side, grinning at the phone in his hand while he imagined Mickey pressing his face into the pillow on the left side of the bed then pulling it against his chest as he slept. God, how had he become so addicted to someone is such a short period of time?

Ian (11:12pm):

The text box remained empty while Ian tried to figure out what to say. Something that wouldn’t make him sound hopelessly smitten or like a total sap. That impulse to fill it with every single declaration that was swarming in his head scared him a little. Not because he didn’t trust those thoughts with Mickey but because he trusted him so much that he wanted to lean on him.

Mickey (11:15pm): You fall asleep on me?

He knew then what he wanted to say, and it surprised him because he had always assumed that part of his life was buried, a unspoken piece of his past that he hated to drag into his current life. Now he wasn’t so sure.

Ian (11:16pm): I wanna do what we did again tomorrow

Mickey (11:16pm): Yeah? I’m sure we can arrange that

Ian (11:16pm): all the way though. Wanna feel you inside me

Ian’s heart thudded at the thought of Mickey inside him, and his dick immediately filled. Shit, he really did want that and not for any other reason but to know what it would feel like with Mickey.

Mickey (11:17pm): fuck Ian this convo is gonna get outta control fast sayin shit like that

Ian didn’t disagree. His lust for this guy was a constant flame that took very little to engulf him, and he was feeling that flame burning him right now.

Ian (11:18pm): Too late

Mickey (11:18pm): aight tell me what you’re wearing then

Laughing out loud, Ian looked down at himself. There was very little light coming in through the open curtains, just enough to reflect off his pale skin. He ran his hand over the front of his underwear thinking about Mickey touching him.

Ian (11:19pm): Cashmere pyjamas

Mickey (11:19pm): Hot

He imagined Mickey chuckling as he wrote that, arm tucked behind his head, eyes shining with pleasure. Was he looking down at himself too, thinking about Ian touching him?
Ian (11:19pm): Literally it would be
Mickey (11:20): might wanna work on ur sexting skills
Ian (11:20pm): with you sure. black boxer briefs
Mickey (11:20pm): Keeping the junk under control?
Ian (11:20pm): It only wants to come out when you’re around
Mickey (11:21pm): Whipped already huh
Ian (11:21pm): Ya. How about you
Mickey (11:21pm): naked
Ian (11:22pm): this convo is very bad idea
Mickey (11:22pm): did u touch yerself yet
Ian (11:22pm): ya. You
Mickey (11:22pm): fuck ya
Ian (11:24pm): was it the cashmere
Mickey (11:24pm): lol
Ian (11:25pm): naked now too
Mickey (11:25pm): what r u thinking bout
Ian (11:25pm): your mouth is my usual go-to fantasy
Mickey (11:25pm): not my ass???
Ian (11:26pm): that gets lotta airtime 2 but kissing u is my fave
Ian (11:26pm): fuckin love your mouth
Mickey (11:27pm): fk cnt typ n jrk
Ian (11:27pm): first thing I’m gonna do when I see u is kiss those lips dont even care where we r
Mickey (11:28pm): k
Ian (11:28pm): you close
Mickey (11:28pm): y
Ian (11:29pm): I also like to come in that mouth
Mickey (11:29pm): fk ian
Ian (11:32pm): I think I can sleep now. Thx mick
Mickey (11:33pm): welcome, thx ian
Ian (11:33pm): welcome

Mickey (11:33pm): Meet me at the gym at 6

Ian (11:34pm): I’ll be there

Ian (11:34pm): pucker up
Chapter Notes

This chapter got out of hand, so it's been split into two chapters. Part 2 posted tomorrow.
Thanks for all the feedback! It's keeping me on my toes!

Once again, the lights were on in the Elite gym when Mickey arrived Thursday morning. God help anyone who decided to get in an early workout because there was only person he wanted to see. The gym was empty as he crossed through to the men’s change room, which was not empty. He dropped his bag to the bench drawing Ian’s attention away from tying the lace of his gym shoe. He tugged at the bow, then released his foot to the floor so he could face Mickey.

The thing with Ian was that he never seemed to stop himself from letting Mickey see what he was feeling, and that look released a whole herd of butterflies in Mickey’s stomach when their eyes met and held. Damn it, he was so fucked that Mandy was going to need a whole new scale.

They met in the middle, fitting their lips together in a chaste kiss. He curled his fingers in Ian’s t-shirt feeling their hearts thudding. Ian laid a palm on his cheek and another on his waist, and they stood that way eyes closed, lips moving slowly against each other.

“Morning,” Ian murmured.

“Mm,” Mickey tried to reply.

“We going to stand here like this all day?”

“Yes.”

Ian smile against his lips and he imagined his face, all happy and shit, and it made him happy. He shot his tongue into Ian’s mouth to kick this kiss up a notch before they were forced to pull apart and act like colleagues. It apparently got Ian’s motor running because he took three steps forward butting Mickey up against the lockers with a slight thud. He leaned his hips into Mickey’s securing them with his hands, while Mickey spread his fingers over Ian’s chest, imagining the smooth skin under his t-shirt.

Releasing his mouth, Ian tucked his face into Mickey’s neck. “We should stop. Someone might walk in.”

“You first, man.” Mickey couldn’t stop the route his hands were taking down Ian’s abdomen heading straight for the silky shorts he liked to exercise in. His hands were leaving a trail of tightened muscles under the material that sent shivers down Mickey’s spine. “Feel good.”

“Mickey,” he whined. “Make me stop.”

One solid shove to Ian’s chest and they were separated enough to break the spell.

“Shit.”
“You gonna be okay?” Mickey snickered.

“No.” Ian straightened his shirt and ran a hand over the bulge that was forming in his shorts. “Let’s get out of this change room though. Not safe.”

As he stepped onto the treadmill beside Mickey, Ian asked about his evening with Slava.

“Cancelled at the last minute.” He watched Ian program in a steep mountain terrain.

“Oh, that’s too bad. Why? Hot date?”

The machine whirred to life and Ian’s long legs immediately started pumping. Mickey set a more sedate option. He was thinking leisurely stroll along the beach. “Uh, didn’t say.”

Ian looked over at him and Mickey just shrugged.

After several minutes of listening to Ian’s pounding feet, he expected to see Ian breathing heavily, but he barely seemed to be breaking a sweat for fuck sake. Mickey kicked up his speed a few notches but drew the line at increasing the incline.


“I just always ran,” Ian explained, then turned slightly with a grin. “Never know when you gotta make a fast getaway.”

“Fair enough.”

They moved to the weights watching each other do a few curls and pretending that they were really here to exercise. Eventually, Ian headed over to the flat bench and loaded some free weights onto the bar. Mickey was doing the math as Ian slid each disc on to alternating ends.

“190, man?” Mickey questioned.

Ian stretched out on the flat bench, curling his fingers around the metal bar above him. Opening and closing them several times. Psyching himself up by the looks of things.

“Spot me?” Ian asked.

Grinning, Mickey moved into position at the top of Ian’s head looking down at his determined face, a foot from Mickey’s groin.

“Nice view,” Ian said, reading his thoughts.

“Yup,” he agreed returning the look. Ian’s legs were hanging over the edge of the bench pulling his lightweight shorts tight and Mickey could see a clear outline of what was happening beneath the material. Resting his hands on the bar, Mickey eyed the weights again. “Okay, tough guy, let’s see what you got.”

Ian managed four reps with a substantial amount of grunting that Mickey enjoyed hearing way too much. As he tried to complete the fifth, Ian’s face turned red and his pecs strained under the weight. Mickey bent down closer to his face. “I’ll kiss you if you push through.”

Their eyes met and Ian’s narrowed as the bar raised slightly. Mickey gave his lips a good licking as extra incentive, then blew him an exaggerated kiss. The bar hit the spotter hooks and Ian exhaled with a laugh.
“Nice,” Mickey said and bent under the bar to deliver on the promised kiss. It was an unfamiliar angle giving the kiss a newness that heightened the experience. He pulled away slightly hovering over Ian’s face. “One more?”

“I can barely lift my arms without any weights.” They were dangling beside the bench uselessly, making Mickey smile.

“Move it, then,” he swatted at Ian’s hip as he passed him on the way to the stacks of free weights. Ian watched him as he slid a twenty pound weight onto the one end of the bar.

“230?” Ian asked.

Mickey stopped to ponder, then added ten more to each end.

Ian’s mouth formed a surprised, “Oh.”

Shrugging, Mickey laid back on the bench. “Little more than normal, but I’m gonna get a kiss if I can press it, so I’m not worried.”

“You’re gonna get more than a kiss tonight.”

Ian was standing in place at the top of Mickey’s head, and he could see a little more happening in Ian’s shorts. “I’m gonna get some of that later, I hope.”

“Oh, you’re gonna get more than some of it.”

Chuckling, Mickey pressed up, lifting the bar out of the hooks and lowering it slowly to his chest then clenching every muscle in his body to lift it back up. As usual, Mickey could read Ian and that damned admiration probably make Mickey even stronger.

Two sets and two kisses later, Mickey sat up feeling the familiar fatigue in his muscles and watching Ian stretch out his hamstrings when indignant voices carried throughout the gym.

“Take the Infinity Stones, for example, he didn’t have to put them in a gauntlet.”

“So what? You wanna see Thanos wearing a necklace!? ridiculous!”

When the owners of those voices caught sight of Mickey standing up from the bench, they stopped in their tracks like they’d been caught discussing top secret information. Mickey smiled at them, as they adjusted their glasses, then stretched his arms behind his back and flexing his pecs in the process.

Sotheby’s Chicago was as fancy as Mickey suspected it would be, taking up several floors of One Mag Mile in the heart of Downtown Chicago and within walking distance of Elite. Once again, Mickey found himself stuffed into an elevator with Ian. They were alone but keeping a professional distance, which for them meant they weren’t crawling all over each other.

“What’s that smell?” Ian asked. He sniffed then leaned in toward Mickey to sniff his neck once quickly. “Are you wearing cologne?”
“No,” he grumbled.

“You think I don’t know what you smell like?” Ian added an exaggerated “pfft”.

“Whatever, it’s no big deal,” he added feeling conspicuous. “Just some scented shower shit.”

Ian turned his body slightly to give Mickey all his attention.

“So you don’t like it, then?” Mickey crossed his arms. “Fine.”

“Of course, I like it, Mick,” Ian began, tilting his head a little to draw Mickey’s eyes toward him. “It’s definitely sexy, but you don’t need it.”

The elevator doors opened, and Ian checked his watch as he stepped out. “Few minutes early,” he murmured absently, Mickey trailing behind sniffing at himself.

The representative from the Art Transport and Shipping Department escorted them from reception to a meeting room where a so-called firearms expert was seated. He was some scholar with a distinguished career subjecting the world to more long ass papers full of gibberish who introduced himself by babbling about his time on the lecture circuit.

Mickey could sense Ian’s amusement all through the dude’s long-winded defense of his credentials, and that somehow diffused Mickey’s annoyance over the fact that this blowhard was going to tell him anything about guns. Instead of getting all riled up, he simply sat arms crossed beside Ian at the boardroom table, while Ian ticked off item after item on his list of shit he thought was important.

He was thorough if nothing else, Mickey figured. He confirmed that Sadie, as the consignor, had transferred control to Sotheby’s to act as agent on her behalf for sale. He also confirmed that the El Paso branch had successfully packed up all of Handley’s guns and that they were ready for transport next week, so they would arrive prior to the presale exhibition. He confirmed that they could head down the hall to the Valuations Department to sign off on the 67 lot items listed for inclusion in the sale. Eventually satisfied, Ian thanked them and ushered Mickey back through reception to the elevator.

“I think we need to get you into the field,” Ian teased. “You looked like you were having the time of your life in there.”

“Yeah, I love meeting with uptight suits. It’s why I got into this business.”

Ian smiled fondly at him. “Well, I hope there’s only one uptight suit you love meeting with now.”

Before Mickey could reply to that, Ian’s phone rang. Based on the way his eyebrows drew down toward his nose, he wasn’t particularly happy to be getting this call. “Uh, Mickey…” he said distractedly looking past Mickey’s shoulder. “I need to get this.”

“Sure, you want me to take care of signing? Meet you in the lobby?”

“Ohkay.” He finally met Mickey’s eyes, and Mickey knew another one of Ian’s secrets had just caught up with them. But the elevator doors opened and three people exited, stopping in the hallway to chat, so Mickey pushed his finger into the down button holding the door open for Ian.

“See you down there then.”

Ten minutes later, Mickey entered the lobby, stopping when he spotted Ian through one of the tall windows. He was standing on the sidewalk and still on his phone, in profile to the window. As
usual, he was twisting his grey paisley tie as he listened to the person on the other end of the phone. Before Mickey could decide how to handle the situation, Ian ended the call and began typing into his phone.

Immediately, Mickey’s cell phone buzzed in his pocket, still on silent from the meeting. It didn’t take a genius to know who was texting him, and his gut clenched a little with suspicion despite his previous decision to give Ian time to come to him. He also felt the weight of resignation, knowing that it wasn’t going to be a conversation he really wanted to have.

Tapping the screen, Ian’s name appeared.

Ian: I gotta take care of something. Meet you back at the office, okay?

Mickey: What’s up?

He couldn’t help but ask the question, even though he knew Ian wasn’t going to answer because if he had wanted to be forthcoming, he would have either asked Mickey to go along on his errand or led with an explanation. A fizzle of anger erupted as well over the fact that he’d opened up yesterday about the one area he felt most exposed. He’d trusted Ian with all the shit from two years ago, and today Ian was shutting him out.

Ian: Nothing serious, just work. Gotta take care of something.

Mickey: Can’t wait for me?

Ian’s hand smoothed the silk of his tie then made a pass over the side of his head to the back of his neck, clearly agitated. He stared down at his phone, and Mickey could feel his anxiety like it was his own. He simply didn’t have it in him to stay mad at the guy, feeling certain that whatever the fuck was going on it was separate from what they had going between them. This is why you keep your shit separate, he reminded himself. His worlds were colliding.

Mickey: It’s cool. See u later

Ian didn’t move, still staring at his phone forlornly, but there wasn’t much Mickey could do about it if Ian wasn’t going to confide in him. As the sidewalk started to fill with pedestrians after the light changed, Ian was jostled out of his reverie, and he glanced through the window into the building’s lobby. The light must have been reflecting on the glass because he didn’t appear to see Mickey. Then he walked away, heading east and away from Elite.

Mickey was seriously considering finishing the construction on Ian’s office himself. Since he’d returned from his meeting without Ian, his cubicle had become the fucking hub of the office. He was going to start charging admission and finally get that retirement he’d been dreaming about since his first day at work.

“I need your billable hours for Janssen, stop dicking around,” Mandy bitched at him from the entrance. Maybe he’d get a door installed, he decided. “Don’t fuck with me. I’m in a bad mood.”

“How can you tell?” he snarked back. A door with a lock, his fantasy continued.
“You got to end of day today.”

“Or what?”

She leaned over menacingly, her arm stretching out to the credenza behind Mickey. “The plant gets it.”

Mickey’s eyes widened. She wouldn’t. Would she?

“Oh, I would,” she said reading him clearly. “I’m still holding a grudge from when you broke my necklace.”

“That was twenty fucking years ago and an accident, damn it.” He slid his chair to the left a little to put a barrier between Satan and his baby.

“Bullshit, Mickey. You don’t use a diamond necklace as a slingshot.”

“Diamond, my ass. Shit was plastic,” he spit.

“Not to me it wasn’t. Mom gave it to me,” she hissed. “Now gimme your billable hours or you’ll regret it.”

“Fuck, fine.”

“Before lunch,” she added stepping out of his cubicle. “Oh, hey, Tico, stopping by to see Mickey? He loves company.”

“I need your billable hours for Janssen too.” She smiled at the other man before shooting a final warning look at Mickey.

"Yes, maam," Tico promptly replied.

By the time he and Tico had hashed out who was dealing with returning Janssen to the airport on Saturday, Lucy was back in her cubicle muttering about breaking up with some guy she’d been seeing. Mickey stared hard at his computer screen, desperate to not be sucked into any of that. When she peered over the edge of the partition with her big brown orbs and they filled with tears, he decided to escape.

Like a slingslot, he was drawn straight to the redhead’s cubicle, nodding semi-politely at Liz and Nelson on his way. Ian was seated at his desk, head bent over the Elite manual on transport security procedures. Mickey could see several passages highlighted in yellow as well as a notepad full of scribbles next to Ian’s elbow. The mechanical pencil in his hand jiggled as he read.

“Hey,” Mickey said quietly.

Ian sat up straight, pencil forgotten as he turned toward Mickey. “Hi.”

He looked so worried that Mickey figured it didn’t even really matter to him what the fuck Ian was up to as long as he was okay. “Gonna run out of highlighters,” he joked nodding at the manual.

Ian looked down at his desk. “Engagement. Elite’s policy if we’re held up while on the road.”

“Tell me it says I can shoot ‘em,” Mickey said.
“Have you actually read the manual?”

“I’m pretty sure manuals aren’t meant to be read.”

Ian shook his head. “Reading them is the reason they were written.”

“No, or they wouldn’t be so fucking boring to read,” Mickey countered. “Just gimme the highlights. Can I shoot them?”

Ian chuckled. “No. Do not engage,” he said sternly.

“I don’t believe you.”

Ian stood up, the manual open in his hands. “See,” he said, pointing at a highlighted section. “Says right here that Elite personnel shall never endanger their own or—”

“That’s bullshit,” Mickey pouted pressing Ian’s hands together so the manual would close with a snap.

“Hey, you lost my page,” Ian complained.

“It’s for the best,” he concluded. “Just follow the trail of yellow highlighting, man.”

They paused to smile at each other. Ian leaned in to whisper, “Did you stop by cause you missed me?”

Mickey leaned in to whisper, “All the background checks panned out for tomorrow’s gala.”

Ian laughed. “Oh, good. So no red flags?”

“No, but I gotta drop by the hotel on the way home. Double check a few things with the night manager who’ll be on duty tomorrow. Do the on-site inspection.”

“I’ll go with you.”

Mickey wanted Ian back to his happy self, but he also needed to start pushing him toward opening up because as much as his heart would break, if the contents of their conversation came between them, he needed to know now not further down the road.

“You don’t got something you gotta take care of?” he said adding a little steel to his voice.

“I’m sorry I ditched you,” Ian said.

“Everything okay?”

“Sure, course, it’s just…” He looked down in defeat because he wasn’t going to lie but he was also not going to come clean either. They were at an impasse, and Ian’s cubicle wasn’t really the place to have this conversation anyway. Just as Mickey was thinking he might as well head back to his desk, Ian’s voice surprised him.

“Tell me more about your town in Mexico.”

The abrupt change in conversation was either an evasion technique or Ian needing to talk about happy stuff. Mickey couldn’t blame him.

“There’s a bar there. Benitto’s. Reminds me of Murphy’s actually. Laid back, plays old rock too.”
Ian was listening intently, and Mickey imagined him picking up his notepad and making a list of important features. It made him smile and Ian smiled a little too, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “It walks out to the beach though. Fucking awesome.”

“Where do you stay when you’re there?”

“Lately, a little apartment on the outskirts of town. Kinda rundown but that’s what I like about it. An old guy owns the whole complex and rents them out to visitors. I’m gonna buy one off him when I get the scratch together.”

“Sounds perfect.” Ian sighed. “Are you going to visit again soon?”

“You fishing for an invitation, Gallagher?”

“Oh, I—” he started to backtrack.

“I’m guessing boyfriends vacation together?” Mickey smirked.

“Definitely within the rules,” Ian agreed, happily and a little dreamily. “You and me on the beach...”

Ian sighed, and suddenly, Mickey could feel his heart beating in his chest in anticipation. He could see it too.

“I better...” Ian pointed in the general direction of the lunchroom, eyes devouring Mickey, “get back to my cubicle. Got work to do.”

“This is your cubicle, Ian.”
Good morning. There are some brief references to past events in this chapter, nothing graphic though. I added a note to the end of the chapter, but it will be a spoiler if you read it. However, it's there if you prefer a head's up.

Also, I going out of town now, so I won't be posting on Sunday. I'll be back Monday morning and hope you will be too. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mickey rolled over, arm reaching out for Ian but it came up empty. He cracked his eyes open searching the darkness for the redhead, pretty sure he’d woken up because Ian wasn’t glued to his back as usual, and now knowing he wasn’t even in the bedroom kicked up today’s unease, which had subsided somewhat throughout the busy evening.

They’d picked up a pizza on the way home from their meeting with the hotel’s night manager because it had been past 9:00 PM and they hadn’t eaten. Sitting on the balcony eating pizza and sipping beer, Ian rambled on about the perimeter security options for tomorrow night’s gala, and Mickey had sat back, daydreaming about smoking a Marlboro while Ian’s voice washed over him. The guy’s mind was a busy fucking place, always buzzing, no wonder he wrote his ideas down all the time. Mickey was exhausted just from visiting.

It was then he realized that despite thinking about having a smoke, the craving itself was mild. Maybe today was the day he actually quit.

“I almost don’t want a cigarette,” he said in awe glancing over at his redhead.

Ian looked at him, pizza sauce on his chin. “Sweet, so you almost quit then. Good job,” he said and Mickey motioned to his chin. “Next up beer!”

“What?” Mickey snapped. “Fuck, don’t even say that shit out loud, Ian.”

Laughing, Ian wiped his chin with a napkin then lifted it for inspection. “Did I get it?” Before Mickey could reply, Ian set his plate on the little glass top table between them. “I think this calls for some positive reinforcement.”

Mickey had zero problem decoding the glint in Ian’s eyes. “Yes, it fucking does.”

Ian took the beer bottle from Mickey’s hand, draining it before kneeling on the balcony floor and pushing between Mickey’s knees. “Don’t want you backsliding.”

“It’s a very real danger.” The zipper on his jeans slid slowly down and he couldn’t take his eyes off Ian’s fingers, anticipation wrapping around him along with the soft night breeze. He ran his hand over the side of Ian’s head, wondering vaguely if this was another stall tactic.

Or maybe an apology of sorts.

But the lateness of the hour, his full belly, the softening effects of a couple beer and Ian’s beautiful
fucking face pressed to his dick stalled any thoughts of having a stupid fucking conversation that he mostly didn’t want to have anyway.

They were seven flights above the city with only a few apartment lights on across the still busy street below, but even the idea of someone being able to see them only heightened the experience. Mickey tipped his head back giving into the pull of Ian’s mouth.

They’d gone to bed shortly after that and Ian had wrapped around him, linking their fingers over Mickey’s belly and holding tight. It was kind of confining, but it didn’t stop him from pushing the realities of life aside and falling asleep.

In fact, it was more a case of not being able to sleep when he wasn’t wrapped around Mickey, which is why he awoke at 1:21 AM. Well, I guess we’re having this conversation, Mickey said to the empty room and steeled himself for the outcome.

After throwing on some underwear and making a quick trip to the toilet, he padded into the living room pausing in the entry. Ian was sitting at the small desk in the corner of the room, in only his underwear as well, spare blanket draped loosely over his shoulders. The only illumination was coming from the streetlights and the flickering of the laptop, which reflected off his profile. He looked so serious, his shoulders arched forward as he stared beyond the computer toward the open patio curtains.

On the laptop screen, an assortment of men in every possible sexual position flickered in the small thumbnails of Ian’s search. Mickey was taken aback, but actually felt relief now that this was finally the moment where Ian was going to start sharing what the fuck he was keeping from Mickey because he wasn’t letting this shit go without an explanation. It was time.

As if on cue, Ian’s troubled face turned toward him, and Mickey wanted to kiss it all better. Instead, he moved into the living room, leaning his ass against the edge of the desk and crossing his arms over his chest. When Ian stared into the laptop, Mickey closed the top with a firm click.

“Talk.”

“I…”

“You,” Mickey helped him along, “were looking at porn.”

“No!”

Mickey lifted his eyebrows in challenge.

“Well, technically, yes.”

“As long as we’re being technical, could you technically tell me why the fuck you’re up in the middle of the night looking at dudes bang?” When Ian’s face shut down, he softened his voice.

“Hey, I’m not a fucking prude, man. I’ve looked at my share of guys banging, but this seems like a weird time to be doing that. Are you addicted to this shit?”

Mickey didn’t really believe that because Ian did not look like he was currently getting any pleasure out of this activity, but he was coming up blank as to why the hell else he’d be surfing.

“I was,” Ian took a deep breath, “looking for myself.”

Well, shit, Mickey hadn’t been expecting that. “The fuck, Ian? You’re a fucking porn star?”
“No!” Ian spat looking disgusted at the thought. “No, well, not now. Technically,” he shot a look at Mickey, “I was looking for my teenaged self.”

Mickey dropped his arms to his sides, absorbing that.

“Shit. Did you find yourself?”

Ian shook his head, and Mickey waited, re-crossing his arms over his chest even if he looked a little unapproachable. If he let them free, they’d start doing shit he didn’t think would be helpful at the moment, like waving at Ian in frustration to spit it the fuck out, or wrapping around him and taking him back to bed where they didn’t have to continue this chat.

“You gonna keep shutting me out?”

“No. No,” Ian inhaled, exhaled and finally opened his mouth. “I like you so much, but there’s all this shit you don’t know. Couldn’t sleep cause I don’t want secrets between us. Sometimes when I can’t sleep I do this. Look.”

Ian ran his fingers over the surface of the laptop lid, lost again in whatever mud his mind seemed determined to drag him through.

“Maybe you wanna start at the beginning?”

Dropping his hand back into his lap, he nodded. “When I was a kid I thought I had my life mapped out. I was really wanted to be an officer in the army.”

“Course you did.” Mickey shook his head slightly.

“Yeah, well, that didn’t fucking work out.”

“I’m not sorry to hear that you aren’t getting your ass shot in some fucking corner of the world, Ian.”

“Hey! Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Ian said.

“I’ve seen you shoot.”

Ian swatted him in the gut, and Mickey dropped his arms to his sides, relaxing slightly at Ian’s playful tap. “Anyway, I made it to cadets for a couple years.”

“I can see little junior Army dropping to happily give twenty. Probably added an extra five just in case,” he teased, trying to keep Ian somewhat relaxed.

“You could bounce a coin off my sheets too.” He smiled cockily.

Mickey returned the look with a lift of disbelieving eyebrows. “Why the fuck haven’t you been making the bed in the morning, then?”

“Cause I dropped out.” Ian turned his attention back to the patio.

“Eyes on me, Gallagher.” When Ian looked back, Mickey pointed two fingers toward his eye sockets.

“Can I have a kiss before I continue?”

Mickey narrowed his eyes. “This reeks of stall tactic, Ian.” But he grabbed Ian’s chin, pulled it
upwards a little roughly and smacked his lips against the redhead’s. Not removing his hand, Mickey said firmly, “Spit it the fuck out now, okay?”

He returned to his position against the desk when Ian started talking.

“I dropped out because I got sent to a group home when I was sixteen while the state decided if my sister was fit to keep raising us after doing so since before I can remember. We were all tossed into different homes for a couple months.”

“That sucks. Those places are glorified juvie.”

“You been there?”

“Nah, but my brothers had when they were younger.”

“But you’ve been to juvie.”

Mickey nudged Ian in the shin with his toes to get his full attention. “Don’t change the fucking subject, Gallagher.”

“Right, sorry. Um, it was actually pretty uneventful for the first couple weeks, then this kid showed up. I guess he’d been there before because lots of kids seem to know him. He was kind of cute and seemed to like me—like, like me, you know?”

“I ain’t gonna like, like where this goes, am I?” His gut was turning a little in dread.

Ian shook his head. “One night before bed, he whispered to meet him in the bathroom after everyone was asleep.”

“Horny teenagers?”

“Yeah, I was also a little lonely, missed my family and stuff.”

Mickey leaned in for another kiss, making Ian smile slightly and take his hand, holding him in place between Ian’s knees.

“I met him and we talked. Well, after that night, when I think back, it was more me talking and him listening. I thought I’d found a friend.”

“I really don’t like where this is going.”

Ian shrugged. “He kept touching my arm and I stupidly thought he was shy, so I leaned in to kiss him and the bathroom door swung open. Three of his friends came in.”

“What happened?” Mickey demanded, watching Ian’s finger absently trace the letters tattooed on his knuckles. He knew where this was going, but he didn’t know how bad it was going to be.

“I guess, they, um, tried to rape me.”

“Tried?” Mickey’s free hand rested on Ian’s shoulder, sliding under the light cotton material of the blanket so he could feel the warm skin.

“Yeah, tried.”

“What’s that mean, Ian?”
“They held me against the bathroom counter, got my sweats down and the biggest guy was trying but one of the monitors showed up yelling that we better not be smoking in the bathroom, and everyone scattered. Me included.”

Mickey stared down at him as Ian shifted forward to rest his chin on Mickey’s chest. “Did you fuck him up?”

“Yeah. I laid in bed for a bit then the asshole started laughing. Real lightly but he knew I’d be able to hear. I launched myself at him. Never found out how bad I hurt him cause the monitor was back turning on lights and I ran.”

Mickey lowered himself to Ian’s lap, thighs hugging his hips, forearms draped over the back of the chair. Then he kissed him properly. Ian’s arms came around him bringing the corners of the blanket with them.

“Ran where? Home?” he asked after ending the kiss.

“I wanted to but was afraid that’s exactly where they’d look for me. I had the guy’s blood all over my hands, the front of my t-shirt and was freaked the fuck out. Plus I was walking around in my socks, no money or jacket or nothing. But I had my cell.”

“That’s good.”

“No, it actually wasn’t,” Ian corrected him, giving his head a good shake in case Mickey didn’t get how serious he was. “I called my mom.”

“Bad news?”

“To say the least.”

“She answered, I take it.”

He nodded. “She would pick that time to not only answer but offer to come get me. Her meth dealer boyfriend drove her.”

“I’m not gonna like where this is going either.” He didn’t even bother to phrase it as a question this time.

“Let’s see. Meth dealer, meth addicted mother, angry gay teenage son.”

“Just need a white picket fucking fence.”

Ian laughed with a little bit of mirth even. “Just telling you this much, I already feel sort of better. Lighter.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I shouldn’t be surprised though. You have that effect on me. Like if I needed someone to talk to you would always be the first person, maybe the only person, I would come to.”

Mickey was going to think about those words a lot, but for now they had shit to get through. “That’s good cause you aren’t stopping until I know why the fuck you were searching the fucking web full of pervs.”

“Okay,” he agreed letting out a long breath. “She picked me up, gave me drugs, found me clothes from somewhere, then basically pimped me out to old, rich queens.”
“So now we’re fast forwarding through the story?” He held up a hand when Ian opened his mouth.
“That’s fine. I get it. My childhood was missing a white fence too. Explain that last part though.”

“She took me to bars and, I guess, basically encouraged me to meet…people.”

“Jesus.”

“Mostly it wasn’t that bad.” He shrugged indifferently.

“The fuck you saying?”

“Well, I had access to lots of drugs, plus they bought me stuff, kept me off the street essentially.”

Mickey just stared at him. “In exchange for sex, Ian?”

“Sometimes, not always though,” he clarified. “Mostly they were nice enough.”

“Okay, so let me get this straight. They didn’t beat you or make you eat all your vegetables or
whatever the fuck, but it was okay that they had sex with an underage boy.”

“Not when you put it that way.”

“How long did this glorious childhood go on for?” Mickey snapped, both of his hands were rubbing
Ian’s biceps repeatedly now. Probably for both their sakes.

“Until Monica OD’ed. Less than a year later.”

“Why the hell didn’t you go home?” They might have come from shit homes, but it sounded like
Ian’s home was a hell of a lot better than these options.

“So many reasons. For starters, there was no home to go to at that point. Just another group home.
Plus I think I was depressed, ashamed, definitely angry. Home seemed like a memory not a place,
you know?” He shrugged and Mickey did know about shame and anger and the meaning of home.

“Ya, I do know.”

“And I was probably in some sort of co-dependent bullshit with my dead mother. I was there with
her when she died. Took me awhile to get over it.”

“You weren’t responsible for her.” Mickey looked expectantly at him.

“I know. Maybe I didn’t then, but I do now.”

“What did you do after she died?”

“You’re not gonna like this,” Ian grinned.

“No fucking shit.”

“Well, I couldn’t stay with Monica’s dealer boyfriend and needed some quick cash.”

Mickey rubbed the bridge of his nose, releasing a long-pained sigh. “Have we finally got to the
porn?”

“Yup.” He looked at Mickey like he was waiting for something.

“Another kiss?”
Ian nodded and Mickey rolled his eyes but gladly locked lips if it was giving Ian whatever he needed to finish his story.

“Did that for money a few times.”

“A few?”

Ian determinedly refused to make eye contact, so Mickey let it go.

“Then it got rough one night.”

“Aw fuck.”

“Up to that point, I’d managed to only do the fucking, but the rich guy who was paying for the video demanded that I...” He stopped.

“Take it?” Mickey wanted to punch someone, thinking about Ian bottoming for anyone against his fucking will.

“Yeah.”

“You refused, I assume?”

“I did, but they said that wasn’t an option. I’d been paid.”

Mickey was at a loss by this point, unsure what to say. He wanted to know, he wanted to not know, he wanted to murder every single person who had been there. “Did they make you?”

Ian nodded then rushed to finish. “It was over pretty quickly because it was easier to just go along with it then I ran again. This time I ran to the cops though.”

“Thank fuck,” he barked, and now understood why Ian spent so much time on the treadmill, probably always wanted to be ready to fucking run.

“I ran to the cops, Mickey.”

“Yeah, so. Did you fucking think I would call that snitching?”

“Dunno what I thought, but that’s not the South Side way.”

“Neither is kiddie porn, Ian.”

“I don’t really think I was a kid.”

“What’d the cops think?” he asked.

“That I was a minor,” Ian laughed lightly. “They took it pretty fucking seriously actually.”

“Go figure.” Mickey frowned when Ian got all serious again. “What?”

Ian shrugged and looked away.

“Oh for fuck sake, there’s more?” Then Ian actually started to laugh, shoulders shaking as he fucking giggled. “Fuck’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” he choked and Mickey could see tears in his eyes, either from laughter or some other goddamn emotion that was leaking out. “Maybe I feel some relief.”
“Jesus,” Mickey mumbled hugging Ian hard for a few minutes. “Finish now.”

“I ended up helping them arrest a bunch of guys.”

“Helped who? The cops?”

“A task force that included cops and people from all different areas of law enforcement.”

“You helped them, huh? By bringing them coffee and donuts?”

Ian giggled again, making Mickey smirk.

“Sure.”

“Don’t sure me, Ian. Did they use you as some sorta bait type shit?”

“They had eyes on me the whole time, and it worked, Mickey.” He sounded so proud of himself that Mickey relented in his grumbling. “It worked in more ways that just that. It sorted me out. I got my shit together. They actually helped me get a full scholarship, that’s how I eventually made it to school. I wanted to get out of Chicago, and one of the guys from the task force went to Georgetown, so I worked my ass off to get accepted there.”

“And give the world the magic of your long ass essays full of gibberish.”

“How many of them have you read?”

“Harumpf.”

All Ian’s playfulness vanished, and he released a huge breath of air as his cheek rested against Mickey’s chest.

“Hey, that’s enough for one night. Let’s go to bed.” He slid off Ian’s lap, pulling the redhead up by the ends of the blanket and dragging him toward the kitchen, where he poured a glass of orange juice and set it in front of Ian. “Need your vitamins.”

Taking a sip, Ian watched Mickey closely from across the island. “Taking care of me?” he asked licking away his juice mustache.

Mickey opened his mouth to offer something sarcastic, but it didn’t feel right. “Yeah.”

Ian blinked, obviously surprised. Staring into Mickey’s eyes, he let the blanket slide off of his shoulders, landing at his feet then he turned away and walked toward the bedroom. Mickey nudged his nose trying to figure out what had just happened as Ian’s firm little ass disappeared from sight. He tossed back the remaining orange juice and followed him to the bedroom.

His eyes had to adjust slightly to see Ian in the darkened room. He was shutting the night stand drawer, lube dangled from his fingers, and Mickey’s dick responded like it was trained. Turning toward the doorway, Ian watched him, waiting for Mickey to figure out what to do.

His feet decided for him and he was standing in front of Ian, reaching up to kiss him lightly. The bottle of lube slipped into his hand and his fingers closed around it. “What?” he whispered, confused.

“Finish taking care of me.”

Now? He wanted to ask. Didn’t Ian need time to—time? But he was waiting for Mickey to make a move, to take control, it seemed. Tossing the bottle on the mattress behind him, he stretched back up
to gently kiss Ian’s lips and run his fingers along his cheek and throat. His other hand sat lightly on Ian’s hip, keeping a two inch gap between their bodies.

Ian stopped kissing him back, and Mickey opened his eyes.

“What don’t treat me like I’m broken, Mickey,” he whispered, face all serious.

“I wasn’t—I won’t,” he corrected.

“I’m the same person I was before you heard all that. I haven’t changed.”

I have, Mickey wanted to say. He wasn’t sure how, but he felt different. He felt responsible, for Ian. Like his bonsai only a million times more. Ian was his now, no matter what, and he wanted to handle this right. Not make shit worse for the guy.

“So this is what it’s like,” Ian said, interrupting his thoughts.

“What’s like?”

“When I’m in my head and can’t get out. This is what it’s like for you to watch me freak out internally.”

Mickey frowned but realized he’d been about to start a loop of self-doubt. “Yeah, guess so.”

“Do you want to fuck me?” Ian blurted.

“Jesus, yeah.”

“Are you sure?” Ian pinched his lips together clearly not convinced.

“I don’t wanna…” He shrugged because the right words were eluding him. “Hurt you, I guess. Make shit worse or whatever.”

Ian nodded, looking off across the room. “I won’t pressure you. Just if you want to.”

“Shit, course I do, but are you, you know, okay?” Mickey was starting to get agitated that he was going to fuck this up more by not getting on Ian than by getting on him.

“Yes, that’s why I’m standing in front of you practically begging you!” Ian was yelling by the end.

“Hey,” Mickey murmured, rubbing a soothing hand along his arm.

Ian yanked his arm away and stepped back. “Let’s just go to bed.”

“Wait, what the fuck is happening?”

“Nothing,” Ian said flatly and started to push past Mickey to get to bed, but Mickey snapped. Fear and confusion and frustration bubbled up to the surface. His hand came up to stop Ian, pressing firmly into his bare chest so he couldn’t move.

“Bullshit.” His hand continued to press, forcing Ian to take a step back. Ian looked down at Mickey’s fingers, at the letters tattooed into his knuckles, then he lifted his gaze to Mickey’s, eye hot, chest rising faster.

Mickey felt that look all the way to his groin, tightening his balls, and he knew he was going to fuck Ian. Shoving a little harder, he backed Ian into the wall, keeping his hand where it was so he stayed
put. His other hand slipped beneath the fabric of Ian’s briefs. A half moan, half sigh escaped Ian’s lungs with each pass of Mickey’s hand over his erection.

When his forehead dipped forward to rest on Mickey’s head, he slid his knee between Ian’s thighs to separate them enough for his hand to move freely, squeezing his balls and absorbing everyone of Ian’s groans. Fingers tightened around Mickey’s forearm when he reached Ian’s ass. He was about to remove his hand, but Ian’s hips rocked forward pressing into Mickey’s hand more firmly.

They needed some lube, but it was on the bed, out of Mickey’s reach. He had to get Ian over there without breaking whatever spell the guy was under. Sucking at the skin of his neck, Mickey grabbed Ian’s ass cheek to keep him close.

“Ian?” he whispered trailing his tongue along his throat, finding the pulse jumping under his skin. “I really wanna fuck you.”

“Ohh.” He sounded fucking wrecked and barely noticed that Mickey was maneuvering him toward the bed. “Right now, kay?”

“Sure, soon.” Mickey smiled, he couldn’t fucking help himself. Ian, in a sex haze, was the biggest fucking turn on that Mickey had ever experienced. Reluctantly, he removed his hand to yank their underwear off. “Lay down.”

Ian still had a hand on Mickey’s forearm and he pulled at it a bit. “Come with me.” Those words went straight to Mickey’s heart because he sounded worried that Mickey might not, that there might be somewhere he wanted to be other than with Ian, other than on Ian.

“Anywhere you go, man.”

Ian’s eyes opened wide, and his goddamn chin tightened like he was controlling his reaction, so Mickey kissed his thoughts away, following him down to the bed, body pressed between Ian’s thighs and Ian’s hand on the back of his head fingers tangling in his hair and holding him place. Immediately, his hips were rocking into Ian, knowing what was coming, and Ian’s heels were digging into the back of his thighs.

“Oh,” Mickey breathed a little shakily. They were definitely both ready to do this. He dragged his lips away from Ian’s, so he could track down the bottle of lube. It was just out of reach, and when he stretched to grab it, Ian stayed attached to him, rolling slightly to keep their chests touching.

With a kiss to the tip of his nose, Mickey flicked the bottle open with his thumb, but he was braced on his other elbow and couldn’t squeeze any lube onto his fingers. “Help me with the lube, Ian,” he whispered.

Ian opened his eyes and smiled at him. It was that smile from El Paso, eating burgers in the car, wondering what he was so afraid of. It was Ian’s Mickey smile, and he was never coming back from it.

“Ian, I lo—”

“Sorry, yes, lube.” He took the bottle from Mickey’s hand and tipped it upside down waiting. As Mickey held out his hand, he decided to save that for another time, a time when Ian wasn’t so overloaded. The last thing he wanted was for him to feel pressured to say those words if he wasn’t ready.

His fingers trailed between Ian’s legs again, slick and purposeful. Ian lifted his ass off the mattress a little in anticipation, and Mickey’s tongue and finger entered him at the same time. Ian’s tongue met
his, and he could feel fingers digging into his shoulders as he opened Ian up, working the lube deep inside so he wouldn’t experience any pain. They were both moaning by the time Mickey got a second finger inside.

“Ready?” he asked holding his hand out for more lube.

“Fucking desperate.”

Mickey laughed, resting his forehead on Ian’s and twisting a fist around himself.

“Me too, man.”

When he was sure he was wet enough to slide right in, he lined up against Ian, braced on both elbows. “Bring your legs up higher.” But he had a sudden thought. “Wait.”

Ian moaned in disapproval when he lifted away to grab a pillow and push it up against Ian’s hip. “Up.” Bracing his feet on the bed, Ian made room for Mickey to slide the pillow under him. They smiled at each other then closed their eyes as their lips met and Mickey entered him.

They’re breathing changed immediately, coming in harsh gasps each time he slid back inside. Ian’s mouth moved to Mickey’s shoulder, teeth sinking into the muscle bunched there. Sharp little stings to the sensitive skin with every breath Ian exhaled, keeping Mickey from sinking into oblivion. He hadn’t fucked anyone in quite awhile and everything was enhanced when it was with Ian because it wasn’t just his body engaged in what they were doing. All of him was engaged.

Listening to Ian whine quietly with each thrust and feeling his heels tighten around his lower back, he knew he needed to help Ian along because the blood was pounding in his body demanding a release.

“Fuck. You feel so good. Gonna touch you.”

“Yeah, Mickey.”

His hand was still slick enough that when it wrapped around Ian, he stroked from top to bottom in one smooth motion, and Ian panted out a desperate sounding groan, his teeth back on Mickey’s shoulder, his hips coming up to meet each thrust.

It happened quickly from there. Ian’s spine arched as he prepared to come, and Mickey let the waves of pleasure move freely through his body, no longer actively halting them. When his hand slid up and over the tip of Ian’s cock, he felt warmth fill it and he groaned in response one final time.

It was completely quiet for a few minutes as they rode out the post-orgasm wave and the need to stay connected. Eventually though, Mickey peeled himself off of Ian and the bed, heading to the bathroom where he washed up and wet a handcloth with warm water. He also grabbed Ian’s hippie healing balm and returned to the bed.

Ian was laying exactly as he’d left him, eyes closed, so Mickey gently pulled the pillow out from under him then knelt between his legs, pushing his knees up enough that he could soothe Ian the way he’d done for Mickey in the past. He watched Ian’s breathing slow and his knee fall to the side, then Mickey arranged his body under the covers, quickly tossed the cloth in the hamper and slipped under the blankets, pulling Ian toward him. Ian lifted his head, so Mickey could get an arm under and Ian’s cheek could rest on his chest, his leg covering Mickey’s.

They were silent as they adjusted to this new, slightly altered reality and what it meant to their relationship. Mickey was tired, but he was scanning his brain to check for any boyfriend
requirements that might be expected of him at a moment like this.

“Thank you, Ian.” He smiled into red hair, but before Ian could respond with their usual playful reply, he added, “For trusting me.”

“It’s what boyfriends do.”

“Right, I knew there was more to this than you were letting on,” Mickey said, his voice laced with humor. “So have you given any thought to what you want in your Christmas stocking?”

Ian’s laugh floated up to him. “Only one thing I want.”

“That right? M&M’s it is then.”

Chapter End Notes

Warning (and spoiler): reference to past sexual assault without graphic detail, more so as part of a discussion than a reliving of events.

Also the comment section is starting to fill with theories about the story, so if you want to avoid them then don’t click on the Comment box!! But don’t let that stop you from leaving me a comment!! 😊
“Nice ankle boots.”

Mandy looked up from her phone at Slava’s words then glanced at her feet, which were propped up on the edge of the coffee table in the far corner of the lunchroom.

“Yeah, well, these damn boots better be nice, I have them in three colors now.”

Delighted to see that someone had made a fresh pot of coffee, Slava topped up his to-go cup before joining her. For someone who drank it non-stop all day, he found it tedious to have to actually make it himself, especially on Friday morning of a long day. He’d be working corporate event security at the Four Seasons hotel until at least midnight, so there wasn’t going to be enough coffee on hand to satisfy him.

“Couldn’t decide?” he asked. Mandy was the only other person in the lunchroom, and she appeared to be in deep concentration, reading whatever was on her phone. He flopped down on the sofa, trying to get a look at her phone screen just to bug her. She frowned at him, tilting her phone away and lifting one foot to properly display her footwear.

“It was hard to pick, but that’s not the reason I ended up with three pairs. Damn UPS.” She gave up on whatever she was doing on her phone and dropped it in her lap.

“Tell Slava everything.”

Mandy grinned despite her sour mood. “Special time with Slava?”

“Well, I did single-handedly bring our love birds together.” He laughed when she elbowed him in the arm. “Why is UPS on your shit list?”

“There’s this driver…” she trailed off in obvious frustration.

“Ah, it’s like a Shakespearean play around here.”

She scrunched her nose up, looking like her brother for a moment. “Doesn’t everyone die in his stuff?”

“I hope not!” He chuckled at her adorable little face. “Anyway, what about this driver? You interested in his package?”

Her smile was back. “Yeah, I haven’t had a package delivered in way too long,” she sighed dramatically. “Anyway, he delivers to my street every day, and I watch him while I drink my coffee in the morning.”

“Sounds like a great start to a healthy relationship.” This time he was ready for her elbow and deflected it.

“Yeah, well, I decided to do something about it.”

“Ankle boots?” He tapped his dress shoe against her ankle lightly.

“Right.”

“Did he not fall at your feet when he delivered them? You had to order more?”
“No, each time my order comes, someone else is working that day,” she said sounding completely aggravated.

“How many colors do these boots come in?”

“Three.”

He sipped his coffee as he pretended to ponder deeply. “So I guess you’re out of luck then. Time to move on.”

“No wonder Mickey doesn’t want to tell you his inner most secrets.”

“Harsh.” He placed a hand on his heart over the pocket of his dress shirt.

“When does special time start?”

“Now. Why don’t you just walk out to the street and say hi?”

“What?” She looked at him like he was crazy. “He’ll think I’m stalking him!”

He lifted a thick blond brow.

“Shut up,” she groaned. “Gah, stop toying with me. What should I do?”

He chuckled, enjoying himself immensely. Cupid had yet to prick him and he planned to go to the grave a bachelor. “Okay. Well, you do work for a world class security company with access to all kinds of information. You could find out something about him and accidentally meet him.”

“Oh, that’s good,” she agreed dropping her feet to the floor as she sat up in excitement.

“Of course, the last time you tried to be sneaky, it bit you in the ass.”

She plunked back against the sofa. “Shit.”

“But it ultimately worked out.”

She sat forward again, making Slava laugh. It was like watching a yo-yo.

“Fuck,” she spat. “I gotta get to work. Meeting starts in fifteen minutes, and Gabe is being a bitch, making Annette’s life hell and that’s trickling down to all the admins.”

Slava had noticed the office tension the last few days. “Two big jobs back to back always get the big guy worked up.”

“Well, maybe he shouldn’t be the big guy then,” Mandy muttered.

“He’s getting close to retirement.”

“Can’t come soon enough for me. Apparently, Janssen has been calling all morning, freaking out about how tonight’s event is vital to Helix’s company image or some shit.”

“Makes sense. It’s his yearly charity drive,” Slava chuckled, thinking about the rich investors who would be attending tonight’s gala.

“Yeah, like pharmaceutical companies need anymore money.” She flicked a finger over her phone screen. “Seriously, I gotta go. You got anything helpful for me?”
He nodded. “Okay, here’s what I think.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, daring him to yank her chain again. But she waited to hear what he had to say.

“You had the balls to set your boss and your brother up in the honeymoon suite,” he began. “Get your ass out on that street and introduce yourself.”

Biting her lip, she nodded a little in agreement but wasn’t totally sold yet.

“Instead of standing around drinking coffee, bring him a cup. That dude is on the clock by 7:00 AM? He needs a fresh cup of java.”

He watched relief fill her eyes. “Okay, yes, I’m going to do that. At least then I’ll know if there’s a spark.”

“You need me to come over tomorrow morning and lock you out of your apartment?” he offered.

She shook her head, earrings swaying with the motion. “Not tomorrow, but if I don’t do it, then come by Monday morning.”

“Deal, but just be warned that I’m going to bring reinforcements,” he said cryptically.

“I don’t think I like the sounds of that,” she said standing up.

“Oh, you definitely don’t want me to bring him.”

Her eyes widened dramatically taking his threat seriously. Slava watched her scurry out of the lunchroom, heels clicking on the tiled floor as she passed Lucy, who made her way to the tea kettle.

Resting a tattooed arm along the back of the love seat, he watched the payroll clerk paw through the box of assorted tea bags, sighing over each one she touched. Finally settling on a flavor, she dropped the bag into an oversized cup with a loud snuffle.

The sniffling got louder the longer she stood there. She was pretty in a homecoming queen on speed sort of way, but he couldn’t ignore someone in distress.

“Everything okay, Luce?”

She turned at the sound of his voice. “My boyfriend...” she began, and Slava couldn’t decide whether this play he was living in was a comedy or a tragedy.

Ten minutes later, he topped up his coffee before heading out of the lunchroom, timing his departure with the start of the meeting Gabe had called to recap the corporate event security for tonight’s gala. He figured he’d scoop Mickey up on his way past his cubicle, but Ian had apparently beat him to it.

The redhead was leaning casually on the edge of the partition, his cheek resting on a loose fist, and he really couldn’t look anymore smitten if he tried. All the scene needed was a few crudely drawn hearts floating above his head.

As Slava slowed, Mickey stood up, shifting forward slightly so he could speak quietly to Ian. He’d never seen Mickey lower his guard like this, not even really with him when they were out drinking or watching a game. They were buddies and partners, in some sense brothers, but they weren’t intimate. And that’s what Slava knew he was seeing. Intimacy.

And a shit ton of fucking chemistry. How the two of them made it as long as they did without jumping each other was impressive. Mickey’s head was tilted down slightly like he was listening
intently, and Ian was watching him so closely that Slava felt a little like a voyeur, certain that his partner would not be happy to know that anyone but Ian was witness to this. Mickey’s eyes shifted to Slava and he stepped back from Ian. Because it was his job to tease the shit out of his partner, Slava grinned knowingly.

“What are you two gabbing about?” he asked leaning in close to Ian.

“If we wanted you to know, we’d a sent you an invitation,” Mickey replied as he reached down for a couple file folders.

“Must a got lost in the mail,” Slava concluded.

Ian laughed. “How’d it go yesterday?” he asked Slava. “At Helix? Did Jaron Little put up a fight or except the inevitable?”

“Handcuffs are very persuasive,” he laughed, picturing the three hundred pound warehouse employee thrashing around as the cops tried to arrest him for his part in the drug thefts. After Mickey and Ian had their suspicions about the two brothers, Helix had set up hidden cameras to monitor all narcotics controlled drug shipments to the warehouse. It didn’t take long to get the evidence they needed, and Slava was sent in to provide a security presence during the high risk employee termination.

Mickey snorted. “I’ve always found handcuffs quite persuasive.”

This got Ian’s attention, but Mickey was deeply enthralled in sorting some papers on his desk, so Ian returned his attention to Slava. “What about his brother Jason, have the cops tracked him down?”

“Doesn’t look like he showed up to work, and he wasn’t at his apartment either.”

“You think he knew the cops were coming for him?”

Slava shrugged. “Could be. The arrests were supposed to be simultaneous so they couldn’t alert each other, but Jason put up a fight, lots of people heard him yelling and throwing threats around the warehouse, took me a good five minutes to calm everyone down.”

“He’s bragging that he got to show off his non-violent,” Mickey paused to add finger quotes to that word, “confrontation techniques?”

“Verbal de-escalation is not everyone’s strong suit. Some,” Slava said to Ian, adding his own finger quotes, “Elite employees rely on violent confrontation techniques.”

“I’ll give you some verbal escalation, man,” Mickey retorted.

“This is starting to get kinky, Mick,” Slava laughed.

Before it could continue, Ian backed away from the cubicle. “I’ll just leave you two alone to fight to the death. See you in the conference room. Gotta grab a couple things.” Slava grinned at Mickey again, shifting his eyes from Ian’s back to Mickey’s face then back to Ian again with a low whistle.

“Don’t fucking start.”

“What?” Slava asked innocently. Mickey gave him a quick glare then nudged him out of the cubicle toward the conference rooms. “Day-am,” he chuckled because teasing Mickey was so much fun. He draped his arm around Mickey’s shoulders giving him a squeeze. As predicted, Mickey scrunched up his face and half-heartedly pushed the arm off him.
“Oh, sorry,” Slava said, “you’re taken now.” When that didn’t elicit a verbal tirade, Slava whipped his eyes toward his partner, who just pursed his lips and stared straight ahead. “Spill it.”

“Why you always gotta get under my skin, Slav?”

“Why do you think?” he scrunched up his own face. “I’m your partner. It’s my job.”

Mickey continued walking without comment, so Slava nuded his shoulder into Mickey’s making him stumble a little. “Fuck…”

“Are you guys,” he lowered his voice and leaned in close to Mickey, “boyfriends?”

Mickey flinched microscopically, but studiously ignored Slava.

“Day-am.” This time, though, he drew it out because he didn't know what else to say.

By then, they’d arrived at the conference room, which was buzzing with people who all had roles in providing security for tonight’s gala. Not everyone would be at the hotel, but a lot of prep went into getting things in order before the event, especially when the client was high maintenance and freaking out about the data leak that happened prior to the release of a new drug a couple years ago. The e-division was now assigned to make sure that didn’t happen again by developing solutions to safeguard information.

That’s why two interns from cyber-security ended up following them into the conference room, and much to Slava’s amusement, one of them attempted to sit in the chair next to Mickey, who wasn’t having any of that. Blinking his blue eyes in surprise, he turned his body toward the kid, letting the full force of his personality shine through and the young fool moved over two chairs.

But the intern must have gotten a shot of courage when Gabe walked in because he muttered, “I don’t think you’ve completed the Harassment in the Workplace seminar.”

Mickey’s eyebrows nearly shot off his head, but Slava thought he saw a dash of respect spark to life in his eyes. “Where do you think I got all my ideas?”

Ian walked in then, and the kid might as well of disappeared in a puff of smoke for all Mickey would have noticed. He shifted his eyes to Gabe, but his attention was totally on Ian as he made his way around the side of the conference room toward the chair his pit bull had saved for him.

This was so ridiculously cute that for one nanosecond Slava felt a jolt of envy, then he remembered that relationships were hard work, time consuming, fraught with potential land mines, and he returned to his happy bachelor state, hoping to hell that he never fell as hard as these two.

Gabe got their attention and opened with yet another reminder. “As the CEO of Helix Pharmaceutical, Clive Janssen is the face of the company and his job is to ensure that its investors continue to feel confident in their investment.”

When Gabe turned his attention to grilling Ian, Slava glanced across the table at Mandy, who rolled her eyes dramatically. Slava mouthed the words “tick tock”, hoping to lighten her mood by reminding her that eventually they’d have a new Director. All of this just reaffirmed for him why he would never want to move up the chain of command like his partner did. Why would he want to put in time just to get to retirement?

Ian was explaining that he would be liaison between hotel staff and their people, that Slava and Mickey would roam the party while three basic security guards provided perimeter monitoring, and that they had completed the on-site inspection the previous evening.
Essentially, corporate event security was one of their basic services, and they didn’t anticipate any specific trouble with this one, but it only took one fuck up to lose a client or ruin a reputation.

By 8:45 PM, the last of the guests had arrived in the hotel’s banquet hall and were milling around in fancy outfits with flutes of champagne or cocktails, nibbling on finger food being offered by wait staff while a band played generic background music. Basically, the place reeked of money and corporate snobbery, and Slava scanned the room looking for his partner, who was going to be working hard to rein in his distaste.

When Slava had arrived at Elite almost five years ago, he’d been immediately paired up with Mickey to transport a classic Lamborghini Silhouette from Chicago to Memphis, arriving in time for a surprise party that a socialite was hosting for her investment banker husband. The guy had barely glanced at the car, just kissed his wife as a thank you and moved on.

Slava had stood beside Mickey staring at the white sports car like they were leaving a child with neglectful parents.

“What a waste,” he had lamented to his new partner.

“That’s fucking rich people,” Mickey had replied. “Better get used to it.”

Five years later, they were still following rich people around, making sure their shit didn’t get messed with or they didn’t have to deal with common folk any more than was necessary, and Slava knew Mickey would be finding this event insufferable.

At 9:30 PM, the band took a break, and Clive Janssen got up on the makeshift stage using the singer’s microphone to make his speech, thanking everyone for coming and investing in Helix Pharmaceutical. He told them about the new weight loss drug that their money had produced and all the people it was going to help. This got polite applause from the audience, and Slava imagined a snort coming from Mickey.

As Janssen started dropping names and amping up his future investments, Slava scanned the room from his position to the left of the stage. He spotted the three security guards manning the exits, exactly where they’d been all night. Mickey stood at the back of the crowd near the employee door that lead to the kitchen, monitoring the wait staff as they entered and exited the banquet hall, and Ian was near the bar talking to the night manager.

Earlier in the evening, just as the guests had been scheduled to begin arriving, the night manager had informed them that the water was going to be shut off to the kitchen temporarily, consequently throwing off the timing of tonight’s events.

“That’s one,” Mickey had snapped at Slava when Ian arrived on the scene to take over discussions with the manager regarding a contingency plan.

“We adjust,” Slava had responded, wanting to calm his partner and remind him that anomalies are part of the job. How they handled each surprise is what separated them from amateurs, but Slava knew that Mickey had never fully recovered from the Forevermark diamond theft. Hell, the guy kept a photo of the jewelry tacked to his cubicle, next to a picture of the thing that had probably kept him going. Slava amended that: the thing that used to keep him going. He wondered how long it would
take the two of them to end up in Mexico together.

“Without our valued stakeholders, Helix would not be able to perform the research that we do…” Janssen’s slightly accented voice interrupted Slava’s thoughts. The crowd was gathered in the center of the banquet hall listening to the CEO talk non-stop for the last 15 minutes. Slava blocked him out as he made yet another scan of the room.

This time though, a familiar but uninvited guest appeared. The crazy dreadlocks were visible above the heads of all the guests as the owner of that hair entered the banquet hall through the employee only door to the kitchen about ten feet behind Mickey.

Slava lifted his wrist to his mouth and spoke into the mic. “Mickey, employee door. Jason Little.”

Mickey whipped around as a 6’5 mountain barreled past him and straight into the crowd of Helix investors. His face was red and livid. “Let my brother go, Janssen,” he yelled. “You have no right.”

Slava’s view was partially blocked as he jogged around the outskirts of the crowd, but it looked like Mickey laid a hand on the massive shoulder to stop him. Jason was well over a head taller than Mickey and almost twice his weight. He gave his shoulder one shrug, effortlessly releasing Mickey’s hand.

“Janssen,” he roared again from the center of the crowd. “You let Jaron go or you’ll regret it.”

Again, Mickey grabbed at the guy, latching on to his arm, only to be tossed backwards out of sight.

Slava cut through a cluster of women in long gowns, trying not to knock them over when they remained oblivious to what was happening.

“This is corporate bullshit,” Jason yelled pushing two men in suits aside. “You’re a dead man!”

Slava’s heartbeat sped up at those words. Could the idiot have come in here armed? The threat also sent the crowd into panic mode, and people started moving in different directions effectively blocking Slava’s progress. He had no idea where Ian was, hoping he was having better luck.

“Fucker,” Mickey yelled as he reappeared and leapt onto the guy’s back, his left arm wrapped around Jason’s throat, his right hand buried in a mound of dreadlocks. Jason swung to the left, then the right trying to dislodge the smaller man, but Mickey wasn’t going anywhere.

Ian appeared then, but he wasn’t any closer to the two men than Slava. He looked more determined though, and Slava knew he needed to de-escalate the situation before Ian overreacted.

Slava was beginning to think that Jason was on something because he was bucking and swinging wildly. His big paw was swiping at his neck where Mickey was attached like he was riding a bull. The crowd was backing away from them unsure which way to move as Jason thrashed unpredictably.

From his position on the stage, Janssen had a clear view of what was happening, and after a moment of confusion, started speaking even louder trying to grab the room’s attention.

“As a world leader in drug manufacturing, Helix Pharmaceutical…” His voiced boomed at the same time as Mickey went flying backwards, disappearing from sight again, landing somewhere in the crowd. Slava finally pushed through the guests, arriving the same time as Ian to find Mickey crouched on one foot, blood dripping from his mouth. He swiped at it with his tongue, then his other foot shot out connecting with the back of Jason’s knee. The guy shot forward, right into Ian whose eyes widened in surprise as he hit the carpeted floor, and hundreds of pounds of livid man landed on top of him.
Shit, Slava hissed knowing this was going to get out of hand as Mickey and Ian reacted like a pair of fucking star-crossed lovers, desperate to protect each other. When Mickey grabbed a handful of Jason’s hair and yanked him off of Ian so hard that the guy partially landed on top of Mickey, Slava started to wonder if they had a work-life balance problem on their hands.

People were jumping out of the way to make room for them, and Ian rolled to his hands and knees, about to get back in the fray, but Slava got to Jason first. He shoved the guy’s arm into his back so hard that he whimpered in pain and gave Slava the opportunity to pin him to the ground with a knee to the lower back and snap handcuffs on.

After running a hand over Jason’s body and not finding a weapon, Slava tightened his hold on the guy’s handcuffed arms, using the painful angle to pull him to standing. Slava glanced around the sea of faces, most of them slack with surprise, but two of them red from exertion and righteous indignation that anyone would dare lay a hand on their lover.

They definitely had a work-life balance problem.

Jason wasn’t ready to give in quite yet, and he twisted toward Mickey, dreadlocks whipping into Slava’s face as he marched him through the parted crowd. “Watch your back, motherfucker.”

Mickey smiled, meanly. “I’ll see you in 8 to 15.”

Jason lunged forward, but Slava was ready for it. “When I fuck you up.”

“It’s a date,” Mickey said blowing a kiss, then wincing when his lip started to bleed again.

They had reached the opened employee door where Ian was waiting. “You think you’re so smart? Can’t see shit under your own fucking nose?”

Mickey stepped forward, shoving his hand in Jason’s chest. “Fuck you talking about?”

Clearly delighted that he’d gotten under Mickey’s skin, Jason laughed. “Eat me.” Slava shoved him into the employee hallway before Mickey could do more than eat the guy.

Ian remained with Jason and several members of hotel security as they waited for the police to arrive and take their prisoner away, meaning Slava could return to the banquet hall to begin dealing with the fallout. Janssen was still talking to the crowd, which seemed mildly excited by the events, a buzz in the air.

Passing Mickey, he heard him mutter “that’s two”. Slava chuckled. He fucking loved his job, maybe most especially when shit got tense. Where’s the fun in a job that went off without a hitch?

Eventually Ian returned to the party, making a beeline for Janssen, which surprised Slava for a moment as he was expecting the redhead to seek out Mickey first. Janssen gave him a dark look as Ian approached but allowed himself to be ushered aside. The two men bent their heads close as Ian started talking, laying a hand on the CEO’s shoulder and leaving it there as he spoke. Janssen’s face softened considerably and he even nodded once.

Slava glanced at Mickey, this time not surprised by what he saw. His partner looked pissed, lips pressed together, knuckle swiping over the side of his nose, clearly not impressed that Ian was using his wooing skills on the CEO.

It was a goddamn Shakespearean play, all right, and Romeo needed to get his head straight.

Just before midnight, they escorted the last guest out, and Ian walked Janssen to the elevator bank in
one final attempt to soothe him. Mickey watched them leave the banquet hall and Slava sighed, knowing he was going to have to talk to his partner about the risks involved in falling in love with someone on the job. For tonight, it was enough to simply finish packing up their equipment and get home to bed.

Returning from a trip to the Escalade, Slava scanned the room for his partner or Ian, but they weren’t around. The storage room door was ajar, and he headed in that direction to grab the remaining tactical bags.

“Not your lip.” He heard as he arrived at the door. “You have such nice lips.”

“Maybe I should start wearing Chapstick.”

“You’re such a dick.”

A bit of shuffling sounded on the other side of the door.

“Relax, Gallagher, the top is still in working order.”

Light laughter followed.

“But I love your bottom.” Slava was sure he heard a moan and he stepped away from the door.

“Plump and juicy.”

“Jesus,” his besotted partner groaned.

Slava walked away from the storage room, half expecting to hear a goddamn sonnet about Mickey’s lips next.
After this flight to El Paso felt very different for Ian compared to the last trip. For one thing, it was an afternoon commuter flight, not early morning. Mostly though, it was that he was sitting next to Mickey and free to stare at him as he slept. The first time they’d flown together, Ian had been excruciatingly aware of Mickey beside him, but he’d had to hide it or at least he’d tried really fucking hard to, suspecting that he’d failed monumentally. Mickey had slept through that flight too, leaving Ian alone with his thoughts. Doubts. Worries.

Today he was free to look over every thirty seconds or so, but the solid presence beside him gave him as much peace at it did anxiety because his life was now intertwined with Mickey’s. That didn’t mean though that the world was going to just release him from his obligations, so he could settle down and grow old with him. He tossed the printouts he’d been reviewing into his bag in frustration then exhaled a long, calming breath through his nose.

Flipping open the flight safety manual, he frowned at the diagrams thinking about the plane making an emergency landing, postponing their trip. Postponing the inevitable. Could he somehow pause their lives right here? Maybe they could land on a deserted island. He laughed at himself. Not many of those between Illinois and Texas.

They were in a small plane, four seats wide. The older couple across the aisle was engrossed in whatever was on their laptop screen, and Slava was two rows ahead of them, so it felt like they were more or less secluded. Not secluded enough to do whatever he wanted to Mickey, but enough that he could look freely.

Letting out a sigh, he stuffed the booklet back into the seat in front of him, glancing at Mickey. When he’d first closed his eyes, telling Ian to get some fucking rest, he’d been turned toward the shuttered window, but the second time Ian had checked, he was facing Ian, head tipped ever so slightly in the direction of Ian’s shoulder. Now his lips were parted slightly, relaxed and unguarded, and Ian stared at them for minute before turning to his phone, looking for the airline’s app, but clicking on his camera app instead.

Lowering his phone so it was angled just right, he centered Mickey’s face in the screen and tapped the little circle capturing the moment forever. He stared at it for a long time, studying each feature, piecing together what made him so attractive to Ian. Then he realized that he had the real thing to look at and shut down his phone.

When he shifted his attention back to Mickey, his tongue moved slowly over his lower lip, moistening it, then disappearing back into his mouth. He loved everything about this guy, but most especially how safe he made Ian feel. He saw Ian and he seemed to like what he saw, even after Ian shared some of the shit he wished he hadn’t had to share. It just seemed to make Mickey like him even more, and that had given Ian a sort of freedom from his past that he'd never felt before. He had shared some of his story with Lip way back, but that had felt more like he was simply explaining not sharing. Weirdly, it seemed that he’d given part of his past to Mickey to carry.

With a quick glance toward the aisle, Ian made sure no one was passing by, then he tipped his face down to Mickey’s hair, pressing a kiss into it. The scent of Ian’s hippie dippie, as Mickey called it, shampoo rose up from the silky strands. It smelled clean and pure, perfect. He pressed his lips in once more before resting his head on the back of his own seat and relaxing his shoulders.

“You finally gonna be able to relax, Gallagher?” Mickey said quietly.
Ian felt his chest tighten in pleasure. “You were awake this whole time?”

“Course.” He could hear the humor in Mickey’s voice. “Who can sleep with you thinking so fucking loud?”

Ian slipped his fingers under the arm rest, running them along the seam of Mickey’s cargo pants. A moment later, warm fingers trapped his. “Why don’t you read one of your fucking papers. Shit’ll put anyone to sleep.”

“When are you gonna tell me which one’s your favorite?” Ian smiled, eyes closed as he relaxed.

“It’s the one called Blah, Blah, Blah. Riveting stuff, man.”

Cheyenne and Axton, as well as their co-ordinator, Roslyn, a no-nonsense task master, were waiting for them in the Elite conference room when they arrived fresh from the unseasonably warm weather and late afternoon El Paso traffic.

“Welcome,” Rosalyn said, greeting the three of them as they sat down at the boardroom table, her messy bun bobbing as she nodded at the newcomers individually. “Ian, I’ve read your paper on soft countermeasures. Impressive research.”

Mickey started choking on the water he’d raised to his lips. Ian turned to him with concern in his words, but humor in his eyes. “You okay, Mick?” he asked, his pressed lips together to stop the laugh when Mickey arranged his fingers around the glass of water, so Ian had a clear view of the middle one.

He turned back to Roslyn. “Thank you. Coincidentally, that’s also Mickey’s favorite.”

“I can see why,” she agreed. “Let’s get down to business. Cheyenne has filled me in on the transport plan and potential vulnerabilities. This meeting should be around identifying critical gaps in that plan.”

Ian neatly organized the Handley printouts in front of himself, clicking the end of a mechanical pencil in preparation for notetaking. One click. Two clicks. A third time and nothing happened, except for the soft chuckle beside him. It lightened his heart, at least for a moment. He was always going to think of Mickey when he picked up a pencil.

It was early evening by the time the meeting broke, so Cheyenne and Axton drove them to their hotel. Mickey grunted beside Ian in the back seat of the SUV when they pulled up to the same hotel they’d stayed in last time they were in El Paso. It looked as pretentious as it did then, but it now held a special place in Ian’s heart. In fact, he’d asked Mandy to book him the same room. He’d die a happy man once he’d gotten Mickey back in that Jacuzzi tub.

“I’m hungry, Ian,” Mickey complained almost absently. “For actual food.”

“Me too,” Slava interjected leaning in toward Ian who was squished between them. “Also for food.”

Ian glanced at Slava, who grinned rubbing his tummy exaggeratedly. Mickey grunted again.
“I checked the website, and the lounge serves pub food,” Ian announced to the car in general. “Does that classify as food?”

“Do they got wings?” Mickey demanded sounding like he wasn’t buying what Ian was selling. “From a fucking chicken?”

“Yes,” Ian said but he drew it out long enough to get Mickey’s attention.

“What?”

“Well, technically, yes they have chicken wings.”

“I don’t even wanna know. Let’s just fucking eat.”

The five of them piled out and into the heat, Mickey grumbling the whole half block they had to walk to the hotel entrance. Salim was behind the bar when they walked into the lounge, and he smiled hugely.

“Ian!”

“Hey, man.” Ian reached his hand across the bar top in greeting as the rest of the group found a table near the back of the room in case their conversation turned to business.

“Chocotini?” Salim laughed.

“Not tonight, need a clear head. We’re here for food.”

Salim nodded, gathering a stack of menus. As he passed them to Ian, he tipped his head toward the back corner of the lounge, eyebrows lifted in question. Ian felt a little blush tinge his cheekbones, wondering exactly how ridiculous he seemed in the bartender’s eyes, but that didn’t stop the equally ridiculous grin that took over his lips.

“No need to say more, man.” The bartender smiled equally as wide. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Ian said taking the menus. “And, um...thanks for listening.”

“What I’m here for. That with a side of taking orders,” he laughed. “I’ll be by the table in a minute.”

“Can I get a couple orders of your chicken wings as a starter?” he gestured to the group. “Before they start gnawing on each other.”

“Sure, what flavor?” Salim laughed again when Ian looked pained. “Got your back. You can trust me, Ian. I know wings.”

“Thanks.” He started to walk away but paused to add. "Maybe bring by a couple pitchers of something on tap. We could use a little relaxing.”

The wings arrived just as they started on the second pitcher, and Mickey eyed Ian waiting for the travesty to begin.

“Spicy blood orange and fresh ginger wings,” Salim announced, placing three plates in the middle of the table. “I brought an extra order because you’re going to want it, and might I also suggest the cherry-smoked bacon chunky fries?” He winked at Ian, who agreed on behalf of the table to let Salim take care of them.

Mickey reached for a wing, and Ian waited for him to sink his teeth into it, watching closely for his
reaction. His lips closed around it as he pulled the flesh off the bone, running his tongue along his upper lip cleaning the sticky coating off and leaving a glistening pink lip behind. He went back in for a second bite and closed his eyes in pleasure, seemingly oblivious that Ian was trying to eat him with his eyes.

Ian sat forward slightly, completely engrossed, feeling like he was enjoying the wing himself and fighting the urge to lick his own lips. Bless Salim, he thought as Mickey sipped from his beer glass, sighing in contentment.

“Uh, Cheyenne, Axton,” Slava said after clearing his throat loudly. “Have you equipped the transport truck with the GPS devices yet? Confirmed they’re working?”

“Of course,” Cheyenne said laughing under her breath. “And we hid them as planned. You’d have to know they were there in order to find them.”

Axton grabbed a second wing as engaged in eating as Mickey.

“Hopefully, we never have to test that theory,” Slava added getting a grunt from Mickey and breaking the spell Ian was under. He glanced around the table to see if anyone had noticed his distraction. Everyone avoided his eyes, confirming his slip.

“Fucking good wings, Ian.” Mickey’s voice drew his attention. “My second favorite thing about this stupid fucking hotel.”

“What’s your first?” Slava asked once again interjecting himself into their conversation and drawing Ian’s attention away from Mickey.

“The seasonal water, Slava,” Mickey snarked, tapping his foot against the side of Ian’s and sending a jolt up Ian’s leg. “I’m hoping to enjoy some of that a little later.”

“Oh,” Slava said leaning around Ian to see Mickey better. “That sounds interesting. Can I try some too?”

“I ain’t sharing any of mine, man,” he said laughing around his chicken wing, and making Ian wish he had some seasonal water to throw in his own face.

“You sound passionate about this water.” Slava stared at Mickey with the same intensity that Ian was now directing at Slava, as he tried to figure out if they were all talking about the same thing.

“Hm,” Mickey hummed, drawing Ian’s eyes back to him. “Maybe I am.” He licked his thumb, sucking it into his mouth.

“You love it?” Slava asked, and Ian looked down at his empty plate, unsure at this point if he actually knew what Mickey was talking about.

Licking his lips once thoroughly, Mickey tossed the bone onto his side plate and looked past Ian, straight at Slava. “Yeah.”

Ian stared at Mickey as he picked up another chicken wing.

“Day-am,” Slava said.

“Can I get some of this water, too?” Axton asked, orange glaze covering the bottom half of his face. “Sounds fucking delicious.”
Ian heard the hotel room door open, followed by Mickey’s amused chuckle. “Again, Ian?” he yelled above the sound of the air conditioner. “That tub better be filled.”

“Your nuts are in good hands,” Ian promised as Mickey tossed their overnight bags on the floor and turned to where Ian was adjusting the taps on the tub. “I’ll keep them warm all night, scouts honor.”

Mickey lowered the air conditioning to a human level, then reached behind his back to yank his t-shirt off tossing it on the tv stand. He looked down at his cargo pants, releasing the button, then looked back up at Ian. “Gonna bathe in your clothes, man?”

“Oh,” Ian sputtered, blinded as always by how sexy this guy made even simple tasks. Salim had said it was a combination of intensity, arrogance and vulnerability, and Ian loved all three. Needed all three.

“In your head again, Ian?” Mickey had his pants off and walked toward Ian. “That place must be exhausting.” He helped Ian remove his shirt, keeping his eyes on Ian’s the whole time.

“It is,” he sighed, wishing he could be more chill. “Except when I’m inside you.”

“Fuck,” Mickey choked, hands on Ian’s pants. “Not wasting any time, huh?”

“No, I don’t want to waste a second.” He cupped Mickey’s cheeks, holding him in place as he pressed their mouths together and backed Mickey toward the tub. When they bumped into it, Ian dropped his hands to his dress pants, pushing them over his hips. “Get in the tub,” he growled.

“Fuck, yeah.” He leaned into Ian reflexively.

“Now, Mickey.”

That got him moving, making Ian smile fondly. He locked his eyes on Mickey’s ass as he bent slightly to step over the tub ledge, yelping when his toes hit the water. But he stuffed his foot in and lowered slowly, his face a picture of concentration. Instinctively, he slid forward to make room for Ian to arrange himself behind Mickey, then Ian pulled him between his long legs until his warm body was resting against Ian’s chest.

For a few minutes, Ian just tightened his arms around Mickey’s middle, hugging him. Then he splashed around for the washcloth he’d thrown in the water, running it up and down Mickey’s chest. He hadn’t added any bubbles this time because he didn’t want anything impeding his view. At the moment, that view included Mickey’s fingers digging into Ian’s thighs as Ian pressed himself into Mickey’s lower back. It didn’t take long for his view to include Mickey hardening.

He dragged the cloth down Mickey’s body, roughly over his erection and between his thighs. His legs were open and resting against Ian’s, but he tried to open them further with each pass of the cloth. They were both breathing heavily, mostly from anticipation of what was coming. The hand Ian had on Mickey’s chest tightened, pressing them together, and Mickey rolled his spine along Ian’s dick. Slowly.

“Mickey,” he whispered into his ear, biting into the flesh. One of Mickey’s hands came up to Ian’s cheek, pulling him forward enough so their lips could scratch together briefly. “Lift your leg up.”
The hand on Ian’s cheek splashed into the water as Mickey slid his calf along Ian’s leg until it rested on top of Ian’s knee, and he shifted enough to connect their mouths properly. Ian released the cloth so he could graze his fingertips over the sensitive area between Mickey’s legs. Over and over until he was squirming against Ian’s chest, and his tattooed fingers tried to wrap around himself.

“No,” Ian whispered into his mouth.

“But,” he panted, “I need more.”

“I know. Me too. Turn around.”

Mickey moved so fast that water sloshed over the side of the tub then he suctioned himself to Ian’s chest. As they attacked each other’s mouths, Ian slid forward enough that Mickey could get his knees tucked into Ian’s hips. They rocked together, frantically rutting as Ian tightened his arms around Mickey’s back.

Breaking apart for air, they rested their foreheads together, noses rubbing slightly, eyes caught.

“Ian, I…uh…”

“Me too, Mickey,” Ian stared hard into Mickey’s eyes. “I feel it too.”

“It?” Mickey asked.

Ian swallowed. “Love.”

Mickey pressed so forcefully against Ian’s lips that he tipped backwards against the hard edge of the tub, but Ian needed more. He always needed more it seemed, so he dropped his hands to Mickey’s hips halting his movements.

“Let’s get out.”

It took several more kisses and a lot of fondling, but they ended up standing beside the bed drying each other with the hotel towels. Ian couldn’t believe how lucky he was to have found Mickey, and he was going to make everything right, so that they could, in fact, grow old together.

When their eyes met, they dropped their towels and met in the middle, bodies still damp and warm from the bath. “I love you,” Ian whispered into Mickey’s mouth. “Never forget that.”

Ian could feel Mickey’s lips form a smile. “I’m pretty sure I’m gonna hear that so many times a day that I won’t be able to get a word in edgewise.”

Sadness tried to steal this moment from Ian, but he focused on the warmth of Mickey’s skin, the pressure from his fingertips as they dug into Ian’s shoulders, the love he felt. “And if you don’t hear it, you’ll know it, right?”

“Yeah, Ian.” He pulled away a little, so he could look at Ian with a touch of a frown. “That’s not something I’m likely to forget.”

Knowing he was on the verge of fucking up the night, he nudged Mickey toward the bed, following him down onto the red comforter and covering his face, chest and belly with kisses.

Rising up to his knees, he traced his tongue over the shape of Mickey’s cock while his fingers worked their way between his thighs again, but Ian still wanted something more. He sucked Mickey into his mouth once, then pushed away, swatting his hip lightly. “Flip over,” he commanded. “Gotta
Mickey stared up at him, eyes shining in the darkened room.

“With my tongue,” Ian added.

He was on his knees, ass up in the air and making Ian smile so damn hard that he had to place a hard kiss on each cheek. “I love you,” he sighed.

“I love you too, Ian,” Mickey panted sounding slightly distracted.

“Oh, sorry,” Ian said draping himself over Mickey’s back so he could partially see his face. “I wasn’t talking to you. Was talking to your ass.”

Mickey’s head dropped down between his arms as he laughed. “It doesn’t fucking believe you.”

“Well, let me fix that.”

Lowering to his calves, Ian kissed Mickey dead center. “I love you,” he repeated, making Mickey laugh again.

“Jesus, Gallagher, you’re a fucking dork.” But Ian could hear it all in the way he said those words, and he returned his lips to Mickey, poking his tongue out, making Mickey grunt. “My ass loves you too.”

Ian added more pressure needing Mickey to be ready now. While his tongue showed Mickey that he loved every single part of him, Ian found the lube he’d dropped on the bed earlier, squeezing way too much on himself since he was going to lower Mickey directly onto his cock from this position.

“Ready?”

Mickey grunted a reply and Ian sucked hard on his ass cheek, while one of his still slick fingers made a single entry, circling and leaving moisture behind. His other hand started applying pressure to Mickey’s hip bringing him down, down, down until Ian was deep inside him, and Mickey was arching his back, immediately overwhelmed.

“Ah,” he groaned sounding almost panicked. “Fuck, fuck.” Ian wrapped both hands around his hips and started to lift him up. “No! Just fuck, hang on.”

Ian sat completely still even though he had no clue how that was possible because he felt desperate to move, desperate to thrust up into Mickey. Every muscle was clenched in anticipation, and he was biting into Mickey’s shoulder blade.

“Okay,” Mickey breathed out lifting himself a little then lowering and pausing. “Oh god.”

“Yeah,” Ian moaned, biting harder. Up Mickey went again then done again. “This is fucking torture, Mickey.”

Ian couldn’t stop his fingers from clenching around Mickey’s hips. Every time he lowered back down, Ian had to bite some new skin on Mickey’s back to stop from thrusting up. Every time he bit, Mickey dug his blunt nails into the skin of Ian’s thighs. “I can’t do this.”

“Move your hips a little,” Mickey said and Ian’s hips reacted before he brain could process the command. “Ah,” Mickey groaned.

“S-sorry.”
“Nah, it’s good. More.”

Ian squeezed his eyes shut as he slid himself in and out a few times, harder with each stroke. His left arm locked around Mickey’s waist as his hips took on a life of their own, thrusting up, holding Mickey in place, so he had to take it.

“Okay?” he ground out, hoping to hell he could stop if Mickey couldn’t take it.

“Harder.”

“Fuck.” He rose to his knees a little, giving him more room to roll his hips up and back, getting a helpless whine from Mickey each time he fully entered him. “You sure?”

Mickey grabbed Ian’s hand from around his hip and placed it on his cock. The impact of each of Ian’s thrusts rubbed Mickey against his palm. “I can feel how close you are,” Mickey whispered. “Throbbing.”

All Ian could do in response to that was dig his teeth into the muscle along Mickey’s shoulder until he actually tasted blood on his tongue and felt come on his hand.

“Holy fuck,” he moaned.
Mickey could barely make out shapes in the dark hotel room, but he could hear Ian’s harsh breathing behind him. Their legs were slightly tangled, and he had to yank on the comforter to free himself enough to turn over. Ian was laying on his back, one hand was clutching his ribs like he was trying to breathe but couldn’t get air.

Coming up to an elbow, Mickey shook him gently. “Ian.”

It took three repetitions of his name, each one more forceful than last, to get the redhead to open his eyes. They stared at Mickey, vacant then confused, for what felt like a solid minute.

“What?” Ian frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“You were dreaming, and it didn’t look like it had anything to do with my ass,” Mickey teased, running his hand along Ian’s chest so he’d slow his breathing.

“I-oh,” he looked stricken. “I was.”

“You remember?”

The breath wobbled out of Ian’s chest. “Trouble today.”

“You worried about the transport?” Mickey asked as he laid his head on the pillow beside Ian, moving his hand from Ian’s chest to his cheek and turning his face toward Mickey. “It’s a big job for your first real transport. Got you freaked out?”

Ian’s eyes searched his face, looking all serious. “Yeah,” was all he said, then he shifted to his side and smothered Mickey with his body.

“You coming already?” Mickey asked from the hotel room door. Ian was still in the bathroom, doing fuck knows what with all that shit he applies to his body. “We’re not entering a fucking beauty pageant, Ian.”

He transferred his duffel bag to his left hand, so he could check the time on his phone. “Slava is gonna come looking for us if we’re not downstairs for breakfast in two minutes.”

Ian appeared, flicking the bathroom light off. “Okay, let’s do this.” His hair was neat as a pin, jaw smooth as silk, shirt pressed to within an inch of its life, and Mickey had come to understand that this
was Ian’s armor. He was as ready for battle as any foot soldier.

“I need to get you a pair of glasses.”

“You do?” Ian asked pausing at the bathroom door.

“Yeah, cause that Clark Kent look turns me the fuck on, Ian.” That gave the redhead pause as he narrowed his eyes, looking for mockery, but all he was gonna see on Mickey’s face was lust.

“It does?”

“Sure,” Mickey said, leaning nonchalantly against the door, duffel bag dangling from his hand as he gave Ian a thorough once over. “Cause it’s fucking awesome when you loosen up. Literally.” He smiled a little at the precision of Ian’s part.

“Shit.” He pressed his body against Mickey’s, knocking their overnight bags together as they kissed. Mickey’s free hand came up to ruffle a few strands of that red hair. They broke apart, already breathing heavily, and Mickey glanced up at Ian’s hair. “That’s better.”

Ian ran a hand over his hair but smiled as he ruffled it a little bit more. “Apparently, I’m fucking dangerous when I loosen up,” Ian said kissing Mickey’s shoulder through his t-shirt. “How’s your shoulder?”

“Fine. Gonna ask about my back and hip and thigh too?” Mickey raised his eyebrows in expectation, loving how serious Ian got over taking care of him, but before he could start another round of apologies, Mickey spoke. “Can’t wait to find out where you’re gonna bite tonight.”

Next thing he knew, his face was squished into Ian’s neck so hard he couldn’t breathe, then he was released and Ian was opening the hotel room.

“I’ve seen that black Expedition twice,” Axton said from the driver’s seat, eyes on the rear-view mirror. “Left lane, behind the dented-up minivan.”

“Me too,” Slava added, looking over his shoulder into the backseat at Mickey and Ian. “Coincidence?”

Mickey followed his gaze through the back window. “Who the fuck even knows we’re here?” He stretched his arm along the seat back, making sure his finger tips grazed Ian’s shoulder, getting a tiny smile from the corner of the redhead’s mouth.

They were on their way to the Elite office, where Cheyenne was waiting with the secured cube van they would be using to transport the firearms, before heading out to the Franklin Mountains and the Handley ranch.

“Shit,” Mickey spat. “That has Fed written all over it.”

“What?” Ian snapped. He had been engrossed in replying to emails on his tablet, but Mickey’s comment pulled him from his concentration.

Ian turned toward the back window, but the vehicle in question pulled over to the curb in front of a strip of outlet stores and was lost to sight by the traffic.


“Pricks?” Ian asked.

“Yeah, any time we had to work with them, it left a bad taste in my mouth. Think they own the fucking world,” he griped.

Slava chuckled from the front seat. “He doesn’t play nice with others.”

“Pfft,” Mickey snorted. “I play just fine as long as they keep their nose outta my shit.”

“Pretty sure that sticking their nose in people’s shit is the definition of Fed,” Axton said, adding his two cents’ worth.

Slava laughed again. “I think that’s the definition of a dog actually.”

Mickey sent a grin Ian’s way, but he wasn’t smiling. Mr. Serious was back, making Mickey wonder what had triggered him this time. Their late night conversation about Ian’s past came back to him, some task force using Ian to bring down a bunch of fucking pervs. He wanted to be pissed off at that, but Ian seemed to think the experience turned his life around and he credited someone from the FBI for helping him get set up in school.

Flicking a thumb over his nose, he relented on Ian’s behalf. “They probably aren’t all dickheads.”

“Woah,” Slava said over his shoulder. “Have we entered the Twilight Zone?”

Mickey ignored him to focus on Ian, who had stowed his tablet and had his phone out, thumbs flying over the screen. He let it drop to his lap as Mickey’s phone buzzed in his pocket, and Ian turned away from him, looking out the side window at the passing buildings.

I love you.

There was something so permanent about seeing it in print, like a contract that he could now hold Ian to. He typed in his response.

You talking to me or my ass?

Watching from the corner of his eye as Ian read the message, he felt himself relax seeing Ian try to suppress a smile as he typed.

Both of you.

Nodding, Mickey shot off one more text then tucked his phone into his pocket because they had just pulled up to the Elite parking area.

I love both of you too.
A half hour later, Lamont met them at the front door of Handley’s sprawling ranch house, and once again, he zeroed in on Ian like the rest of them weren’t even visible.

“Ian,” he said, tipping his cowboy hat slightly in greeting. “Good to see you again.”

Ian smiled wide, falling into step beside the cowboy. “I’m glad to be back, Lamont.”

Mickey felt the karmic hand of fate providing him with an opportunity to experience what Ian had been experiencing. Jealousy. Crossing his arms in resignation, Mickey followed the men as they made their way toward Handley’s gun vault and chatted about the weather like a couple of fucking senior citizens.

“Smooth operator,” he mumbled.

Slava leaned in to, as usual, offer his thoughts on the matter. “Looks like you need to brush up on your knowledge of Southern US weather patterns.”

“I’ll take a bullet first.”

Then again Ian was showing an inordinate amount of interest in the fact that El Paso got virtually no rain all year, but some was expected today. As long as they were in the sky before rain fell, Mickey couldn’t care less. He’d had enough of this sauna, time to head home.

While Ian soothed all of Sadie’s concerns about the possibility of hijacking along the route, they began transferring the 67 firearms, which were packed in double-walled, aluminum cases approved to pass airline security standards for transportation of a firearm. Each case was numbered for easier identification and secured with a combination lock.

Once the guns were loaded in the reinforced shell of the van’s cargo area, Axton climbed into the cab then entered the cargo area via the pass-through door between the front and back of the van, so he could lock the rear doors from the inside. The entire unit was bullet-resistant, designed to handle ammunition from most handguns and rifles.

Axton settled into the driver’s seat, and Cheyenne and Slava got into the SUV, which was also reinforced. No sense protecting the van from bullets if the support vehicle was vulnerable. Hijackers would simply hold the team members in the SUV hostage until they got access to the guns.

Mickey was double checking the rear van door and waiting for Ian to finish smoothing Sadie’s feathers and stroking Lamont’s ego. The three of them had arrived at the front doors of the ranch house, stopping to finish whatever was so enthralling about their conversation that it was taking them for-fucking-ever, but seeing Ian standing on the porch, Mickey felt a swell of pride, which was ridiculous.

Just because Ian looked so damn perfect didn’t mean he needed to swoon like a fucking girl. Just because the sun did amazing things to the color of his hair, just because he wore a fucking suit like a fashion model, just because he knew how to tip his head to show sincere interest in whoever was speaking, just because he turned slightly toward Mickey and locked eyes with him. None of that, he tried to tell himself, was reason enough to cause so many bodily reactions, especially not while on a job.

Ian shook Sadie’s hand gently, then endured Lamont’s hands, both the one he was shaking and the one squeezing his shoulder. He turned once on his way down the front steps to nod at the Handleys then walked directly to Mickey. The movement caused his suit jacket to open slightly, revealing the Glock 22 strapped to his waist. Damn, if Mickey’s dick didn’t respond to that.
“Okay, all set,” Ian said, stopping a couple feet from Mickey.

“Did you need to wipe any drool off your suit?”

Ian immediately swiped a hand over his chin. “What? No.” He looked down at the lapel of his suit to make sure.

Mickey laughed at the big dork. “Lamont’s.”

“Oh,” he laughed too then leaned in to whisper directly in Mickey’s ear. “I’m sure he could smell you on me, so he got the message.”

“Fuck, let’s get this shit over so we can go home.”

They caught eyes and the word “home” drifted between them. Then like clockwork, Ian’s face tensed up as a wave of stress washed over him.

“Jesus, Gallagher, are you sure you’re in the right line of business?”

“Yes, just…” he paused to make sure Mickey was paying attention then his lips moved silently. “I love you.” He walked to the SUV, getting in the back seat behind Slava, who was riding shotgun.

All right then, Mickey thought, no shortage of drama where Gallagher was concerned.

The electronic gate closed behind their mini motorcade as they turned onto the dirt road which would eventually take them to the highway into El Paso and the main airport. The Franklin Mountains rose up around them, dotted with trees that somehow withstood the desert wasteland and scorching heat. As he scanned the area for anything amiss, Mickey expected to see a tumbleweed roll across the road.

“This fucking countryside is trying to kill us,” Mickey snarked to himself mostly because his only companion was Axton, and the guy lived here so he must find it tolerable.

“Yup,” he agreed. “Born and raised in Texas, but still find the heat a bit much.”

Mickey wondered if this was an opening he was supposed to take to get to know the guy better. Looking at the side mirror, he could see the support SUV a couple car lengths behind them. He imagined Ian would turn toward Axton and inquire into his personal life. The thought caused Mickey to instinctively pinch his lips and wrinkle his nose, and that made him chuckle at himself. Surely, polite conversation wouldn’t kill him.

“Yeah, I was born and raised in Chicago.” Okay, he thought, that didn’t actually kill him, but he scanned his brain for more and came up empty.

“I’m thinking of moving. Shaking things up a little,” Axton glanced at him quickly, then back to the empty, dusty gravel road ahead. “What are summers like in Chicago?”

Mickey thought back to summers growing up without air conditioning and bitching about the heat, but thinking it had nothing on this dry ass countryside. “Bearable compared to this. It’s the winters you might need to get used to.”

And that’s when Mickey realized he was talking about the weather with some dude. Fucking Gallagher.

“Okay, we’re a couple miles from the bridge,” Axton said just as Slava’s voice came over his
earpiece sending feed from their radio units.

“All clear.” His voice crackled slightly as the radios struggled to pick up satellite. “One mile to the bridge.”

Mickey didn’t need to be in the SUV to know that no amount of hair gel was going to keep Ian from freaking the fuck out, but there was nothing to be done other than keep driving. Less than a half hour from now they’d be at the airport, preparing to load the gun cases onto a Cessna. Tico and Nelson would be waiting for them on the other end with a similar convoy.

Because the simple beam bridge was only a few hundred feet long, it would take less than a minute to cross, but it hadn’t been designed for heavy traffic and wouldn’t accommodate two vehicles if one of them was wide like the van. This was the ideal spot to ambush them, but that was only possible if potential thieves knew they were going to be on the bridge this morning and had a plan to breach the van’s reinforced walls.

Ian’s agitation had left a mark on Mickey apparently because he started to tense up as the wheels of the van hit the prefab bridge and the sound changed from the crunch of gravel to the whine of metal. They were on a straight strip of back road without any connecting roads for several miles on either end of the bridge, leaving the riverbank below as the only available hiding spot. The foothills were tucked away from the road and the only vegetation on either side of them was low lying scrub.

Besides a golden eagle gliding through the sky above them, the countryside was quiet. Not a single tumbleweed to be seen. Because Mickey could cut the sudden tension with the dullest knife in his collection, he asked Axton if he ever sees tumbleweeds.

The guy chuckled, eyes ahead, both hands on the steering wheel as the van bumped over each groove in the bridge. “Nope, they’re just an urban legend.”

Mickey sat up straight as they neared the end of the bridge, then bumped one final time over the ridge and back onto the gravel road. He glanced out the side mirror again as the SUV cleared the end of the bridge.

“Shit.”

“Yeah,” Axton agreed, letting out the breath he must have been holding.

“That was fun,” Slava piped into his ear.

Mickey clicked the push-to-talk button on the inline microphone. “How you doing, Red?”

A moment later, Ian’s voice filled his ear, and Mickey could have kicked himself for engaging the guy because hearing his voice so intimately in his ear was bringing back way too many memories.

“I’m fine, Mickey.”

Bullshit, he thought, but they couldn’t have a private conversation, and he didn’t want to distract either of them by texting Ian, so he settled for this generic interaction as a way of letting Ian know he was here.

“23 minutes until we’re at the private hangar,” Mickey added then released the talk button.

“I’m reviewing road reports and Slava’s checking the police scanner,” Ian began. “So far there appear to be no interruptions between here and the airport.”
This made Mickey smile a little, knowing Ian was exercising what little control he had over the situation by doing his research.

Silence fell for the next ten minutes, until Mickey picked up the conversation he’d started with Axton. “Are you yanking my chain about the tumbleweeds?”

They were merging onto the Patriot Freeway and leaving the Fort Bliss Military Reservation behind. “Yup, you wanna see tumbleweeds? There’s about a million of them lodged in my back fence at the moment.”

“No shit. We don’t got any in Chicago.”

“You sound disappointed,” Axton said. “This part of the gunslinger image you’re cultivating?”

Mickey glanced over at him and had to smile too, imagining himself as Mickey the Gunslinger riding into some one horse town, a Desert Ironwood strapped to each hip, while the townsfolk scattered and the outlaws eyed him warily, having heard his name on the lips of dying men. The sheriff, a redhead with a—

“Mickey?” Axton repeated.

Shit, he’d been daydreaming. On the fucking job. “Yeah?” he asked, deciding the conclusion of that fantasy would need to wait until later. Maybe he’d even share it with Ian. Yeah, he’d definitely be into hearing about it.

“Said it looks like the storm is rolling in.”

The endless blue sky had started to darken, and they were driving straight into it. “Shit, hopefully, we can get another half hour before it pisses down on us. Don’t wanna be loading guns onto the plane in the fucking rain.”

A few minutes later, they pulled onto Airport Road, passing a Carl’s Jr and getting Mickey’s mouth watering. It was just past lunch and breakfast in the hotel lobby felt like it happened days ago. A clap of thunder sounded in the distance, followed by the crackle of static in his ear.

“Fuck,” Slava said unnecessarily.

“Exactly,” he agreed as Axton turned the van onto Boeing Road, which would take them straight to the charter company they’d arranged to fly with. He could feel his shoulders relaxing the closer they got to the hangar. As soon as the stylized A appeared indicating they’d arrived at Atlantic Aviation, he let out a breath.

Hitting the talk button, he broke the silence. “Ian, you alert the manager we’re about to roll up?”

“Yes, head straight to the hangar at the back of the building. They’re waiting for us,” he replied quickly, clearly waiting for Mickey to make contact.

They drove past a line of palm trees and through the open section of chain link fence attached to the side of the brick building. As they made their way around the giant metal hangar to the rear, the security gate closed behind them and three small air crafts dotted the tarmac in front of them. The blue and white Cessna Grand Caravan sat center, having been driven straight out from the building behind it. The nose of the 41 foot, single engine turboprop was pointed toward the taxiway that would lead to one of the three runways.

As Axton drove them toward the plane and the two men standing near the wing, Mickey scanned the
6000 acre airport grounds, the perimeter surrounded by an alarmed chain link fence. Just beyond that were the city’s freeways and a number of smaller roads with access to the various airport administrative buildings. In the distance, the Franklin Mountains framed the area, with dots of city life to the left and right. Everything looked relatively quiet for a major airport.

One of the pilots, a stocky middle-aged guy in yet another pair of tight Wranglers, waved them over. Axton pulled around, so he could back the van up to the Cessna’s front landing gear, leaving enough room for them to maneuver around the wing. Four storage doors were hanging open beneath the fuselage, allowing for easy loading and unloading of the gun cases, which is why Ian had picked the Caravan over more luxury type planes.

Axton and Mickey waited in the locked van until Cheyenne parked the SUV closer to the hangar, out of the way when the plane began taxiing, and Slava and Ian approached, moving to the rear of the van where the pilots waited and out of Mickey’s line of sight. They had learned the hard way that you can never be too cautious, and if the two Atlantic Aviation dudes were part of a scheme to rob them, then they didn’t want to make it easy for them. He wasn’t opening the door until they had verified their credentials.

Meanwhile, the sky had turned nearly black as the storm clouds gathered and moved toward the airport. Weather was often a factor in work, but the timing of this storm seemed more ominous that usual. They were cutting it close, and Mickey hoped this shit didn’t postpone take off. The winds hadn’t picked up yet, meaning they might make it out of El Paso on time.

Ian had turned on his microphone, so Mickey could hear his conversation with the two men in time to get his answer about the weather.

“A storm is coming in from the northwest, but we’re not expecting high winds or heavy rain,” one of the pilots said. “However, we probably have about 15 minutes before it starts.”

Axton and Mickey exchanged looks, and Ian’s voice carried to Mickey’s ear. “Easily enough time to load the cases. Will we be okay to take off though?”

“Yes, we won’t be dealing with wind shear, which was the only factor we were concerned about. Ground control cleared us to depart in,” the guy must have paused to check his watch, “47 minutes. We’ll need to be taxiing from our hangar to the Zero Eight North runway in less than half an hour. You requested minimal downtime, so we need to get the plane loaded asap so Chuck here has enough time to complete the pre-flight inspection.”

“We’re ready to transfer, Mickey,” Ian’s voice erupted from his earphone. “Unlock the back.”

Axton cut the engine and shifted in his seat to watch Mickey pull on the retractable key ring attached to his belt loop and begin the process of unlocking the through-door separating the cab from the cargo area then step into the rear of the van. He could sense Axton following him and watching as Mickey crouched down in front of the slide bolts securing the back doors. When he shoved his hand into the side of both bolts, they slid easily to the left and the double doors swung open.

Slava’s amused face blocked out some of the light that burst into the dark cargo area. The Cessna loomed about twenty feet behind him, and Ian was standing with the pilots near the plane’s propeller, squinting into the wind that had begun to pick up. Returning his attention to his partner, Mickey tried to ignore the eternal smirk tugging at his lips and eyes. His arms were crossed over the bulletproof vest covering his chest, tattoos pulled tight over his exposed biceps.

“Good morning, sunshine,” he said looking at Mickey’s scowl.
Shaking his head at his partner, Mickey started to respond but the wail of police sirens cut him off. They sounded too close to be travelling on either of the freeways. Before he had time for another thought, an El Paso County Sheriff's car and two off-road transportation mini-vans rounded the side of the airplane hangar, heading straight for them as another crack of thunder sounded almost directly above. The flashing lights of the cop car disappeared from Mickey’s view as the vehicle swerved around to the front of the van.

Slava’s hand went to his hip, fingers grasping the Glock attached there as he turned toward the Sheriff’s vans when their all terrain wheels came to a screeching halt a few feet from the nose of the plane.

“What the fuck?” Mickey snapped.
“What the fuck?” The words exited Mickey’s mouth like bullets spraying the scene in front of him. All around him noise. The police sirens that had stopped barely 10 feet from where he was squatting inside the back of their security van, the thunder cracking above him, all of it making his head pound in confusion. Slava had turned toward the sirens, and Mickey watched his spiky blond hair darken. Fuck, the rain had started.

It fell lightly as the side doors of the two El Paso County Sheriff’s off-road transportation mini-vans opened, and several men jumped down to the tarmac. When they started moving past the Cessna toward the security van, instinct kicked in, and Mickey reached for the door handles, making brief eye contact with Slava who nodded and took a step back from the doors as they slammed shut. Mickey re-engaged the first bolt, locking him in the van with Axton. “Jesus, fuck,” he spat, stepping backwards from his crouched position and right into Axton, who landed on his ass and sent two gun cases sliding across the van floor. “No fucking way am I losing another goddamn fucking thing.”

“What the hell?” Axton yelled, but he was up on his knees immediately and crawling toward the cab. “What’s happening?” Mickey was kneeling now among the 67 gun cases. The pocket-sized GPS was clutched in his left hand, thumb hitting the SOS button repeatedly, while his Glock dangled from his right hand. “Gotta think. Call it in, Axton.”

“Holy fuck, they aren’t cops, Mickey. They have assault rifles,” Axton whispered in amazement.

As the sirens cut out and deathly silence settled in, Axton held the through-door partially open, so he could see into the cab of the van. This gave them a view of the front window, where two men definitely not dressed in Sheriff’s uniforms were exiting the cop car parked near the front fender of the van.

Mickey had seen at least six guys so far. They were all South American, carrying assault rifles, and about to steal high end merchandise in what appeared to be a pretty fucking organized manner.

SATG.

It had to be. They may have branched out from armed robbery and hijacking, like Ian suggested, but when painted into a corner, they seemed happy to return to their old methods. Ian had ensured that the guns were nearly impossible to access. Yet, here they were about to the steal them.

An image of the redhead’s face flashed in Mickey’s mind, followed quickly by the stupid fucking
smirk Slava had just given him, and he felt his chest squeeze painfully. Should he wait for a command to open the door? Open it now? Fuck, he didn’t know. All he did know is that thosefuckers out there weren’t nice.

“Mickey, you should open the door,” Axton said as if reading his mind.

“I just need to think,” he hissed, looking around the van for something that would classify as a fucking miracle.

“No,” Axton repeated. “You fucking don’t. Open the door!”

Mickey looked away from his preppy face and demanding dark eyes.

“How many times did Ian tell us we don’t fucking engage if there’s an incident? Don’t put anyone’s life at risk, he said. About a hundred bloody times. Cheyenne is out there.”

“Lemme fucking think, man. And call it the fuck in, Axton.”

The guy huffed and shifted back to his heels, staring hard at Mickey as he hit the talk button on his GPS tracker, spitting information and coordinates into the mini device.

Ultimately, though, it was Ian’s voice that forced Mickey’s hand. He had re-engaged the push button on his microphone.

“Mickey.”

That’s all he said and that was all it took. A shout followed and the sounds of a scuffle, then Mickey’s earpiece went silent. He crouched down to disengage the bolt, feeling equal parts fury and fear. That this was happening again was going to be a thorn in his side until his dying day, but nothing would compare to losing either of those men out there.

Before he slid back the bolt, he spoke into his microphone giving the bastards a warning, so they didn’t gun him down when he opened the door. Hopefully. “I’m opening.” Then he spat over his shoulder, “Lock yourself in the cab, Axton. One of us needs to make it out.”

The doors swung open and, once again, light, rain and the Cessna’s fuselage filled his view, but instead of his partner’s grin, he was met with angry dark eyes and pockmarked leathery skin. He quickly scanned the tarmac behind the weather-beaten face, finding Ian kneeling between Slava and Cheyenne, their hands raised to the backs of their heads. He could see the Elite Security logo across the front of Slava’s chest, which meant he was seeing his partner’s t-shirt not his tactical vest. It was gone. His eyes shot to Ian’s chest.

Fuck.

The South American asshole standing behind them was wielding an assault rifle that Mickey barely had time to register as an M-16 because he was yanked forward, out of the van, his face pushed into the damp asphalt. The muzzle of yet another M-16 jabbed into the back of his neck, making him wince.

He was barely able to turn his head, cheek rubbing harshly against the tarmac as the rifle continued to pin him down, but he saw several men lined up between the back of the van and the two police vehicles tossing gun cases from arm to arm. They must have figured out that the van was tagged with GPS devices, and removing the guns would be quicker that finding and dismantling the tracking devices.
The pressure from the rifle muzzle lessened as the gunman turned toward the men shouting commands in Spanish. Mickey tried pushing up to his hands, so he could see exactly how many men they were dealing with and regain some control, but a boot connected with his hip and flipped him to his back, eyelashes immediately filling with rain water making him blink up at the dude who was glaring down at him. They shared a long hostile look, and the muzzle of his rifle pressed into his forehead.

“Stop!”

Mickey clenched his jaw so hard his teeth ached. The urge to shout back at Ian to shut the hell up, to stop drawing attention to himself was overwhelming. Less than five minutes had passed since they’d heard the sirens, and it would take several more minutes before any sort of emergency response would arrive. Even if airport security arrived now, they would not be prepared to deal with this. It was going to take a fucking SWAT team.

The gunman barked at him, “Up, pendejo.”

Mickey rubbed at his eyes, trying to see properly and find Ian again as he rolled to his side, but he mustn’t have been fast enough because the guy pulled back the cocking handle on the M-16 and unloaded a round from the magazine into the chamber.

Mickey loved guns, always had. The power, the precision, the beautiful fucking symmetry that brought it all together, but he hated that any mouthbreather on the planet could get his fucking hands on them. It ruined it for everyone who respected the fuck out of how dangerous they could be. Now some South American asshole was using something he loved to make him do something he hated. Surrender.

The muzzle of the rifle moved to the side of Mickey’s head when he pushed up to a kneeling position and linked his fingers behind his head.

“No!”

Ah, Ian, come on, baby. Shut up.

But he couldn’t say any of that aloud for fear of drawing attention to his weakness. It was too late anyway. The rifle left Mickey’s temple as the gunman turned toward the group kneeling in front of the Cessna.

“Tráeme el pelirrojo.”

Ten years of trips to Mexico, Mickey had picked up some Spanish and what he understood made him clench his teeth in frustration, anger and plain old fucking fear.

The redhead.

The young kid behind Ian jammed his rifle into Ian’s back until he stumbled to his feet, then shoved him with the muzzle once more to get him moving faster in Mickey’s direction. He kept his hands behind his head as he walked, giving Mickey a clear view of his dress shirt, but no vest or Glock.

Mickey shifted his eyes to Slava who was watching Ian’s progress across the tarmac. His partner’s face was expressionless, cold even, but his left hand moved slightly where it was tucked behind his head. He formed a fist, clenching it twice, the muscles in his bicep contracting with each movement.

Hold.
He was warning Mickey to not be a goddamn hero. He sure as hell hoped it didn’t come to that, but he wasn’t letting them near Ian without putting up a fucking fight. Mickey knew he’d protect him with his life. It’s just how it was, how he’d known almost from day one that it would be. It was the reason he’d fought so hard at first and it was the reason he was bracing himself to fight now. Where Ian was concerned, he would be a goddamn hero.

Ian was led to the rear doors of the van. Their eyes met for the first time since they’d stood in the Handley’s front yard. The guy had looked stressed out then and now he looked utterly miserable. But he slowed his steps, staring down at Mickey where he was kneeling a few feet away. Mickey felt his body shift forward slightly in his need to get closer. For all of two seconds, they were free to look at each other.

"Sorry." Ian's lips moved with that one word, and he hoped that Ian could read in his eyes that they were in this together. No matter what happened next, Mickey had his fucking back.

Then the moment was over because the punk behind Ian gave him one final shove toward the head gunman, who had reached into the back of the van to place the three remaining gun cases directly in front of Ian.

“Open,” the gunman spat at Ian, tapping the first and largest case with the muzzle of the rifle. “Pronto.”

“He doesn’t fucking know the passcode,” Mickey snapped. It was standard protocol that they hadn’t been given the passcodes both to protect the items inside from internal theft and to protect the drivers from having to deal with hijacker demands. The rifle found its way back to Mickey’s face, and Ian moaned. Then he turned toward the first case and punched in the passcode without hesitation. The case sprung open.

“Get the tracker,” the guy said, moving slightly so that Ian would have a clearer view of the rifle pressed to Mickey's temple. “Vaminos.”

Ian adjusted the contoured foam surrounding the gun, removing the tiny round device and tossing it in the back of the van then starting immediately on the second case. Efficiently, almost like he was prepared.

What the fuck?

Mickey shook his head slightly trying to dislodge some of the rain that was blurring his vision. Questions were ricocheting around his brain. How’d the gunman know which cases contained the tracking devices and why the fuck did Ian know the passcodes? The guy followed the manual like it was the holy fucking grail.

As Ian dragged the third case closer to him, the wail of another set of sirens added to the confusion. Mickey was sure this set was supposed to be the cavalry coming to save them. Too fucking late. The noise threw Ian off and he entered the wrong passcode, looking over his shoulder at the gunman, who shoved the rifle so hard into Mickey’s temple that he fell sideways onto his palm, frowning furiously and spitting a couple of obscenities at the fucker. He made sure they were in Spanish, so there was not miscommunication.

Maybe not the smartest move, Mickey decided, when the dude stepped closer, looming over him and blocking out the little bit of sun that was trying to break through. This time when they entered into a staring contest, the guy smiled at Mickey but it didn’t set his mind at ease. The muzzle caressed Mickey’s temple, then traced the side of his face, following the contour of his cheekbone and jaw, before slipping under his chin and lifting it higher stopping only when Mickey couldn’t bend his
His hand was itching to grab the barrel and yank it out of the asshole’s hand, but Ian was watching
them now. He must have entered the correct code this time and removed the final tracking device
because he was waiting for further instructions. When the gunman glanced at Ian, the rifle jabbed
painfully into Mickey’s throat almost choking him, and his hand, of its own volition, reached up for
the barrel. Thunder cracked directly above him, the force of it so loud it vibrated through Mickey’s
body, making him wince.

But not with as much force as Ian’s voice.

“NO!”

Ian threw his entire weight into the gunman’s side, sending him sideways and taking Mickey with
them.

“NO!”

Mickey was trying to figure out what exactly was happening as his shoulder blades hit the ground
and his elbow scraped along the asphalt. The gunman reared back and away from Mickey sending
Ian onto his ass. Before Ian could get fully back on his feet and finish whatever the hell he meant to
do, a gunshot filled the air, more piercing than the thunder and far more devastating to Mickey’s
system because he knew.

He knew that the bullet had been aimed at Ian, that you don’t get away with attacking the leader
even if it’s just with your body. He also knew that the bullet had found its target. This he knew
because he was sure that he could feel it himself in the way Ian staggered to his knees and clutched at
the side of his rib cage.

Mickey kicked his boots wildly, dislodging the gunman from where he’d fallen, stunned by the
sound, on top of Mickey. Scrambling backwards, he got back to his knees, crawling desperately
toward Ian. He could hear words coming from his own mouth, and even though he wasn’t sure what
they were, he was certain that most of them were Ian.

He was slumped against the tailgate, his red hair darkened by the rain and completely disheveled.
Irrationally, Mickey wanted to run his fingers through it until the part was perfectly lined up. Ian’s
eyes opened as soon as Mickey’s fingers grabbed his biceps.

“You’re okay?” Ian’s voice was sharp, but he leaned heavily into Mickey’s hand, searching
Mickey’s body for a wound.

“Yes, did you—did you think I was shot?” Mickey could see blood staining Ian’s dress shirt. Before
he could do a damn thing about it though, he needed to get Ian out of the open.

“Not shot?” Ian panted, chest rising and falling rapidly.

“Jesus, that was fucking thunder not a gun shot.”

Vaguely, Mickey could hear voices and sirens and engines running, but he couldn’t put it all
together, and he had no idea why no one was stopping him from dragging Ian around the side of the
security van, away from all the action. Once he had him propped up against the rear tire, Mickey
straddled his thighs, so he could undo one button on Ian’s dress shirt, getting his fingers inside and
tearing open the rest of the buttons, revealing not only the chest he loved so damn much but also too
much fucking blood.
“Fuck, Ian, you told us not to engage,” he hissed. “Says so in fucking sub-section whatever the fuck in the goddamn manual.” Mickey was shouting now, almost hysterical as everything he touched was soaked in rainwater and blood, making it nearly impossible to see where the bullet had hit.

“Sorry, Mickey,” Ian slurred, wincing each time Mickey moved his hand. He tipped his chin down toward his body. “I think I’ve been shot.”

“Ian,” he whispered, knowing he needed to apply pressure to the area to staunch the blood right fucking now.

He ripped at the Velcro of his own vest, tossing it aside then reached over his shoulder to yank his t-shirt off, bunching it up into a makeshift dressing and pressing it just below Ian’s rib cage. It was basic training that the pressure needed to be almost painful in order to be effective, and he braced himself for Ian’s anguished response. It went straight to Mickey’s heart like a gunshot of its own, but it only lasted a moment and Ian seemed to relax again, probably close to passing out.

Mickey racked his brain for what else he could do without a proper first aid kit. The location of the puncture was a plus. It was away from his heart and lungs, likely only hitting one of the lesser organs. The size and speed of the bullet though is what worried him. An M-16 was fucking deadly, more so than any handgun. He didn’t know which fucker made the shot, but none of them were very far away. The velocity had to have done damage.

Fuck. His brain was trying to replay all the events and figure what he could have, should have, done differently. And who he was going to kill if anything happened to Ian.

The cotton material was quickly becoming saturated and he increased the pressure. Ian’s eyes opened, shooting around frantically then stopping on Mickey’s face. “What…owww,” he wailed trying to pull away from the hand pressed into his waist, but Mickey pinned him to the wheel well with his free hand.

“Stop fucking moving. You’ve been shot, for chrissake.”

Ian’s eyes blinked, trying to stay open, but the rain and the loss of blood was making it difficult. “You’re okay?”

“Jesus, yeah.” He tried to smile reassuringly.

“Fuck,” Ian groaned again, releasing air through his nose slowly, deliberately. “Thought we had it all covered.”

“No shit,” Mickey spat, wiping rain from both of their faces then glancing around. “Where the fuck is everybody?” He’d pulled Ian out of the clearance and in the process blocked his view of what was happening.

“Should be here by now,” Ian murmured, face relaxing a little as his eyes closed again and his chin dipped heavily toward his chest.

Mickey felt like he was suffocating and he wanted to scream, but Ian needed him to remain calm. He released a breath through his nose like Ian had, maybe he needed some fucking yoga to help him keep his shit together.

“Hey,” he began but got no response. “Ian, wake up.”

Nothing happened and Mickey felt his lips tighten in response to the need to howl. “Ian,” he tried again. “Stay with me. Please, baby, come on.”
Ian’s eyelids fluttered a couple times. When they finally remained open, his lips tipped upward and
his hand lifted from the wet pavement where it was resting to the top of Mickey’s thigh. “You called
me baby?” His hand squeeze lightly, then slid back to the pavement. “Say it again.”

Mickey thought he might cry. His throat was so tight, he didn’t know if he could say it without
breaking down.

“’s okay, don’t…” He closed his eyes as pain washed over his face.

“Ian, baby. Look at me.” By the time he finished that, his voice was calmer, firmer. He’d break
down later, when the two of them were cuddled in fucking bed fighting over who broke what
fucking rule from the manual. “Look at me please.”

Once more those green eyes tried to focus on him. “Course, where else would I look? You’re pretty.”
A tiny smile lifted the corners of his lips, but Mickey could see the effort it took.

Mickey brought his forehead to Ian’s pressing them together, feeling Ian's cold skin against his. “I
love you. Please stay with me, okay?”

“Don’t hate me.” Before Mickey could process that, Ian continued. “Set up.”

Yeah, they’d been set up. That much was fucking obvious. Someone had betrayed them. Someone
who knew their route and their timeline. Someone who knew the van was packed with GPS.
Someone who knew which of the gun cases contained trackers.

“Did they get the diamonds?” Ian’s voice shook him out of his spiraling thoughts.

What? “The guns, you mean?”

“Guns,” Ian repeated. "Yeah."

“Why did you know the passcodes, Ian?” But the redhead was zoning out again.

Mickey told his brain to shut the fuck up with the bullshit it was trying to force him to think. He’d
never believe that Ian had set them up.

Never.

Not when his brain whispered that Ian knew all the details. Not when it reminded him that Ian had
only been around for a few weeks. Not when it reminded him that Ian hadn’t explained who he was
talking to that day at Sotheby’s. Not when he remembered the SATG files in the backseat of the
Escalade.

They just needed to get out of here, so he could think clearly. It felt like a goddamn hour had gone
by, but it had been likely less than 15 minutes since he’d opened the back door of the van to see
Slava’s mug grinning at him.

Fuck, Slava! He hadn’t heard any gunfire, and the sirens sounded like they were in the hangar, but
his partner would be here helping him if he was able. Another wave of adrenaline filled fear swept
over him, and he thought he might be sick. It didn’t help that his hand was now covered in Ian’s
blood. His t-shirt was done soaking it up, and it was just the pressure of Mickey’s hand that was
staunching any of the flow. Mickey’s first aid training was not helping him in this situation besides
reminding him that the ideal window for administering to a gunshot wound was ten minutes.

He needed to get Ian out of here. The driver’s side door of the van was close, but he had no way of
alerting Axton to open the door and he couldn’t release the pressure on Ian’s side. The GPS had fallen from Mickey’s hand when he was yanked from the van. He was trapped in this spot.

“Let’s go to Mexico soon?” Ian asked quietly. His body completely relaxed now, only Mickey’s hands keeping him up.

“Yeah, soon. Like really soon.” He kissed his forehead, pressing his lips firmly into the smooth, wet skin. “Tequila and sandals.”

“Sunscreen.”

“Fuck yeah.” Mickey did cry then, just a little he thought but the rain was washing the tears away so he wasn’t quite sure.

“Gotta go away first though.”

Mickey pulled back.

“Mick,” Slava shouted, dropping down to squat beside him. His hand kneading Mickey’s shoulder. “Ambulance is here.”

Suddenly, there were people everywhere, pulling him away and moving Ian quickly and efficiently onto a stretcher. The rain started to let up, sky turning blue, which seemed wrong to him.

“Mickey?” Ian called out from where he was propped up on the stretcher.

“Here,” he said, squeezing a shoulder between two dudes, one of which was dressed like an EMT and applying a dressing to Ian’s side, the other was in a dark blue suit and sunglasses actively blocking Mickey’s access. “Here,” he repeated more firmly. They could shoot him if they needed, but he wasn’t fucking moving away from Ian.

He covered Ian’s hand where it was laying on top of the blanket. The white material quickly stained red from the blood on Mickey’s hand. Ian’s blood. They made eye contact then, his panicked eyes boring into Ian’s groggy ones, searching for answers and promises and, most of all, reassurance.

Don’t leave me, he wanted to beg.

“Excuse me,” the EMT said pushing gently at Mickey’s arm. “You need to move, sir.”

“Mickey,” Ian repeated quietly, his face a mess of streaked blood and rain. “I have to go.”

“To the hospital, yeah,” he nodded at Ian even though his green eyes were closed now, and he looked unconscious. “I’ll come with you,” he whispered.

They were moving the stretcher now, across the tarmac toward the waiting ambulance. Vaguely, Mickey noticed the Sheriff’s transport vans were gone and replaced by several El Paso Airport security and Customs and Border Control vehicles, a Fed-mobile and an ambulance.

“Sir, you need to move away from the stretcher now,” the annoying medic repeated. “We need to load the patient.”

“I’m going too.” He barked, frantic to make someone understand. It was ridiculous, he knew, because Ian needed treatment, but he also knew that he couldn’t let Ian out of his sight.

“Who are you to the patient?” the medic asked as a second medic appeared on the other side of the stretcher.
“I’m his—” Mickey choked on his tears. Everything, he wanted to say.

“Partner,” Slava said from behind him. “His fucking partner.”

“Well…” the EMT said reaching down for the lever to lower the stretcher in preparation for rolling it into the back of the ambulance.

Slava stepped around Mickey, leaning into the EMT’s personal space. “In every sense of the word.”

Before anyone could respond, a deep, baritone stopped them all. The large man in the dark suit and sunglasses moved into Mickey’s space. “Step back.”

“Fuck you,” Mickey spat, feeling the last 15 minutes erupt. “You step back.” He shoved his chest into the guy’s, but the height difference probably made it look ridiculous. Mickey had to crane his neck to see the dude’s chin.

“This won’t end well for you.”


“Mick,” Slava said. Hands grabbed gently at his biceps as Slava pulled him back. “We’ll figure it out, let them go.”

“But—” he didn’t know what else to say. Ian was in the ambulance now, and the doors were closing. Mickey finally remembered that Ian was possibly fighting for his life, and Mickey was bickering with random assholes. “Fine. Fucking fine.”

He shrugged off Slava’s hands and turned away from the ambulance. People were everywhere, moving, talking, gesturing. Cheyenne and Axton were huddled with a uniformed cop. The two pilots with a second cop. No sign of any of the gunmen or the fucking gun cases.

A gust of wind swept across the hangar and Mickey shivered, trying to focus on what needed to happen now, but he felt lost.

Slava was talking to him, telling him that the hijackers had driven the stolen police vehicles through a hole they’d cut in the access gate that runs around airport, escaping the same way. They’d left the cop car where it was parked in front of the Elite van because the stolen vans were built for all-terrain travel. They’d escaped into the mountains.

“We were fucking set up, Mick,” Slava explained. Mickey shivered again. “Just like two years ago.”

The wail of the ambulance cut off whatever Slava was going to say, but his hand on Mickey’s shoulder drew his attention away from the departing vehicle. “Hey, let’s get you a shirt, okay, Mick?”

His voice was so gentle that Mickey looked down at himself. He hadn’t realized that he was half naked and sucked in air when he remembered why. Beneath that bare skin, his heart was fucking breaking. Heedless of the blood caked on his hands, he pressed them into his eye sockets.
Well, fricansimba, has paid 7/16th of her soul for an extra chapter that is full of, and I quote, "all the orgasms they need to have". Turns out I haven't been keeping up on my soul taking quota so...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

2 months later

After weeks of hot, dry summer, they needed rain. That’s what everyone kept fucking saying anyway, but Mickey wasn’t getting any pleasure out of watching the sky piss down on them. Lately, it was hard to find pleasure in much of anything, especially in talking about the goddamn weather. And most especially, when the weather brought back shitty memories.

He should be fucking happy though since he was watching the rain hit the pavement and the constant flow of traffic from the 16th floor of the Capital Building where he was standing at the window of his fucking office. The drywallers had not only completed their work, but so had the painters and carpet layers. Almost a month ago, they’d removed the work in progress sign from the door belonging to the Coordinator of the Protective Services Unit.

A lot of shit had happened since El Paso. Pieces of a puzzle that eventually fit together but left the most important chunk missing. When Mandy had announced that he was being moved yet again but this time into an office, he had not been prepared for it. Mostly because he was still in shock and worried about his—about Ian. The missing chunk. But also because following the hijacking he had so many debriefings with the Major Theft Crimes division of the FBI as well as Elite’s corporate office that he figured the stain on his name was going to be permanent.

But it hadn’t been the case at all.

Instead corporate office had Skyped him two weeks after his return to work to thank him for a job well done, and a week after that, he’d received a letter offering him the Co-ordinator’s position. He hadn’t delved too deeply into what the fuck he’d done specifically to warrant such an outcome, but simply agreed to their terms and started packing his shit for the move.

And two weeks ago, he’d stepped into the freshly renovated office, immediately setting both of his babies on the credenza along the south facing window. They were still sitting there soaking up what sun was available on this dreary day. They were adjusting well to all the changes. Adapting. Thriving even, as he could see a minuscule bud forming on the squat jade tree.

Grabbing the tiny pruning shears from the top desk drawer, he bent over the bonsai peering closely at the bud. They had to be the slowest growing fucking plants on the planet. When he’d first gotten the thing, he’d thought it be would a challenge to care for it. Turns out the challenge is in not caring for it, but in simply letting it be. A decade later, Mickey had learned to patiently wait for it to bud, removing only what needed removed. One nip of the shears and he was back to square one.
Sitting next to the jade was a second plant that he wasn’t even sure why he still had. It was a tall, lean fucker in a flashy metallic pot. Mickey used the shears to snip a yellow leaf because the thing constantly needed pruning. Grew like a weed. As different from each other as two plants could be, but somehow the jade now seemed incomplete without the other plant.

He tossed the shears back in the desk drawer where they landed on top of a Snickers bar and the drawer snapped shut with more force than necessary. He glared at the tall plant, trying not to think of the redhead who’d given it to him the day before they flew out of town, but Ian was always there, in his mind just waiting for Mickey to let him in. There wasn’t anything that Mickey did that Gallagher wasn’t there to intrude upon, especially the moments he spent alone. Everything seemed to remind him of Ian, and more often than not, the fight to keep those memories at bay required more strength than he had and he ended up giving in to them.

“Look what I got you, Mickey!”

He had looked up from his desk to where Ian stood at the entrance to his cubicle, holding the leafy green plant out for examination as Mickey leaned in for a closer look.

“Guess what it’s called!” Ian had demanded, ready to pounce on Mickey with the answer if it took him too long to guess.

“George,” Mickey had replied. “Hang on. No one has a normal fucking name now, so…Jackson with four x’s.”

Ian had laughed, like Mickey’d intended. “No, what kind of plant do you think this is?”

“Do I look like a fucking horticulturalist?”

“Fine! I’ll tell you then.”

“As you can see, I’m on the edge of my seat.” Mickey had deliberately leaned back in his desk chair.

“Dick.” Ian had pursed his lips, but his eyes had stayed happy. “Wait! No! That’s not what it’s called.”

Mickey had just shook his head slightly.

“It’s a fig tree!”

It was so obvious that Ian was waiting to make a massage joke that Mickey couldn’t stop the stupid smile that had taken over his face, and the plant had sat in his cubicle until he’d moved to the office.

Mickey had few physical reminders of Ian, but each one he did have hurt like hell. In addition to Jaxxxxon, he had that fucking black cashmere sweater. There were a couple other clothing items, jeans and a hoodie, but they didn’t unleash a world of hurt on him every time he touched them. He’d thought of chucking it out lots of time, especially at 3:00 AM when he was going fucking insane wondering where the fuck Ian was and why the fuck he hadn’t contacted Mickey. But, ultimately, he couldn’t get rid of it because it was a reminder that Ian had actually existed. They’d been together for such a short period of time that sometimes Mickey wondered if he’d imagined it all.

Had he imagined that Ian loved him? Ultimately, he always decided that you can’t fake that shit. Not the way Ian had anyway.

The photos on his phone were proof. Ian had taken several of himself or the two of them together because Mickey didn’t take photos and Ian thought that was dumb. That had been fine with Mickey
though because he’d loved that face and felt the world could use more copies of it. He pressed his thumb to the base of the phone and it came to life, but instead of swiping into his photos, he went to the text messages between them, thinking about their last text conversation before everything had gone to shit.

They’d been sitting in the back of the Escalade on their way to the Handley estate. Ian had texted that he loved Mickey, and he’d shot back a teasing message asking if he was talking to him or his ass. He remembered thinking that it was significant to him to see Ian’s declaration in writing. That it made it official somehow.

His thumb scrolled looking for Ian’s final message to him, sent the day after he was gunned down at the El Paso Airport. The last time Mickey had seen Ian he was being lifted into the back of an ambulance and Mickey was being denied entry by some big fucker in a pressed suit.

FBI.

He’d never seen the guy again, but he’d bet the cash he’d scraped together for his place in Mexico that the dude had been a Fed. He dressed like one, and he definitely wore the arrogance of one, blocking Mickey’s access to Ian like he owned the guy.

Maybe he fucking did. Apparently, Mickey was never going to know because the ambulance had driven out of the hangar while Mickey had stood watching. The asshole in the suit had waited until the ambulance rounded the side of the charter building before getting into the passenger seat of the black SUV and following. Mickey hadn’t let the tinted windows stop him from snarling at the man inside.

Slava had led him to the Escalade where their duffel bags were stored. As he dug into Mickey’s bag to get him a clean t-shirt to cover his bare chest, Slava had continued recapping what had gone down while Mickey was trying to keep Ian alive.

How the head gunman had sprang to his feet, shouting orders at the other men, as the sound of sirens closed in on them. The punk who’d shot Ian was whisked away by two of their men and shoved into one of the vans, his gun stowed in the back with the Handley guns. The three cases that Ian had opened were scooped up and the vans headed up the taxiway toward one of the access roads.

Airport security and other law enforcement had arrived, as a result of the SOS Mickey and Axton had been sending from their GPS units, and the alarm that had been activated when the hijackers cut through the airport fencing.

It had taken Mickey awhile to process everything that Slava had told him, but he’d had no trouble understanding that hijackers had been waiting for them, that they’d been set up by someone they trusted. Again.

Over two weeks of interrogations, disguised as debriefings, followed. He and Slava had been questioned by the Feds repeatedly about both the guns and the diamonds. Looking for a link. Looking for weaknesses in their process. Looking for gaps in security. Looking for who could possibly have known.

Of course, once they started examining it, the list was surprisingly long. There were the obvious choices. Him and Slava of course, but Mickey never once doubted his partner even if the Feds weren’t positive. The authorities took apart the El Paso crew, reviewing Axton, Cheyenne and even Roslyn’s stories. They’d tried to intimidate Mandy as Ian’s assistant, but she’d kept her cool. And on it went for more than two weeks, with everyone down to the janitor being interviewed.
Then the debriefings had stopped. In the end, it seemed that everyone’s stories had been consistent. Or at least, everyone that Mickey knew about. Because the elements of the theft crossed state lines, it became a federal case. Therefore, as the feds were constantly reminding him, Elite employees aren’t privy to the details of an FBI investigation, especially suspects in that investigation. So Mickey was left seething with injustice as well as a ridiculous list of things to piece together.

Through it all, Mickey had waited for Ian to show up, but he’d gone up in a puff of smoke. His one text after the ambush was the only contact he’d made with Mickey. Those three short sentences currently lit up his phone screen, and his eyes scanned them, even though he had them imprinted into his brain and his heart.

*Out of surgery but I’m going to be okay Mickey. I probably wouldn’t be if it wasn’t for you. You saved me and we both know what that means…*

The thirty-seven messages in the thread prior to that were from Mickey. He hadn’t reread them all in a few weeks, trying to move on, but he couldn’t help himself now, almost wanting the surge of anger to replace the sting of hurt. His thumb scrolled quickly through them, eyes skimming.

*Which hospital r u at*

*R u fucking ok*

*Fuck is going on?*

*Talk to me right fucking now Gallagher!!!*

*I fucking love u and I’m fucking worried about u*

*Motherfucker! Pick up your phone ffs*

*U better not be fucking dead*

*Ian come on, pls*

*IT’S BEEN 24 FUCKING HOURS AND I’M LOSING MY FUCKING MIND*

They went on like that until Ian had sent that one text, staking his claim, like Mandy had, that Mickey owed him because he’d saved him. God help him, he’d wanted to follow through on the debt more than was probably healthy.

He’d spent nearly a week in El Paso alternating between searching for Ian and waiting for him to send more information, to tell him what was happening, whether he was in trouble, how Mickey could get to him. But he’d never replied to Mickey’s final text.

*Is this goodbye?*

Three days after he sent it, they were permitted to fly home to Chicago, and he’d spent the flight torn between rage that Ian hadn’t replied and relief that the answer hadn’t been yes, convinced that Ian would show up again full of explanations that would make everything okay. That dream had died a slow fucking death.

Now he didn’t know what he thought. He fucking knew what he felt though. Nothing, not one single thing that had happened since that day had changed how he felt about Ian. He was pissed off and going to tear a strip off of the motherfucker if he ever showed his fucking face again, but that had nothing to do with loving him.
Trusting him, however, was another matter.

Realizing that he’d just let himself spiral again in the Ian loop, he sat down in his office chair and flicked on his computer to print out his team’s billable hours for the last two weeks. He had a meeting in a half hour with the new branch Director, who was still trying to get the office under control after all the shit that happened, a job Mickey did not envy. The least he could do to help was get his fucking paperwork in order.

His finger hesitated over the mouse and the cursor awaited his command as he second guessed his decision to hit print, wondering if he’d ever be able to see a print icon without losing his shit. The whole situation was so fucked up that it was almost comical, only he didn’t laugh. He did hit print though and stomped out of his office to enter into yet another face-off with that goddamn printer.

His footsteps slowed as he passed the cubicle. Their cubicle, his traitorous brain whispered to him. It was currently empty as they were in the process of filling Mickey’s old position. He’d texted Axton when he recalled his offhand comment about wanting to make a change. He may have pressured the guy a little to get his ass in gear and apply, but he didn’t want some newbie dropped on his doorstep. He liked a seasoned team that he knew could handle their shit. Axton would fit right in, plus the dude loved chicken wings almost as much as Mickey.

The lights were off as he entered the copy room, and he had a completely irrational moment of near terror, like the idiot in a horror movie who heads down to the basement despite knowing full well that he was never going to return. He flicked the lights on and the copier was waiting for him.

His print out sat in the output tray.

Five minutes later, Mickey was cursing as he punched buttons on the control panel, trying to remember his new password that would allow him to make copies. Did it end in a 12 or a 01? He dug deep into his soul for some zen-like feelings, but they must have been buried under all the layers of anger, frustration and complete disbelief.

“Please tell me I don’t have to call the copy repair guy again because of your feud with an inanimate object. None of what happened is the fucking copier’s fault,” Mandy bitched, as she walked into the copy room. “I told you to just give your goddamn shit to me to print and copy. I’m your fucking admin, Mickey.” She pushed him out of the way and clacked the copier keypad with her multi-colored fingernails.

“What crawled up your ass and died?” he pouted crossing his arms to watch her.

“What do you think?” she spit out as the machine clunked to a halt.

“No idea.” He snickered when an error message appeared.

“Well then let me spell it out for you, shall I?” she hissed, flinging open the front panel then glancing at him with her little sister scowl. “M. I. C….K. E. Y.”

She started to laugh then, and he fucking dared her, with blue eyes that had narrowed to slits, to continue, to finish that thought on penalty of death. She didn’t continue but then she didn’t need to because they both heard it as clearly as if she’d sung the whole song.

“You were born a dick,” she explained, pulling crumpled paper from the feed. “However, like the mature person that I am, I’ve come to accept that. But the last few weeks have achieved epic proportions. Even for you. Problem is that we work together and I can’t get away from you. I’m staring to worry that I might actually murder you. Please for the love of god, talk to someone!”
He opened his mouth in protest. “Mature, my ass.”

“Oh, that’s the part you focus on. Fucking figures,” she snapped. “Pussy.”

Dick. Pussy. He had had those thoughts about himself when he’d been too afraid of Ian and everything he represented. But he’d gotten his shit together and put himself out there only to get crushed in the process.

“It’s your fucking fault, Mandy.”

“Mine?” she squealed, glaring at him as the panel slammed closed. “I didn’t give birth to you.”

“Eww, what the fuck?”

“Would you just fucking talk to me? For all our sakes! How many copies do you need?”

“Four. I thought you’d learned your fucking lesson. That you were gonna keep your nose in your own damn business.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m surrounded by idiots.” Four sheets of paper spit out the side of the copier.

“Oh, yeah, your love life is the stuff of legends. How’s Mr. UPS?”

Her face turned as red as the colored tips of her jet black hair.

“See! You’re impossible!” She crumpled the four sheets of paper and tossed them in the recycle bin.

“I’m impossible!?” he yelled, heedless of the volume as he grabbed the copies and tried to smooth out the wrinkles.

“M. O. U. S. E.” She scurried out of the room before he could retaliate.

“Pussy,” he yelled after her then straightened his fucking tie like the goddamn professional he was.

Mickey usually avoided Perks Coffeehouse, not only did he think five dollars for a coffee was highway fucking robbery, he wasn’t up for the looks Paolo always sent his way. Today though, he needed to get out of the office. As the Co-ordinator, he now spent more time in the office than out in the field, which he hadn’t thought through when he’d dreamed of getting the job.

Maybe Slava had the right idea. The guy wanted no part of management even though the position of Co-ordinator for the Investigations Unit was open because Ellen, who used to be the Co-ordinator, had taken over Gabe’s position now that he was gone. This left her job available, but corporate wasn’t rushing to fill it. Mickey was, of course, cool with Slava’s decision because he might be the guy’s boss now, but he was still Mickey’s partner.

Soulful Indie music assaulted his ears when he entered the coffee shop, but strong coffee also assaulted his nostrils, so he counted it a win. Paolo wasn’t behind the counter, making it a definite win. He ordered his Americano and chocolaty chocolate chip muffin and took a seat along the window. As he stared out the glass watching people rush here and there, he halfheartedly ate his muffin and sipped his coffee, wondering what Ian was doing at this exact moment. Was he staring out a window too thinking about Mickey? The fucker better be.
“When did you switch to chocolate chip?”

Mickey looked over his shoulder at the shiny, Chapsticked lips then back to the street.

“Hey, Paolo.”

The barista sat down on the seat next to Mickey, body turned parallel to the counter so his knees could brush Mickey’s hip ever so slightly. His elbow rested next to Mickey’s coffee cup.

“Haven’t seen you in awhile,” he tried again.

“Yeah.”

“We should do something about that.” He leaned forward to say that, making it sound intimate.

“Like what? Reduce the price of your coffee?”

Paolo laughed a little. “Or…” he dragged that out. “We could skip the coffee altogether.”

“Go straight to muffins?”

“Not exactly what I was thinking,” he practically purred as his tongue traced his shiny bottom lip.

Mickey knew damn well that the dude wasn’t talking about bakery items, but he felt like even just talking about banging someone else would be cheating, and that pushed his buttons like nothing else seemed to. He turned in his chair, so his hip pressed more firmly into Paolo’s knees.

“My place or mine?” he snapped a little more forcefully than he’d intended.

Paolo’s eyes widened and he glanced quickly around, but they must have been out of earshot of other patrons because Paolo smiled and dropped his fingertips to Mickey’s knuckles. “Yours. I have roommates.”

Mickey stared at the fingers touching his tattoos and braced himself against the repulsion he was feeling. No fucking way was he going to live the rest of his life without having sex. Maybe if he squeezed his eyes closed hard enough and pictured red hair, green eyes and that beautiful damn smile, he’d be able to go through with this.

Mandy pushed open the security door leading to the roof, bracing herself for her brother’s reaction to seeing her step out into the afternoon sunlight. She’d spent the couple hours since the whole copier freak out alternating between cursing his very existence and wanting to protect him from the world.

He was sitting on the edge of the building, legs straddling the concrete half wall. Okay, she thought, she better take her time with him. The clang of the door shutting drew his attention, and she could see his lip curl from where she was standing. A bit of that anger curled inside her chest along with his lip. He was so fucking difficult sometimes. Then she reminded herself that the love of his life was missing in action and that uncurled her heart.

For a brief moment earlier this summer, she’d thought her own love story was about to begin and that she’d be telling her grandkids about how it all began with a hideous brown uniform and some sweet fucking ankle boots. Now those ankle boots sat in her closet and she was probably never going to wear them again.
Walking slowly forward, she touched the flame of her lighter to the tip of her Marlboro, letting Mickey adjust to her presence and the knowledge that she was here for more than a nicotine fix. Watching her approach, he calmly stuffed a hunk of nougat and caramel into his mouth then crumpled the Snickers wrapper in his hand.

“Have you had your cholesterol checked recently?” she asked, thinking about the amount of chocolate she’d seen him eat lately.

“Sure, never miss an appointment with my doctor.”

She blew smoke into the still grey sky.

“Looks like more rain,” she offered, hoping to warm him up a little before hitting him with the big talk she had planned.

It didn’t have the desired effect since it produced a scowl. If talking about the weather was going to set him off, then they were in for another fight because she wasn’t leaving until shit got sorted. She’d try a different tactic then.

“Turns out I’m fucking proud of you, Mickey,” she said holding her smoke up. “Seeing you quit makes me want to consider quitting smoking in a few years.”

His lips turned up at the corner, but his attention was on the traffic below. To her utter amazement, he looked at her. “So, I’m, uh, sorry for that shit I said about UPS. The fucker is lucky though I didn’t break his legs and deprive the world of his deliveries.”

She took a long drag, trying not to wallow in self-pity, but in a sense the whole ordeal had given her more empathy for her brother. It had been scary as shit to stand on the sidewalk beside the UPS truck and offer a good looking stranger a fucking cup of coffee. Threat of rejection had almost paralyzed her, but he’d accepted it with a smile that had lit up her body like a match. She’d rushed into the office that morning and kissed Slava on the cheek so hard he’d pretended to be wounded. Three days, two dates and one package delivery later, Mickey had held his phone up to her face, the Facebook app mocking her.

Relationship status: married.

“I’m going to die alone,” she moaned in memory.

“Join the club.”

“At least you fucking got a taste of love. More than most of us get.”

“See that’s where you’re wrong Mandy.” He swung his leg over the ledge and stood up. “You said it was okay to let someone love me. It wasn’t okay. It’s not okay.”

“So you’d undo the time you had with Ian?” she challenged him, continuing when he went mute but didn’t walk away. Maybe he was actually ready to work on how he was dealing with all this. “Erase it if you had the power? Make it not have happened?”

“You’re like a scab that keeps coming back every time I pick it,” he snarked without heat.

“That’s exactly right, brother.”

He looked at her waiting for the trap, the trap he knew was always there.
“Scabs help you heal, so you aren’t a walking open wound,” she explained.

“Oh, so you’re gonna solve all my shit for me?”

“If only you’d let me,” she sighed. “I do have a suggestion though.”

“Color me surprised.”

She pointed the lit end of her smoke at him. “I checked and you have lots of vacation time built up.”

“Trying to get rid of me?” he pouted a little.

“Never. Your sunny disposition lights up the room.”

They stared at each other for a moment, locked in a battle of wills.

“Too hot to head down to Mexico,” he finally replied.

She threw up her arms, nearing defeat but knowing that if he agreed to take time off, there was only one destination he would ever choose.

And she was banking on that.

“Well, then think outside the box and go to fucking Iceland. Just go, for the love of god.”

He walked away, heading toward the exit. Maybe, she thought flicking her butt at the outdoor ashtray, it was time to admit defeat, but he held the door for her. She looked around waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“I’ll think about it,” he said quietly.

“Shit, Mick, you’re up to 260.” Slava looked down at his partner from where he was spotting him.

“You been doing anything but lifting lately?”

“Eating fucking chocolate.”

“Stress eating, huh?”

“What? Don’t say shit like that, man.”

“Like what?”

“Like…that.” His face was all bunched up as he tried to put his finger on what was so disturbing about talking about dealing with stress.

“You’re so cute when you’re uncomfortable.”

“Oh my god, are you gonna spot me or do my fucking nails?”

“Hm, I didn’t know I had the option.” He was laughing now. “Okay, tough guy, let’s see what you got.”

Something changed in the air between them, and Mickey sat up. “I’m good. Gonna jump in the
shower.”

“What’d I miss?”

“Nothing, man.”

Slava followed him into the change room, knowing it was time to push his partner a little. “Another memory about you know who?”

Eyeing Slava as he gulped water from his Gatorade bottle, Mickey remained silent then, tossing the bottle into his bag, turned to the shower.

“You gonna shower with me?” Mickey asked as he slid the curtain open, his hand dropping heavily once the words left his mouth. “Fuck.”

“Mick,” Slava said drawing it out, actually feeling a jolt of pure empathy. Mickey had fallen so hard, so fast that when he’d hit the ground it had fucking hurt.

“Nope.” He twisted the taps, then tossed his t-shirt toward his gym bag while the water heated. Returning to his bag for shampoo, he avoided looking at Slava who had no such reservations, watching Mickey stomp around the change room and pretend Slava wasn’t there.

Eventually he was naked and disappeared from Slava’s view, the shower curtain a completely ineffective barrier as far as Slava was concerned.

“You realize you’re trapped now,” Slava began. “Didn’t think this through very well.”

No response.

“It’s time we talked about things.”

“I’m all talked out. All we did was talk about shit with every fucking suit in the U. S. of goddamn A. I’m good with never talking about it again.”

“I don’t mean the details of what went down. I mean how we feel about it.”

Mickey’s face appeared around the curtain, then just as their eyes met, disappeared again.

“For a second there,” Slava admitted. “I thought you were gonna step up. Start sharing your feelings.”

“Nah, just checking that aliens hadn’t taken over your body.”

Chuckling to himself, Slava knew that some of his partner still lurked under the somber face, so he moved a little closer to the shower.

“We’ve been through a lot of shit together. You’re like a fucking brother to me.” Only the sound of water running came from the shower. “Now you’re my boss. It’s unprofessional to ignore your employees.”

“Oh for fuck sake!” he yelled from behind the curtain. “I feel homicidal. If Lucy wasn’t locked up for the next decade, I’d fucking beat her with that goddamn copy machine!”

“Okay,” Slava said. “See now don’t you feel better?”

“No, I don’t feel better, Slav.” He could hear cursing as the shampoo bottle hit the shower floor. “I’ll
feel better when I burn her cubicle to the ground.”

“Are all your feelings illegal in nature?”

“When it comes to talking about what went down, then fucking yes.”

The shower shut off, and the curtain slid open partially. Slava stepped forward to hand him his towel, which Mickey looked at like accepting it would cross some bro line, so Slava tossed it at his face.

“Two years, right under our fucking noses.”

“I feel the same way, Mick. At least you didn’t console her about her goddamn motherfucking boyfriend.”

Mickey swiped the towel over his chest, looking up at Slava’s words. “The bitch tried, lemme tell you, but I hadn’t developed the sensitive, touchy feely side I have now.”

“I’m rethinking my touchy feeling side,” Slava complained, picturing Lucy’s sad, tear shrieked face as she told Slava all about how her boyfriend had gotten into some hot water and, as a result, they were going to be separated, only to find out during the investigations that there was more to her sob story than that. “Talk about a snake in our midst.”

As soon as the words left his mouth, Slava knew they’d land on Mickey with more intention than he’d intended, but instead of acknowledging that he was hurting, Mickey returned to anger.

“While I’m at it, gonna torch the entire e-division,” he began clearly on a roll now as the towel made harsh swipes over his wet skin. “Maybe if I light a fire under their asses, they’ll do their fucking job.”

While Slava didn’t disagree with the sentiment behind the threats, it had been three weeks since Lucy’s arrest and the guns were safely locked in an evidence compound, so it was time for Mickey to direct his emotions where they belonged.

“Hey,” Slava began, giving his partner a chance to put up his defenses. “Still no word from Ian?”

As predicted, Mickey ignored him, concentrating on the button of his dress pants, and Slava wanted to comment on the subtle changes in his partner since Ian had come into their lives, the ways the other man had rubbed off on him. He’d quit smoking, he’d started to dress more professionally, he tried to contain his reactive outbursts—a little. Slava had even seen him try to make small talk.

Of course, Ian had left some other marks on Mickey, and that’s why Slava was cornering him today.

“Well, my friend, if you don’t get away for a bit, I’m going to ask about Ian every day.”

“The fuck?” he looked up from jamming an arm into his dress shirt. “Jesus. You and Mandy.”

“Me and Mandy love you, man.”

“Oh my god.”

“Yup,” Slava continued. “From the moment we met, five years ago, I felt a soulful connection with you and knew—” A wet towel sailed toward his face, but he wasn’t trained in just about every martial art known to man to be taken down by a towel. “I knew that you and I were going to be besties.”

“Argh.” His partner was trying to work the knot on his tie, but behind the gurgling noise, Slava could see humor.
“Best friends forever,” Slava said clasping a hand over heart. “BFFs.”

“Fucking fine. Tell Mandy to do it. Book whatever,” he sighed. “And don’t get any fucking ideas about giving me a friendship bracelet cause I won’t fucking wear it.”

When the Pacific coastline between the Puerto Vallarta airport and Guayabitos came into view, Mickey knew he was minutes from arriving at the beachfront town. He’d made this trip on the back of a rented Italika motorcycle so many times now that it had become familiar, and he relaxed, feeling fucking free as the wind whipped through his hair. It might be stupid as fuck to speed along the winding highway without a helmet, but at this moment in his life, he felt like giving the finger to common sense and responsibility. If he was going to use this trip to reset his life, then he was doing it on his own terms.

Besides, he’d survived way riskier behavior, and, according to his nosey ass sister, he was going to be stronger because of it. Yeah, well, she’d know about failed fucking relationships. As soon as that thought passed through his mind, he felt yet another new emotion. Guilt. Over being an shitty brother. Damn it, he was so fucking soft now that he should be worried about melting under the Mexican sun.

Guayabitos’s colorful main street full of souvenir shops and squat buildings appeared, and beyond it, the two kilometer stretch of ocean swells and pearly fine sand. He’d be taking a dip in that soon, but first he needed to eat. His gut was empty. The damn airline didn’t even offer nuts anymore.

It was dusk by the time he parked the motorcycle in front of Benito’s Cantina. He unhooked his backpack from the bike and entered the cool interior of the bar, immediately missing the tropical air. His mouth was watering for some fried fish and coconut bread and about a dozen beers. If he ended up getting drunk, his little two room apartment was only a ten minute walk. Hell, everything in town was only a ten minute walk.

He’d contacted Guillermo, the old landlord, to make sure his usual place was available for the week, and now he was thinking of grabbing a six pack and hanging out poolside. An image of the tiny yard behind the apartment building and the bathtub sized pool appeared in his mind, making him smile fondly. It wasn’t luxurious in anyway, but it was comfortable. It was a proper Milkovich vacation stop, not that he’d ever bring a fucking Milkovich here. He’d only ever wanted to bring one person here, and like clockwork, his heart hit a wall. Fucking Gallagher, he thought as his eyes adjusted to the dim room. No part of his life was safe from the asshole.

His stomach growled reminding him that he was here to eat and drink and be fucking merry not pine for some dude. Didn’t matter if he was hot as fuck, didn’t matter if he could get Mickey off without even really trying, didn’t matter if he had the best fucking sense of humor—

For a split second, he thought maybe his mind had finally snapped, that it had spent so much time thinking about Ian that it had actually conjured him. That the man standing across the bar was Ian. In that split second, he thought the red hair and pale skin belonged to the six feet of man he’d fallen in love with. But the hair was overgrown and tossed around his head, no tight ass part in sight, and the pale skin was tinged pink by the sun, noticeably so even in the dim cantina.

His eyes traveled down the exposed throat to the perfectly fitted white linen shirt opened to mid-chest and light blue cotton shorts wrinkled like that’s how god himself intended it.
He walked out.

Chapter End Notes

I hope that answered ALL of your questions! can't think of anything I've missed. Kidding. Lots more puzzle pieces to come.

PS it's my baby girl's 14th birthday this weekend so I gotta do stuff. I'll post the next chapter late Saturday morning, then take Sunday off, then finish up Monday and Tuesday.
From his position at a corner table, Ian had been watching the door of Benitto’s Cantina open and close for nearly two hours. Every time it opened and sunlight crept across the scarred wood floor, his gut would clench in anticipation, dread, hope. Some nearly lethal combination of feelings that were going to need an outlet soon or he might end up losing his mind. He’d already snapped at the sweet server who’d asked in broken English if he’d wanted another drink.

After four days of roaming around Guayabitos and visiting the cantina daily, he was ready for Mickey to arrive. Scared shitless, but ready to face him nonetheless. He hadn’t seen him for 57 days. It seemed impossible to Ian that he’d gone that long and survived. Before El Paso, he’d been having trouble going one night without him. Maybe he wouldn’t have to go another.

Or maybe he would have to go the rest of his life.

No, he wasn’t going to give up before Mickey had even set foot in town. He was banking on the card he had up his sleeve, that Mickey would want to know what Ian knew. He’d want answers. After that he might tell Ian to go fuck himself, so Ian had to prove he was worth a second chance before handing over everything he knew about the thefts.

Deciding he actually could use a third drink, he tried to get the server’s attention, but she wasn’t inclined to make eye contact with the moody redhead who had made the cantina his home the last few days, so he’d head to the bar and order a pina colada from the bartender himself. It would help loosen him up, take the edge off. As he pushed away from the tiny table, he touched his hair, feeling soft waves rather than stiff precision, confirming for him that the Ian he had become because of Mickey had the courage to do what needed to be done.

Before Ian could take more than one step toward the bar, the front door opened and Mickey walked in.

He stood in the halo of early evening light letting his eyes adjust to the dim atmosphere, and Ian just stared, letting every detail, every feature fill him with heat. The black tank top, the loose fitting Levi’s, the sharp blue eyes that widened as they scanned the room, stopping abruptly on Ian.

He hadn’t been positive that Benitto’s would be Mickey’s first stop when he arrived in Guayabitos, but his gut had told him that he’d want a beer and probably a meal. As Mickey’s eyes narrowed slowly though, Ian panicked thinking that maybe he should have waited until Mickey had a chance to eat and relax after the plane ride and the drive from Puerto Vallarta before ambushing him.

The look on his face tried to fuck with Ian, tried to sweep all his courage away. Of course, he wasn’t going to be happy to see Ian standing in his favorite drinking hole after everything that happened, so he couldn’t be expecting him to open his arms in welcome. But he hadn’t expected him to dismiss Ian with one look then turn away.

He walked straight out the side door leading to the patio. Ian hesitated a moment, wondering if he should give Mickey a bit of time to adjust then track him down. But the fear that he might hop back on his bike and disappear into Mexico somewhere was a real one, so he followed him out.
By the time he made it to the patio, Mickey was already on the sandy beach and Ian had to weave through the colorful plastic tables and chairs to keep up. Night was just about to fall, but the moon was nearly full and most of the establishments along the beachfront were lit up, giving him enough light to see where he was going.

He watched Mickey slow as his sandals dealt with the soft give of the sand beneath his feet, and Ian simply kicked his cheap flip flops aside as soon as he reached the end of the wooden patio and the smattering of palm trees that lined Banderas Bay. In the distance, a family of four were folding up their umbrella and herding their children toward the street. Other than that, they were the only people on the beach.

Mickey hadn’t turned around once, but he had to know Ian was behind him following his path along the shoreline. If he’d really wanted to get away, he would have left through the front door of the cantina and gotten back on his bike. Instead he was headed for a large pile of rocks jutting out to sea. It was semi-secluded and an ideal location to talk. Or tell someone to fuck off.

Now that it was happening, now that he was on the beach with Mickey, he thought maybe he needed more time, to prepare and plan and get all his shit straight. What if he fucked up and said the wrong thing? What if he never got another opportunity to make it right? What if—

Mickey’s powerwalking came to an abrupt halt about ten feet from the rocky ledge, and the backpack hanging off his shoulder landed in the sand beside him. He turned around to face Ian, arms crossed in defiance. Ian’s mouth was dry and his heart was thumping in fear and hope. There was finally only eight feet of sand separating them but also an entire ocean of misunderstanding.

Ian shoved his hands into the front pockets of his shorts, needing to keep them under control as he spoke. “You look good,” he said, meaning it more than those three words could express. His dark hair must have recently been trimmed, and the black tank top exposed his shoulders and arms. “Lifting more than 240 by the looks of it?”

Mickey shrugged his response, tightening the muscles along his shoulders in the process, and Ian thought he might explode with the need to touch him. His hair, his face, his body. Every compact, stocky inch of him. Now need was whipping through his body along with the fear and hope, and he knew this was a vulnerable state for him, that he was prone to impulse when he was emotionally overwhelmed.

Looking up at the night sky, he took several deep breaths then returned his attention to Mickey, smiling slightly to show he was harmless not here to attack and demand. He was here as an ally not an adversary.

The constant roll of the waves filled the silence and the tropical night air clung to them. It was stupidly romantic and achingly perfect for this moment, and Ian prayed that Mickey could feel it too.

“How the fuck did you know I was going to be here?”

Not the start Ian was hoping for because it was going to piss him off even more, but none of the shit they had to talk about was going to be easy.

“Well, technically,” he began, then paused when memory flowed between them. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but he thought Mickey softened microscopically.

“Answer the fucking question or I walk. And you won’t be following me.”

Wishful thinking then.
“Don’t be mad at her. It’s not her fault.” Ian didn’t actually want to say Mandy’s name because he felt bad for putting her in the middle, even though she had technically put herself there, and Ian wasn’t above using that to his advantage. “She only wants what’s best for you.”

“You contacted her?”

“Yeah, I…thought it would be better to do this here.”

“Gonna use my tropical paradise against me?”

“No, I—” He shrugged helplessly. No more lies. “Yes.”

Mickey exhaled through his nose, uncrossing his arms so he could swipe at his bottom lip once. Ian could feel his uncertainty and wanted to drop to his knees in the sand to plead for him to listen. “Trying out some truth, huh?”

“Yes, only truth now I swear,” he lifted his hand to his heart like a pledge, but mostly because it was thudding so hard. “Will you listen?”

“Apparently, I fucking owe you.”

Suddenly, Ian’s brain refused to work. He didn’t know where to start. Didn’t he have a plan? What was his plan? He was silent so long, Mickey continued.

“Gonna keep me waiting?” he bit out. “You in to me waiting around like some bitch for you?”

“No,” Ian continued to fumble for words. “Of course not.”

“Yeah, well, I was busy while you were gone,” Mickey continued.

“That’s good. Real good.”

Mickey’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “Maybe I got a boyfriend keeping me busy.”

Ian’s legs just about gave out on him from the shock of those words, but he managed to take a couple steps closer, stopping when he could see the blue of Mickey’s eyes. He didn’t care in that moment if those eyes were burning with anger. That burning was directed at him and that’s all he needed to continue.

“I don’t believe you.”

“Don’t have to, man.”

Animosity radiated from him. Had he gone out trolling just to prove to himself that he was free of Ian? He’d done it before. More than once. But just because he hadn’t gone through with it then didn’t mean he wasn’t capable of going through with it now. Because now he was hurt, rejected, angry.

Ian pressed his lips together and tried to inhale a calming breath. Before he could complete a full inhale, Chapsticked lips and silky skin danced around his mind. Fuck.

“Who?” he bit out.

Mickey smiled, knowingly.

“Paolo?” Ian snapped, fingers clenched at his sides now.
Mickey just shrugged neither agreeing or disagreeing.

“Mickey,” Ian whispered, releasing his anguish all over that one word.

“What the fuck did you think?” he exploded. “That I was going to spend the rest of my life jerking off alone in my room thinking about you?”

“No! Maybe! I thought you’d fucking wait though!” Ian finally snapped, taking several more steps toward him.

“Wait for fucking what?!” Mickey’s eyes flicked up and down Ian’s face and chest, daring him to come closer at his own risk, but Ian was too scared to heed the warning.

“Me!” he spat right into Mickey’s face, noses almost touching. They were panting, chests heaving with emotion and Ian felt fingers bunch in the front of his shirt. Irrationally, he thought Mickey was going to pull him forward into a kiss, but instead his lip curled in distaste.

“I did fucking wait, you motherfucker!” The hurt in those words was so clear that Ian wanted to hold him, but he never got a chance to turn that thought into action because the fingers in his shirt released and his palms flattened against Ian’s chest. Then he shoved hard enough that Ian stumbled backwards, landing on his ass in the sand. Instinctively, Ian’s foot shot out, colliding with Mickey’s ankle and he fell to his knees, legs tangled with Ian’s.

“Well, I thought you’d wait fucking longer!” Ian yelled as Mickey’s head and shoulder crashed into his rib cage sending him back into the sand. Throwing his weight to the left, Ian managed to roll Mickey partly to his side, giving Ian a chance to jam a knee between his thighs.

“Maybe if you’d fucking texted me! 57 fucking days, asshole!” Mickey continued, wrapping his heel around Ian’s upper thigh and tightening it. “Fuck you, Gallagher.”

They were so close, Ian could feel his harsh breath and the heat of his body, where they were pressed together and it zapped all his strength.

“Mickey,” he whispered the word with all the longing he couldn’t contain any more. Mickey froze, giving Ian the opportunity to roll him onto his back and drop between his thighs. Getting no resistance, Ian braced on his elbows in the sand, looking down into his expressive face, knowing he wouldn’t see forgiveness but hoping all the same.

“Fuck you. And fuck me for giving a shit about you.” Then Mickey bucked once shoving Ian over until he landed on the sand next to him. They lay there side by side staring up at the night sky, breathing harshly yet in sync. As the warm sand tried to soothe him, Ian sighed not wanting to give defeat even a slight advantage, but his brain was caught in a trap.

“Is Paolo really your boyfriend?”

“Sure, Ian, we hold hands walking down the street.”

Ian threw an arm over his eyes and groaned loudly.

“I’ve already got something picked out for his stocking.”

“Jesus, are you trying to fucking kill me?” he whined then added a muttered, “Dick.”

“He’s not my fucking boyfriend.”
“Oh,” Ian whispered. His brain was buzzing and he knew he should probably backtrack and come at this from a different angle now that he’d gained a little ground, but he couldn’t go on with anything else until he knew. “Did you sleep with him?”

Mickey laughed beside him, and Ian turned his head, feeling the sand grind into his hair.

“No, I didn’t sleep with him.”

He put so much emphasis on the word “sleep” that Ian thought he might explode. He turned his body in the direction of his head, so he was entirely facing Mickey who was still laying in the sand beside him, close enough to touch.

“I need a fucking smoke,” Mickey blurted out.

“I won’t be offended.”

Ian watched him tapping his chest, fingers slowly making a staccato beat against the tank top.

“Quit.”

“Today?”

“Everyday.”

Ian laughed lightly in memory.

“Haven’t had one since you left…”

Me.

It was like the word itself was a dagger ripping apart Ian’s heart. He reacted the only way he could think of to show Mickey he meant everything to Ian. He covered Mickey’s body with his own. Hip to hip. Chest to chest. Lip to lip. It was gentle and deliberate. A little bit tentative, but relentless nonetheless.

And Mickey kissed him back, even lifting his head from the sand to get closer to Ian. His hands were all over Ian’s back, pushing up the soft linen of his shirt. Ian moaned as fingers dug into his flesh and held him close. God, he missed him so fucking much.

When a leg tightened around his thigh, Ian jammed a hand between the sand and Mickey’s denim covered ass, so he could squeeze the fullness, his fingers tightening almost savagely. Mickey moaned into his mouth, head dropping back the couple inches to the sand. Ian looked at his flushed face for a second then attached his lips to the lightly stubbled jawline, sucking his way toward his throat.

He didn’t want to focus on how hard they both were. It wasn’t time for that, but another longer moan escaped through Mickey’s parted lips, and Ian almost came in his shorts. “Fuck, I love you.”

“Get off.”

He said it quietly and without any anger, chilling all the heat currently pooling in Ian’s body. “Shit, sorry,” he said rolling to the side then flopping back to look up at the sky. They were quiet again as they caught their breath.

“How’s your wound?” Mickey asked.

Ian pushed up his shirt enough to touch the circular raised skin just below his left rib. He traced it for
a moment, remembering how it got there. Remembering Mickey’s voice keeping him from fading, from freaking out. Giving him something to focus on rather than the pain or memories of thinking Mickey had been shot.

The image of the assault rifle tracing Mickey’s cheek and throat was burned into his brain so permanently that it felt like more than a memory. When the thunder boomed, he’d been so fucking sure it was a gun shot that he’d died himself because no one was going to survive an M-16 bullet to the throat. Not even Mickey.

He’d spent the last two months thinking about all the moments after that, but there was one moment that he spent the most time on.

Baby.

“Healing,” he finally replied. “Didn’t actually do that much damage. Had to have the bullet removed and some blood vessels needed repaired, but my organs are intact. Pretty lucky, actually.”

“If you say so.”

“Got a cool scar,” he said to lighten the mood, but he actually didn’t hate the scar because it was a reminder.

“Finally got some street cred?”

“Yup, you wanna see how cool it is?”

“Maybe another time,” he said but Ian felt so fucking hopeful at the easy way he said it.

“Maybe you could kiss it better later too,” he teased because he needed their easy banter so badly.

“Maybe.”

“What?” Ian spat lifting his head from the sand to look at him.

“Fuck you, course I wanna kiss it, asshole.”

Ian’s head fell back to the sand, and they went back to staring at the night sky, with Ian wondering if Mickey was picturing himself running his lips over the scar, slowly healing it with the force of his will. Ian sighed. He was sure thinking about that.

“Who the fuck do you work for?”

Ian had been expecting that question, but it still shocked him, especially after the gentle teasing. This was the moment he found out if Mickey would listen or not.

“The Major Thefts Crime Unit of the FBI.” He said it quickly but made sure he was perfectly clear.

“Figured.” And Ian’s whole body relaxed at that. It wasn’t a surprise, not a hit that Mickey would be dealing with now but one he’d been dealing with for two months. “Cause you’re an asshole. Probably graduated top of your class.”

He smirked and Ian heard it for what it was. A tiny crack in Mickey’s armor. “Yeah, I did.”

“They give you a plaque and shit?”

“Named the award after me actually.”
Mickey sat up, wrapping an arm around his knees as he released a long sigh.

“Mickey, I’m sorry that I haven’t been in contact.”

After a long sigh, Mickey rolled his eyes. “Well, you’re an asshole, so…” he returned his attention to the sand. “It was either that or you had amnesia.”

“There’s a third option.”

“That I suppose you’re gonna tell me all about?”

“Yes. I was protecting you.”

“Ah, so the third option is that you’re a fucking hero,” he snorted, tossing a tiny seashell toward the receding tide. “I should be fucking grateful that you’re an asshole, huh?”

“No, fuck, I’m not saying that. I’m just…I’m not a Fed anymore.”

“No shit. Did they can your ass?”

“Basically. They encouraged my resignation.”

“Didn’t meet your quota of sticking your nose where it don’t belong?”

“No, I was sleeping with a suspect during an on-going investigation, and apparently, I didn’t even give a shit.”

Mickey shot him a quick look. “Yeah? That sounds pretty stupid.”

“Actually, I probably would have kept my job if I had only slept with him. It was the falling in love part that wasn’t acceptable. They thought it colored my decision making and that I could potentially cover up information.”

“You have a fucking funny way of showing your love, man,” he continued before Ian could respond. “Why did you fly 3000 miles to ruin my holiday when you could have just fucking texted me? Assuming you remember how to text.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I fucking knew nothing,” he hissed and Ian felt his body tighten. This was the heart of the issue between them.

“I told you I recovered from surgery. Sent that text as soon as I was conscious enough to find a charger and do it.” He’d woken up in the hospital bed unsure where the fuck he was, groggy and stiff, but his first thought was Mickey. The immediate panic that he had been hurt or killed, then it all crashed back into his head. Baby.

“Oh well, thanks, Ian. For that long detailed explanation,” he said. “And for disappearing without a trace.”

“I did tell you though,” he said quietly.

“Told me what?”

“That I had to go away for awhile.” He turned toward Mickey, searching his profile for acknowledgement. “That I wanted to go to Mexico with you.”
Mickey looked at him and the events in El Paso passed between them. The rain, the gun shot, the blood, the promises, the heartbreak. Then Mickey pushed up to his feet, storming toward the water’s edge. Stopping there. Going no further.

The moon reflected off the black hair and pale shoulders. Please, don’t walk away, he wanted to beg but knew he had to let Mickey make up his own mind now. After everything that had happened, was Ian worth it?

Chapter End Notes

A question we've all had now and then, huh? But we know what Mickey's answer has always been.

See you bright and early Monday morning. xo
I'm sorry. Things are crazy around here and I was trying to proofread, but I've given up! Pretend it's perfect okay. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

2 months earlier

Sotheby’s Auction House, Chicago

Ian ushered Mickey out of the Sotheby’s boardroom, knowing if he didn’t get him away from the pompous academic who thought he wrote the actual book on firearms, Mickey was going to show the guy exactly what a gun was capable of. All they had left to do here was sign some releases and the guns would be ready for arrival next week.

“I think we need to get you into the field,” Ian teased as they headed toward the elevators. “You looked like you were having the time of your life in there.”

“Yeah, I love meeting with uptight suits. It’s why I got into this business.”

Ian smiled fondly at him. “Well, I hope there’s only one uptight suit you love meeting with now.”

Before Mickey could reply, Ian’s phone rang. Reluctantly pulling his gaze away from Mickey, he looked down at the screen, bracing himself for the name to appear. He considered ignoring it but knew if he didn’t take care of it now, his Special Agent-in-Charge would just keep calling. He was pissed at Ian and ignoring him was just going to intensify that.

“Uh, Mickey…” he said distractedly looking past Mickey’s shoulder. “I need to get this.”

“Sure, you want me to take care of signing? Meet you in the lobby?”

“Okay.” He finally met Mickey’s eyes and could see suspicion along with concern in those sharp blue eyes. There were so many things he needed to tell Mickey, yet he felt like his hands were tied. If he told Mickey that he was an FBI field agent looking into the jewelry theft, whatever they had going on would be over and so would Ian’s whole case.

The elevator doors opened and as three people exited, stopping in the hallway to chat, Mickey pushed his finger into the down button holding the door open for Ian. “See you down there then.”

Accepting the call on his phone, he brought it up to his ear as the doors closed, eyes on Mickey the whole time.

“Gallagher speaking,” he said and braced himself.
“Jesus Christ almighty, Ian. I was this goddamn close to flying to Chicago and firing your ass on the spot.” Ian held the phone away from his ear as Mack’s deep baritone hit the inside of his ear like a drum.

“Yes, sir. I understand.” He hit the main floor button on the elevator panel, grateful he was alone for this.

“Don’t you fucking yes sir me. Jesus, what the hell were you thinking? A field agent can’t just go silent. You know we’re going to think the worst.”

Ian could picture Mack running his hand over the shiny, dark skin covering his head where hair used to be. He’d spent the last ten years of his life watching that unconscious gesture in fascination because he was sure his superior had rubbed his hair right off of his head. Now Ian was giving him yet another reason to stress out.

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“Speak.”

As the floors counted down, Ian swallowed. “I have violated several sections of the Ethics Handbook for On and Off-Duty Co—”

“Oh for Christ Sake, I know the name of the goddamn manual, Ian. And I have no doubt you violated it. I’m scared to ask which sections.”

“3a, subse—”

“Just sum it up for me,” he sighed.

“I’ve engaged in sexual conduct with a suspect. But,” Ian spoke louder, firmer. “I have absolute conviction that he was not involved in the theft, therefore, technically not a suspect. In my books.”

“I suggest you avoid putting those two thoughts together in one sentence ever again. There’s a reason for Section 3 whatever, sex dirties the investigation, Ian.”

“But—”

“Always. No exceptions. Information is now compromised by default. I don’t care if you’re Dudley fucking Do-right, you can no longer be considered impartial.” He sighed again, and Ian tried not to imagine him shaking his head. “I can’t believe we are having this conversation. You read the fucking manual, Gallagher. And if you’re breaking rules, then there’s no hope for the rest of us.”

“Yes, sir.” The elevator dinged announcing its arrival in the lobby.

“Christ, we’re too far into this to pull you out though. The gun transport is less than a week away, and we need an agent in there.”

“Please let me see this through.” As he stepped into the lobby, he felt panic that if he was removed from the case, whoever they inserted in his place would not be prepared, leaving Mickey and the team in even more danger than they were now. Despite being unable to find any indication that the SATG would try to ambush them during the Handley transport, Ian was certain it was going to happen. He’d been studying the group’s patterns since grad school, and this job fit their current patterns perfectly—he just didn’t know exactly how.

Mack had been silent for so long, Ian wondered if they’d been disconnected. “Mack?” he asked,
pushing open the glass door and exiting to the street. He didn’t want Mickey accidentally coming up behind him while he had this conversation.

“I am so angry at you right now. We’ve been working on bringing down the SATG for-fucking-ever, Ian. And you pull this bullshit.”

“I’m sorry.”

Mack’s voice softened now that he’d had his outburst. “You’ve worked hard to get where you are, to turn your life around. This guy is worth throwing that all away?”

Ian glanced around the busy sidewalk, heading toward one of the recessed windows. “If it comes down to that.”

“Seriously?” Mack sounded surprised, probably thinking that Ian would wake up hearing that he could lose his job.

“Yes.”

“Ian. Son,” he began, not above using his knowledge of what makes Ian tick to get him to listen. “I think you’re making a mistake.”

“Sir, I—”

“I’m your damn superior, do not interrupt.”

“Sorry, sir.”

“I’ve watched you grow up, and I’m…proud of you, but you aren’t thinking with your head and you are going to regret it. You’ve wanted to be an agent since you were 17. One good lay and you throw it all away?”

Ian remained silent.

“Speak.”

“May I be candid?”

“Ian?”

“Yes, sir?”

“This isn’t the army.”

“Right, si—Mack. Mickey is definitely a good lay,” he paused embarrassed despite the fact that when Mack had met him, Ian had been engaged in more than consensual sex. He was being paid to do it for a camera. “I mean, he, we, um, sir.”

“I get it. I’ve had sex before.”

“I’m sure you have.”

Mack started laughing. “Jesus, you don’t need to drag this out. I know exactly what you’re going to say. You love him.”

“Yes...”
“That really fucks everything up.”

“I don’t see it that way.”

“No, of course, you don’t. Love does that. Well, we’ve reached an impasse. My hands are tied until after the transport.”

“Mack, I—”

“Did I say speak?’

“No, sir but this isn’t the army.”

“Don’t push your luck.”

Ian remained silent.

“Here’s what is going to happen. I am going to let you complete this mission under two conditions.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t be too hasty.”

Ian braced himself for what was coming.

“One, following the Handley transport, you will have absolutely no contact with Milkovich until the case is closed. Not one whiff.”

“Sir! That could take months!”

“Listen to me, Gallagher. I am your friend. No, I’m your mentor, but I’m also your fucking boss. You have broken rules. Rules, Ian.”

“I know.”

“Are you listening? Don’t answer that because I know you’ll just say “yes sir”. I repeat. The minute the gun transport is over, you will walk away and have no contact until the case is closed. In fact, I am going to be there and see to it that you don’t. Do you agree?”

Ian’s fingers tightened around his tie, twisting as he accepted his SOC’s decision. If he refused and was pulled from the case now, it would put the team in more danger and potentially throw away years of work. If he accepted, it would mean leaving Mickey and being unable to tell him why.

He released the tie and smoothed it once, patting it back into place as he made his decision.

“Yes.”

“Wise decision. And two, you will then offer your letter of resignation.”

“What?” Ian’s heart dropped, and he turned away from the constant stream of foot traffic on the street, so he could have a second of privacy, but too late he realized he was standing in front of a window.

“Ian, you are still considered a trainee, and there is absolutely no room for error. Milkovich remains the prime suspect, whether you think he’s dreamy or not. He had access to the jewels.”
“So did a lot of other people!” Ian interrupted.

“And he’s spent way too much undocumented time in Mexico the last decade. That reeks of SATG involvement.” Mack took a deep breath, daring Ian to interrupt again. “Which means if you were thinking like a damn agent, he’d still be at the top of your list as well. You do understand that, right?

Ian didn’t bother replying because he didn’t agree. Maybe, he was blinded by love, but he didn’t think so. In fact, he had been sure that Mickey was innocent within 24 hours of meeting him. He was just so upfront that Ian didn’t think he could do anything sneaky or underhanded. If he had wanted the diamonds, he would have simply walked in and taken them, not stabbed his partner in the back then went drinking with him. No way.

“Until we have a better candidate, he remains the prime suspect, and you will be reprimanded for your indiscretion. This is not my personal decision, Ian. This is hard, cold protocol. I’m sure you are familiar with the exact subsection.”

Ian had, in fact, recently read the Handbook entry hoping to find a loophole. “In very limited circumstances, a pre-authorization may render lawful conduct with the suspect if it is consensual and falling within the Regulations.”

“So you have the goddamn rule memorized word for word, but still fucking broke it. There was definitely no pre-authorization involved.”

“I broke the rule. And sir?”

“Yes, Field Agent Gallagher?” He sounded so tired, and Ian could now add his mentor’s disappointment to his list of transgressions.

“I regret to inform you that I would do it again.”

“I have no doubt. But now we have to salvage this case and what’s left of your career. Perhaps this way you get to leave with a resignation rather than a termination on your file.”

“Thanks, Mack,” he said softly, feeling a little bit of relief that the consequences had finally arrived.

“Jesus, Ian,” his SOC’s voice was quiet now, “go down to the field office now and make an official report on the status of the case. For the record.”

Ian thought about Mickey, wondering if he had finished signing off on the Handley auction items and had come looking for Ian. He needed to get out of here before Mickey found him because he knew that those blue eyes would see the devastation on Ian’s face. He was going to be so fucking hurt when Ian disappeared, but if Ian didn’t handle this properly then the backlash could take Mickey down too.

He swiped into his phone.

Helix Pharmaceutical’s Annual Investors Gala, Four Seasons Hotel, Chicago

Ian was breathing heavily and his ass was tender from hitting the banquet room floor with nearly 300
pounds of man on top of him, but his gaze raked Mickey looking for damage. Other than a split lip, he seemed fine.

Slava was marching Jason Little away from the crowd of party goers toward the employee only door where Ian was waiting, but the handcuffed man wasn’t ready to give in quite yet, and he twisted to face Mickey, dreadlocks whipping into Slava’s face as the crowd parted to give them room. “Watch your back, motherfucker.”

Mickey smiled, meanly. “I’ll see you in 8 to 15.”

Jason lunged forward, but Slava was ready for it, yanking upwards on the handcuff’s chain. His face contorted in pain, but it just added to his fury. “When I fuck you up,” he roared in Mickey’s face.

“It’s a date,” Mickey said blowing a kiss, then wincing when his lip started to bleed again.

They had reached the opened employee only door. “You think you’re so smart? Can’t see shit under your own fucking nose?” Jason hissed back.

Mickey stepped forward, shoving his hand in Jason’s chest. “Fuck you talking about?”

Clearly delighted that he’d gotten under Mickey’s skin, Jason laughed. “Eat me.” But Slava didn’t wait around for the altercation to escalate. Ian barely noticed Slava shove Jason into one of the kitchen table chairs in the staff room because his brain was buzzing like it hadn’t been in weeks.

After he’d gotten into Georgetown, he had been close enough to Mack to start bugging the Major Theft Crimes agent about cases he was working on, and it seemed to Ian that everything kept coming back to the South American Theft Group. For years, Ian had followed their every move, even using them as the basis for much of his security research.

Two years ago, he’d noticed a new pattern of thefts, in both what they were stealing and how they were doing it. His instincts screamed that something had changed within their organization. By then he had finished school, was working as an intern for the Justice Department and had started the application process for admittance into the FBI Academy. But the Colombian thieves were still his personal project and because of that, once he’d been accepted into the Academy and received his Field Agent Trainee status, he was immediately sent to Mack for grooming. Ultimately, the undercover assignment at Elite was the perfect fit.

Until he’d met Mickey.

Now Ian’s whole life plan had been tilted on its side, but he still felt certain that he was on the right track as far as all the thefts were concerned. And he’d bet everything he had in his bank accounts that Jason Little had just cracked the case open for them. Now he needed to figure out how.

Slava had handcuffed Jason to the wooden slats in the back of the chair and was passively staring at his prisoner, daring him to misbehave, while Jason actively ignored him. Two hotel security guards were hovering around.

“Slava, we got this covered. It’s going to be chaos out there,” Ian said motioning to the banquet hall just as a phone started ringing from the vicinity of Jason’s crotch. “Mickey’ll need help.”

“On it,” Slava said motioning for one of the security guards to stand behind Jason.

As he walked out of the staff room, Ian stuffed his hand into Jason’s front pocket, ignoring his howl of protest. By the time he retrieved the phone it had stopped ringing, so he tossed it on the table in front of Jason.
“Any chance you want to tell me your password?” Ian asked, and the two security guards chuckled as Jason cursed loudly. “Fine. We’re going to get access to your phone eventually.

“Fuck you.”

“What did you mean out there? What don’t we see under our noses?”

Ian was waiting for the phone to ring again, hoping that whoever was on the other end would give them a lead. The police would be here soon, and he needed to know if this was going to become a jurisdictional nightmare as the CPD and the FBI fought over who’s case was more important.

Before he could repeat his question, the phone rang again and Jason started yanking on the chair back, but the two security guards subdued him. Ian turned the phone to read the screen better.

Lucy.

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**The Loft by Hilton, El Paso, Texas**

*The sun was setting on the horizon, making the roll of the ocean waves look like a sea of blood. Ian stood on the shore watching Mickey toss small objects into the rippling red water.*

*Diamonds. They glistened each time he released one, and Ian was fascinated, studying them.*

*Suddenly, a group of faceless men ran onto the shore, yelling at Mickey to hand over the jewels, and Ian wanted to warn Mickey, but he couldn’t make any words come out of his mouth. They were trapped in his body and suffocating him.*

“Ian!”

“What?” Ian frowned in confusion. The room was so dark and Mickey was yelling at him for some reason. “What’s wrong?”

“You were dreaming, and it didn’t look like it had anything to do with my ass,” Mickey teased, running his hand along Ian’s chest so he’d slow his breathing.

“I-oh,” he released his breath. An image of Mickey falling into the blood red ocean the last thing he remembered. “I was.”

“You remember?”

The breath wobbled out of Ian’s chest. “Trouble today.”

“You worried about the transport?” Mickey asked as he laid his head on the pillow beside Ian, moving his hand from Ian’s chest to his cheek and turning his face toward Mickey. “It’s a big job for your first real transport. Got you freaked out?”

Ian’s eyes searched his face. “Yeah,” was all he said, then he shifted to his side and smothered Mickey with his body, wanting to take those bullets in his dream rather than see them enter Mickey’s body.
He was staring up at Ian, clearly expecting some more explanation. Instead Ian kissed his neck, sucking hard enough to get a hiss from Mickey.

“Sorry,” he mumbled into the skin, not sure if he really was.

“Not complaining.”

Fuck, he loved him. Ian continued sucking his way down Mickey’s neck, making sure that he pulled the skin into his mouth, so he could easily sink his teeth in.

“Jesus, Ian.”

Continuing down Mickey’s body, he covered his chest, nipples, belly with bites until he had to push the sheets out of the way. He hooked his arm under Mickey’s thigh, lifting it to his mouth and sinking his teeth in, getting a tight-lipped groan in response as the flesh gave under the pressure. He opened his eyes to watch Mickey arching his back, shoulder blades pressing into the mattress, his own teeth brutally biting into his bottom lip. Mesmerizing didn’t even cover it as far as Ian was concerned, and he had to circle his own cock to try to contain some of the lust he fucking felt, afraid he might break the skin on Mickey’s thigh.

He kept up the pressure until Mickey kicked him softly in the ass with the heel of his foot, and Ian released his mouth, covering the inside of his thigh with kisses then sucking Mickey’s cock into his mouth, sliding the whole length in and closing his lips around it.

“No biting!” Mickey moaned. “You’re a fucking savage tonight.”

Ian smiled as best he could, and his tongue swept around gently swirling over everything it touched, and Mickey moaned softly. “Yeah.”

But Ian wasn’t in the mood to be gentle. He increased the suction until Mickey kicked him the ass again.

“No,” he whined. “Fuck, don’t stop.”

Ian looked up at him through his lashes as he slid his lips closer to the tip of Mickey’s cock.

“Agh!”

Ian slid back down, and Mickey grabbed two handfuls of Ian’s hair, yanking hard. Ian’s fist tightened around himself, and his mouth shot back up to the tip of Mickey’s cock. They kept this up for several minutes, until Ian’s mouth pulled one last hiss from Mickey’s mouth and he came. As soon as he released Ian’s hair and his hands fell to the mattress, Ian let his cock fall from his mouth and he swatted Mickey’s hip, forcing him to turn over onto his belly.

Ian immediately sunk his teeth into an ass cheek, just once and just hard enough to hear Mickey’s groan again, then moved up his body laying a kiss on the red mark left by Ian’s teeth earlier in the evening. As he stretched out, covering Mickey’s body with his own, he found his hands up near the pillow and intertwined their fingers. When his hips started moving, pressing himself into Mickey’s ass, Ian whispered into his ear.
En-route to Handley ranch, El Paso, Texas

“I’ve seen that black Expedition twice,” Axton said from the driver’s seat. “Left lane, behind the dented-up minivan.”

“Me too,” Slava added. “Coincidence?”

“Who the fuck even knows we’re here?”

Ian felt Mickey’s fingertips touch his shoulder as he said those words, and the subtle intimacy of it made him smile.

“Shit,” Mickey spat finally getting Ian’s full attention. “That has Fed written all over it.”

“What?” Ian snapped.

He’d been engrossed in checking emails on his tablet, making sure there was no new information to contend with before the transfer. He’d also been trying to piece together how the Little brothers and Lucy linked to the Forevermark diamonds because he knew they did but couldn’t see how Lucy had access to the information needed to pull off the crime.

Neither brother had given up any information, and they hadn’t arrested Lucy yet in case it tipped off the SATG prior to today’s transport. The bureau wanted inside the organization and felt they had the best chance of that by letting the South Americans steal the collection of guns then following where it led.


Ian turned toward the back window, but the vehicle in question pulled over to the curb in front of a strip of outlet stores and was lost to sight by the traffic.


“Pricks?” Ian asked.

“Yeah, any time we had to work with them, it left a bad taste in my mouth. Think they own the fucking world,” he griped.

Ian zoned out as the conversation continued around him. In that moment of easy comradery among these men, he felt like a fucking traitor. A tiny listening device was embedded in the top button of his suit jacket, and he had activated it from the app on his phone as soon as they’d entered the SUV and he was officially on duty.

He was a prick. This was basically a betrayal of everything the two of them had found together. Mickey would never forgive him once he found out, and Ian wouldn’t blame him.

Mickey sent a grin Ian’s way, but he couldn’t smile back because even that felt like a betrayal.

“They probably aren’t all dickheads,” Mickey said trying out another smile on Ian.

“Woah,” Slava said over his shoulder. “Have we entered the Twilight Zone?”

Ian couldn’t stand it. He stowed his tablet, so he could get his phone out and send Mickey a text. No way was he going through with this deceit.

Ian: I’m undercover and wearing a wire
Shit, shit. If Mickey knows then he’ll have to either lie under oath or admit that he and Ian had been sharing information about the case. Neither would be in his best interest. If Mickey ended up in prison for something Ian did, he’d lose his fucking mind.

Ian: I’ll be going away for awhile soon. Will you wait for

Before he finished that message, he deleted it. As if Mickey would simply answer the question with a yes or a no. He’d demand all kinds of answers and that would lead them back to the same problem.

Ian: I love you

He turned away from Mickey, looking out the side window at the passing buildings. Looking at him was just too fucking hard.

Atlantic Aviation hangar, El Paso International Airport

“What the fuck?” Ian spat as three vehicles screeched into the airport hangar, sirens blaring. Had Mack changed his mind and sent in the cops? That didn’t make sense unless they had uncovered something since he’d last spoken to them from the bathroom of their hotel room.

Instinctively, his hand went to his hip where the Glock was sitting as the vehicles slowed, one of them stopping directly in front of the security van containing the guns. Ian knew then that these were not cops. They were being hijacked.

He’d spent the entire drive from the Handley ranch expecting ambush around every corner, except the airport because the grounds were surrounded by an alarmed fence, the sensors would alert airport security if any section of it was breached. Yet, somehow what had to be stolen police vehicles were now surrounding them.

At the same time as the side doors opened on the Sheriff’s vehicles and six men exited, carrying assault rifles, Mickey locked himself inside the van with the guns, and Slava turned to watch the men spread out around them.

One of the men started shouting orders and Ian raised his hands above his head as his gun and vest were taken. He glanced at Slava and Cheyenne as they were stripped of their vests and ordered onto their knees. Ian’s jacket was in the pile of tactical vests, so he’d lost contact with Mack and the other agents who were positioned somewhere outside the airport grounds.

The sirens cut out, and the sudden silence felt like thunder. The next few minutes went by in a blur as Mickey was shoved to the ground, the muzzle of a gun pressed to his head, and last night’s dream became a reality. Ian was screaming inside, knowing he hadn’t handled this correctly, that he had fucked up missing this as the potential ambush point, and now Mickey had a fucking assault rifle shoved into his temple. And Ian couldn't stop himself from calling out each time it looked like the gunman was going to pull the trigger.

Once the guns were removed from the back of the security van, Ian was shoved toward the van where Mickey was kneeling. They made eye contact for the first time since the Handley ranch, and the love in Mickey’s eyes was so fucking clear to Ian that he almost broke down then because he knew he didn’t deserve it.
“He doesn’t fucking know the passcode,” Mickey snapped. The familiar sound of his voice cleared Ian’s mind of the panic trying to take control and immediately questions started to form. How did they know Ian would know the passcodes? How do they know which cases contained the tracking devices? Only Gabe and certain members of the team knew which three cases to search. And nobody inside Elite knew that all of the cases actually had tracking devices.

As his mind reviewed all this, he managed to get the first two cases open and remove the devices. Adrenaline was making his limbs light and his mouth dry. A new set of sirens pierced the air and Ian looked toward the sound causing him to fuck up the passcode on the final case. Mickey’s gun.

Knowing he shouldn’t, but unable to stop himself, he looked over at Mickey and felt his heart clench painfully. The rifle jammed into the side of Mickey’s head so hard he fell to the side and Ian cursed himself. Then entered the fucking passcode.

The Desert Ironwood was polished so well that he could almost see his reflection in the bluish metal, and he remembered Mickey holding it almost reverently in his hand. His appreciate and respect for its qualities had given Ian a new appreciation as well. So many things had changed for Ian since meeting Mickey. He hadn’t been able to explain that to Mack, to make him understand that a job or even a career didn’t ultimately matter when compared to actual love.

Love that made you whole, filled in the empty spots, gave you courage.

Fuck, he was losing his damn mind. Mickey had a gun to his fucking head. He stepped back from the van’s tailgate, so they would know he was finished. The rain was falling faster, making everything slightly distorted, but he could see Mickey and the head gunman locked in a battle of wills, the muzzle of the assault rifle pressed so hard into the pulse on Mickey’s neck that it was making an indent.

Ian’s dream flooded back, painting the whole scene with a red tinge just as a spine numbing crack split the air. Instinctively, his body crashed into the gunman’s taking him to the tarmac. He tried to wrap his arms around the man’s neck, but his feet slipped on the wet pavement and when the gunman shoved off of Mickey, it sent Ian backwards. He landed on his hands and bounced back up.

He needed to get to Mickey, but it never happened. A hot searing pain lit up the side of his body, and he staggered to his right knee hitting the tarmac with a thud. He closed his eyes as wave of a nausea washed over him and the sea of red returned.

Mickey.

Warm hands ran over his arms and he opened his eyes. Confused, he searched Mickey’s body, but he didn’t see any red at all now.

“You’re okay?”

He faded out for a moment, giving in to a need to close his eyes. But Mickey’s voice kept pulling him back. Then a throbbing pain, like a hot poker, radiated through his ribs and he cried out trying to get away from it. Mickey yelled at him, and he felt bad, thinking he should apologize but the hot poker was back.

“I think I’ve been shot.”

The pain started to recede, replaced by a warm numbness that spread slowly over his whole body, and he relaxed into the hand that seemed to be holding him up. But Mickey’s voice pulled him back. As he opened his eyes, he saw a plane taxiing down a distant runway and he remembered. They
were at the hangar, shots were fired.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen,” he said hearing the slurring in his voice and wondering if he’d maybe been shot.

“No shit,” Mickey spat. “Where the fuck is everybody?”

Ian tried to look around, but his body refused to cooperate.

“Be here by now,” he agreed, deciding to rest until they arrived.

Baby.

Mickey’s voice calling him baby. He liked that and wanted to hear it again.

Baby.

He opened his eyes that time because Mickey sounded so upset, wanting Ian to look at him. That was so silly. Why would he be upset? He had a hard time not looking at Mickey.

“…pretty.”

“Please stay with me, okay?”

Panic washed over him at those words. Had Mickey found out that Ian was leaving? Was that why he sounded so upset?

“Don’t hate me,” he begged.

Mickey’s forehead was pressed against his, and his sadness reminded Ian of his dream. Mickey had looked so relaxed as he tossed the sparkling diamonds into the ocean. But now it was Ian’s job to find them.

“Did they get the diamonds?”

“The guns, you mean?” Mickey snapped, sounding confused.

The guns. The transport. He had to leave now but he’d see Mickey as soon as he could.

“Can we go to Mexico soon?”

“Yeah, soon. Like really soon.”

That sounded perfect to Ian, but there was some stuff he had to do before then. He just couldn’t quite remember what it was.

“Gotta go away first though.”

Then we’ll go to Mexico and everything will be all right.

Chapter End Notes

There are two chapters left and they still need fine tuned. I’m still planning to post
Tuesday and Wednesday, but the posting time might be a little off as life is messing with my plans. Thank you so much for keeping me going. It's been amazing!
Guayabitos, Mexico

“That’s quite a story, Gallagher.”

“I started to tell you so many times,” Ian said, pushing his empty plate out of the way so he could rest his forearms on the table.

Mickey studied his face, something he’d missed doing probably more than anything else the last two months. When he’d stood looking out at the ocean earlier, he’d thought about that face while watching the sunset burn the edges of the horizon red, not blood red but something softer, lighter. Mickey would probably say it was his favorite color, and he would definitely say he had a favorite face. There was simply no way he was going to deny himself the pleasure of looking at it whenever he wanted.

He’d eventually turned back toward Ian, grabbing his backpack from where he’d dropped it in the sand then stopping where Ian was sitting, cross-legged watching him. The guy might be an asshole, but Mickey was going to give him a chance to explain himself.

“Come on, Gallagher. I’m starving.”

As they sat at a corner table in Benitto’s Cantina, Ian talked while they ate their fish and coconut bread as well as a gigantic piece of chocolate cake with jalapeños, and now they were waiting for another round of drinks.

“So many times the words got stuck,” Ian explained, palm pressed into his chest like he was reliving the experience. “Not just on the way to Handley’s when I wanted to text you, but once in the elevator back in Chicago and more times than I can count in bed.”

“That what you were trying to tell me in the hotel after your dream?” Mickey asked, thinking back to their last night together. “Babbling on about protecting me from sunsets or some shit.”

“Yes, I was so scared that something was going to happen to you during the transport that I dreamt about it, that you got hurt and it was my fault because I didn’t tell you.”

The server arrived then with their drinks, taking away their empty plates as they watched each other from across table, sharing the memory of that night, and the marks Ian had left on Mickey’s body. He’d had to look at those marks until they’d faded, remembering and trying to forget everything. Ian’s blood on his hands and the way he made Mickey feel, but he was stained by both.

“Nothing happened to me except that for 24 hours, I fucking thought you were dead. Dead, Ian,” he said, not holding back the accusation in his voice. He’d wanted to spit these words at Ian for so long that he wasn’t having any problem getting them out of his chest. He also sat forward resting his arms on the table, so Ian could see fully how he felt about the aftermath of El Paso. “Your asshole of a boss made sure that I knew nothing. Left me fucking hanging, thinking the only fucking reason you wouldn’t contact me after what went down was because you were…dead.”
Ian started to open his mouth, but Mickey lifted a hand to silence him. “I’ll do the talking now. You wait 57 days to tell me this whole story after contacting my fucking sister first. She browbeat me into taking this vacation 8 days ago. Eight fucking days. What was your fucking back-up plan if I had said no, or if I had waited another 57 days to take the fucking vacation?”

Once again, Ian was holding in words that so clearly were trying to escape from his pursed lips. Mickey watched him for a moment, taking some perverse pleasure in seeing him struggle, but it didn’t last long as he was under no illusion that Ian had gotten any of his own perverse pleasure in knowing Mickey had been hurt. In fact, it was pretty obvious to Mickey that the guy was aching to ensure Mickey understood.

“I was fucking scared that you were going to tell me to fuck off. I thought we’d have a better chance of sorting it all out here, away from...everything, from reminders. I’m sorry I waited though. It was selfish.”

Mickey narrowed his eyes, searching for manipulation but decided Ian was just plain scared, still was by the looks of things. “I don’t totally disagree. Anyway, it doesn’t matter.”

“What?!” Ian snapped, looking ready to leap over the table. “Mickey, please, let me--”

“Jesus, relax. I was just gonna say that I saw it all coming.” Ian frowned but calmed down. “Not the details, but the fucking pain that was going to come with this…thing we got. You walked off the elevator that first day on the job in your goddamn suit, and I considered getting on the elevator myself and never returning to work. Was gonna run before you had a chance to smile at me.”

Ian smiled a little, apparently happy to hear that Mickey was a goner from day one. "So it was love at first sight, huh?"

"Fuck you is what it was, Gallagher."

Cocky didn’t begin to cover Ian’s smile now.

“Whatever. I knew I was fucked,” Mickey concluded, sitting back in his chair with a sigh. “That hasn’t changed.”

“Me too,” Ian whispered. “What I didn’t…couldn’t explain to Mack was that not only is it not the sex, but it’s not the love either, neither of those things made me walk away from my job after years of striving to get to where I thought I wanted to be. It’s that with you I’m--”

Mickey could feel his heart thudding now for some reason, like whatever Ian was going to say would tap into something that he’d been too afraid to admit, even to himself. Ian was searching his face, probably hoping for help in explaining what exactly is was.

“Whole?” Mickey offered because he was done being afraid.

“Yeah, complete,” Ian nodded. “At peace.”

They were back to staring at each other. Mickey thought he could see Ian’s heart thudding through his white linen shirt. Probably because it was so damn tight, he thought fondly.

“It didn’t seem possible to wait until we’d solved the diamond theft to be with you,” Ian continued. “Waiting the two weeks we did wait was fucking torture. Felt like wasted time. Plus I didn’t need any evidence to know you weren’t involved. I just needed evidence to prove you weren’t involved.”

“Mack didn’t have the same confidence in me that you had?” Mickey smirked thinking of the guy
who had stood between him and the ambulance that took Ian away.

“I helped him see the error of his ways.”

“By tossing Lucy in his face?”

“Yup, took five minutes for her to break down apparently. Crying to anyone who would listen about her boyfriend. I think she really loves him.”

“Love will make you do dumb things,” Mickey said watching Ian shrug in agreement. “Like agreeing to help your gangbanger boyfriend with his career goals apparently.”

“She said Jason and his brother only meant to sell the narcotics they were ripping off to the Colombians, but once the group got wind that the brothers worked in the pharmaceutical industry and weren’t above breaking the law, they were invited to join the group on a more full time basis.”

“Working their way up the corporate ladder,” Mickey added.

“Exactly. Way up, in fact, to the top. All the way to Janssen and the information leak at Helix two years ago. That was the first big job they did for the Colombians, stealing the formula and a bunch of data, which the SATG then sold to foreign buyers.”

“If you didn’t have proof of that shit,” Mickey said shaking his head in disbelief, “I wouldn’t believe it. Those Colombian fuckers have been smash and grab artists for a decade and suddenly, they are helping two goons with intricate industrial espionage and a fucking glorified secretary with one of the most finessed jewel heists in years.”

Ian nodded, and his eyes light up like green Christmas lights. “Right! I’ve been saying this very thing. There are other jobs from the last two years in other cities that I know belong to SATG, but we haven’t figured out the pattern yet. The gun transport was the first time we’ve been able to catch them red-handed. Of course, they have given us nothing. You aren’t getting shit out of Colombian criminals. Everything we got was from Lucy, and her knowledge is limited. Something is gonna break soon though. I can feel it.”

As quickly as the lights lit up, his eyes dimmed. “Well, someone at the FBI is bound to figure it out eventually.”

Mickey sighed, deep through his nose. “Fuck, Ian. You’re not only an asshole, you’re an idiot too.”

“What?” This got Ian’s hackles up. Apparently, he was okay with asshole status, but don’t question his brains.

“Why’d you quit your damn job? You should of fought Mack on that. Like you’re the first Fed to bone someone on the job. Please.”

Ian sighed. “Maybe. It just seemed easier this way. I was done defending us, didn’t want it all dragged through the mud and shit, you know? Wanted to protect it.”

Sure, he got it. “Now you gotta walk away from not only your job but your SATG hobby. That sucks, man.”

Taking a big slurp of his beverage, Ian smiled showing off the frothy mustache forming on his upper lip and clearly changing the subject.

“How’s your piña colada?” Mickey asked.
“Good, did you want a sip?” Ian lifted the tall glass toward Mickey, then on second thought removed the little paper umbrella. “Probably don’t want to drink it with that still in it.”

“I’m concerned that it didn’t bother you to drink it that way.”

Ian twirled the umbrella, then tucked it behind his ear like a flower, getting a head shake from Mickey. They fell silent after that, watching each other, far less warily than they had when they’d sat down two hours ago.

“How’s your michelada?” Ian asked trying to give it a Spanish flare. “Hot chili sauce and beer? I’m concerned that that is going to bother you in a few hours.”

Ian tried hard to keep a straight face but failed miserably, forcing Mickey to cover his grin.

“Think you’re pretty funny, asshole?”

He continued to smile, all big white teeth and rosy cheeks. “You gonna call me asshole for the rest of our li—” His smile vanished, replaced by uncertainty. Mickey was tired of seeing that look on his face because it seemed to accompany most of the experiences the two of them had had together so far.

Ian sat forward, little umbrella wobbling as he moved. Lifting his hand, Mickey plucked it from behind his ear and tossed it on the table. “Can’t take you serious with that in your hair, man.”

It didn’t distract Ian though. The question was now on the table and he was hoping Mickey would answer it, would confirm or deny Ian’s role in his life. As if there was ever any doubt in anyone’s mind that Mickey loved Ian. The doubt had been the other way around. Briefly.

The last couple hours had sorted out a lot of shit in Mickey’s mind. Now he wanted to touch Ian. He was done talking and fucking listening.

“I feel like your fucking priest,” he complained, lightening the mood. “And this cantina is your damn confessional.”

“Well, I don’t want to keep any secrets from you, Mickey,” he began then his lips pulled back into a ridiculous grin and Mickey braced himself for whatever was coming. “I’m hoping to be given permission to enter the pearly gates.”

One hundred percent against his will, Mickey laughed. “You’re such an asshole.”

And they were back where they started.

“Ian,” he began, “I will definitely be calling you an asshole for the rest of our lives.”

Ian insisted on paying for supper and they exited onto the darkened street. It was quiet, a few lights still lit guiding vacationers to their resort hotels.

“Where you staying?” Mickey asked, looking up and down the one main street.

“Aurora.” Ian pointed across the street.

“How long you paid up to?”

“Um,” Ian began, looking left and right guiltily.

“Pretty sure of yourself, huh?”
“No!”

Mickey watched him, daring him to lie.

“No, I was sure of us.”

“Nice save. Where’s all your shit?”

“Front desk.”

“Let’s grab it then.”

A few minutes later, they were making their way down the plank sidewalk, bags hanging off their shoulders, breeze blowing around them. Mickey looked at the asshole beside him, then reached for his hand, linking two of their fingers.

Ian, to his credit, did not look at Mickey, he just squeezed his fingers nearly snapping Mickey’s off in his haste to make sure Mickey didn’t get away.

“I ain’t going anywhere, Ian.”

“That’s asshole to you.”

Mickey grinned, enjoying the quiet and darkness.

“That paper you wrote on soft countermeasures?” he asked.

“Yes,” Ian said looking at him quickly.

“Not my favorite.”

“No?”

“Nah, I mean you clearly get the idea of counterattack, but I like to come in swinging, destroy their payload, but you’re basically arguing for a passive approach, Gallagher. That’s more Slava’s style. He should probably read that paper.”

Ian took a deep breath, "Mickey, measures that physically counterattack an incoming threat--" He closed his mouth when Mickey grinned. “Thank you. I’ll take that under advisement.”

He was quiet, but clearly dying to know which one of his papers was Mickey’s favorite.

“Now, the one on C4i protocol, that’s my favorite.”

“It is?” Ian sounded amazed, probably not really buying that Mickey would ever read any of his papers.

“Sure, you sound surprised. Not your favorite?”

Ian smiled happily, then had to push the envelope by fully linking their fingers together. Mickey was fine with that as the street was dark and basically empty, and he was done fighting it.

“You owe me 57 fucking orgasms,” Mickey groaned as his back hit the wall just inside the door of
his one bedroom apartment. The impact nearly knocked the wind out of him, but he didn’t fucking
care.

“I promise to give you every single one of them tonight.”

Pushing into Ian’s chest, Mickey turned them until Ian’s back hit the wall with the same impact. He
grunted, hands on Mickey’s ass holding him in place so he couldn’t get away.

“I’m gonna collect every fucking one of them.”

Ian locked an arm around his waist and pushed away from the wall to turn them once more, but
they’d run out of wall and hit the edge of a small table. Mickey’s backpack toppled to the floor,
followed by a crash.

“What was that?” Ian asked arm still locked around Mickey’s waist but his attention on the floor
beside him. “Is that a…bobblehead in your backpack?”

“Mm,” Mickey said, lips wrapping around Ian’s earlobe. “Día de Muertos. Day of the Dead.”

“Scary looking dude.” Ian’s hips tilted forward as Mickey sucked the flesh between his lips, but Ian’s
mouth kept yakking. “You taking him back home with you?”

“Fucking e-dweebs need a daily reminder.”

“Holding a grudge?” To Mickey’s dismay, Ian’s ear disappeared as he bent down to pick up the
ghoulish ceramic figurine, apparently happy to see that the intricately painted skull was still attached
to the skinny body.

“Yes, until I join that bobblehead on the other side.”

Ian was finally back, attention where Mickey wanted it. On him. “Time’s a ticking, man. 57 is a lot.”

Ian was all over him, literally. It was hard to keep track of his whereabouts as desire rolled over
Mickey like the relentless tide just outside his window. His lips were soaking up every one of
Mickey’s moans, his hands were clasping the sides of Mickey’s head, buried in his hair, his hips
were rolling against Mickey’s. He was everywhere.

Mickey got his arms around Ian’s neck, planning to do the same thing with his legs. He needed them
wrapped around Ian and the bed seemed a million miles away. While their tongues slipped around
each other, he felt Ian’s hands grab at his ass pulling upwards.

Then his hands and mouth were gone, and Mickey wanted to complain. He wasn’t done with that,
but Ian was on his knees, clawing at the zipper on Mickey’s jeans, demanding entrance. He let his
fingers drift over Ian’s hair, feeling the soft waves.

“Where’s my Clark Kent?” he groaned, silkiness gliding between his fingers. Why the fuck was he
finding that so fucking sexy? He opened his eyes to watch, more enchanted by the sight of his tattoos
lost in the red hair than by the sight of his dick in Ian’s mouth. Must be fucking love.

“Ian,” he panted, wanting to tell him to stop, that he wanted Ian inside him. Instead of answering,
Ian’s mouth opened wider and Mickey hit the back of his throat. “Nah, come on.”

Instead of relenting, Ian’s throat relaxed and Mickey smashed the back of his head against the wall to
keep himself from whimpering. He needed him to stop. He needed to get fucked.
“Ian!”

Again Ian’s mouth opened.

“Ian.”

Again.

“That’s one,” Ian said smiling up at him.

“I was trying to fucking tell you something,” Mickey bitched.

“Yeah, I know, but holy fucking hell, it’s hot to hear you chanting my name, while I blow you.”

“Fuck you. Chanting my ass.”

“IT was chanting.”

Mickey frowned down at the idiot. He ran his fingers over Ian’s cheek, so could cup his chin and hold it in place, looking into his eyes. They were so happy, no shadows lurking ready to jump out and ruin the moment. Suddenly, he didn’t care if Ian saw through him at least this one time. “It was definitely chanting,” he said.

Ian shot up to his feet, giving Mickey a kiss. “Where’s the bed in this place?” he asked looking around, making Mickey laugh. “I need sex now.”

“I was trying to tell you, man.”

“Well, try telling me now buy getting your ass in the bedroom.”

Mickey pushed away from the wall, adjusting his jeans around his hips. As he passed Ian on the way to the bedroom, he smirked making sure he coated it liberally with some flirty eyes. Ian growled, attaching himself to Mickey’s back as he tried to take the remaining dozen steps that would get him to the bedroom. If Ian was going to hump his ass like that then they were never going to reach their destination because he was having trouble walking.

Ian’s warm hands pushed at Mickey’s tank top, bunching it up around his chest then sliding down again over his belly. They’d stopped walking now, not even trying to get to the bedroom. Mickey was getting hard again, and by the feel of things, Ian was ready to bust, so he lifted his arms above his head and Ian slipped his shirt off, tossing it aggressively across the room.

“Mm,” Mickey hummed in approval. “Unleash the beast, Gallagher.”

“Jesus, don’t tempt me.”
Mickey tempted him.

He arched his back, ass pressed firmly against Ian and head resting on his shoulder. As Ian ran his hands down the taut muscles of his abdomen, Mickey covered Ian's hands with his own pressing them firmly against his body. Together, their hands slid under Mickey’s jeans and Mickey turned his head searching for Ian’s lips.

He was definitely hard again and anticipating the moment Ian snapped. It was kind of electrifying to not know when it was going to happen or exactly how it was going to look, just knowing he was going to reap the benefits.

To speed things along a little, he moaned, the sound muffled by Ian’s mouth, and Ian stilled his movements, hands pausing in pushing denim out of his way. Mickey opened his eyes and met Ian’s slightly wild eyes, which were inches from his own. Yup, he was going to fuck Mickey exactly how he wanted it.

With abandon.

“Lube,” Ian commanded.

“Yes,” Mickey agreed.

“Where?” Ian asked, hands now around Mickey’s hips as his jeans slipped down his thighs.

“What’d ya mean where? In your fucking duffel bag is where.”

“Mickey! Why is this happening?!” Ian whined. “Again.”

“You been here how many fucking days? Getting ready to stalk my ass and you don’t buy any fucking lube?”

“I was…preoccupied,” he said pathetically.

“With fucking what?”

“Worry.”

“Jesus, Ian. Lemme check my backpack, maybe there’s a packet somewhere in it.” But Ian’s arms didn’t release him. “You gonna let go?”

“I can’t.”

Mickey chuckled. “So we’re just gonna stand like this forever?”

“Yes.”

Mickey continued to chuckle. “I missed you, asshole.”

“God, me too.”

His arms dropped to his sides and Mickey gave him a quick look then kicked his pants the rest of the way off before dumping the contents of his backpack on the kitchen table. A little square packet appeared between a crumpled receipt and his passport. When he looked up, Ian was naked, his clothing tossed aside.

“You are one lucky motherfu--” He didn’t get a chance to finish that because Ian knocked into him
so hard he took a step forward, bracing both hands on the table, finger tips curling into the clothing piled beneath them. The weight of Ian’s chest on his back kept him in place.

“Open it,” Ian commanded, while his fingers spread Mickey open, making him drop his head between his arms as his body immediately responded. “Now, Mickey.”

He brought the foil up to his mouth and bit into the corner, spitting out the foil edge. Ian’s fingers appeared and he squeezed until they were covered then dropped his hand back to the table, waiting to feel Ian’s slick fingers slide into his ass.

“Ahhh,” he groaned, dropping to his elbows because Ian had gone straight for two, and Mickey’s knees had gone a little weak. Ian’s body followed his, chest still heavy against Mickey’s back, keeping him grounded.

“You’re ready?” Ian’s fingers were fucking into him, slick and determined, but not what he wanted. He lifted the packet, holding it near Ian’s face in answer to that question. “This is gonna feel so freaking good.”

“Did you wanna talk about it or do it?” Mickey tossed the now empty packet onto the table, trying not to think about what the fuck they were going to do after the haze of this round wore off. Nothing was open until the next morning.

“Both.”

“Yeah, you’re gonna describe it for me?”

“No, you are.”

“Yeah, right.”

Ian stood up, hand resting on the middle of Mickey’s back, and the tip of his cock ready to push inside. “How does that feel?” he asked.

“How does what feel? You aren’t doing anything.”

“So not good then?” Ian laughed, then the tip breached Mickey’s hole, quickly contracting to hold him in place, and Ian grunted. “Ah, now?”

“Good.”

“Just good?”

“Yes.”

Ian slid in a little further. “Try to be a little more descriptive.”

“Really good,” he groaned then expanded to take more of Ian. “Really fucking good.”

Ian pulled out a bit.

“Really fucking bad.”

Then he was back with some force behind his thrust and Mickey pounded the table once. “Fuck, yeah.”

Ian was gone and back, thrusting hard enough that Mickey’s thighs banged against the edge of the
“Tell me.”

“Ian,” he half begged, unable to remember any other words.

“Tell me,” Ian demanded and Mickey opened his mouth to respond. “And don’t say good.”


“Mickey,” Ian moaned behind him.

“Faster, Ian. It feels like I need it faster.”

Mickey tried to keep up but the force of each thrust sent his elbows sliding over the material covering the table and he nearly face planted. With one swipe, he sent his clothes over the edge of the table to the tiled floor then planted his hands firmly.

“You ready now?” Ian’s laugh washed over Mickey making him smile.

“Gimme what you got.”

Ian did. He always did. Mickey may love Ian and being with him definitely brought him peace, but it didn’t hurt that he was a really good lay.

They fell back on the double bed ten minutes later, staring up at the slowly turning ceiling fan, legs spread as the breeze cooled them.

“Well, that’s two,” Ian said, his toes tapping against Mickey’s. “Fifty-five to go.”

“Gonna need to get creative because we’re out of lube.” All he got in response was a strangled sound, like the redhead was dying. “I guess we can find something other than sex to pass the time.”

Ian’s head whipped over, eyes wide. “No,” he said with conviction, making Mickey snicker. “Just let me think.”

As he tapped his belly thoughtfully, Mickey realized he hadn’t see Ian’s scar yet. For a second, he panicked not wanting to ruin the night by reliving that shit, but the thoughts had already arrived, so he needed to deal with them. He rolled on top of Ian, who appeared to have no problem with that as his arms tightened and pulled Mickey down for a kiss.

That took a few minutes and involved some pre-round three grinding, but Mickey disconnected and slid down Ian’s body, stopping when he reached the small circular scar still slightly red and just beneath Ian’s lowest rib. He ran his thumb over it, feeling the raised texture and thinking about all the blood that had poured from it, how he’d tried to stop it and was so sure that Ian wasn’t going to wake up the next time he asked him to.

“I was scared,” he whispered, memories pushing into his head. “Only time I’ve ever been that scared.”
Ian’s hand brushed over his hair, softly, soothingly. “I wasn’t. I mean I was scared you were going to hate me, but I wasn’t ever scared because I was shot. You were there and I knew you were taking care of me.”

Mickey wanted to shrug it off, make it seem like anyone would have done it, but he was still too fucked up about it to make light of it.

“I also got one of my favorite memories out of the experience,” Ian added.

Mickey looked up at him, wondering what he could have taken away from that day that was worth holding on to. “Yeah?”

“You called me baby.” He looked satisfied, content, happy.

“Have I created a monster?”

“No, but I’ll live in hope that one day I’ll hear it again.”

“Anything’s possible, I suppose.”

“Can you at least kiss my boo boo better?”

“Sure.” He pressed his lips to it, once, twice, actually hoping like a little kid that it would make it all better. Fucking Gallagher, turning him into a sap.

“Thank you for saving my life.”

“We saying thanks for saving each other’s life now?” he smirked, ready to move on from the taxing activity of feeling shit. Shit other than horniness, that is. Time for some of that.

“I believe it’s protocol,” Ian quipped and Mickey slid up his body to kiss him for getting it, for knowing, for being exactly who he is.

They added some grinding, and Ian got his hand involved, stroking them both faster and faster, tongues twirling as they reached another climax. Mickey came first and pulled himself out of Ian’s grip, watching Ian continue to pump his hand while he caught his breath, then Mickey took over.

A few minutes later, they were back to laying spread eagle on the bed, and Ian lifted a weary hand, holding up three fingers. When he dropped his hand to his belly, his fingers landed in their mixed ejaculation and Mickey had a nice laugh. “Now you know how I fucking feel. Dealing with jizz all the fucking time.”

Ian lifted his head to look at the mess. “I don’t mind, kind of like it.”

“Well, keep telling yourself that when you have to get up to wash and I’m snoring away here in bed.”

They grinned at each other, stupidly happy. Quiet for a bit.

“Well,” Mickey said. “You wanna know the scuttlebutt around the office?”

“Scuttlebutt?” Ian laughed. His fingers found Mickey’s where they were resting between their bodies.

“ Fucking Slava, he’s wearing off on me.”
“He’s good? Adjusting to your new role as his boss?”

“I think he loves it, the fucker.” Mickey pictured Slava’s rapt attention at each meeting, nodding at all the things Mickey’s said, taking notes that end up being doodles of cats and donuts. “He pulls the helpless employee card to get me to do shit for him. Says shit about what a good boss would do.”

Ian raised their linked hands to his lips, kissing Mickey’s knuckles as he listened.

"Jaxxxxon is growing like a weed," Mickey continued.

"Oh!" Ian beamed and Mickey didn’t even have to look at him to know it. "How’s your baby? Your other baby, that is."

"Fine. We're all enjoying our new digs."

Ian turned his head at this. "You're in the office?"

"Fuck yeah. I hope to never see the inside of a goddamn cubicle as long as I live."

Ian beamed again. "Both of your babies are happy."

Mickey kissed Ian's knuckles. "Speaking of cubicles, I'm trying to get Axton in mine. I was proud of him in El Paso."

"I like him too. Seems solid."

"Anyway, you know how Mandy is, I’m sure, since you two have formed a knitting group to chat about me."

“Poor kid,” Ian tsked and Mickey shot him a side glare. “She told me that you threatened to stuff the guy into a packing box and ship his UPS ass to Af-fucking-ganistan.”

Mickey nodded lightly. “I do believe that is the exact quote. Um, what else? Tico and Liz are not sleeping together.”

"What? Should they be?"

"The place is like a soap opera, so I'm just waiting for it."

"Good point."

“Oh, big news. Gabe’s officially retired. Finally. He was making the office hell the last couple weeks he was around. Course, shit was a fucking mess after El Paso, and after Janssen found out the Little brothers and Lucy had fucked him over, but still. Come on, who grumbles and complains all day at work?"

Ian was laughing so hard by the end of this comment that Mickey pulled his hand from Ian’s and refused to give it back. “Anyway, Gabe left, took Annette with him. Affair apparently. They had to leave the country to escape his wife.”

"Holy shit. How’s Ellen? An improvement over Gabe?"

"She's holding her own. It'll be better when they fill the Investigations Co-ordinator position though."

Ian looked impressed. “Wow, Mickey, you’re really good at this scuttlebutt.”
“Yeah, well, this asshole took my cubicle awhile back, and I was stuck near the lunch room. Got a lot of fucking visitors.”

“Sounds like an asshole.”

“Yeah, he is but I love the asshole.”

“I’m sure the asshole loves you.”

“I swear to god, Ian, if you turn this into a fucking pun, I’m leaving your asshole here in Mexico.”

Ian mimed zippering his lips and held out the key. Mickey shook his head, but accepted the key, then got out of bed, walked to the patio and threw the key into the tiny pool below. When he turned back to the bed, Ian’s eyes were wide but not nearly as wide as Mickey’s smile.

“Well, now this should be interesting.” He left Ian laying on the bed to go into the kitchenette then returned with some water and a towel, which he tossed on Ian’s stomach. “This is fucked up, man. We got no lube, no beer, no food. Probably shouldn’t even be drinking this water.”

Ian yanked Mickey down to the bed, then jumped up himself and dashed into the kitchen, returning with an assortment of Mexican chocolates, which he promptly opened up and dumped on Mickey’s belly.

“How the fuck do you eat chocolate all damn day and not get a spare tire?” Mickey asked as he tapped his own belly, feeling the last two months of Snickers. “Fucking guy.”

Ian sat down beside him, crossing his legs, lips sealed and hand on Mickey's belly.

"Oh, would you look at that." Mickey grinned. "I just happen to have an extra key."


“Gallagher,” he warned, but didn’t stop Ian from feeling him up.

“You replacing nicotine with chocolate?” Ian asked.

“Needed something to take my mind off a smoking,” he agreed, narrowing his eyes at Ian. “Yeah, yeah. Think you can take my mind off a chocolate?”

“I'm gonna try,” Ian nodded slipping a spicy caramel into Mickey's mouth and his fingers between his legs. "I got a debt to pay.”

“You do. The internet says that if you deny a man an orgasm you owe him for life.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this one was late to publication...the next is going to be too. I wasn't planning to be writing this week, but when I added the extra chapters it tipped this story over into this week and I'm busier than usual. But it would be two days maximum. Thank you all soooooooo much. xxoo
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Four months later 😊

“This exhibit is now closed,” Ian snickered to himself as he read the sign pinned to the half wall of the cubicle entrance. The words were printed in huge font on regular bond paper and attached to the grey partition with four colorful thumb tacks.

He was standing just outside the small corner space that once again separated his boyfriend from the general population. Either Mickey hadn’t noticed the sign or he’d given up, thrown in the towel in defeat. Ian was guessing he hadn’t noticed because Mickey hadn’t bitched about the sign, and all Ian had heard about the last two weeks on the drive to work, at the dinner table, in the shower, even in bed was the pranks being perpetrated upon him by unknown assailants.

Currently, he was focused on the papers strewn about his desk, dark head bent as he ran a highlighter along a line of print. Ian could just barely make out the mumbling as it drifted up to him.

“Who writes this shit?”

This was followed by a snort of disdain as his tattooed fingers reached down for the desk drawer, pulling on the handle absentely, his attention still on the page in front of him. The drawer opened to reveal a bag of red and green Christmas M&M’s and an N-Strike Elite Retaliator Nerf Gun, making Ian smile. Whoever was fucking with Mickey was about to meet a foam dart blaster.

Mickey scooped up a small handful of candy and tossed it in his mouth, crunching loudly as he turned his attention to his computer screen. Ian could probably stand here all night watching him do random, everyday things and never get bored, but he was here to drag Mickey away from his homework to the staff Christmas party that was almost in full swing in Elite’s reception area.

“You’re sexy when you’re writing long ass essays full of gibberish,” Ian said leaning into the cubicle, so he could read over his shoulder. “Oh, breach prevention testing. Fascinating!”

“Yeah, I’m definitely fascinated. That was just the word I was looking for,” Mickey grumbled.

“I’ve always found critical gaps in security protocols the very—”

“You wanna write this goddamn paper for me? Or just jerk off as you read it?”

“I’d prefer to jerk off while you read it to me.”

“That’s probably the only kink I want nothing to do with. Why the fuck is that word underlined?” he asked pointing at the computer screen. Ian moved closer until his cheek was almost touching Mickey’s.

“Cause you spelled it wrong.”

“I doubt it,” Mickey muttered but turned his head to inhale deeply. Ian remained where he was, enjoying being sniffed almost as much as Mickey seemed to enjoy sniffing him. “Fuck sake, how am
I supposed to get this fucking paper finished with you smelling like that?"

Ian shifted just enough to press his lips to Mickey’s, once quickly. Then he swiveled his chair and pulled him to standing. “Party’s starting. Let me get you liquored up and take advantage of you.”

“Fine. I gotta print this so you can review it for me before I submit.”

“You worried? You nailed all your other assignments,” Ian said stepping back so Mickey could turn away and start pushing papers around on his desk in a random path.

“Whatever, just wanna get this shit over with, so I can live my normal fucking life,” he complained.

“Is it worth it? Do you wish you could go back to being a protective agent rather than team lead?”

“Dunno. Guess, not. Don’t matter cause I agreed to their terms. I gotta get this diploma to climb the ladder, so I’ll do it. Even if I hate it.”

Ian glanced around the tops of all the cubicles checking that the coast was clear then he wrapped his arms around Mickey’s waist and hugged him. “I’m proud of you,” he whispered in his ear, and Mickey bonked his head against Ian’s. “Even if you don’t know how to spell recommendation.”

“Fuck you is how you spell it,” he muttered and they laughed together. Suddenly, the two lemon rums he’d thrown back before coming to get Mickey hit his system and spread warmth along his limbs. Or it was the way Mickey’s body felt against his. Most likely, it was the combination.

“Feel good,” he whispered, closing his eyes and squeezing tightly, rocking a little left and right as he milked this moment of every goddamn thing he could. “Love you.”

He honestly intended to let Mickey go then because they were at work, even if it was the Christmas party and rules were meant to be broken, but he felt Mickey relax slightly as he became heavier in Ian’s arms. He squeezed tighter and Mickey rested his temple along Ian’s chin.

“I would clean out my bank accounts to kiss you right now,” Ian said quietly but with all the longing that was zipping through his body.

“We still alone?”

Ian pulled his head back in surprise, wasting no time scanning the sea of grey partitions. “Yep!”

“Make it qu—”

Ian kissed him, hands on Mickey’s hips twisting his body to face Ian then pressing him back into the edge of the desk. He wrapped one arm around Mickey’s waist, the other snaked up his back so his palm could cradle Mickey’s head. Then he leaned in attacking his mouth.

Thirty seconds later, he pulled back enough to breath, opening his eyes to see how much shit he was going to get from Mickey.

“Jesus, Gallagher, did you cover Jaxxxxon’s eyes?”

“He’s seen worse when you still had your office,” Ian decided thinking about all the “meetings” they’d had in Mickey’s office before the water main broke yet again and Mickey was kicked back down to cubicle level. They hadn’t been able to shift their trysts over to Ian’s office because, as the Investigations Coordinator, he was situated next door to the Director. The two roles spent a lot of time reviewing cases, and Ellen thought it was more efficient if their offices were adjacent.
“Yeah, I think it stunted him seeing you blow me that many times.”

“I wish he could see me blow you right now.”

“That makes two of us,” Mickey said. “Let’s do the rounds so we can get the fuck out of here.”

He pushed Ian away, but before he could actually step back, Mickey grabbed a handful of cashmere and pulled Ian back until they were a few inches apart. Ian melted a little in anticipation. “You know anything about that fucking sign on my cubicle, Gallagher?”

Ian blinked in surprise, feeling like he had whiplash from the change in mood. “Um,” he began.

“You swore you’d never lie to me, man.”

“Mickey, I don’t want to be in the middle of this.”

“Whose side are you on, Ian!”

“Yours!”

“Did you know about the birthday cake?”

“No, I swear,” he said placing a hand on his heart. “I didn’t know about the Christmas decorations either.”

“I’m gonna find out who’s behind all this bullshit, and they’re gonna pay.” After hitting the print icon, he shut down the computer and pushed past Ian to exit the cubicle, the Mexican bobblehead guarding the entrance. “I need some fucking staples too. Bastards think they can get away with pranking me.”

Ian followed admiring the fit of his dark jeans and the way the dress shirt molded to his triceps. “Uh, maybe you just ran out of staples.”

“That seems coincidental, don’t you think, Ian?” he shot back, giving Lucy’s old cubicle a side glare as they passed it on the way to the copy room.

“Well, technically, to determine if two events are coincident, they must match point by point and—”

Mickey glanced over his shoulder, eyes stormy.

“Right, I agree. Coincidence, definitely,” Ian said nodding even though Mickey had turned back toward the copy room. Ian could see his shoulders tighten as he pushed open the door.

“Why didn’t you just let me grab your printout?” Ian asked entering behind Mickey and flicking the light on.

“Cause I ain’t no pussy.”

Ian smiled at that. “Well, we could always take back the power.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Mickey asked as he keyed his password into the copier control panel.

“It’s an office Christmas party tradition to photocopy body parts.”

“You thinking of putting your dick on that thing?” Mickey snickered as the machine hummed to life.
“No. I had something else in mind.” Ian’s eyes traveled down Mickey’s body.

A huff followed that answer. “You fucking wish, bitch.”

“I mean it would be a way to turn bad memories into good ones.”

“Nothing, not even putting my bare ass on that copier is going to make me hate it less. I knew from the moment I started working here that it was evil.”

As he said it, the machine kicked in, internal parts clunking menacingly.

“Well, I’m not gonna argue with you about that. Even though I still think you should hop up there.” He was trying not to crack up completely.

“How about you just take a picture of my ass?”

“Yes! Right now?” Ian’s hand shot out to close the copier room door.

“Jesus, Gallagher, no.”

“Come on.”

Ian pulled him against his body, running his hands over the ass in question, starting to feel the heat build between them.

“I can’t. Not with that thing in the room watching us,” he said pushing Ian away and turning at the sound of his print job finding its way through the machine. “Still can’t believe you figured this shit out. Entire e-division was asleep at the fucking wheel. No wonder head office scooped you up to lead the Investigations unit.”

As Ian watched Mickey grab each sheet of paper as it shot out of the printer, he let himself feel some pride that not only had he solved the mystery as to how Lucy got her hands on confidential information but that he’d also gotten legitimately hired by Elite. The executive team had been impressed enough with his problem solving and research skills that they’d offered him the Investigations Co-ordinator position after his discovery.

Of course, they’d also been adamant that Mickey and Ian not be allowed out in the field together, which wasn’t a huge problem as the two units didn’t do extensive fieldwork together. Ian’s job involved studying evidence and looking for patterns as opposed to handling security directly.

“You’re fucking smart, Ian.” Mickey had all his printouts and was searching the cabinet for a paper clip and staples.

“Soft countermeasures, Mickey,” Ian laughed at the snort that floated over to him. “There was only a certain number of ways that Lucy could get the details about both the diamond transport and the gun transport. It was just a process of elimination, considering and rejecting each possible choice until only one remained. Paper. We printed copies of everything.”

“Oh, Sherlock.”

“So basically, the photocopier did it,” Ian said getting a nod of agreement from Mickey as he returned to Ian.

“I fucking knew it deep down inside.”

Ian laughed. “Well, you now know all the settings are changed, so no one can access print jobs from
the copier anymore.”

Mickey crossed his arms, refusing to change his mind about the copier.

“Hey,” Ian said, wrapping his arms around Mickey’s biceps, pausing momentarily to squeeze them and smile because he’d been spotting Mickey in the gym several times a week. “The activity log is regularly checked to make sure print jobs don’t remain in the queue after printing, everyone has to enter a password now in order to access their print jobs, and they’ve updated the features to include biodirect—”

“Jesus, Gallagher, I’ve been working here the last four months, I know all that mumbo jumbo. It just doesn’t change shit as far as I’m concerned.”

“Since there’s no way anyone can access our print requests from the copier anymore,” Ian concluded. “It’s time to forgive the machine and find a way to work together.”

“You suggesting I become friends with this goddamn thing?”

“Maybe just not enemies?”

“How do we know that someone isn’t cooking up a new scheme to use the vending machine to access confidential information?”

Ian watched his eyebrows slowly travel up his forehead as he got more exasperated.

“I love you so much.”

“What?” Mickey’s eyebrows dropped down two inches as he studied Ian warily.

“Sorry, I got distracted,” Ian said. “Anything’s possible, but you know I’ve been working with the e-division to develop comprehensive security protocols with interfacing and scalability that…”

“Jesus, Ian, I need a fucking drink after being forced to endure that sentence.”

“Oh, good to know. I was thinking of chanting that to you in bed tonight.” He moved closer, lowering his voice. “Whispering in your ear about sensitive due diligence.”

Mickey pretended to yawn. “Maybe ask you to make a recommendation,” he snickered, shifting in time to avoid getting his belly pinched.

“I do need a drink though,” Mickey declared, then flapped his essay at Ian. “Make that a dozen drinks.”

“I’ll drive tonight. You have as many as you want.”

“We can cab it.” They stopped at Mickey’s cubicle so he could drop off his paper.

“Nope, I’m good. Let’s go party.”

As they passed the grouping of e-division work stations, Mickey didn’t even miss a step as he flicked a Deadpool bobblehead over the edge, the tiny Santa hat on its head flying off. “Fucking e-dweeds should a known about the print settings on the copier. Not exactly rocket fucking science.”

Ian ushered Mickey forward, hands on his shoulder blades, pushing him into the mingling crowd and Christmas cheer. “You need alcohol, STAT!”
“Jesus, looks like someone ate a Christmas party then threw it back up in here,” Mickey commented. Ian grinned down at him, looping an arm around his boyfriend’s waist and giving him a squeeze.

Their arrival in the Elite reception area timed exactly with Mandy’s exiting from the elevator, looking tanned and relaxed, smiling as she scanned the party goers until she found her brother and Ian, who had snagged a bottle of Budweiser from the cooler set in a corner and was stuffing it into Mickey’s hand.

“Well, looks like little miss sunshine enjoyed her vacation,” Mickey said lifting the beer bottle to his lips. “Must a gotten laid.”

Ian agreed, as her happy face stopped in front of them. “Mexico agrees with you. Welcome back.”

“Well, I figured if it was good enough for grumpy pants, it’s good enough for me.”

“You don’t say,” Mickey began, eyes tracking Axton who was helping Kyle man the DJ system laid out on the reception desk. “Looks like Axton got a tan on his vacation too.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Mandy agreed, smile challenging her brother to mess with her. “I’d forgotten that he was going away. Maybe I’ll ask him how it went.”

“Yes, why don’t you do that. Ask him if he got laid,” Mickey yelled as she flipped him off, heading straight for the Axton, who had reindeer antlers attached to his preppy blond hair and a pile of electrical cords in his hand. He all but threw them at Kyle when Mandy arrived.

“A goddamn Shakespearean play around here.” Mickey jumped slightly at the sound of Slava’s voice, making Ian chuckle. “Nobody died though.”

“Jesus, Slav, don’t say shit like that,” Mickey barked eyes shooting to Ian.

“Sorry, Mick, my bad.”

Ian laid his hand on Mickey’s lower back for a second, trying to soothe him as the three of them watched the festivities. People were chatting, milling, swaying to bad Christmas music. Eventually, their little circle grew to include Mandy, Axton and Kyle.

“I’m trying to escape Ellen’s pictures of her grandchild,” Kyle said as he pressed his skinny body between Mickey and Slava.

“She’s definitely proud,” Ian agreed.

“Almost worse than Gabe’s bitching everyone out,” Mickey added.

“Luckily we still have you to fill that role,” Mandy smiled hugely at her brother.

Ian eyed the level of beer in Mickey’s bottle, preparing to grab him another if need be.

“He seems more relaxed now,” Kyle said.

“Who? Mickey?” Mandy asked, eyes bugging out. “Um, no, not since he started school.”

“Not Mickey. Gabe.”

“You’ve heard from Gabe?” Ian asked surprised.

“You guys SnapChatting?” Mickey snickered over the idea of the 20-something receptionist and the
50-something retired Director hanging out together.

“No, but Annette and I follow some of the same singers. She posted that she got backstage passes to a Maluma concert, and convinced Gabe to go,” he explained. “So jealous, oh my god.”

“Fascinating,” Mickey said, waggling his empty beer bottle in Ian’s face. Smiling at the prospect of a soon to be tipsy Mickey, he accepted the bottle.

“It really is!” Kyle agreed, obviously eager to talk about his musical interests with his work buddies now that Annette was gone. “He rarely performs outside of Colombia though, so I’ll probably never get to see him in person.”

“How’d Annette see him then?” Mickey asked and the question radiated through the circle of listeners. Ian stopped his movement toward the cooler, Slava’s attention shot fully toward Kyle, Mandy laid her hand on Axton’s forearm, and Mickey exploded. “Answer the fucking question, Kyle.”

“What?” Kyle asked, eyes widening in fear like a dog who’d peed on the carpet.

“How,” Mickey began waiting for Kyle to nod at him, “did Annette see Mam…Mala…whoever the fuck?”

“Maluma,” Kyle clarified as though that was the key bit of information.

“Yeah. Where was the concert?” Mickey took a stab at patience.

“Oh, I see,” Kyle nodded. Mickey’s hand did the thing where he is clearly trying not to smack you upside the head to get you hurry the fuck up. “In Colombia, of course. Bogotá, where Annette was born.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Mickey exploded again.

“What?” Kyle asked, head swiveling around the group as they absorbed this information. “Do you guys want to see Maluma? Cause I wouldn’t hold my breath over him coming here. One time he was in Miami but…” He trailed off realizing no one was listening to him anymore.

“Colombia,” Ian said quietly. “No, no. No?”

“That fucker,” Mickey hissed, steam almost visible from his ears and Ian whipped over to the cooler to get him a beer as he continued to spew. “That fucking prick! I wanna strangle him! What a snake!”

Ian returned with two beers, handing one over immediately.

“We don’t know anything for sure,” Slava said as Mickey sucked back his Bud in frustration.

“Oh, we fucking do. What’d you say about coincidence, Ian?” Mickey asked.

“To determine if two events are coincident, they much match point by point,” Ian began, sipping from the second beer until Mickey ripped it from his hand. “Woah, you drank that fast, Mick.”

“Better get me another, man.”

Axton offered to get a round for everyone and slipped away.

Mickey continued, “Anyway, I have no fucking idea what that means, Ian, but I do know there’s no
such thing as coincidence in the world of security. Every fucking time, I let my guard down, shit goes south. I fucking thought we had the goddamn culprit. But like you said Lucy was just a pawn.”

Ian touched the bottom of the beer bottle, encouraging Mickey to bring it to his mouth, so he’d take a breath and calm down. It worked as his throat bobbed accepting the liquid in one long pull. Now that was fascinating, thought Ian.

“If Gabe does have something to do with it, I don’t think Lucy knows, Mick,” Ian said. “She would have given it up. She would have done anything to protect Jason.”

Axton returned and Mickey accepted the full bottle at the same time as he handed him his empty bottle, which Axton looked at briefly before accepting. Mandy rolled her eyes.

Slava piped up. “I don’t think she’d know. Too risky for Gabe to work in the office with her.”

“Agreed. He’d be an idiot to shit in his own…what’s that saying?” Axton turned to Mandy for help.

“Would you egotistical assholes listen to what you’re saying?” Mandy demanded, ignoring Axton. “This may or may not be a coincidence, but you are jumping to fucking conclusions. Just leapt right over the actual information and straight to what you expect.”

“What the fuck you talking about?” Mickey bit out.

“Annette. You jumped right over her because she’s a woman.”

“No,” Mickey snarled. “I jumped over her cause she’s an admin.”

Mandy’s eyes glittered like blue jewels as she glared at her brother. “Like I said. Egotistical. Who the fuck gets shit done around here? Who has access to everything around here? You can barely print a fucking piece of paper. Ian spends half the day refilling his fucking mechanical pencil. Slava burns himself every time he tries to make a pot of coffee.”

All five men stared at her, stunned.

“Admins run the place,” she concluded, giving them all one final glare for good measure.

“Receptionists are important too,” Kyle added but everyone ignored him.

“Da-yam,” Slava said nodding vigorously. “Kyle even said she’s from Colombia, and we still assumed Gabe was the key player.”

“He may well be,” Mandy decided. “But he didn’t do this without Annette obviously.”

“Makes sense,” Ian said, mind buzzing. “When did Annette start working here?”

Five sets of eyes turned to Mandy. “Rest my case,” she muttered. “We’d have to check her file to be sure, but I’d say going on three years.”

Ian’s mind was now on fire with excitement. “Mick…” he whispered, wrapping his hand around Mickey’s bicep and not even getting distracted this time. Not much, anyway. “Mick…”

“Yes, Gallagher, I know. You’ve sucked me into your SATG pet project the last few months.”

“Could this be the thing, the pattern change that started just before the diamonds were stolen?” Ian was scanning every bit of information he’d sifted through the last decade of his life, certain that it had all led him to this point. It hadn’t been a waste of time. Even his career change, which at first had
looked like a mistake, strategically, had led to this moment.

“Yes,” Mickey decided. “I fucking know it is.”

“So it wasn’t all just the printouts. Gabe,” Ian paused under the weight of Mandy’s disdain, “and Annette knew the details of both transports. They were able to set up the thefts of the diamonds and the guns.”

“So why’d they even bother with Lucy, with the whole printer business?” Axton interrupted.

“To cover their bases? Scapegoat?” Slava offered.

Ian nodded. “Right, and they still needed information from other companies, like Helix. Gabe and Annette don’t work there.”

“What about all the other jobs you think are SATG, in other cities and shit?” Mickey was looking at him, beer bottle dangling from his fingertips forgotten. Ian grabbed it and took a sip then handed it back.

“I don’t know. Thinking.” Ian chewed his lip.

“I wonder how high up the SATG hierarchy they go,” Slava said. “If they are in Colombia, then they gotta be more than simple informants.

“Well, there’s Jack Shit we can do tonight, other than get drunk. Ian, my beer is empty.” Mickey looked expectantly at Ian while handing his empty bottle to Axton, who once again accepted it.

“Let’s keep this to ourselves for now. Who the hell knows at this point who we can event trust.”

He glared at Kyle, who took a step back right into Mandy, who placed a hand on his shoulder.

“I’m not even sure what you guys are talking about,” he said quickly. “I’m just the receptionist.”

“Remember that.”

Kyle nodded at Mickey and excused himself, stopping at the table of liquor and pouring vodka straight into his Solo cup.

The remaining Elite employees shared a final look before dispersing.

“Merry fucking Christmas,” Mickey concluded.

An hour later, Ian was politely listening to Ellen talk about her grandchild, while scanning the room for Mickey. He’d made sure that those tattooed fingers had been clasping a beer bottle all night and wondered now if his boyfriend might be relaxed enough to head home.

Mandy and Axton were dancing to what Ian assumed was the Colombian singer Kyle loved so much. It was pretty sultry and gave Ian ideas for what he and Mickey should do when they got home. Liz and Tico seemed to be swaying a little too close to each other, and Ian laughed at the idea that Mickey had called it. Slava had an arm slung around one of the e-dweebs shoulders, smiling at whatever she was saying.

It felt to Ian like he had found his place in the world, that he finally belonged somewhere. When he’d returned from Mexico and promptly packed up his shit to take to Mickey’s apartment, Lip hadn’t even bothered to give him a hard time, just ate his bowl of corn flake as Ian stuffed clothes into his
duffel bag and a couple of garbage bags.

“So I guess you won’t be going out with Frankie again, huh?” Lip snickered and Ian ignored him. “You really do love him.”

“Yeah.”

“How’s the sex?”

Ian just smiled hugely as he thought about what word could possibly sum up sex with Mickey. He zipped up his duffel bag and dragged all his shit out of the bedroom to where Mickey was waiting with Carl.

“I’m ready,” he said and Mickey took the garbage bag from his hands.

“I’m ready to go home, Ian,” Mickey said, pulling Ian from his memories and back to the office Christmas party. His fingers ran lightly over the back of Ian’s dress pants, and Ian’s eyes shot to Ellen, but she had turned to her admin to show her a photo on her iPhone.

By the time Ian turned around, Mickey was at the elevator, down button activated, both of their coats draped over his arm. Ian excused himself and followed, arriving as the doors opened and Mickey stepped inside. He slowed at the open doors to find his sexy as fuck boyfriend leaning against the back of the elevator car, watching Ian from half closed eyes, coats dangling from his hand, hips pushed forward.

Ian had lost count of how many beers Mickey drank, but they had definitely softened his sharper edges. He lifted a finger to beckon Ian inside, making him swallow in anticipation as he obeyed, under Mickey’s spell. The doors closed quietly behind him, and he didn’t stop walking until he was pressed up against Mickey’s body, lips on his throat, hands on his hips.

Harsh puffs of breath escaped through Mickey’s parted lips, and Ian pressed closer, running his hands along his upper thighs, desperate to get under some of the material separating him from soft skin.

Ding.

So soon? he thought, pulling away but Mickey came with him, turning his head to connect their lips, arms around Ian’s shoulders. Ian took another step backwards as the doors opened to the parking garage. He cupped Mickey’s ass to turn him in the direction of the exit, checking for anyone lurking about. It was all clear, so he continued to kiss Mickey but kept his eyes open ensuring they actually made it to the car.

Oblivious to where they were, Mickey kissed him back, moaning and breathing into Ian’s mouth, mumbled words escaping every now and then. At the car, Ian pressed him up against it, holding him there with his thighs as he found the car keys in his jacket pocket. Mickey’s hands were on Ian’s chest, working at the buttons of his dress shirt. By the time, Ian got the passenger door unlocked, his shirt was half undone.

“In,” he said pushing Mickey toward the open car door.

“Entry permitted.”

Ian laughed giving Mickey a quick hug. “Get it the car before I fuck you right here in the parking garage.”
Mickey’s eyes lit up. “Against the front of the car?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

“We’re at work, Mick.”

“Work smerk.”

Ian laughed again. “You won’t feel that way on Monday morning.”

“That’s miles away.”

“How about I fuck you in our bed?”

“There too. And in the car.”

“You have a lot of faith in my ability to reload.”

“I don’t wanna wait until we get home,” he pouted.

“In you go.” And Ian got him into the passenger’s seat cop-style then reached around him to attach his seat belt so he stayed put. Mickey stuck his tongue in Ian’s ear the whole time.

“We should do it in the backseat.” The words shot down Ian’s spine.

“Seriously, we’re only ten minutes from home.”

“I want you,” he whispered sending more shivers down Ian’s spine. He could feel himself melting under the power this guy had over him, but he knew that Mickey would regret it the next day, especially if Ellen decided to head home anytime soon as her car was right beside theirs.

“I want you too but I want you slow, riding me for at least an hour.”

Mickey sunk his teeth into Ian’s earlobe.

“Owww!” he howled. “Jesus, Mickey.”

But Mickey just sucked on the tender spot. “Drive fast, then.”

Nine minutes later they walked in the front door of the apartment, dropping coats and shoes and keys. The lights were lit on the Christmas tree, and Ian felt the warm happiness that he’d missed most Christmases growing up. It was still three days until the official holiday, but they weren’t due back to work until after.

He didn’t realize that he was staring, lost in thought, at the tree until Mickey hooked a finger in the waistband of his dress pants, pulling him toward the sofa as he lowered the zipper. He managed to get Ian’s pants off and finished opening the buttons on his shirt before pushing him back to the sofa cushion with a determined shove.

Ian watched Mickey unbutton his own dress shirt then start in on his pants, focused intently on his work and giving Ian the opportunity to just watch, which was his favorite pastime. Naked, Mickey dropped to his knees to straddle Ian, hands on his shoulders, lips pressed lightly against his. Ian wanted to drag him forward, but figured they should probably get some lube before things got started. If this was going to be the slow event he wanted it to be, then they needed lube for sure.
“Hey,” he whispered, not wanting to break the quiet contentment they’d established. “Lemme get some lube.”

Mickey smiled at him and pushed away. Standing, he went over to the Christmas tree, bending to pick up Ian’s stocking. Whatever was in it wouldn’t come close to comparing to the sight of that ass when it was directed at Ian, but it disappeared as he turned toward Ian offering him the red velvet stocking.

“It’s not Christmas yet,” Ian said but accepted it.

“Let’s break section 17 of the handbook, okay, Gallagher?” Mickey resumed his position, straddling Ian’s legs, the stocking heavy between them.

“I think we can do that.” He peeked inside the stocking, laughing immediately as he pulled out the first large bottle. “Uberlube Luxury Lubricant,” he read.

“Now you won’t go forgetting, Ian,” he tsed. “Got you the fancy shit cause I know you like that hippie dippy stuff.”

“Only the best for your ass, Mick.” He pulled out two more bottles turning them this way and that as he checked them out. “Can’t wait to write reviews for each one.”

Mickey chuckled. “I think that’s called porn, man.”

“Fine, I can’t wait to write porn then.” Ian tossed the three bottles aside, sticking his hand back in the stocking and pulling out a bag of peanut M&M’s. “Yummy.” Then he dumped the stocking upside down on the cushion beside him. A rainbow of M&M’s foil bags fell out. “Holy shit. How’d you find all these flavors?”

“I used this thing called the internet.”

Ian nodded. “Well, I can’t wait to do a taste test. These Nutella ones are at the top of the list.”

“Okay, but first let’s do those reviews of the lube,” Mickey said, grabbing the Uberlube and cracking the top.

“Wait,” Ian said, taking the bottle from his hands and looking at his beautiful eyes. “I wanna give you your present too.”

“Don’t wanna wait until it’s technically Christmas?”

“No,” he said but he suddenly felt nervous, almost afraid.


“Sorry, no, nothing. Just…scoot so I can grab it.”

Mickey slid to the cushion, grabbing the bag of Thai coconut M&M’s and tearing it open with his teeth. He’d eaten two by the time Ian returned with a rectangular gift wrapped box, sitting down beside Mickey.

“Come back,” he said holding the gift out of the way and nodding at his lap.

Once Mickey was back in place, Ian held the shiny box with his flattened palms, and Mickey raised his brows slightly in anticipation. “What’d ya get me, Ian?”
“Um,” Ian swallowed, watching his face closely.

“You don’t look very excited to be giving me this present.” Mickey’s hands stilled on the corner of the paper where he was about to rip it.

“Sorry, I’m excited. Now open it.”

Mickey didn’t waste any more time tearing into the paper then, frowning in concentration as a wooden box appeared. He tossed the paper on the floor and peered closer at the top of the box. Two stylized M’s were engraved in the cherry wood finish.

“Fancy, Gallagher,” Mickey said and Ian could see color forming in his cheekbones. He wanted to run his thumbs over them, feeling the heat of his skin. Whatever Mickey was thinking it was making his body react because his breathing was a little shallow too. “Did you get me a gun?”

“You’ll have to open it to find out,” Ian said quietly, feeling his heart racing. He wasn’t sure why he was so freaked out, but hoped it wasn’t showing. Mickey smiled at him as he unhooked the clasp.

Blue eyes widened so much that Ian felt himself start to seriously freak out. He didn’t look happy, just shocked and frozen.

“No,” Mickey said, shaking his head in confusion. “What the fuck, Ian?”

“I…” but for some reason Ian couldn’t find words, didn’t know how to explain why he’d spent $13,000 on a Christmas gift for his boyfriend of four months.

“No way, Ian. I can’t accept this! How the fuck did you afford it?” Mickey was saying all of this while holding in his hands 40 ounces of billet steel covered in black mirror double blued finish. He didn’t even look at Ian, just held the gun in his hands, fingers sliding over the shiny grip. “Fuck.”

Ian was still holding the open gun case between their naked bodies and Mickey suddenly snapped out of it, laying the gun back in the contoured padding and shutting the lid with a click, then taking the case from Ian’s hands and sitting it on the cushion next to the M&M’s.

“Ian, I can’t…” but it was Mickey’s turn to search for words. They were staring at each other.

“You can’t tell me you don’t like it.” Ian shrugged.

“Did you fucking steal it?” Mickey asked, eyes narrowed.

“What?” Ian pulled back offended. “You think I’d give you a stolen gun for Christmas?”

“This thing is worth over fifteen grand. What’d you take out a fucking loan?”

“Well, I got a good deal.”

“How good?”

“A few thousand less than that.”

“Why?” Mickey narrowed his eyes a little searching Ian’s face.

“I’m persuasive when I want to be.” He shrugged but lifted his chin in defiance.

“Persuaded who?”
Ian cracked open the box to look down at the Desert Ironwood nestled in the foam molding.

“Eyes up here, Ian.”

Their eyes met.

“Lamont.”

“What?” Mickey spat, crossing his arms.

“I contacted him before the courts released the guns to the auction house and expressed my interest in arranging a pre-show sale.”

“Expressed your interest, huh?”

“Yes, I expressed it well enough that I got the gun for under market value.”

Mickey was chewing the corner of his bottom lip as he watched Ian. There was no way that Mickey was worried that Ian had expressed his interest in a sexual manner of any sort, but he was obviously adjusting to the idea that Ian had used his charm to wheel and deal.

“We’ll just leave it at that for now,” Mickey decided. “Second question. Did you rob a bank?”

“Sort of.”

Mickey’s eyes shot open.

“I cleaned out my bank accounts,” Ian stated, chin lifted once more. “All of them.”

“Like fuck.”

“Come on, Mickey. It’s my money. I can spend it how I want. How I want is on you.”

Without warning, Mickey kissed him, hard and quick then pulled back.

“Fuck, Gallagher,” he spat. “I guess it’s a good goddamn thing I bought the expensive lube.”

Ian laughed, relief weakening his limbs slightly. He’d been afraid this would end in a fight.

“We’ll talk more about this, but right now I want to make sure I say thank you really fucking properly.”

He flicked the lube open, wetting both his hand and Ian’s, then tossed the bottle aside, so he could concentrate on Ian’s half erect cock and getting his tongue back in Ian’s mouth. He worked his fingers until Ian was hard and breathing harshly, then slid his still slick fingers between his legs finding his hole and rubbing light circles to the same rhythm as Ian’s fingers had found on Mickey’s body. They watched each other, intimacy at an all time high, even for them.

When Ian pressed inside, Mickey pushed back on his finger and rolled his hips, the movement getting him ready faster. He flattened his palm against Ian’s balls and brought his mouth to Ian’s ear, breathing deeply into it for a moment, feeling Ian shiver in response.

“I love you.”

Ian’s arm locked around his waist and lifted him high enough that he could enter him quickly. They were both ready and the Uberlube was definitely luxurious as there was absolutely no resistance. It
was just one smooth slide until they were fully connected.

Whole, really.

Mickey moved his hips again, controlling their movements, determining their speed. He was taking his time, pulling every ounce of pleasure from their union, while Ian kneaded his hips, kissing his throat and chest, chanting his name and making Mickey bite his lip hard to keep himself in check.

When Ian’s fingers wrapped around his cock, it was almost too much as his body contracted and prepared to give in to the need. His chin dropped, lips seeking Ian’s, and just before he found them he whispered.

“Baby.”

Ian’s foot shot out, kicking the coffee table out of the way and Mickey found himself on his back pressed in to the coarse fibers of the carpet, Ian’s weight covering him. He wrapped his arms and legs around the man above him and held on.

Held on as he thrust into Mickey. Held on as he chanted Mickey’s name. Held on as Mickey shot his load between their bodies and accepted Ian’s into his own body.

They were quiet for a moment, overwhelmed by how intense things could get between them sometimes. They lay breathing heavily, hearts quieting against each other. Mickey thinking about his gift, and Ian thinking about Mickey thinking about his gift.

“Thank you, Ian.”

He pulled back to make eye contact. “Only if you’re okay with it. We could sell it and make a profit.”

Mickey watched him closely.

“Put the money toward buying that place in Mexico.”

“Shit,” Mickey said frowning at him.

“Yup, I was torn between those two things.”

“Nah, you made the right choice. We can save for the apartment,” he nodded. “Together.”

Ian pressed his lips together in a happy smile.

“Up, getting stiff and gotta clean up jizz.”

“I’ll help you.”

They made their way to the bathroom, cleaning up and getting ready for bed. “What are we going to do about Gabe?”

“And Annette?” Ian smiled into the mirror.

Giving Ian an eye roll, he spit toothpaste into the sink. “Yeah, her too.”

“I should probably call Mack.” Ian suggested.

“Um, no. That fucker doesn’t deserve to know.”
“Hey, he’s still the closest thing to a father I’ve ever had,” Ian countered.

“So? He’s a dick.” Mickey rinsed his toothbrush, moving out of the way so Ian could spit.

“Come on, you’re going to have to get to know him. We’re going to end up visiting.”

Snorting, Mickey ignored that. “Whatever. Let’s look into a few things ourselves then make a decision.”

“Yeah, that’s probably best. Could be nothing, no sense ruining the guy’s retirement by sicking the Feds on him.”

“Exactly,” Mickey agreed but Ian knew it had nothing to do with Gabe’s vacation plans. “As soon as we return to work, we’ll start snooping.”

“Deal.”

“First I gotta get this fucking paper finished,” he griped. “Shit!”

“What?” Ian dropped his toothbrush into the holder.

“I left all my shit at work, man. In my fucking cubicle.”

“You were feeling those half dozen beers. Almost let me bend you over the hood of the car in the parking garage.”

“Mm, like the sounds of that.”

“Yeah?” Ian slid his body between Mickey and the bathroom counter. “How about we head into the office tomorrow and get your school work, then we find a secluded place to park?”

“Interesting,” Mickey agreed. “Maybe I’ll catch those fuckers red-handed messing with my cubicle.”

“About that,” Ian began.

“What? You better fess the fuck up, Gallagher, if you ever hope to have another orgasm in your natural life.”

Ian chuckled, loving how Mickey had to jump straight to the worst threat. “Well, I may have overheard that when you return from the Christmas break, there will be a water cooler set up in your cubicle.”

Mickey crossed his arms, lips puffing out as he worked up a good fit. “This is fucking war.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, that’s a wrap and yes, the photocopier did it. 😊

I’m about to ramble, so feel free to accept my thanks for reading and run off. I look forward to meeting again…

First, I want to say that Raine called it and there’s no way that I can leave this at 29 chapters. The idea of that will keep me up at nights, so a little later in the future, I’ll post
an epilogue to the epilogue because no way is Gabe getting away with this. That snake!

Second, holy shit, thank you so damn much for enjoying this and letting me know, for commenting throughout and making me so damn happy. I can’t add anything more than what I’ve put in the comments, and the comment section is my favorite place in the world. If you haven’t read them all, it’s worth going back for. They are hilarious and witty and wonderful!

Third, it was torture to keep quiet during your theories and helpful reminders because it was like reliving my experience writing the story as I tried to decide who/what happened. When I started it in April last year, two problems came up. First, it was my first full-on AU and I didn’t know how to write the characters in such a different world, so I turned to Raine who keeps her characters constant in a million different AUs. She told me to bring canon into the AU, so that’s what I did. Basically, everything that happened in here was canon—with a twist.

The other problem was that I wanted Ian to be the thief. I tried so hard to make it happen, but I just couldn’t force it and he turned into a good guy. So that really messed with the plan and I gave up, but first I sent the chapters I’d written to Nic, who reminded me over the past year that I needed to tell her who stole the diamonds, that it would be cruel to leave the mystery hanging. 😊 Then in April of this year, Doddz said her red pen had gathered dust and needed something to do.

Anyway, as I banged my head against the wall trying to figure out who stole the fucking diamonds, my husband learned the meaning of patience as I ran every damn idea past him and BookJunkie sent me musical inspiration to keep going and Ashja requested a Rock of Ages/GV mashup giving me a chance to try out AU writing.

So basically, thank you to everyone who offers kind words and support. If you ever hesitate to comment, I’m here to tell you that writing is lonely, and getting an email notification is like having a chat with a friend while working. I appreciated the love, but also the honest reactions and the questions. It’s all valuable and desired.

Now that I’ve written another fic in this note box, I’ll sum up that I think I tried out everyone of your heist ideas at some point in planning and laughed in memory when I saw them show up in the comments. Then one day, I was screaming internally at the photocopier when it kept eating my copies, and I thought “the photocopier did it!”

See you later this summer for the follow-up and a visit from Timeless Yev. 😄 For now, I have so many fics to read…Nic, Raine, Doddz, Stars_fall_on, Jam_mm, Erika, PrettyCalypso, Koganfrancis, britney1, Gal_Pal…let me know if I can add you to my list! If you’re looking for reading material, click on their names in the comments, maybe I’ll see you in the comment sections.

Love, Jackie

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!