Twisted By Design

by orphan_account

Summary

“You touched me like you expected me to touch you back, even though I never did. You’ve always treated me like I’m okay. And that makes me feel okay.”

My Chemical Romance, still unknown and fresh out of the Jersey scene, need a keyboardist. Stella Anderson, while perhaps not happy to, is willing to help out an old friend. One thing leads to another and, before she knows it, Stel is a part of the band. She never meant to get invested, not when she's enough of a mess as it is, but My Chem is one good thing she can't let go of.

Notes

For vanilla_fiend
I miss you

Written for bandombigbang 2011 Wave One

Bonus tracks/ Enhance content:
Mix by lemniciate
Art by amkave

This is probably one of the most self-indulgent things I’ve ever written. It is, after all, a female OC. It’s also a story that gripped me from the very beginning. Writing has been amazing. When I first started writing it I wrote 10,000 words in under a week. I have taken every effort to have Stella be a proper character. But I’m warning you super in advance.
There’s a female original character. With something of a badfic premise. You’ve been warned.

I take trigger warnings very seriously and have tried to treat this topic with the sensitivity that it deserves. If you feel that I have not adequately warned or have been disrespectful in any way I would very much like for you to private message me or leave an anonymous comment here and I will do my best to address your concerns.

See the end of the work for more notes.

Every single one of us is twisted by design / And dispatches from the back of my mind / Say as long as we're here everything is alright.

You! Me! Dancing - Los Campesinos

It’s the day before they’re due to start recording and they’re all so hyped up that Frank is honestly surprised that no one’s exploded or died yet. Gerard is jittery and fidgety and his eyes have a wide look that Frank recognizes from the first days of Pencey.

They’re all sitting in the studio, practising and jamming, going over the same song over and over again. Frank has a constant little voice in the back of his head telling him that he’s dreaming and that they haven’t really asked him to be in their band. Gerard’s insisting that they go over Munroeville and he’s been obsessing over it for an hour and a half.

“We’re missing something.” He says, gesturing wildly. Mikey has a tired look in his eyes when he pulls his head up from his bass.

“We were missing something Gee. We have Frank now.” Mikey says with the world weary tone of the sensible and responsible younger sibling. Gerard gestures dismissively.

“Yeah, no. I know that. No, Ray. look at this.” Gerard grabs his other notebook, his song notebook, and shoves it at Ray. He takes it sceptically. Gerard is rambling about musical feeling and pointing at chord progressions. Rays nods along. “I feel like something’s missing but I can’t tell what.” Gerard says, just about tearing his hair out. Gerard has heaps of natural musical talent but little to no experience or training and it frustrates him when he can’t express his ideas in words.

“Frank, come here.” Ray says, pushing Gerard along the couch to make room. Frank picks up his guitar and sits down next to Ray. He hands him Gerard’s notebook that has all their songs and Frank begins to look at the verse that had Gerard all fidgety.

Gerard chews his lips. Out of the five of them, Ray and Frank have the most musical experience. Matt’s a mean drummer but, like most drummers, his mind is on the bass line and not musical fluency of expression.
“I think Gerard’s right, there’s something missing here but I’m not sure,” Ray says.

Frank nods and idly plays a few lines on his guitar. Gerard has a point. The melody’s a good one but it’s almost like there’s holes in it. Frank plays it again and then again. It’s frustrating, seeing the holes but not knowing how to fill them. He plays it slowly and thinks about increasing the rhythm part, which wouldn’t work, or co-opting Mikey’s bass line, which would fuck up the beat. Whichever way he pushes and pulls the instruments in his head they’re just not enough. They’re a five man band, which is usually enough but not enough for the way that Gerard’s trying to push this song.

“Fuck,” He says finally and takes his fingers off the frets. Gerard looks at him, worried.

“What is it?” Ray asks. Frank shakes his head and leans back on the couch.

“I see where the holes are,” He says, gesturing at Gerard. “But we’d need a keyboardist to fill them. And last I checked, none of you know how to play piano.”

Mikey swears loudly, which surprises all of them. Gerard is thinking, obviously turning songs over in his head. Ray looks at Mikey and lifts a questioning eyebrow. Mikey gestures at Gerard, who is scribbling in the notebook now.

“Now we’re not going to be able to get anything done until we get a keyboardist or he learns to play piano.” Mikey says tiredly. Matt swears as well. They can all see that Gerard is well and truly in love with the idea that he’s got going, and then he hits his crash cymbal really hard, to further express his frustration. Frank rolls his eyes at him but lets it go.

Ray massages the bridge of his nose.

“You really think we need a keyboardist?” Ray asks, resigned. Frank shrugs.

“You can see it for yourself man.” Frank says. Ray nods

“Yeah, I know. Where the fuck are we going to find a keyboardist?”

Matt drops his head onto one of his toms and makes a choked groaning noise.

“We start recording tomorrow!” He says, face still pressed against the drum skin. Gerard has moved off the couch, into the corner of the room and is silently talking to himself. Frank can hear the bridge of Monroeville being whispered over and over again. He sighs.

“I know someone; I can give them a call. They’ll probably say no but they owe me a favour.” Frank shrugs. Ray gestures towards the phone in the corner of their practice space.

“They any good?” Matt asks as Frank dials. Frank nods and smiles.

“Fucking amazing,” He says. Stella picks up on the fifth ring.

“Hello?” She says warily.

“Hey Stel, it’s Frank. Wanna come play keyboard in the band I’m in?” He says, all in one rush of breath.

“Fuck you, no” She says, not angrily.

“C’mon Stel, it’s not like you have anything better to do.”

“Some of us have real jobs Frank.” She says, only a little meanly.
“Fuck you, you hate your job. Call in sick!”

“Which band are you even in now?”

He has to fill her in on the past couple months of his life and then jump the question on her, again.

“Will you come and play with us, please?” He says very quickly, like maybe she’ll just hear the interrogative note at the end and say yes without thinking.

“What the hell Frank, no.” She says flatly.

“Please?” He whines, just on the dignified side of begging. She bitches him out for five minutes and he waits patiently.

“Hey Stella, c’mon. These guys are really good.”

“That’s what you said about Pencey,” She says but it’s not cruel, just a reminder. He feels his mouth twist up in a grimace.

“They need a keyboardist. We need a keyboardist.” Frank says instead of getting angry about Pencey and his shitty luck. Stella makes a vaguely interested noise into the phone.

Frank does end up begging but he wasn’t lying about Stella owing him a favour and she finally relents. He puts the phone down grinning, even though he’s agreed to pick her up from the train station at ass o’clock in the morning.

Gerard is looking at him like he’s Jesus Christ and he’s just turned the water into wine.

“You got us a keyboardist?” Gerard says, like he’s only just tuned back into Radio Real Life. Frank wouldn’t be surprised. He smiles wide though, because Gerard’s hard to say no to.

“Yeah,” he says on the exhale. “I have to pick her up from the station tomorrow morning; she’s coming down from NY.”

“She?” asks Matt. Frank makes a face at him.

“Her name’s Stella. She filled in for Pencey once or twice. She’s a friend,” he says, trying to phrase his reply so that none of the dorks that he’s friends with bitch about him springing a surprise girl on them.

“She lives in New York?” Gerard says, almost hopefully. He doesn’t really miss New York but it has a special place in his heart. Frank nods.

“She’s from there,” Frank says simply. Mikey suspects there is something that’s being skirted around.

“Is she just playing with us for the record or is she joining?” Ray asks as pragmatically as always. Frank shrugs.

“Personally, I think she’d be fucking awesome in My Chem. But she...she doesn’t really play well with others.” He says, spreading his hands before him. Ray makes a noise like a question. Frank shrugs again, like he’s unsure how to continue.

“Stella has... issues,” he says. “So just, like, don’t fuck with her? She plays keyboard like she invented it,” he says, as if that ends the discussion. It basically does because then Matt suggests they should all go out and Frank says he can’t, he has to drive in the morning but Gerard’s for it which
means Mikey is and Ray gets dragged along for the ride.

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Everyone is already at the studio and fiddling with their instruments when Frank bangs through the door. A woman follows him in, towering over him even in a pair of sneakers. She’s wearing jeans with holes in them and her shirt hangs off one shoulder to show a coloured tattoo of Pippi Longstocking.

She flicks her fringe out of her eyes with a twitch of her neck and surveys the studio. There’s a bruise beside her eye, turning yellow around the edges.

“Sorry we’re late, traffic was a bitch,” Frank says, waving his arms. “Guys, this is Stella.” He gestures at her and her eyes flick back and forth around them. Ray takes a step forward, ever the gentleman, and extends a handshake to her.

“Thanks for saying you’d play with us. I’m Ray,” he says. She shakes his hand lightly and smiles warily.

“Tiamo Frankie a favour,” she says. “It’s no problem.” She smiles with half her mouth like maybe they can make it a problem.

Frank looks over at Gerard and sort of points Stella in that direction.

“Stella, this is Gerard,” he says. There’s an odd tone to his voice, like he’s talking to a child or someone who’s not all there. Stella smiles at Frank like she’s indulging him and then looks Gerard up and down critically.

“Frankie says you sing,” she says, as if she doubts the wisdom of listening to Frankie now. Mikey recognizes the way that Gerard’s face twists and he knows that he’s about to curl in on himself and be embarrassed and have his fragile ego injured. Frank swats her shoulder.

“Hey, he’s good. Just because you’re cranky from the train doesn’t mean you have to be a bitch,” he says and picks up his guitar from where it’s leaning against the couch. She makes a face at him.

“Tiny,” she bites out playfully. Frank rolls his eyes.

“Beanpole,” he shoots back.

“Freak.”

“Weirdo.”

“Crazy.”

“Okay, so let me get this straight,” Matt interrupts. “We’ve got Frank already and now we’re getting another five year old?” Everyone laughs.

“Fuck off,” Frank says, flipping Matt off casually. “C’mon Stel, just play something already,” he says, pointing at a keyboard set up in the corner. She wanders over and runs her hand along the keys carefully. She looks up at Gerard through her fringe, already picking up on Gerard’s muted I’m-the-leader vibe.

“What do you want me to play?” she says, her lips twisting into a kind smile. He shrugs.

“I dunno, something good,” he says. She laughs and then nods.
“Something good. I can do that.” Then she looks down shyly, bends over and presses her fingers to the keys. There’s a brief moment of silence and she breathes in deeply and then launches into something blindingly fast. Her fingers dance across the keys but she’s eerily still, only her arms and hands moving while the rest of her body hangs bent over and poised just above the keyboard.

Suddenly, her whole body heaves with a movement though her shoulders like she’s about to throw up. Gerard starts forward but then stops when she just keeps playing, fingers flying over the keys. Frank doesn’t react to something he’s seen her do before and smiles smugly as Ray starts to nod along and Matt looks thoughtful. Stella’s brilliant, he’s always known this, but now some other people get to know too.

Later, she and Frank sit on the couch and he plays some of his verses over and over again both as practice and to help Stella work though some writing of her own. Gerard has his lyrics and Frank and Ray help him work through putting them to guitar music and then putting it all together. It’s been Ray and Gerard writing mostly and Matt sometimes but none of them have any piano training so it’s up to Frank and Stella to write the keyboard parts. Frank doesn’t really have much piano training either but he’s worked with Stella before.

Gerard is watching them nervously from the other side of the room, chewing on his lip. Mikey is ignoring Gerard watching them. Matt is recording a track and Ray is watching him through the glass, looking just as nervous as Gerard does. Stella’s pulled her keyboard onto her lap, away from the stand to play along with Frank. She leans into him, looking over his shoulder to watch him play. They debate and bicker over the songs and occasionally Gerard will butt in with input about a verse or line.

It’s nearly the end of the day but Frank and Stella have managed to pull together rough keyboard tracks for all the songs and they’re both exhausted. He leans his forehead on her shoulder and groans loudly. She rolls her shoulder but doesn’t push him off.

“I think we should practice with you,” Ray says to her. She looks up from her keyboard. “Now,” he says to clarify.

“Really?” she says, brushing her fringe out of her eyes.

They do practice. Unbeknownst to Stella, the band had a frantic, whispered meeting in the hallway while she was working. Frank doesn’t say much because they know what he thinks; he thinks that Stella’s amazing. He doesn’t say why or how he knows her but it’s clear that she’s a friend.

“She’s weird,” Gerard hisses. Mikey rolls his eyes.

“I don’t really think you get to say that,” Mikey whispers back. Gerard sticks his tongue out at him.

“She plays well.”

“We don’t know her!” Gerard says.

“I know her,” Frank says. Gerard wrinkles his nose up but it’s clear that she’s a friend.

“If it feels right,” is all he says.

And somehow, just like that, Stella is part of the thing they have, this band. They practice together and it feels amazing and sounds even better because Stella’s good – she wasn’t making that shit up. She can play, and play well, and well enough that they ignore the strange way that she flinches away when they get too close. It isn’t that it’s noticeable at first but they’ve spent the whole day together
and the only person who can get close is Frank.

At one point Gerard tries to touch her tattoos, like he did with Frank, but she flinches back so hard that her neck almost cracks. She looks at him with wide eyes like a deer in the headlight. Frank puts a hand on her wrist.

“Gerard likes tattoos,” he says calmly. Stella sweeps her eyes up and down over Gerard.

“He looks pretty fucking clean to me,” she says, her lips forming around the ‘fucking’ viciously. Gerard shrugs. He thinks it’s meant to be an insult but he can’t be sure.

“I don’t like needles,” he says. She gives a one shouldered shrug as she calms down.

“Fair enough.”

When they finish practising, Stella staggers back from her keyboard, massaging her wrists.

“Fuck,” she says, looking around. “Frankie, you were right. You guys are good.” She waves a hand distractedly. Frank smiles.

“We’re good. You mean we’re good.”  

Stella is trying to make up for all the cigarettes that she missed out on during her and Frank’s frantic writing. She’s working her way through her pack like someone’s about to take it away from her, not even stopping in between drags to enjoy the burn. She’s a real chain smoker, not like Frank who enjoys the buzz but can’t smoke a whole pack in one sitting.

They’re both sitting on a low wall outside the studio, legs pressed against each other. It’s fucking cold. There’s the sound of a door closing and then Gerard walks up alongside them, holding a pack of cigarettes.

“I guess great minds think alike,” Frank says. Stella taps the ash off the end of her cigarette. Gerard makes a vague sound of agreement and lights up. Stella doesn’t even speak in between cigarettes, just keeps going. Gee watches her, impressed.

“You smoke like you’ve got a death wish,” Gerard says. Frank thinks that he thinks that he sounds deep. It’s actually a pretty good way to describe Stella though. She snorts and then pulls her cigarette out of her mouth. There’s a noticeable tremor in her wrists.

“Maybe I do,” she says. She’s got a smoker’s voice, a little rough around the edges and too old for her. She’s older than Frank but not as old as Gerard. Gee’s eyebrows do some interesting acrobatics that Frank watches sort of idly, debating whether or not he wants to continue this cigarette. Stella’s kind of intense and angry, especially toward strangers, and no matter how well they played together Stella still does not like new people.

“Do you?” Gerard finally asks before taking a long drag on his cigarette. Stella smiles vaguely.

“I did,” she says, and then drops the butt of her last cigarette to the ground, putting it out with the toe point of her shoe.

On tour they live in a van for weeks. It sucks; Stella knows it sucks. No one’s ever comfortable, and
while everyone gets on you can’t live with five other people in a van for three weeks and not have some fights. There aren’t any punches thrown though, which is good because she doesn’t really know the other boys, not yet, and when people try to punch her she gets angry. Gerard drinks a lot but he’s not a mean drunk, just a giggly one and sometimes a sad one. Mikey doesn’t drink much at all, says it fucks with his head, and she doesn’t really get him, he’s so quiet and not there.

She thought that they’d all be like Frank, when he first told her (before he called her about playing for them, way before) about My Chemical Romance. He wasn’t in it then and Pencey Prep was sort of in the process of falling apart, and she knew that he was sad and angry that his friend(s) had it so good when all that Frank had worked towards was falling apart. So she’d sat in her shitty New York apartment and listened to Frank ramble about his life and My Chem. He hadn’t been able to keep it out of his voice. Frank Iero was in love with My Chemical Romance.

But really they’re all so different she barely knows where to start. Gerard is a troubled artist from his head to his toes but, under it all, he’s kind and awkward. Mikey is near silent but he’s funny and clever. Ray talks to you straight and that’s Ray all over, just an up-standing gentleman. Matt’s an everyman, the kind of guy who’s easy going and gets on with most people, laidback and assured.

Stella doesn’t know where she’s supposed to fit in. She’s the only girl in a band of guys. She’s the only New Yorker in a band of Jersey boys. But she likes it. She’d almost forgotten how much she loved to play to an audience. Sometimes there’s about ten disinterested scene kids in the audience and other times there’s 100 eager boys and girls in eyeliner and every time, every single time, Gerard fucking goes off. Frank throws himself around the stage, not caring about injury or safety or expensive and important equipment. They rub up against each other like a pair of teenagers in heat and the boys and girls in eyeliner fucking eat it up with a spoon. Gerard is not exactly a man hyper-aware of personal space. Every night they cram six not overly small people into their crappy van and they curl up around merch boxes and instruments and each other and Stella hates every single second it. She’s never comfortable with people so close. The boys are sensitive enough to give her the back of the van to sleep in but she’s crushed in with parts of Matt’s kit and it’s impossible to get comfortable.

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It becomes A Thing. Time passes and the band grows easy around one another and it becomes A Thing That We Do. They ask before they can touch Stella. Gerard and Frank are pretty handsy people and Mikey’s slowly picking it up and there’s a lot of hugging but they always ask Stella first.

Sometimes they forget and they wrap their arms around her only to have her jump out of their grasp, struggling to breathe. They all accept, in a vague sort of unknowing way, that Something happened to Stella. Mikey gets it, mainly because Something happened to Gerard too and they leave her alone about it. She doesn’t want to talk about it? Fine. Stella can look after herself, they say.

When they go on their first big tour and they have a bus, Stella whoops in joy and runs around the parking lot with Frank on her back. She won’t be crushed into a tiny van with boys who stink all the time anymore. She loves her life.

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Stella and Frank met in college, at Rutgers. He was a freshmen, she was a junior. The beginning of their story sounds a little like the story couples tell, which is a joke that Frank tells endlessly.

They tell their story one day, sitting in their van with nothing to do and a long drive ahead of them. Most of them are smoking; Stella taps her packet against the side of the van in time to the roll of the
wheels.

Frank tells stories like he plays guitar, jumping all around chaotically. Stella tries to keep him on track.

They met in a class that Frank was taking because it sounded cool. Tattoos and Sub-Culture. He admits it’s mainly because it had tattoos in the name. Stella is actually serious about this kind of thing. It’s why she has a degree in Urban Studies and Frank doesn’t have one at all.

Frank might be a little insensitive about some things but he doesn’t mention how Stella was a different woman when he met her. He doesn’t say a word about how easy going she was then, how happy and comfortable in her own skin.

Both of them talk about falling in some kind of love with each other, about going to gigs and getting drunk and Stella basically living in Frank’s dorm room before Frank finally really dropped out of college and moved back to Belleville, leaving Stella all alone. Stella picks up the thread there about graduating from Rutgers and moving back to New York and working shitty jobs not going where she wanted. The story ends with the day that Stella got a phone call from Frank about coming down to play keyboard for some friends of his.

There’s some things they skip over and Mikey recognizes it from the way that Frank talks that Something happened after Frank dropped out. He knows that his family talks the same way about Gerard sometimes, skipping over the Somethings.

But it never seems important, to ask Stella about Something. It would have been rude. Like telling Gerard he’s drinking too much while holding a beer.

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Stella believes in Frank. She’s cynical and tired and a little worn around the edges; she struggles to believe fully in Gerard’s big wide dream that he tries to draw in the air with expansive arm gestures. (Stella knows that this is partly because Frank watches Gerard with open loving eyes that see only his hero while Stella can smell the vodka on his breath and hear the slur to his words, and be unimpressed.)

But Frank buys into this dream; he believes. And Stella will always believe in Frank. So even when she’s afraid and tired and she doesn’t understand why anyone would want to hear them play, she lifts her head up and smiles at Frank and lets him touch her. She believes in Frank. Frank believes in Gerard. There’s a symmetry to it that appeals to Gerard’s inner art student and an irony to it that appeals to Stella’s worn soul.

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They play okay shows, bad shows, good shows and then everything clicks and they play amazing shows. They play shows that are so blindingly amazing that Stella jumps up and down and screams and shakes with the adrenaline rush. Gerard drags them all along with his energy and one day he says “you should sing back up lyrics” and sure, Stella’s all for that, so she ends up screaming into a microphone while her fingers slide along her keys.

Later, when Gerard starts falling over during shows, Stella sings that little bit louder to cover up the sound of him mumbling aimlessly into the microphone. Mikey doesn’t cry but the look on his face is so pained she just wants to give him a hug.

She hasn’t given a hug in years, not even to Frank who always initiates the hugs that are his alone.
She hasn’t tried to touch anyone since before Frank dropped out of college.

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Gerard is sober, which is reason enough to throw a party. Stella thinks maybe she understands why he drinks so much. Listening to him talk makes her wince. He’s full of ideals and brilliance and dreams. Maybe he drinks to dull the burn of wasted potential.

She wouldn’t know. She’s never been much of a drinker.

Gerard is so blindingly sober that Frankie trips over his own feet in surprise and Mikey whacks his head into a cabinet in the kitchenette while trying to make food and watch Gerard talk at the same time.

He’s drawing and talking at the same time, occasionally stopping to gesture emotionally. Ray and him are going back and forth at a mile a minute about movies, songs, tv shows. It’s kind of an argument about homoeroticism in the horror genre but it sort of morphs into a scholarly discussion on the definition of film as an art form. Stella butts in with some input about the sociological tendency of young generations to use sex as a revolutionary weapon. (Only they couch it in terms of ‘well, this guy, who was an awesome motherfucker by the way...’)

Really, Stella could see some of her old professors having the same conversation, only in a room not a bus and there’d be less cigarettes and less of Gerard shouting “Well, you’re just an uneducated motherfucker with no artistic taste!”

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Stella tends to bottle everything up, packing it tightly away inside her, and then when it gets too much she just explodes out at anyone, screaming and shouting and swearing and hitting things. She starts to gets in fights like there’s no tomorrow and she’s got a death wish. She plays with a black eye three out of five shows and she’s broken her nose at least twice. She tries to punch Ray once, when she’s so angry that she can’t see. He catches her fist in one hand and rocks back onto his heels with it, looking at her like she’s breaking his heart. She calls him a fucker and wins a fight with an anonymous groupie to make herself feel better

Brian pulls her to one side after she plays a show with blood streaming down her face from her lip and nose, covering her keyboard.

“What the fuck are you trying to do?” he says angrily. He reaches out to shake her like he would do with any of the boys but then she flinches back and glares at him. He lets his arms drop guiltily. Brian forgets mainly because he’s a band manager and he’s never believed in coddling anyone. Stella makes a hacking noise in her throat and then spits out a mouthful of blood and saliva, barely missing Brian’s shoes. She gives him a dirty look and then looks away when Brian’s expression doesn’t change.

“Yeah, ‘cause we’re all in a position to go pointing fingers at who’s fucked up. Don’t act like you know Brian,” she says and then spits out some more blood. Brian opens his mouth to say something but she just turns and walks away, leaving him standing on his own.

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She doesn’t know what to do with herself. Touring has a purpose, she gets that, but it feels like they’re drifting across America. Stella think she wants to get fucked so she lets a guy in a show touch her arm as an experiment and it’s three hours before her skin stops crawling.
Brian has a security guy trail her so that she won’t start any more fights. She’s not two, she wants to shout, she can look after herself. She wants to scream at the sky but sometimes Frankie looks at her like he’s scared, like he doesn’t quite know where this is going.

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Things start to fall apart. They’ve got it good, got it so good. They’re just starting to get big, big enough that people sing along and they are a real band, a real band that people know.

Gerard drinks and gets high, and sometimes Frank joins him. Ray and Matt argue. Mikey tries to stay out of the way. Stella’s nightmares get worse. One night she wakes up in her bunk screaming. Gerard throws a book at her. He’s trying to get high in peace, thank you very much.

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Stella can’t let herself get high. She can’t. Getting high makes her see things that aren’t there and it’s like her nightmares all over again only the real world is overlaid against the dreamscape and somehow that makes it worse. She’s not like some people who get jumpy and fun when high. She gets panicked and paranoid. She screams at anything and can’t stand to talk to anyone because they’re lying, she knows it, they’re lying.

So when Gerard waves something, something powdery and a little bit shady, at her and tells her “c’mon Stel, c’mon”, she doesn’t. But she doesn’t try to make him stop. And maybe that makes her a liar too.

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Things get worse. Later, when Stella looks back on it, she has trouble remembering it. She knows that large chunks of it are missing for Gerard and that scares him but she doesn’t have an excuse. She wasn’t depressed or alcoholic. She just had baggage.

She thinks it’s the nightmares. They make it difficult to remember.

She remembers talking to Mikey a lot. Ray and Matt would argue or sleep, and Gerard would be somewhere, anywhere, and Frank would probably be looking for Gerard or a good time. And Stella and Mikey would be the only sober ones, the only ones who could hold a conversation that made any kind of sense.

Sometimes Gerard would stumble back on his own. Sometimes Frank would have his arm around his shoulders and they’d both be plastered or high as kites or both. The worst times were when Frank would be carrying Gerard, and Frank would be stone cold sober. She knows that Frank was disappointed in her. She’d been to the headspace that Gerard was in, she knew the feeling of falling and needing to have one last great hurrah. Why can’t she move off the tour bus couch and help him?

Her nightmares continue to get worse.

Mikey and her talk all the time. Ray watches Stella shake before she walks onto stage like she’s the one who’s fucked up. Matt plays whatever the fuck he wants and Ray sometimes looks like he’d be quite happy to fuck him up but nothing happens. She thinks they’re all going crazy with the tension. Everything’s just on the edge of falling apart but nothing is happening.

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“Gerard’s not okay,” Frank whispers one day, into her hair. She nods and he wraps his arms around her.

“I know sweetie,” she says, as if she of all people can offer comfort.

Gerard falls off the stage and he’s so blitzed he doesn’t even notice he’s bleeding. Matt and Ray start arguing about the show. It’s the kind of fight Stella hates; Ray and Matt snipe at each other until they’re intolerable. Frank takes Gerard to the medic station and Mikey follows Stella deeper backstage, down maintenance hallways and past storage closets. They don’t really talk; just walk next to each other in the narrow hallways, until they find an emergency exit. Mikey lights her cigarette for her and they lean against the grungy brick wall of the venue, smoking in the oven-hot Southern heat. She thinks they’re in Arizona.

Stella smokes her cigarette down to the filter and drops the butt onto the asphalt, kicking at it idly with the toe of her shoe. Mikey smokes more slowly, taking his time with his cigarette. There’s a drop of old stage sweat sliding down her back, between her shoulder blades.

She pulls out a second cigarette, rolling it around her fingers. Mikey’s eyes flick over to her and he reaches into his pocket, digging out his lighter. He holds it up and raises his eyebrows, asking if she wants it. She nods and extends her hand, makes a ‘mmm’ noise.

He tosses it and she catches it one-handed, curving her hands around her cigarette as she lights it. Mikey doesn’t try to hide the fact he’s watching her. She smiles at him, close-lipped.

“You wanna watch a movie when we get back on the bus?” he asks, ashing straight onto the ground. She shrugs.

“Dunno. Have we watched all our zombie ones yet?”

Mikey takes a drag off his cigarette and looks out across the empty parking lot. He shrugs.

“Maybe? I think we have a couple left?” he says, looking unsure. She smiles, more genuinely now.

“Sure then, we can watch one of those,” she says. Mikey finishes his cigarette and tosses it onto the ground. They both watch the bright cherry on the end flare and then burn out, leaving just ash.

Stella wakes up the next morning to the sound of Mikey’s snuffling snores, the two of them spread out across the back lounge. Mikey’s head is pillowed on one hand and the other touches Stella’s thigh, just above her knee. She’s slow moving away from the touch and, as she does, Mikey sighs in his sleep. He shifts slightly, moving his body weight till he’s nearly falling off the couch.

She hasn’t seen Mikey sleep deeply like this in weeks. Carefully, as quietly as she can, she nudges him back on the couch. He snuffles quietly and she smiles down at him. He’s cute, even under the bus’ artificial light, even with the shadows under his eyes and his ridiculous haircut. She brushes some of his hair off his forehead and tugs one of the mangled blankets off the back of the couch to cover him.

The deep after-show ache is starting to set in and she pulls herself up from the couch to stumble through the open lounge door and nearly face first into her bunk. Only a few more shows and then they head to Japan. Stella falls asleep as soon as her face touches her pillow.

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It’s funny how rock bottom looks like Japan and is full of Asians.

The show sucks. She doesn’t understand how anyone can listen to their music or come to their shows or anything when they’re just a bunch of fucking kids from the East Coast with complexes and baggage and no talent.

Then someone finds Gerard under a stage – she never finds out who, she thinks it’s a tech or security (someone they trust, thank god). Everything goes to shit. Frank flips out and tried to crawl under the stage but Stella grabs him by his shirt collar. Frank flails against her and makes a choking noise. He tries to punch her. She throws him to the ground bodily. She’s bigger than him and a little stronger too.

“Stel, what are you doing? Stel, what the fuck, let me-” he shouts, struggling against the knee she’s using to hold him down.

“Just stay the fuck down Frankie,” she says, looking over at Mikey. He’s pacing and running his hands repeatedly through his hair in a gesture that makes him look achingly like his older brother. She wants to cry with joy. Something is happening, something is finally happening. She can see Ray out of the corner of her vision, coming this way. Gerard is a presence that she can feel slipping away, under the stage. Frank is still fighting her, thrashing and pushing at her leg. She meets Mikey’s eyes when the silence is broken by the sound of Gerard sobbing harshly and uncontrollably.

In the end, Ray talks him out from under the stage. Stella wouldn’t have guessed it but, when thought about, it makes perfect sense. Mikey is Gerard’s younger brother and for all they’re like best friends, Gerard doesn’t want to embarrass himself in front of the boy he’s supposed to be a role model for. Frank is always so openly Gerard’s that it’s pitiful sometimes. And Stella is Stella. She doesn’t let people touch her.

So it’s Ray that leans against the support beams and talks to Gerard. Stella drags Frank out of earshot, pulling him along by his shirt collar. He fights her every step of the way. At one point he bites the webbing between her thumb and forefinger, drawing blood. She slaps him across the face, hard. Frank grabs his cheek, shocked. The only sound is the low buzz of Ray talking, the words impossible to make out.

“Fuck you Frankie,” she says in a harsh whisper. Now is really not the time for Gerard to pick up any extra tension by osmosis. “You think it’s only about you? Yeah, I get it. You buy into the whole dream, you drank the kool aid that Gerard’s been mixing. I get it. Now shut the fuck up and let someone else save Gee’s life.”

Mikey looks distressed at the mention of Gerard’s life and takes a step towards the stage, towards Ray and his brother.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Stella hisses angrily and whips an arm out to grab the back of Mikey’s jacket. She pulls him close to her and she’s full of enough energy from fighting Frank that she doesn’t notice the way his bony hip bangs against hers. “I will fuck you up if you do not stay put,” she stage whispers into his ear, and then looks down at Frank. “The same goes for you.”

Stella loves a fight. She lives and breathes for fights, for the way that pain makes you feel like a real person, not a zombie, but it doesn’t feel like this is her. She doesn’t feel like Stella, holding Frank and Mikey back while Ray talks Gerard down from the metaphorical ledge. (Just because Gee’s not hanging off a building doesn’t mean that Stella can’t see the ledge in front of him clear as day.)

Mikey relents and stays back, although Stella worries that if Ray doesn’t hurry up with his life-saving speech they’re gonna have to talk both of the Way brothers down off that ledge. Frank is still in
shock from Stella’s slap and words that he doesn’t try to get back to the stage.

Frankie is her best friend. But she will not hesitate to break his nose if he puts Gerard’s life in danger. The band has become part of Stella and she doesn’t know if any of them are anything else but My Chemical Romance.

And if Frank, whom Stella loves with her tiny broken heart, fucks that up, she will end him.

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Frank sits next to Gerard on the plane ride home. Gerard shakes all over and can barely talk through the rattling of his teeth. Frank tries to hold his hand but Gerard pulls it out of his grip. Later, Ray sits next to Gerard (on their not very super secret Gerard-duty) and Frank sits next to Stella. He looks at her like he’s about to cry.

“He won’t hold my hand,” Frank says quietly. Stella places her hand on top of his.

“You mean ‘he won’t let you help him’,,” she says carefully and quietly. Frank sighs and nods.

“When did you get to know me so well?” he asks. She smiles and chuckles though her nose, just a huff of amused breath.

“I didn’t think you’d noticed,” she said. She’s aiming for joking but it’s hard to get the tone right when your friend is just across the aisle shivering through withdrawal. Frank just lets his head fall forward and it hits the chair in front of him with a dull thump. She cards her fingers through his hair.

“I always wondered why you only ever let me touch you,” he says, his voice a little bit muffled by the chair.

“I guess I was always a bit of a fag hag,” Stella says, not unkindly. Frank snorts.

“I mean it though,” he says as he leans back, forcing Stella to remove her hand from his head. She shrugs and smiles sadly.

“You touched me like you expected me to touch you back, even though I never did.” She lays a hand on his upper arm, near his shoulder. “You’ve always treated me like I’m okay. And that makes me feel okay.”

--

My Chemical Romance may still be reeling from the shock of nearly losing a member (and actually losing one, Matt was a good guy) but the world is apparently still waiting for the I’m Not Okay video. They land in the good old U.S of A. and get Gerard into a hotel before anyone can say “Isn’t that the lead singer of mildly well-known rock band My Chemical Romance?”

Frank’s wiped; he didn’t sleep on the plane. Mikey looks like maybe he’s about to keel over and Stella recognizes the tremble in his wrists. Even Ray, who actually possesses some mental health, looks pained. Stella makes them go to bed and then dumps her bags in Gerard’s hotel room, glaring at him like she’s daring him to argue. He just bends his head down and accepts it, like a puppy that’s been kicked.

Now she feels bad.

“Here,” she says quietly and opens her arms to him, silently asking for a hug. He looks up and then his face twists into a mask of confusion.
“What?” he asks, quite loudly. She grins at him.

“Come here and give me a hug, you stupid motherfucker,” she says, crooking her hand. He takes a quick step across the room to wrap his arms around her. Her skin crawls but she’s careful not to freak out. Gerard needs her to be normal for just a little while. He’s bent over to hug her around her middle; his nose pressed against her side. She pets his hair, waiting for him to finish. “Oh sweetheart,” she says carefully and quietly. Gerard makes a noise into her stomach and then sighs, pulling back. He lets go of her carefully, like she’s made of glass. Gerard looks at her seriously, meeting her eyes. He’s a little shorter than her.

“I’m done, you know,” he says seriously. “I never said it to you. No more drinking, no more drugs. I’m done.” Stella nods.

“Good,” she says and then allows herself to fall into sitting position on the end of one of the hotel beds, jamming her hands into her hoodie pockets.

“Are you going to sleep at all?” she asks, kicking her heels against the bed. Gerard screws up his nose in annoyance and shrugs.

“I don’t know,” he says honestly. She smiles at him, the emotion not reaching her eyes.

“You should try,” she says gently. Gerard shakes his head like a dog, his hair shaking around his head.

“You’re trying to look after me?” he says. It’s almost sarcastic. She chuckles quietly.

“I think I’m supposed to,” she says. Gerard sits down next to her, careful not to touch her by accident.

“It’d be simpler if I could look after myself, wouldn’t it?” he asks, looking at his hands instead of her. Stella sighs and then pulls a packet of cigarettes out of the pocket of her hoodie. Gerard looks at her, obviously confused as she walks to the window with her lighter. She cocks an eyebrow at him and pushes the window open.

“Look Gee, if we’re gonna have this conversation now, I need to smoke,” she says baldly, lighting up. Gerard’s mouth twitches in amusement.

“Anyone ever told you that you’re kinda a bitch?” he says. She laughs with a deep ‘ha!’ from her chest.

“You’re the one who screwed up,” she says before taking a long drag on her cigarette. He smiles brightly, ducking back down to look at his hands. She looks across at him, leaning against the hotel wall next to the window. “Just because you fucked up, doesn’t mean you can’t be happy, you know,” she says, like she’s talking about the weather.

“I think you’re supposed to be gentle to me. Everyone else has been tiptoeing around me like I’m about to break,” he says bitterly, still looking at his hands.

“Yeah well, it’s only been three days,” she says conversationally. Gerard snorts.

“Three days is a long time,” Gerard says. One of his hands shakes but he doesn’t appear to notice. Stella pretends that she doesn’t. She breathes in the smoke of her cigarette and then blows it out slowly.

“Yeah. I know what you mean. It’s a long time,” Stella says and then walks over to him, pulling a
cheap hotel chair with her. She spins it so that it faces Gee and falls into it, waiting until he looks up and meets her eyes.

“Frank’s gonna worry and tell bad jokes. Mikey’s gonna worry and get quieter. Ray’s gonna worry and be so nice to you it hurts. I’m gonna worry and get in a fight with someone.” Stella pauses to take a drag and fix Gerard with a careful look. “We worry because we love you, never forget that, okay?” she says. Gerard nods quickly. “So, when you’re with us, it doesn’t matter. You’re getting clean so you can be Gerard. So be Gerard. Laugh and tell bad jokes and draw. Swear and shout and argue. Drink too much coffee and smoke.” She taps ash from her cigarette onto the hotel desk behind her. Gerard makes a frustrated noise and gestures with both hands, clenching and unclenching his fists.

“I don’t think I can be trusted to be Gerard,” he says after a long moment of thinking. Stella nods.

“That’s fair enough. But when you trust yourself to be him again? Well, we’ll all just be over here, still loving you,” Stella says roughly, her voice fraying from the cigarette. Gerard looks up at her through his too-long bangs.

“Thank you,” he says with feeling. Her lips twist into a grimace.

“Yeah, well don’t expect me to be nicer to you,” she says, not unkindly. “I’m going to take a shower. And since I’m sharing this damned hotel room with you, you’re taking one too,” she says as she stands up, putting her cigarette out in an ash tray. Gerard falls back onto the bed until he was spread-eagled.

“But Stellaaa,” he says with a grin, dragging her name out till it sounds like a whine. She smiles at him and kicks his shin lightly.

Later she forces Gerard into the bathroom and then into the shower. She threatens to stay and make sure he actually washes his hair but he throws a tiny bottle of shower gel at her. They talk aimlessly while Gerard showers, shouting over the sound of running water. He comes out of the shower drying his hair, not wearing a stitch. Stella doesn’t blink, just pulls on her pyjamas and crawls into her bed.

She’s seen every single one of the boys in every kind of compromising position. Just because the bunks on the bus have curtains doesn’t mean anyone has any privacy. She’s long grown used to knowing every single detail about them and them knowing everything about her including the way she likes to wash her hair and some of Frank’s jerk-off fantasies, which she really didn’t want to know about.

It’s dark and Stella’s just drifting off when Gerard speaks, loudly and clearly as if he’s standing next to her though she knows that he’s in bed because she can see his dim outline.

“Stel, will you ever tell us what happened to you?” he asks. She sucks in a breath quickly, not expecting the question. She takes a moment to think about it. Gerard knows she’s not asleep.

“I don’t know. I hope so. I’d like to get to a place where I could do that,” she says, surprised by her own truthfulness. She can practically hear Gerard thinking from the other side of the room.

“Do you trust us?” he asks. She sighs.

“Completely. But like you said, I don’t really trust myself.”

“Oh.”

“Go to sleep Gerard. We’ve got a video to film in the morning.”
“Thank you Stel,” he says.

But Stella is already asleep.

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If Stella hugged people, she’d hug Brian Schechter. There’s no booze on set at all, anywhere (Mikey looked) but there’s snacks and red bull and Gatorade and no one, not anyone, is drunk at all. No one says anything but they’re all walking on egg shells around Gerard.

She thinks he meant it when he said “I’m done”. She hopes he did because there’s a clarity in his eyes that makes Stella’s heart crack. Mikey tries not to hover but he’s like a mother hen, especially when cameras wander in Gerard’s fragile direction. Frank keeps a watchful eye. Stella’s fingers itch. She wants a fight but instead she finds her keyboard and plays till her fingers ache.

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Bob Bryar is a hell of a man. He’s a good man too. He takes one long look at them, watches Gerard’s slightly crazed look and the way they all lean in around him and leaves it well and truly alone.

He’s also a little panicked, which Stella kind of gets since he’s played with them a sum total of twice and he’s not a professional drummer, he’s just the sound guy who’s friends with some crazy Jersey boys and one nutty girl from NYC. But he’s a good drummer and Ray takes it upon himself to play with him for a bit so he can get a feel for the song.

Mikey keeps finding things to do that aren’t near Gerard and then giving up and coming back and then reminding himself that Gerard needs space and finding something new to do. It’s a vicious cycle.

Frank is clinging to Gerard as if he’s not sure that Gerard won’t simply disappear through some strange sobriety-gained power. Stella suspects that Gerard is going stir-crazy under his shame and embarrassment. She wouldn’t be surprised.

They do the take in the garage where they actually play, instead of do some stupid acting where Stella has to pretend fight with a cheerleader (and it’s like all her high school fantasies come true, sometimes Gerard has the best ideas), and Gerard just lets loose, screaming and jumping up and down. Frank kisses him with just a peck at the side of his eye because their normal craziness wouldn’t be on beat.

Stella loves the keyboard lines in I’m Not Okay. Her and Gerard wrote them together and they’re beautifully angry crashing notes that complement Ray’s thrashing so wonderfully.

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Frank and Ray are busy being filmed doing stupid things and Stella’s sitting outside on some stone steps smoking. Someone screechy will kill her if she gets ash on her stupid prep school uniform so she’s sitting at a funny angle, holding her cigarette far away from her body and leaning forward to take a drag from it. Some guy from props is giving her funny looks but she thinks that’s because her shirt is thin enough that you can see her bra. It’s black because, fuck that, she’s a rock star now and she can wear a black bra with a white shirt if she wants to.

Bob comes around a corner, flipping one drumstick over in his hand. He stops when he sees her, bent over awkwardly to reach her cigarette. He raises a sardonic eyebrow. She waves her free hand at him and then flips him off.
“I can’t get ash on my costume,” She says around her cigarette. Bob sits next to her, looking confused.

“You can’t get ass on your what?” he asks. She makes an annoyed noise around her cigarette and pulls it out of her mouth with a pop.

“I can’t get ash on my costume, you fucker,” she says, enunciating each syllable like he’s an idiot. He punches her shoulder lightly.

“Don’t be a bitch,” he says lightly, “You got a cigarette?”

“I don’t know whether I should give cigarettes to someone who calls me a bitch,” she says but she’s already reaching into her pocket to pull out her pack. She hands it to him and he lights up without saying anything. They both sit like that for a little while; Stella still smoking at the weird angle. She thinks that maybe she should thank Bob for dropping everything (like a career, holy shit) to help them out because they couldn’t fucking get on with their own drummer and their lead singer was pretty much tearing himself apart but she thinks it would also embarrass Bob who doesn’t really go for big shows of emotion.

They smoke together and Bob plays something that sounds like Cemetery Drive against the steps. Stella hums along, her fingers twitching over an invisible keyboard. Stella gets called for a take where she has to sit in the back of a class and look angry and she stands up, putting her cigarette out against the steps. Bob looks up at her.

“It’s gonna be good, isn’t it?” he asks. She doesn’t know if he means the video or Gerard or just the band in general. He could mean fucking lunch for all she knows. But she nods.

“It’s gonna be great,” she says before walking off. She’s not lying. The video’s going to be awesome, Gerard’s going to get better (is getting better) and the band already is awesome, the addition of Bob Bryar just makes it better (and they’re having pizza for lunch, she checked with catering).

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Just because the band is suddenly devoid of drugs and alcohol doesn’t mean that Stella doesn’t find fighting supremely satisfying. Brian is always mildly disappointed but unsurprised and apologetic. Stella tries to make it up to him by making sure no one ever needs to go to the hospital or never bothering him with her fight-related injuries.

And this is why Stella stumbles into sound check in Ohio desperately trying to cover the cut on her forehead that is bleeding into her eye. Worm gives her a concerned look and she’s all about to tell him to just fuck off already when Mikey hands her a box of band aids. They have dinosaurs on them.

“Brian left them in the bus for us,” Mikey says before she can curse him out and then goes back to his bass to pluck at it aimlessly. She looks between Mikey and the band aids for several seconds before she decides not to look a gift horse in the mouth. She spends the first fifteen minutes of the sound check trying to put the band aid on without blinding herself before Ray tires of listening to her swear and miss her cues and puts it on her himself.

“For fuck’s sake Stel, are you trying to lose your eyes?” he says as he sticks it on her.

“Fuck you, no,” she says, looking up at him with the best glare she can muster when there’s blood dripping down her face and her knuckles are bleeding. She’s always glad she never got knuckle tattoos like Frank; she would have fucked them up so bad. Ray just sighs and shoves her shoulder
lightly. She sticks her tongue out at him and then plays Venom note perfect just to prove she can.

That night Stella climbs into the bus with a black eye and a split lip. The cut on her forehead has reopened and is pouring blood over the ridge of her eyebrows. She clutches at her abdomen. She’s been kicked in the stomach, hard, and it still hurts. Frank is the first to notice her, looking up from his video game as soon as she opens the door.

“Fuck!” he shouts and drops his controller, taking a few quick steps towards her. He reaches for her arm but she waves him away with a weak flap of her hand.

“No, no, I’m fine Frankie, really,” she wheezes and allows herself a controlled fall sideways onto the couch. She winces when she jostles her arm and it bumps against her stomach but doesn’t find the energy to move from her awkward position.

Frank flaps one of his hands in a strange worried gesture and sits down next to her. He doesn’t touch her until she manages to pull herself mostly upright and lean her forehead against his shoulder. He reaches around her to rest his hand against her upper arm and she sighs.

“What the hell happened?” he asks. Mikey is sitting on the floor, still holding his controller. He doesn’t seem to have noticed that his car has crashed. Gerard’s being very quiet, looking up from his drawings. Ray’s stuck his head out from the bunk area and Bob’s sitting across from them. She can feel them all looking at her. She makes an annoyed noise in the back of her throat.

“I thought I could take him. He had friends,” she says flatly. Her skin feels like it’s buzzing. The pain of the cut on her forehead is sending endorphins rushing through her body. A muscle jumps in her jaw. She moves to pull away from Frank.

“I’m getting blood on your shirt,” she says slowly when he doesn’t let go of her. She can feel her heart beat spike suddenly.

“Look Stel, we need to talk,” Gerard says, “about you. And the fights and things.” He says, a little awkwardly. Stella shakes her head, trying to clear the haze of the endorphin rush.

“Is this an intervention?” she says. She’s trying really hard not to be a bitch. She knows the guys worry about her and that Frank’s arm around her is loose. She can break his grip if she needs to. Bob looks up from his hands and meets her eyes.

“Yes,” he says.

“I don’t fight with any of you,” she says as reasonably as she can. Ray clears his throat. She looks at him, unimpressed. She’s trying to be reasonable. She is really trying.

“Oh fuck you,” she says, “That was one time.”


“You wouldn’t remember. You were drunk,” she says. Gerard looks hurt and a little surprised. She feels like she should apologise but she can’t quite bring herself to.

“Don’t be a bitch Stel,” Bob says casually, crossing his arms. She moves her shoulders out of Frank’s encircling arm and leans back.
“I’m trying not to be,” she says ironically. Maybe if she’s sarcastic and flippant enough they won’t realise she’s being truthful. Mikey puts his controller on the floor softly.

“C’mon Stel, give us a break. We worry about you,” Mikey says. She rolls her lips around in a sneer.

“You worry about everyone Mikey,” she says. Mikey shakes his head angrily but doesn’t speak.

“We all worry about you,” Frank says from beside her and that is the last straw, really because Frank, of all people, cannot say anything about her and her messed up coping mechanisms. She turns on him, glaring.

“I don’t think you get to worry about me, Frankie,” she hisses angrily. “You weren’t there were you? I look after myself, remember?” Frank flinches back from her and his mouth twists sideways guiltily. She wants to hit something so bad but her arm and stomach are throbbing, her face still bleeding. She rubs at it angrily, smearing the blood across her forehead and into her hair. She doesn’t care. She looks around at the rest of band, glaring as best she can. Gerard won’t make eye contact and Ray ducks his head but Bob and Mikey stare back at her steadily. She doesn’t even try to meet Frank’s eyes.

“Fuck,” she says to no one in particular. The fight had felt so good. It had been just what she’d needed, even if she’d lost. She didn’t care. The pain had been wonderful, a high she’d never been able to get from anything else. She rubs at her face again, wincing when her nails catch at the edge of her cut. “Fuck,” she says again. She wants someone to say something because the only response she can come up with is just “fuck” over and over again. She can’t look up from her hands and the ground. She feels like she’s failed, like there was a test and she just hasn’t met expectations.

There’s the sound of a cupboard opening and closing and Mikey’s shadow falls across Stella’s hands. He moves the box of dinosaur band-aids into her field of vision and she hears herself snort in amusement. She looks up at him and he meets her eyes, pushing his glasses back up his nose with one long finger.

“I’m such a fuck-up, aren’t I?” she asks him. Everything hurts. He shakes his head and rattles the box of band-aids. She takes it from him but doesn’t open it.

“You’re really, really not,” he says. She makes a face like she doesn’t believe him but he lets it slide. She looks around at the rest of the band, even taking in Frank with the sweep of her eyes. Only now she doesn’t feel angry, only tired and deflated. She waves the box of band-aids like a surrender.

“I’m tired and everything hurts,” she says flatly. She thinks she might start crying if this allowed to go on for too long.

“We worry,” Ray says carefully. She looks at him mournfully.

“I know,” she says and then looks away, flicking her eyes over to meet Gerard’s. “I can’t stop.”

Gerard sighs and twirls his drawing pen in his hand.

"That's only in your head. You can stop," he says gently. She shakes her head pitifully.

"No, no. I let myself down. I...I was stupid and something happened and it was my fault. I..." She feels like she’s on the edge of something, that terrible sinking feeling when you stand on a cliff and the world falls away in from of you. Her hands shake around the band-aid box and Mikey is still standing in front of her, looking down at her patiently. She flicks her eyes away from him and looks at the ground. “I can’t stop,” she says finally, taking a step away from the edge she’d been approaching. “I can’t, I can’t stop.” Her hands are shaking so hard that she’s about to drop the box.
“Stel,” Gerard starts gently and she can’t take it, can’t take Gee looking at her like she’s about to shake apart. She jumps to her feet and the band-aid box falls to the floor. She can feel her shoulders heave as her whole body shakes.

“No,” she says with as much finality as she can muster. “We are not talking about this anymore. We’re done. This is done.”

“Stella, this is important,” Frank says emphatically and she knows, for fuck’s sake, she knows but she can’t talk about this, she really can’t. Her whole body is aching and she just wants to lie down in her shitty bunk and sleep but instead she side steps Frank and flees out the front door.

She nearly falls flat on her face when she trips on the last step off the bus. She hates her shakes, she hates them so much. She’s quietly and resolutely dealt with them for years now but she hates that she wears her emotions on her sleeve, that when she’s angry or upset she shakes so hard she can barely stand up. She’s never been able to control them.

She folds herself into a sitting position against the bus, the asphalt of the parking lot digging into her legs through her jeans. She fumbles her cigarettes and lighter out of her pocket, although she drops them both twice, her hands are shaking so badly. She can feel herself on the edge of hysteria as she struggles to breathe before she all but shoves the cigarette into her mouth. It takes four tries to get her lighter to work. She lights her cigarette with shaking hands and breathes in as deeply as she can. She doesn’t even bother to try and hold onto her lighter, just lets it fall to the ground.

She doesn’t pause much between drags on her cigarette. The shivers and shakes in her shoulders start to level out and she no longer feels like she’s struggling to breathe. There are a few lone stars picked out in the night sky and she watches them idly, her cigarette tip her only light. She burns through her first cigarette and she’s lighting her second when the door to the bus opens and light spills out into the parking lot. She’s expecting Frank but Mikey steps down from the doorway, holding his own pack of cigarettes in one hand.

The door closes behind him and Mikey’s hands curve around his lighter gracefully as his cheeks hollow out around his cigarette. The flickering light of the flame reflects off his glasses. She doesn’t think he’s noticed her.

“Frank said we hit a nerve,” Mikey says, without looking at her. There goes the unnoticed theory. He takes a drag on his cigarette.

“Frank knows what he’s talking about,” she says quietly, tapping ash off her cigarette. Mikey’s face doesn’t change much but he’s radiating annoyance.

“And we don’t? Just because Frank has a past with you and we don’t means we don’t get to worry about you?” he asks. He doesn’t raise his voice. She sighs.

“No. It just means I have more ways to guilt trip Frank than you,” she says, her lips twisting sideways as she looks disgusted with herself. Mikey takes long drag on his cigarette and then sighs, walking over to sit down next to her. He leaves a good few inches of space between them.

“Sometimes you act like you’re not a part of the band,” he says, not looking at her. She takes a long drag on her cigarette, trying to give herself time to think. “We know that you trust us but you never talk to us. Even Frank doesn’t know what you’re doing,” he says before she can speak.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” she says quickly. Mikey nods slowly and takes a drag off his cigarette.
“When you figure it out, you gonna tell us?” he asks after he’s blown out a thin stream of smoke.

“I hope so,” she says quietly. She takes a drag. Mikey shrugs.

“Fair enough. You gonna be alright to play tomorrow?”

It takes her a moment to figure out that he means her cut up face and the way she holds her stomach gingerly, not her shakes. She nods.

“I’ll be fine. Just sore,” she says. Neither of them speak for a long moment, the air around them filling with their smoke. “Brian’s gonna be pissed,” she says and lets her head fall back to thunk against the bus. Mikey takes a drag.

“We’ll cover for you,” he says casually. “Say you fell down or Frank hit you with his guitar during the show or something.” He twirls his free hand in an expansive gesture.

“Thanks,” she says gratefully. She can see his face rearrange into a small smile out of the corner of her vision.

“Least we can do,” he says.

She lets the butt of her finished cigarette fall from her finger, not caring where it lands. She doesn’t particularly want to start another one and Mikey’s is nearing the filter.

“You want to go back inside?” he asks as the bright spark of her cigarette fades. She sighs, heaving her shoulders with it. Her shakes have mainly abated although she still feels jittery, wrong in her own skin.

“I’m going to have to, aren’t I?” she says tiredly. She’s being childish, she knows, but she can’t particularly bring herself to care. Mikey shrugs and stands, angling his body towards her. Sharp shadows angle across his face, his eyes unreadable.

“We kinda need our keyboardist, yeah,” he says and slowly, carefully reaches a hand out to help her up. She looks at it warily for a moment before she slides her hand into his and lets him pull her to her feet.

“We’re driving all tomorrow, aren’t we?” she asks. She knows the answer. They have a show and no time off between getting there and going on stage. It’s gonna suck. Mikey nods and lets go of her hand gently.

“Yeah.” he says, on an exhale, and drops his fading cigarette butt onto the asphalt. There’s some background noise, the normal sounds of a tour on pause that Stella tunes out easily. They stand for a moment with their hips angled towards each other, not touching. Mikey looks taller than he is actually, in the darkness, less gangly and more confident.

“C’mon,” he says, jerking his head towards the bus, and the spell breaks; Mikey reverts back to the skinny, gangly young man with too-long limbs. She lingers, kicking the toes of her ratty Chucks against the ground, but bright, welcoming lights spill out of the bus door when Mikey opens it. She squares her shoulders, breathing deep. Time to face the music. Mikey holds the door for her and then follows her into the bus, always careful not to crowd her.

--

Mikey kisses her behind a tree at a south western rest stop. She wasn’t expecting it, one minute they’re talking about video games and the next he leans in, curls his fingers around her jaw and presses his lips against her.
She panics. It’s too much, too much fear and panic and confusion all at once, and she doesn’t so much pull away as fall over. Her whole arm vibrates when she cracks her funny bone against a root and she barely catches her head from hitting the ground suddenly.

Mikey apologises later, when she’s recovered and no longer shaking. She brushes it off. It’s not his fault.

It isn’t till she’s in her bunk that night that she realises he kissed her. She has no idea what that means.

--

They’re all standing around, waiting, just waiting, for someone with a headset to tell them where to go so they can play their first ever live TV show with Gerard sober. They’re all sober. Stella is shaking. She gets the shakes worse than any of them before a show and she’s shaking so hard Frank doesn’t know if she can play. She shakes when she holds things, like an alcoholic, like Gerard does sometimes.

Mikey and she have a brief but intense conversation with their foreheads almost touching. Mikey touches her wrist and she doesn’t flinch away. He seems to be asking her something but she shakes her head and looks over at Gerard. They lean into each other and then pull back before their bodies touch. Frank grips his guitar too tightly and fidgets with his hair. Bob is hiding his nervousness behind a mask of heightened seriousness.

Frank’s so nervous that he can’t play like normal, can’t run around and jump up and down and fuck Gerard with clothes on. Instead he jumps onto Bob’s bass drum and nearly ruins the whole set.

--

Stella feels the keyboard under her fingertips and it’s like coming home. Everything just melts away from around her, the tv cameras and the audience just melt away and she just plays. She wonders if this is what Gerard and Frank feel like during a show. She jumps up and down and shrieks the back up lyrics and shakes her head, her hair flying around her. It’s a massive high and she knows that her energy is pulling the rest of them along with her, Gerard picking up on it and just roaring into the microphone. Frank leaps onto Bob’s bass drum and for a second it’s almost comical, Bob’s terrified face and Frank still playing, wind milling dangerously. She sees it before it happens, knows that Frank’s gonna fall and, oh shit, there’s a lull in the singing right now, everyone’s gonna see Frank fuck up Bob’s drum kit.

Stella falls forward, over the keyboard and screams into her microphone, just out and out screams. Her throat is raw and it hurts her ears but it covers the crash of Bob’s bass drum. She keeps playing, hearing Frank and Bob both swear under the music and Gerard keeps singing and Mikey keeps the bass steady until Bob can join back in. Bob continues to swear for the rest of the set but the songs still sound fine.

Afterwards, Stella shakes all over except this is a good shake, an adrenalin filled, oh my god I’m alive kind of shake. It feels like the start of something new. Gerard smiles carefully at the end of the show. Bob is having a belated heart attack; Frank apologises repeatedly and worriedly. Ray looks triumphant and he hugs Gerard fiercely, back slapping. Mikey puts a gentle hand on Stella’s wrist and Stella feels her world shift when she doesn’t flinch away.

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Stella has the coolest, best life in the whole world, ever. Warped Tour’s a fucking pit and she’s
always unwashed and dirty but she loves it. She wouldn’t be doing this if she didn’t really fucking love touring.

Her, Frank and two other bands starts an elaborate game of tag that extends over several days and only ends when their respective tour managers gang up on them.

Stella talks to the fans whenever she can, brings Frank with her, and signs things till her wrist hurts. Girls tell her that she made them believe they could do it too and all she can do is blush and look away. She isn’t half as strong as some of these kids think she is.

--

Stella doesn’t like Pete Wentz at first. She takes one look at him and sees the sold-out messed-up hipster that she was born to hate. Then she takes a second look and he’s got one arm around Mikey and another around Patrick Stump and they’re all laughing over something. Mikey’s laugh shows sudden white teeth and if he can make Mikey laugh, Stella’s going to give him a second chance.

Pete has a way of working his way into your heart without your consent and the second chance becomes a third chance and then a fifth chance. He likes her, in the way that Pete likes some people without any reason at all. One day on tour he hug tackles her from behind. She almost has a fucking heart attack but her instincts take over and she throws him to the ground with a roll and pins his throat with her knee before she even registers what’s happened.

“Fucking Jesus Christ Wentz, you trying to give me a fucking heart attack?” she asks, not angrily but still trying to catch her breath. Pete looks up at her with wide eyes, obviously terrified.

“What the hell, Stella?” he asks, pushing at the leg holding him down. She leans back and removes her knee, shifting her weight to her back leg.

“I took self-defence at college. You surprised me.” She lies quickly and smoothly, pulling herself out of his reach. Her knee bounces, a nervous tic. Pete gives her a look that says he doesn’t believe her but he lets it lie.

“C’mon, Mikey was going to make me buy him a drink. If you bat your eyelashes at him, maybe he’ll buy me a drink,” he jerks his head towards the My Chem bus, smiling his stupid horsey smile.

“Buy your own drinks Wentz,” she drawls snarkily, but follows him when he starts off towards the bus. The shake in her hands stop. She smiles.

--

She would like to pretend that Frank's demands came out of nowhere, that is was a sudden surprise and she had no idea it was going to happen. She knows that's not true. Frank, for all that's he's an occasional asshole, likes honesty. Stella isn't a particularly honest person.

Late at night, probably more early morning, when the only light is the ghostly light of Stella's laptop casting shadows on their faces as the "Return of Dracula's Mistress: Revenge!" plays on the screen, Frank half turns on the couch to elbow her and says, "Why don't you tell Mikey?"

Stella yawns, feels her jaw crack, and turns her head to look down where Frank's tucked up against her, her laptop balanced on their legs.

"Tell him what?" she murmurs as a virgin in white screams shakily on screen. The volume's turned nearly all the way down; the only important parts are when Dracula's mistress ravishes her victims and then sends their severed heads, drained of blood, to Dracula's wife. Frank elbows her again
when she gets distracted by another virgin, this time the brunette who will eventually win Dracula's affections.

"Tell him about college," Frank says. Stella's so tired that, for a second, she wonders why Frank sounds so serious, they're watching a movie that is utterly mutilating Bram Stoker's vision, but then what he's just said clicks in her head.

"Why would I tell Mikey about college?" she says carefully and slowly, not quite sure how to react. Frank leans back further, so he can look her in the eye.

"You're shitting me right?" Frank says, raising his eyebrows. "You aren't serious about Mikes?"

"I don’t know yet," she says seriously. "Should I be serious?"

Something bloody explodes on her laptop screen. Frank sits back, away from her, his forehead furrowed as he frowns.

"I thought maybe you’d told him already..." Frank says quietly. "You looked happy."

She looks away from him.

"We’re all happier now. Things are better," she says softly. She doesn’t like arguing with Frank. "I don’t want to ruin anything."

"Okay, don’t even pretend that’s why," Frank says quickly. "Don’t even pretend that’s why you won’t tell anyone."

Reaching forward, she moves her laptop off her legs and onto the couch next to her.

"Why should I have to tell anyone?" she says, staying bent over and facing away from Frank. "It was years ago."

"We’re your friends, Stel. That’s a good enough reason, right?"

Her hands clench into fists and then relax repeatedly.

"Okay, fuck you," she says, sitting back. "Fuck you and your 'we’re your friends' bullshit. You don’t get to tell me-" Her voice shakes.

Frank reaches for one of her hands but she pulls it away at the last second.

"Hey, woah, Stel, it’s okay. I didn’t, I’m not, I wouldn’t make you if you didn’t want to," he says, drawing his legs up underneath him.

She sighs and leans forward to press her fists against her eyes until wriggling lights dance on her eyelids.

"Hey, Stel, it’s okay, just forget I said anything, I shouldn’t have," he says quickly, resting his hand high on her shoulder. Stella shrugs it off, shaking her head.

"But I want to." She’s so frustrated her fingers curl. "I want to be honest and happy and normal, you have no idea how much I want that. But it—it isn’t..." She shakes her hands out of annoyance at her own ineloquence. "It isn’t who I am. Or...I don’t want it to be. It isn’t everything I am."

She leans back, pulling up her knees and wrapping her arms around them. Frank sighs.
“We know that. They know that. There’s so much of you that’s separate from that, they know. You wouldn’t be here if that wasn’t true,” Frank says. Stella tucks her chin over her knees and closes her eyes. She breathes slowly and deeply for several minutes, the familiar feeling of being just on the edge of full blown shakes comforting her. She can feel her whole life stretching out around her, not just ahead but every moment she’s lived so far. She has a chance to make the past better, to make it hurt less. There’s a decision to be made. She moves her head to rest her forehead on her knees and look across to meet Frank’s eyes.

“Could you call a band meeting? Tomorrow? We’ve got a day off right?”

Frank nods and smiles grimly. Tightening her hold around her legs, she smiles back. She can do this.

--

Gerard’s sitting down at the crappy coffee table, drawing, when Stella finds him. She lets herself fall in one of the chairs that are set way too low down and are impossible to sit in comfortably.


“Yeah?”

“I need you to draw something for me,” she says seriously. Gerard frowns in confusion.

“Okay. What did you have in mind?” he says, flipping over his piece of paper. She shrugs.

“I don’t know exactly. Something about…” she draws breath. “Something about a new beginning.”

Gerard draws her a bird perched at the edge of an open cage, as if it’s unsure whether it should fly away or not. It’s only line art, Gerard’s only got a pen, but it’s beautiful and, somehow, captures the unease of new freedom. Stella thanks him and practically runs out of the hotel, with just the line art and enough cash for a cab and a tattoo stuffed into her pockets.

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She finds a barely reputable place with the cab driver’s help and asks for a walk-in appointment, clutching Gerard’s drawing in her hand.

The guy coos over her Pippi Longstocking tattoo that she got in college sophomore year and listens the story of her New York tattoo. It’s the distinctive skyline, the Twin Towers still intact. She got it a week after they went down. She wanted to remember.

He walks her through the process, even though it’s obvious she’s done it before. She watches him sterilize his kit and rolls up her shirt to let him at the dip of her shirt. Her hands shake but the rest of her holds mercifully still.

It fucking hurts – never let anyone say that tattoos don’t hurt – but she bites her lips and grits her teeth against the pain. She’s been through worse.

--

She tries to say it to herself in the mirror, her skin still buzzing from the new ink. Looking at herself in the mirror - seeing her freckles and dirty-blond hair, the edge of her Pippi Longstocking tattoo visible on her shoulder - she can only think of how worthless she is. She’s alone in her hotel room but she still stutters over the words. She tries to force them past her teeth until her shakes become so
terrible that she dry heaves, her body desperately trying to rid itself of food she hasn’t eaten.

She’s never had a flashback. It’s something she’s eternally grateful for. She shakes and has terrible nightmares but she’s never gone backwards to it in her own mind. Her exact memories are hazy, flashes of images that she avoids thinking about.

She does remember afterwards. There was, she thinks, an article in the newspaper decrying the fact that Rutgers didn’t care for its student’s safety. She remembers seeing the headline of the printed article tacked up in her dorm hallway and puking all over the floor. It had been the first day she thought she’d be able to leave her room but it set her back another three.

It had been a bitch, pulling herself together enough to graduate. But she’d done it. She has a degree: a fancy bit of paper in a frame that sits in a box in a storage unit because she’s never home long enough to unpack it. The moment she’d graduated, she’d felt everything tying her to her past snap. She’s a different person and it’s a different time.

Now she has to tell her band.

She tries to say the words one more time. Her lips catch around the ‘r’ sound and she laughs hysterically. She’s never going to do it.

She remembers the article.

--

Stella is pretty sure that the hotel staff thinks she’s insane. Paranoid and freaked out, she spends her time at the hotel computers looking over her shoulder and rapidly opening new windows on Internet Explorer every time someone comes near her. The internet is slow enough that the newspaper article loads in degrees, slowly appearing on the page.

She knows, objectively, that it’s been years. She never let it beat her, never let it define her. She’s always been more than one night when she was in college.

She still has to hold both hands over her mouths to stop herself from vomiting all over the computer once the page loads. She hits print, closing the window and standing up so fast she nearly knocks her chair over. She grabs the single sheet of paper without looking at it, crumpling it in her hand and shoving it into the pocket of her hoodie.

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Frank hugs her quickly, around the shoulders, after he’s herded Gerard into the room. Gerard’s still making noises about ‘my drawings, Frank! I had an awesome idea about zombie vampires,’ but then Bob puts a hand on his shoulder and pushes down until Gee sits down on one of the beds in surprise.

“Shut up, Gee. Frank said band meeting, then band meeting,” Bob says, mainly exasperated but partially fond. Gerard makes a small face of annoyance but doesn’t try to get back up. Mikey, Ray and Bob had all showed up in Stella’s room on time but Frank had to forcibly pull Gerard out of his room. She’s sitting at the room’s desk, running her hand over the face-down article obsessively. This all seemed so much simpler in her head. Her hands are shaking again and she can’t stop fidgeting, needing to keep moving.

Frank doesn’t sit down after he hugs her, just leans up against one of the walls and crosses his arms. He doesn’t look angry or worried, just expectant. He thinks she can do this. She thinks she can do it. She knows that she’s a mess. She knows that you can’t have something like that happen to you and not have something wrong. She’s only recently started to be proud of herself for surviving.
“I got a new tattoo,” she says, crossing and uncrossing her legs. They all immediately turn to look at her, confused. “Gerard drew it for me.”

“Wait, the bird? You got that tattooed?” Gerard asks, suddenly interested. She nods.

“Yeah. I needed to. It was time,” she says. She flattens the article on the desk again. “I...I need to tell you...to tell you all. It’s important.” She’s having trouble getting full sentences out. They’re all staring at her.

“Tell us what?” Ray asks, his eyebrows knitting together in confusion and worry. She knows she won’t be able to say it. They’re smart guys. They’ll get it. She looks across at Mikey and smiles shakily. He smiles back, even though she can see that he doesn’t quite understand what’s going on.

“This,” she says. Bob’s the closest, within reach, so she leans over and shoves the article into his hand without any warning. As it turns over, she sees the headline picked out in heavy black text against the white background. It’s like looking at the sun for too long and then closing your eyes, only to have the shape of the light hover, fever-bright, on the inside of your eyelids. The heavy shape of the word is burned into her consciousness and seeing it again sears it onto the inside of eyelids. She blinks and the word ‘rape’ hovers there in heavy black font, haunting her.

**Rutgers Student Raped Minutes From Campus**, reads the headline. It’s dated five months before Stella’s graduation. Gerard and Mikey peer over Bob’s shoulder to read. She doesn’t want to wait for them to finish.

“Can, can you explain?” she asks Frank, quickly, on her way out the door. “I’m gonna go to the bus. Play for a little bit.” Ray’s back lounge studio has a keyboard squeezed in that she can play. Frank smiles at her gently and nods.

“Yeah, sure. Go ahead.”

She hears Mikey shout “Stel, wait!” but she ignores him. Her hands have stopped shaking. For better or worse, they know. She can’t go back.

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Stella thinks seriously about punching the wall of the bus. She’s punched worse - nearly broke her hand one time when she punched some cinderblock in her old apartment - but she needs to play tomorrow. She feels jittery, hyped up and fidgety, like she needs to be moving but her hands aren’t shaking. She’s mostly surprised. Stress makes her shakes worse, not better. She’s only ever been able to coax them away by playing until her wrists hurt too much to shake.

She doesn’t like playing in the back lounge studio but Ray keeps one of her old Casios tied to a wall, just in case. She plays Ghost of You, Cemetery Drive, I’m Not Okay which leads into Sorrows and then Honey. Monroeville always reminds her of that first day in the recording studio; her and Frankie desperately trying to write keyboard parts while everyone else bounced between practicing and laying down tracks.

She’s halfway through Monroeville - her fingers trip over the notes without her needing to think about it – when someone knocks on the door. Frank would have just walked in; Bob would have knocked louder; Gerard would have shouted her name instead of knocking and Ray wouldn’t have bothered her at all. It’s Mikey.

She lingers over the notes for a second longer. She doesn’t really know whether she wants to talk to anyone. It feels like maybe she should be freaking out. It’s so anti-climatic. She’d have expected that...
she’d puke at least once. Her stomach rolls ominously and she takes the thought back quickly. She’d gotten her tattoo to work off her manic fear but it might have worked too well. She wants that sense of purpose back, of wanting to run until there’s no road left. It feels too much like she’d drifting, purposeless and confused. It’s an odd déjà vu feeling, reminding her of before the band, before Gerard’s music or Ray’s guitar or Bob’s rhythm, before Mikey.

Playing’s helped but she still feels wrong, too sharp around the edges to be good company. This is big, important shit going down in her life right now and she doesn’t know if she can muster the energy to be scared for herself. There’s another knock on the door and then her phone buzzes in her pocket with an incoming message.

let me in pls – m

She dumps the keyboard on a pile of clothes of varying degrees of disgustingly unwashed.

“I fucking know you didn’t forget the door code. You didn’t have to make me get up,” she says when she yanks the door open, turning away quickly so that Mikey has to follow.

“Oh, I didn’t know if you would let me in,” he says and rubs his arms absently, standing awkwardly in the middle of the bus. Stella feels a tremor start up in her wrists.

“For fuck’s sake, it’s your fucking bus too,” she says, feeling the desire to punch something rekindle suddenly. She throws herself bodily onto the couch and crosses her arms, trying to hide the shake in her hands. Mikey moves across the bus in large overstated movements, telegraphing every step until he sits down across from her.

“If you ask if I’m okay, I will punch you in the face,” she says, sitting on the couch across from him, pulling her keyboard onto her lap like a shield.

“Do you want to punch me in the face?” he asks, not sounding particularly perturbed by the idea.

“Not particularly,” she says, fiddling with the settings on her keyboard as an excuse not to look him in the eye. “I feel like I could be convinced though.” She plays a few notes idly, working her way through a complex warm up that needs her full attention. Mikey huffs out a sigh, long and slow, and then crosses his arms stubbornly.

“Are we gonna talk about this or are we gonna do that passive-aggressive shit, ‘cause we did that when Gerard was drinking and I’m really, really over it,” Mikey says, all the words spilling over each other in his rush to get them said. Stella jerks her head up from the keyboard, so shocked that her had skitters on the notes and mashes four discordant keys at once. They both wince and Stella pushes the keyboard off her lap quickly, sitting on her hands.

“What the hell Mikey?” she says, not angrily, and her voice cracks slightly on ‘hell’, out of surprise or pain. He meets her eyes quickly and then looks away, talking to a point over her left shoulder.

“I want to talk about it. You can’t just… You can’t just give us that and expect us not to say anything. Expect me not to say anything.” Mikey still won’t meet her eyes but his jaw juts out stubbornly, the same face he makes when he actually wants something and isn’t afraid to ask for it. Stella’s seen it maybe twice.

"I don't want to talk about it. It happened to me. I think I get to choose."

Mikey snorts.

"Yeah, because letting us choose what's best for ourselves works so well for this band," he says, his
arms unfolding and folding into fists over his knees. Stella shakes her head angrily. She's nowhere near the level of mess that Gerard was. She doesn't drink, doesn't like drugs.

"Don't compare me to Gee. This is different. I'm okay. It's been years," she says, trying to put the right truthful inflection in her voice.

"Then why tell us now?" Mikey says, standing up quickly and pacing the few steps of the length of the front lounge. There isn't a lot of room and he's got enough nervous energy that he seems to fill the whole space. Stella draws her legs up under her, sitting cross-legged on the couch and keeping her hands tucked underneath her. She tries to make herself smaller, hunching her shoulders a little. Mikey turns on her when she doesn't say anything. "Huh? Why tell us now?"

She shrugs.

"Frank asked me why I'd never told you before. I couldn't come up with a good enough reason." She shrugs again. "It's been so long. You never forget. But sometimes it just feels like a powerful nightmare, instead of something I lived through," she says, trailing off quietly at the end. Mikey doesn't say anything and stops pacing, paused partially turned away from her. She can't see his face. She takes a deep breath, tries to be brave, and looks up, straight at his shoulder.

"My life is the best it's ever been," she says, clearly and sharply. "I guess I just couldn't resist the chance to fuck it up."

The last words she spits out are bitter and angry but it's how she feels, like she's just ruined the best thing she's ever had: the band and the halfway there, uncertain thing she has with Mikey. He shakes his head.

"That's fucked up, Stel." He sounds choked up, like he's about to cry or he's smoked too many cigarettes. She sighs and half-smiles, pulling up her lips on only one side of her face.

"Maybe a little," she says, the levity in her voice all faked. "But I've always been like that."

Mikey shakes his head.

"No, that's not what I mean," he says quickly, turning so fast she flinches. He doesn’t notice, just falls to his knees next to her and reaches for one of her hands. He stops before he touches her, as if suddenly aware that he’s moving too fast. She takes a deep breath and puts her hand in his anyway. It shakes perceptibly, even when Mikey presses his palm against hers. He tucks his thumb over her pinkie finger, holding her hand against his gently. He doesn’t meet her eyes.

"Stel, it’s fucked up that you think that. It’s fucked up that we didn’t know or do more." He moves his hand to thread his fingers through hers, keeping his eyes on their hands. “I’m always going to feel like we should have done more,” he says quietly. She squeezes his hand gently, feeling hers shakes tighten with the grip and shakes her head.

“Mikey, you and the band are the best thing that ever happened to me.”

"I don't get it," he says, his eyebrows furrowing. She smiles at him.

"It's not something you forget. Ever. It's not like somethings, where you can go a while and not remember and then get reminded. I always know that it happened to me. I always know why I have nightmares. I always know why I have shakes. It doesn't leave you. But do know when it seems… unimportant? There's only ever one time where it feels like this thing that happened to me isn't important. Do you know?" Mikey squeezes her hand back and shakes his head.

"No," he says, his eyes darting sideways away from hers. She smiles.
"When I'm on stage. When I'm playing. When I'm not just Stella, I'm Stella Anderson from My Chemical Romance. I'm more than it, right then, when I'm playing. I wouldn't have that without you." She says, pulling her hand out of his to gesture emphatically. He reaches up to grab her hand again, pulling it down from a choppy gesture meant to illustrate how truthful she is.

“I feel like this changes everything. I didn’t know this about you,” Mikey says, leaning his forehead against their joined hands. She moves her thumb to brush against his temple, as comforting as she knows how.

“It doesn’t have to change anything,” she says gently. “I trust you,”

Mikey makes a “hm” noise in the back of his throat, like he doesn’t believe her. She tugs on his hand, forcing him to look up at her.

“Hey, fuck you,” she says, smiling tightly. “If I can trust you enough to tell you, you can trust yourself enough to keep trying at this thing with me.”

He squeezes her hand tightly and doesn’t let go.

“You want me to keep trying?” he asks, looking up at her. She wants to tell him to stop being self-deprecating, that she’s got enough of that for the both of them, but it sounds like he honestly wants her opinion. The tremor in her wrists starts up again, making both their hands shake slightly.

“Yeah, I do, I want that,” she says, almost whispering. The only thing holding her together is Mikey’s grip on her hand, tight enough to feel it but loose enough she could pull out. She wants to hug him but the thought of it, arms wrapped tight around her so she can’t get out, sends a shiver down her spine. Mikey smiles up at her. It doesn’t quite reach his eyes, where he looks unsure and a little afraid.

“I’ll keep trying then,” he says. Their smiles match each other, carefully happy but still unsure.

It's awkward. It's really fucking awkward. She texts Frank from the bus to check if there's anyone left in the room and only goes back to the hotel when he replies with "no one here but me...". She showers for half an hour and keeps her headphones in as much as possible the rest of the time, not wanting to talk about it. Frank moves around her carefully, as if afraid she'll break.

She sits on the edge of her single bed to redo the bandages on her new tattoos after her shower but her hands shake so bad she can't secure the bandages without irritating the ink. The sounds of Frank showering cover up her noises of frustration.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," she mutters steadily, trying to attach the new bandages for the sixth time. The new ink itches, flaring into pain quickly when she touches it. It looks good on the pale skin of her hip, the solid black ink of the bird cage and raven. She feels centred, focused in on the pain and sensation, the knowledge that this is with her forever.

The shower cuts off suddenly and she bites her lip to hold back a wince of pain when she misjudges the angle and touches the edge of the bird cage tattoo. The bathroom door clicks open and she doesn't look up, just refolds the bandage and tries again.

“God fucking damnit,” she grumbles, dropping the bandage try and shake her hand out. Her shakes aren't usually so bad she can't do things. It’s bothering her that she can’t even do something simple like look after her tattoo properly.

“Stel, you need a hand with that?” Frank asks offhandedly, dropping clothes into a pile on his bed.
“I’m fine,” she bites out grumpily, before throwing the bandage down onto the bed in frustration. She doesn’t technically need the bandage to look after her tattoo; she’s just always felt better about covering hers up when they’re new. The shake in her hands gets worse as she gets angrier. Now it’s almost impossible to hold the bandage.

“Hey, Stel, c’mon, let me do that for you,” Frank says, still playing it casual. She crosses her arms, high up on her chest and tries to ignore him. For a long moment, Frank stands across from her while she refuses to look him in the eye.

“I’m ignoring you,” she says, finally. Frank snorts.

“Because that’s worked so well in the past,” Frank says, leaning over her to pick up her bandage. “Let me?” he asks, stepping next to her and kneeling. She thinks, just for a quick moment, of telling him to fuck off, maybe shoving him. It’d feel good. She doesn’t know if it’d be worth it though.

“Fuck, fine,” she says, dropping her arms and leaning back, her shirt already folded up to reveal the tattoo. Frank leans forward, slowly, and lays the bandage flat against the tattoo. He presses carefully along the edge, using the surgical tape to attach it. He leans back and she pulls her shirt down quickly, turning away from him.

“You want to talk about it?” Frank asks, sitting back on his heels. She shakes her head.

“Not particularly,” she says, trying to make it sound like that’s the end of it. It obviously doesn’t work.

“You talk to Mikey?” he asks, face impassive. She feels her neck crack she moves her head so fast, flicking her eyes up to glare at him.

“What are you saying?” she asks quickly, angrily. Frank shrugs, staying casual.

“Well, did you?” he says, still kneeling next to her.

“Fuck you, we talked,” she says, looking away.

“Okay,” Frank says and smiles at her. “That’s all I wanted.”

--

Gerard corners her in the bus kitchenette three days later. It starts out innocent enough with questions about her keyboard parts, but he’s asking them so fast, one right after another, that she can’t get away. He stops suddenly.

“Why’d you tell us?” he asks, suddenly, seriously.

Stella stops, her hand still in the cupboard, reaching for cereal. She turns towards where he’s sitting at the small table, tucking her hands behind her back. She smiles, although it feels more like a grimace.

“Funny, Mikey asked me the same thing,” she says carefully, looking over Gerard’s shoulder. He tips his head sideways inquisitively, like a bird.

“What did you say?” he asks.

“That I couldn’t think of a good enough reason not to,” she says gently.

Her hand is shaking. For fuck’s sake she thinks and grabs the edge of the kitchenette counter hard
enough to turn her knuckles white.


“I’m pretty sure I could take any of you guys in a fight,” she says, smiling at much as she’s able. Gerard doesn’t laugh, just shakes his head.

“You know what I mean Stel,” he says seriously. She sighs quietly.

“Yeah Gee. I was scared. I was scared of you drunk, the bands we toured with, the techs, our roadies. It got to the point where I didn’t even feel it anymore; I was scared all the time.”

“I read a thing,” Gerard says and for fuck’s sake, of course Gerard read a thing. “It said that… survivors find coping strategies to try and get better.” Gerard looks at her out of the corner of his eyes hopefully, like he’s asking a question.

“My coping mechanism was joining your stupid fucking band, Gee.” She pauses. “You know all that shit you say, about saving lives and stuff?” she asks, watching Gerard out of the corner her eye. He blushes and smiles sheepishly, like he always does when you remind him of the ridiculous things he says on stage, but he nods.

“Yeah,” he says carefully. She wants a cigarette.

“Well, I think I’m one of those kids whose life you saved. What did I have in New York? Nothing but a shitty apartment and a shitty job going nowhere and a shitty death wish. I was alone and messed up and nearly ready to die. The band saved my life, Gee. Don’t ever think it didn’t.”

--The Paramour is a big yellow brick building laid out around a big central pool, trying way too hard to look like it’s actually in Europe. If she’s honest, it doesn’t look haunted. Ray and Gerard spent the whole drive over talking about all the hauntings that supposedly happened to Papa Roach’s drummer. It sounds like a crock of shit to Stella but then she doesn’t spend her spare time doodling zombies or composing songs about vampires. She just plays keyboard in a band.

They all get big rooms with double beds spread out throughout the mansion. Mikey and Stella get theirs next to each other in the same hallway; Gerard picks one on the top floor with a view over the tree; Ray grabs the one a few doors over from the studio. Frank follows Bob around for half an hour, threatening to share with him, before Bob shuts himself in a room on the second floor and pushes a dresser in front of the door. Frank ends up in the room across from Ray, where’d he left his stuff when they first arrived.

That first night, they all sit around a table in the massive kitchen and bitch each other out for hours over Chinese takeout. It gets cold and sticky and the noodles congeal and Frank keeps waggling his eyebrows at where Stella and Mikey are holding hands under the table.

It feels surreal; Mikey’s long fingers curled around hers under the table, while his brother studiously attempts to teach Bob how to use chopsticks. Bob is against chopsticks on principal. He expounds regularly on how the act of moving his food from the table to his mouth should be as simple as possible.

She feels giddy, overwhelmed by her own happiness. Mikey holds her hand when they walk back to their room and kisses her in the hallway, always careful to keep his hands to himself. She doesn’t want to let go of his hand but she doesn’t want to get closer either, doesn’t want to disturb the air between them. She goes to bed smiling.

--
She wakes up screaming. Rain lashes at the windows and, for a brief moment, Stella doesn’t know where she is. Her sheets are tangled up and wrapped around her body like rope, trapping her arms against her, and she thrashes, not knowing where she is, terrified. She doesn’t remember her nightmares, just the intense feeling of fear and panic. It’s overwhelming, the urge to run that’s purely instinctual.

She throws off her sheets and rolls out of her bed, stumbling across the room and catching herself against a wall. Her legs can barely hold her up; she feels so weak and wobbly. The sound of wind and rain at the window fills the room and in the dark the furniture starts to take on shapes, the looming distorted forms of people or animals. She’s shaking from adrenalin, not fear, but she still reaches for the light switch, her hands shaking.

The light flicks on for a split second and then shorts out with a disturbing fizzle, returning the room to darkness.

“Fuck, fuck,” she pants. Weak kneed, she stumbles to the door, throwing it open with shaking hands. She knows Mikey’s room is only inches away but it feels like miles as she fumbles for the door in the dark. Unable to find the handle, she pounds on the door heavily, still trembling.

The door opens suddenly, framing Mikey’s gaunt face, and Stella has to hang onto the door frame to hold herself up. There are big purple circles under Mikey’s eyes. There’s no light in the hallway, no moonlight shining through the window, only the sound of rain.

They look at each other for a long time, until Mikey appears to make a decision.

“Nightmares?” he asks, not moving from the doorway. Stella nods. She’s beginning to find her feet again but she doesn’t let go of the door frame. “Me too,” he says, sounding tired.

Neither of them sleep that night. They watch tv in Mikey’s room, too wired to doze off. The sun rises early and chases the rain away and they stumble down to breakfast with huge purple bruises under their eyes.

--

The next night, Stella doesn’t dream. She wakes up to the sound of something thumping against the wall she shares with Mikey, as if someone’s hit the wall by accident, and then a shout.

--

Mikey stops sleeping at night. He dozes during the day, falling asleep over his bass. Stella keeps finding him around the house, asleep at the kitchen table, passed out on the couch in front of a movie. She tries to stay with him at night-time; insomnia’s easier when you have someone to share it with but Mikey takes to locking his door, even though she can hear him moving around till sunrise.

Gerard starts having night terrors that leave him frantic and afraid in the morning. The light in her room is unreliable and flickery, even when it gets replaced, and the bath in Bob’s room fills during the night. Ray and Frank complain of noisy pipes and sounds coming from the studio while they sleep.

They’re surprisingly productive for being sleep-deprived and running on fumes. Stella sets up a portable keyboard in her room to work on at night. She’s not sleeping much anyway.

They toss song ideas back and forth idly, often too exhausted to turn any of them into reality. Gerard’s got some heavy ideas; there’s nothing fully formed yet, but almost there. She plays keyboard for him for hours in the studio, just the two of them, going over the same song again and
Mikey keeps locking his door.

--

One night when Gerard’s sleep terrors are so bad he just stays awake instead of sleeping, he finds Mikey in the kitchen with a whole bottle of vodka. His shouts wake everyone up. Bob and her run into each other on the stairs and by the time they’ve traced the sound of Gerard screaming, Frank and Ray already fill the doorway.

The kitchen isn’t enormously large but Mikey looks tiny, hunched over the table with his head down. There’s a clear bottle of vodka on the table in front of him. Gerard can’t finish a sentence, he’s stuck somewhere between angry and terrified, between worried and betrayed.

Stella pushes her way past Ray and, without saying anything, grabs the vodka bottle by the neck and drops it into the garbage can. It thumps satisfyingly. Mikey’s eyes follow her around the room but he doesn’t move to stop her. Gerard stops shouting. There’s a long moment of silence, punctuated only by Gerard’s heavy breathing.

She’s brilliantly, coldly angry. Her right hand, the one she used to pick up the vodka bottle, is shaking loosely but her left is perfectly still. She wants to punch someone.

“Mikey, do you have anything to say?” Gerard murmurs.

“I’m fine,” Mikey says, in a straight monotone. Stella makes a noise sort of like a snort.

“What was it you said to me? ‘Passive-aggressive shit?’” she says, annoyed. “Letting people in this band do what they think is best for themselves works so well?”

Mikey crosses his arms and leans back.

“What do you want me to say?” he says, almost grumpily. Stella turns, her anger suddenly flaring.

“What do we want you to say? What do I want you to say?” She shakes her head, so angry she’s gesturing wildly. “I told you everything. Everything. Everything that I thought I should keep secret, everything that was purely and only mine! It is not ‘what do I want you to say’ it is ‘what do you have to say for yourself’!”

She’s isn’t proud of the way she’s nearly screaming but then, she isn’t particularly proud of Mikey at this point either.

She has to take a very quick and surprised step back when Mikey surges to his feet and, with all of his not-very-considerable strength, shoves the kitchen table onto its side.

“I don’t...have anything...to say...to any of you,” he pants, before pushing past all of them on his way out the kitchen door and up the stairs. Stella lets herself practically fall to the floor, legs folding under her till she’s sitting cross-legged. Her head falls into her hands.

“There’s something wrong with Mikey,” she says, to the quiet kitchen.

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Mikey stands awkwardly, his bags in the dust next to him. Out of the corner of her vision she sees
Frank tug Gerard away gently. Mikey smiles carefully, like he doesn’t know if it’s the right thing to do. She takes a step forward as if she’s about to hug him or kiss him. He shakes his head, just once, and his bangs fall in front of his eyes.

“Um. I don’t know Stel. I don’t know,” he says, slightly panicked. His eyes are wide and he shakes his head again. He looks afraid but she doesn’t think it’s of her. She smiles and she knows that she’s welling up, that her eyes are full of tears like a fucking girl.

“It’s okay,” she says. “I...I understand. Just, you know, think about it. About us. And you make a decision and you tell me. And it’ll be okay. Whatever you decide.”

She reaches up slowly, telegraphing every movement, and brushes his bangs out of his eyes. “You need a haircut,” she says gently. She wants him to know that whatever happens, it’s okay, but she’s doesn’t know how to say it. He wraps his fingers about her wrist, holding it near his face.

“Will you...? I... I don’t want to ask,” he says, stuttering over his words. She sighs.

“I think we’ve established that you can ask me anything,” she says. He smiles weakly, lifting his shoulder in a one armed shrug.

“Will you wait?” he asks, still holding her wrist. He doesn’t say ‘for me’. She nods without thinking.

“You waited all that time for me,” she says simply. “Of course I’ll wait.” They both smile shakily and Stella knows that she’s about to start crying. Mikey tightens his grip on her wrist and then releases.

“I...I lov...” he begins. She shakes her head frantically.

“No,” she says. “You don’t...you aren’t...you don’t have to promise me anything.” She gestures brokenly between the two of them. She doesn’t want to start crying. There’s something wrong with Mikey, but there’s always been something wrong with her. It shouldn’t matter.

Frank and Gerard are still watching them; Frank is holding Gerard’s hand and keeping him from interrupting them.

“I’ll wait,” she says. “We have time.”

--

They put out the record. Mikey comes back. Apparently, everything is as it should be. Stel knows, objectively, that her life is better. She still shakes without warning, but they’re controllable. The urge to scream and shout at the world decreases. She fights less. It isn’t that she decided, at some point, to stop fighting. It just seemed to stop on its own. She isn’t angry.

She misses Mikey. They’re avoiding each other as much as they can. The tour is constant and exhausting and they’re too tired to deal with the emotional baggage still hanging off them. They all dance around each other, being way too careful. Mikey takes his cocktail of meds every morning with orange juice and cereal and everyone really emphatically doesn’t say anything.

One night, they all crowd into a single motel room to watch The Man Who Laughs. Mikey’s already claimed the centre of the double bed and Stella stands awkwardly in the door before Mikey, just as awkwardly, pats the bed next to him. She smiles carefully and then props herself up against a couple of pillows and the headboard. They’re close enough to touch but neither of them makes a move. Gerard and Ray come in arguing about a band that Stella hasn’t heard of (but is probably going to hear too much about tonight) and Bob’s giving Frank a piggyback so he has to duck through the door.
Frank raises his eyebrows at her but she scratches near her eye with her middle finger until he gets the message. She doesn’t pay much attention to the movie really, too hyperaware of Mikey’s body next to her. She leaves her hand on the bed next to her and, halfway through the movie, he lays his hand down on hers. She looks over at him, the light from the tv casting sharp shadows across his cheekbones.

“Can, can we just let it happen? We can talk about it later, can’t we?” he whispers, without looking over at her. He looks nervous. She tightens her grip on his hand as her only response.

On screen, someone dies. Mikey threads his fingers through hers. Bob throws a pillow at Frank when he, really obviously, stops watching the movie and starts making waggly eyebrows at Stella. Stella smiles and leans her head on Mikey’s bony shoulder. Things, while maybe not good, are better.

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Fin.

End Notes

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