Summary

Josh is the star of his high school's basketball team- until the new kid moves in. But that's okay, Josh likes the competition. Thing is, so does the new kid.

(ft. typical high school drama, rival friend groups, Brendon being a lil shit, melodramatic basketball games, broken hearts, broken bones, and secret relationships that aren't so secret.)
Salutations friends!!! i hope you enjoy this wip <3 It'll probably be about 50 *tyler voice* ISH chapters long (which is SO LONG and waaay longer than initially imagined lol!), though i couldn't say for sure, I'm just the writer <3

fic title from Lovely |-/

EDIT: hey friends, so lil 2015!me had a lotta heart but not a lotta skillz, so the first like 3 chapters may be a lil slow, but 2019!me promises you that you won't regret giving this (mega long) story a chance!!!! the writing RLLY improves, i promise you. i have plans to lightly edit the opening chapters sooner or later :) LOVE YALL!!!!!

See the end of the work for more notes.
summer's on its deathbed

Chapter Notes

title from The Calendar by patd

It was a sticky afternoon near the end of August, the heat of the day worsened by the extreme humidity. Josh tugged at the collar of his shirt as he squinted up at the sun, not a cloud in the sky to offer some shade. The pavement was hot against his legs and back, even through his clothing, only adding to his discomfort. But these were the last days of summer and he couldn’t quite muster the energy to get up from his sprawl on the corner of the basketball court.

There was a nudge against his foot as the basketball his friends had been lazily playing with escaped from them. Josh nudged it with his toe and sent it rolling back across the pavement to the other side of the court. Brendon scooped it off the ground and tossed it to Jordan, who was still bouncing around enthusiastically. Josh had tuned out what they were chatting about a while ago, shortly after he’d lost interest in his halfhearted attempts to tone his basketball skills for the new school year. It was just too hot for it today.

Josh’s eyelids were heavy and he let them fall shut, arms behind his head as a cushion. There was the sound of steps approaching a minute later. He peeked through one half lidded eye to see Spencer collapse next to him, leaning against the base of the basketball hoop. He stretched his legs out in front of him and flicked Josh on the part of his lower stomach showing beneath where his shirt had slipped up. “Hey. You’re right, it’s too hot out here today, I’m done with the practicing for now.”

Josh smacked at his hand, but wasn’t annoyed. He made a noise of acknowledgement. “At least I don’t really need the practice. You on the other hand….”

“Not fair!” Spencer poked at his stomach again as the sound of another pair of feet approached.

“That’s it, I’m wiped out,” Brendon proclaimed, wiping sweat from his forehead. Jordan was still at the opposite end of the court, trying to make a basket by throwing the ball with his back to the hoop. Brendon shook his head in Jordan’s direction, chuckling as he sat down cross-legged on top of Josh’s outstretched legs. Josh kicked weakly at him. “What’s with you guys, get off me, there’s the whole court to sit on and you sit on me!”

Brendon acted oblivious to Josh’s complaining and picked at a weed coming up through a crack in the pavement. He sighed and said, “At least school’s next week. Then we can play in the indoor gymnasium.”

Spencer groaned. “Yeah, but is it worth the extra work? All those classes…eugh.”

Josh gave up his attempts of getting Brendon out of his space, resigning himself to the extra weight and heat against his legs. “You don’t pay attention anyway, Spence, why does it matter? Besides, it’s our last year. Then you never have to go again.”

“Yeah,” Brendon chirped. “Then there’s college.”

Another groan from Spencer. Josh and Brendon shared a bemused look.
A few minutes of lazy silence passed before Spencer asked, with only mild interest, “Hey, Josh, is your brother going out for the team this year?”

He had to shake Josh’s arm a little to rouse him; the heat was making him so drowsy he had almost dozed off. “Hm, what? Nah, I don’t think so.” Josh stretched, yawning. “I don’t think he’s good enough, honestly.”

As if to prove his older brother’s point, some whooping sounded from across the court. Josh, Spencer, and Brendon looked over to see Jordan jumping around, arms raised victoriously, the ball wedged between two branches of a small tree behind the basketball hoop. Brendon laughed, tossing Jordan a quick salute, and Josh held up his middle finger.

“So maybe he’s not good enough,” Spencer agreed, as the three of them continued to watch as Jordan shook at the tree, trying to loosen the ball from its grip. “Let’s see who we all know for sure’s gonna be on the team. There’s me, y-

Brendon interrupted. “You sure?”

Josh laughed as Spencer kicked at Brendon, dislodging him off of Josh’s legs, and Josh took the opportunity to pull his legs away, sitting up. “Well I’m definitely on the team,” he said proudly.

“And me,” Brendon added. “And I guess if not enough people try out then we might let you join, Spence.”

Spencer ignored Brendon’s comment and Josh’s snickering and counted on his fingers. “You two, me, Pete, maybe Andy?”

Josh shrugged. “Maybe. But he hurt his ankle last year, remember, he might not try out again.”

“Shit, that’s right.” Spencer chewed the inside of his cheek thoughtfully as he stared across the basketball court. “Shit, I hope we don’t get any new kids trying out.”

Josh groaned just as Brendon made a noise of remembrance. “I think we can bet on at least one new kid,” he said ominously. He waited to elaborate until Josh punched him on the shoulder.


Brendon beamed and leaned in conspiratorially. “My mom was talking to the coach’s wife, and apparently there’s a new kid coming to school this year who was like, the star of the team at his old school. His parents talked to the principal and then even the coach about scholarships and opportunities to play in state competitions and shit. Kid must be really into basketball.”

Spencer elbowed Josh in the side. “Looks like you’ll have to actually work to be in the spotlight this year, Dun. That smile and colorful hair and tattoo can only get you so far, talent will count in the end, you know.”

“Look who’s talking, I don’t even know how you made the team last year,” Josh replied.

“Don’t pay him any attention,” Brendon said, animatedly turning away from Spencer to face Josh instead. “The tattoo will always get you fans, for sure. The freshmen just love it. They all want you to get them one. You’re like the local bad boy!”

Brendon and Spencer dissolved into laughter. “Ha ha.” Josh rolled his eyes at them.

In all honesty, Josh wasn’t anywhere near the best player at the school. He knew this. He could play
moderately well, better than Jordan and not as good as Peter, but he could hold his own. Even though he had no serious hopes of getting a college scholarship from his playing skills, he was one of the more popular basketball players at Worthington High School. He’d gotten in trouble for it at the time, but the pink hair really drew a lot of attention to him during the tryouts of his first high school year. That and the tattoo he had been too young to have gotten anywhere legally. That fact alone made the other students interested in him. Not only physically did he attract people, but Josh had an electric personality, too; you couldn’t be around him without some of his energy rubbing off on you. He was a natural born star of a small town high school basketball team, and he filled the role well, had filled it for three years. This would be his last year of high school and Josh had been planning all summer to continue on in the spotlight as he had been.

Except now he’d have some competition.

Bring it on, he thought to himself.

“You okay?” Brendon’s voice floated through the thoughts in Josh’s mind. “Someone looks scared! I said I think, I don’t know if this kid’s gonna try out or not.”

Spencer waved a hand. “Sure you don’t know. The kid you just described to us? He’ll try out, guaranteed.”

Josh shrugged. “Whatever. It’ll be fun. Just dye my hair again before school starts next week and presto, I’ll be right back at the top of the team.”

“If just dying your hair is the secret to being a good basketball player, we should put some color in Spence’s hair-”

“Enough already about my basketball skills, I know I suck!”

Jordan appeared suddenly behind Brendon, bouncing the ball down in Josh’s lap, and Josh let out a muffled huff. “Mom just texted me, Josh, supper’s almost ready.”

Josh sighed lazily, not so eager to get home out of the late afternoon heat as he had thought; it was easier to just lounge and sweat on the court with his friends. But then he remembered that his mom was making lasagna for dinner and he forced himself up off the ground, tucking the ball beneath his arm. “All right, let’s head out. See you guys later, wanna do this tomorrow?”

Brendon and Spencer stood up, too. “Nah, can’t. I got a dentist appointment,” Spencer said, dusting off his shorts.

“I don’t think I can make it either, J, my cousins are going back home to Washington tomorrow and you know how it is, I was barely able to sneak off today. God, I hate them,” Brendon whined. “I wish they at least didn’t have to share my room while they were here.”

Josh laughed, patting him on the shoulder. “Life sucks like that. Guess I’ll see you guys around then. Next time I see you we might be officially seniors.”

Jordan had already started off down the road on his skateboard, and Josh hurried to pick his bike up off the grass and straddle it, still balancing the ball under his arm.

“See ya later, Dun!” Spencer called as Josh followed after Jordan. Josh didn’t reply, but smiled lopsidedly to himself. He liked his friends. He hadn’t been able to hang out with them enough over the summer, and in that respect, he was extremely thankful for school to be starting again. And the basketball. Those two things made school just about worth it.
Any secondhand thoughts Josh might have had earlier concerning the new basketball player who would possibly challenge his social level on the team this year faded quickly and dissipated in the back of his mind as his anticipation for homemade lasagna with garlic bread grew the closer to home he pedaled.

Saturday morning, the last day of summer that Josh could actually sleep in, and his mind woke him up before the sun had even risen. Maybe it was doing him a favor and just getting him mentally prepared for the start of the school year. Josh cursed anyways.

He flopped around in bed for half an hour, sheets tangled around his legs, tapping pointlessly on his phone. None of his friends were awake and texting yet, and he’d lost his headphones over the summer, so no listening to music before his parents and siblings were up. Josh sighed dramatically out loud and rolled off the bed to the floor, feet thumping loudly. He made great effort to be a bit more quiet as he changed, pulling on some shorts over his boxers and a sleeveless top. It was already warm in his bedroom, even before the sun was up and with the ceiling fan spinning, and Josh figured it to be another scorching day. He eyed the basketball in the corner of his room. His friends couldn’t join him today, but he might as well shoot a few baskets by himself one last time before school started. At least shoot a few baskets before Jordan was awake and ready to come with him.

Josh didn’t like apples but grabbed one off the counter for a quick breakfast anyway. He tiptoed through the kitchen to the door leading to the garage, apple in one hand, ball tucked under the other. He grimaced at the loud whirring noise the garage door made when he hit the button, but he’d rather ride his bike to the court than walk, and his bike was shoved in the garage beside his dad’s car. Hopefully his family would just sleep through the noise and he could escape without notice.

Pedaling a bike while holding a basketball and eating an apple was a little harder than Josh had originally figured, but he got down the driveway all right and started off down the road, hoping for the best. The sun still wasn’t up yet, and the sky was a muted shade of blueish gray, with a hint of a warmer tone- orange or maybe pink- forming behind a row of rooftops.

This is…actually kind of sweet, Josh thought as he eyed the sky and munched his apple, bike swaying dangerously for a moment before he straightened it back out. It’s not too hot yet, and no one else is even awake. This is actually really sweet.

He panted a little to get up the small hill and then coasted down the other side, basketball court within view. A strip of light was beginning to color the tops of the trees behind the court, the rest of the ground still cast in shadow. Josh finished his apple and rolled his bike to a stop across the street from the court, aiming and tossing the core towards a trashcan beside the sidewalk. It bounced off the rim and landed in the grass. Josh was standing with one foot on the ground to balance himself still seated on his bike, contemplating whether or not an apple core would be considered littering, when he heard the sound of a basketball smacking the pavement. He looked up and peered through the mesh wire fence lining the court on the street side.

At the opposite end of the court, Josh could see another boy dribbling a ball, rhythm steady, hands and feet quick. The ball shot into the air and made a perfect basket, metal net clanging joyously. The boy was tall and lean with brown hair and looked pretty nondescript, at least from as far away as Josh was. He watched as the kid caught the ball again and dribbled it while jogging in a wide circle away from the hoop. He turned suddenly and threw the ball again, without half as much time as Josh thought was necessary to calculate where to aim, and Josh was startled to hear the same metal clanging as the ball went in the net. The kid jumped in victory and did a small, quick jig that made a lopsided smile appear on Josh’s face. He grabbed the ball again and began doing some fancy
dribbling, faster than anything Josh had ever attempted before. It was slightly mesmerizing.

Josh didn’t realize how long he had been standing there, halfway on and halfway off his bike, just watching this kid do impressive things with a basketball, until his crotch started to hurt from leaning on the rail of his bike. He shifted, unsure as to whether he should take his own ball and shoot baskets on his own side of the court, or introduce himself to this kid and see if they could shoot baskets together. He glanced over at the kid once more. He had just collapsed cross-legged onto the court and was spinning the ball on his finger, his back to Josh. He hadn’t noticed him yet.

Now on any given day, Josh would have been pissed that another kid was using his basketball court. No one had a right to be out and about at this ungodly hour of the morning, on a Saturday no less! Josh conveniently excluded himself from that statement. The basketball court was normally deserted, so this was rarely a problem, but the one day when Josh was awake early, someone else happened to be there. Yes, any given day and Josh would have been pissed. Any given day, and Josh would have marched onto the court to play on the opposite side, oblivious to the other person there, in the hopes they would eventually get the hint and leave. So Josh himself was confused when instead of playing alone or joining the other kid, he secured the basketball under his arm once more and turned his bike around, pedaling away down the road as quietly as he could.

The sun was getting high enough in the sky now that the relative cool the shade had provided was disappearing. By the time Josh coasted to a stop on the driveway, the shade was completely gone and a sheen of sweat had broken out across his back. His dad was rummaging around in the garage, and Josh saw with some dismay that he was pulling out the lawn mower. Resolving himself to his fate, he climbed off his bike and walked it up the driveway.

His dad turned when Josh entered the garage and leaned his bike against the wall. “Hey there, son. You’re up early! Last day of summer, I thought you’d be sleeping in.”

“I thought so, too,” Josh said, bouncing his basketball off the side of the car.

His father frowned at him and shook his head as he finished pulling the lawn mower out into the driveway. “Josh, would you bring me a trash bag from the box by the back wall? Thanks!”

Josh retrieved a bag and trotted into the yard, handing it out to his dad, ready to make a dash inside. Just as he turned-

“How about you mowing the front lawn for me, hm, champ?” His dad patted his back as he passed Josh and headed into the garage. “Your mother and I will really appreciate it. I’m taking her to the grocery store later....” his voice trailed off into muffled sounds as he disappeared from sight.

Josh stared out at the ankle high grass, even taller weeds scattered across it. He dropped the basketball to the ground and watched it bounce a few spaces away and then roll to a stop in the grass. He sighed.

So much for Saturdays.

Josh heard Spencer before he saw him, Brendon pouncing on Josh’s back with arms slung around his shoulders half a second later.

“Yo, Dun! Seniors, man! Here we are, we made it!” Josh turned around from his locker awkwardly with Brendon still clinging to him to see Spencer butting past a group of freshmen standing nervously by the water fountain. He punched Josh amiably on the chest and Josh staggered a bit.
“Dude, get off me. Brendon, you too, you weigh a fucking ton.”

“Whoa whoa, teachers, remember?” Brendon chided, finally releasing Josh as he glanced around the crowded school hallway.

Josh just rolled his eyes as he turned back to his locker, struggling with the lock to get the combination correct.

“It’s so loud in here no one can hear anyway,” Spencer said, raising his voice as an especially loud group of teachers hurried past. “Man, first day of twelfth grade. That’s something, isn’t it? Hey, Joshua, my man, you dyed your hair! It looks sick!”

Josh shook his head, hair flopping back and forth to show off the bright red color.

“It looks great,” Brendon agreed, ruffling Josh’s hair. “When did you get it done? It was plain ol’ ugly brown on Friday.”

“Yesterday,” Josh replied, smacking Brendon’s hand off his head. “My parents were so mad. They were hoping I’d forgotten about coloring it.”

“The principal will love this,” Spencer laughed.

Josh shrugged. “Whatever, she’s used to it by now.”

Brendon leaned against the locker next to Josh’s as Josh continued twisting at the lock. “Do we have the same homerooms?” he changed the subject, smoothing out the schedule sheet in his hands. “I’m in room…eighteen. Physics is first thing, aw shit.”

Spencer pulled out his own schedule. “Room sixteen. History’s first for me. God, I’m gonna hate this class.” He waved the sheet of paper in front of Josh’s face. “How ‘bout you, Joshie?”

Josh batted his hand away. “Do not call me that. I don’t know, I just want to get my damn locker op-”

He gave it an exceptionally hard tug and the door swung open, Josh stumbling backwards into Spencer.

“Voila,” Brendon said dramatically, giggling at Josh and Spencer’s mishap. “It’s opened.”

“Shut up, you guys are the worst,” Josh complained with a smile on his face, shoving his bag in his locker as he decided to unpack his things later. They had classes to get to now. He grabbed his books from his bag and rummaged in his pocket for his schedule just as the first bell rang, students in the hall scampering for their classrooms.

Brendon patted Josh on the shoulder. “I gotta go, catch up with you later. Maybe I’ll see you in my homeroom. We all have precalculus during second hour though I think, so I’ll definitely see you guys then!” He slipped away into the crowd and down the hall.

Spencer knocked Josh’s books out of his hands before hurrying off in the opposite direction, waving over his shoulder. Josh glared after him but couldn’t help chuckling to himself. He picked up his things and began walking down the hall as he scanned the schedule sheet for the number of his homeroom. The hallway was emptying quickly, and Josh sighed loudly as he realized his homeroom was on the second floor. He bolted for the staircase and went up two steps at a time.

The last bell rang just as Josh burst into the classroom in a moderately disheveled state, struggling to
keep a grip on his books and shoelace halfway undone, and he could see a red strand of hair slipping in front of his eyes. The teacher standing at the front of the room, a tall, trim woman with blond hair pulled back in a short braid and glasses with a pattern on the side gave him a hard look. The classroom was quiet except for Josh’s labored breathing, and he blushed a bright shade of pink he was sure probably almost matched his hair. He mumbled an apology for being almost late and made his way through the desks to the only remaining empty seat, in the middle of the room. Josh looked to the sky and sighed inwardly - of fucking course. How convenient. He slipped quickly into the seat and glared threateningly at the boy next to him who looked like he was about to laugh.

Despite the morning’s rough start, the rest of Josh’s classes that day went smoothly. Since it was the first day, none of the teachers gave any homework, except for the precalculus teacher. After joining his friends in precalculus, Josh went separately to his history class, meeting up with them again at lunch. The three of them sat with some of Spencer’s other friends, kids who lived in his neighborhood. Josh remembered from last year that their names were Ryan and Joe, and he smiled and talked with them a bit, but for the most part he spent his lunch break tuned out of the conversation and looking around the cafeteria, tapping his hands against the table in a made-up beat. Brendon gave him a funny look, and Josh knew he was acting restless, but truth was he was restless. This year’s basketball tryouts weren’t until Thursday, and Josh didn’t know how he was supposed to wait that long to just try out for the team. Granted, he already knew he would make it, but the wait still didn’t help his anxiety any.

“You cool?” Brendon asked quietly from across the table as Spencer was telling an animated story about the time his foot got run over by a car.

Josh shrugged nonchalantly. “Yeah, I’m cool.” He smiled appreciatively before looking away again out at the cafeteria. It was loud and crowded and hot and Josh felt a bit of discomfort forming in the back of his chest, but he forced the feeling back down. Snippets of conversations floated to his ears, a girl’s perfume wafted by as she passed their table, a pair of brown eyes met his from across the room. Josh turned away from the rest of the cafeteria and tuned back into the conversation at his own table, rubbing at his head, hair sticking up in the place he’d just touched. Spencer and Joe were laughing loudly at something Ryan had just said, and Brendon was sitting next to Ryan with his arms crossed in front of his chest, glancing nervously at Ryan. Josh squinted his eyes slightly but was too distracted by Spencer’s booming laugh to give it much thought. He was certain Spencer was the loudest kid in the entire cafeteria.

The classes after lunch dragged on, Spanish especially for Josh; he hated it. He finally felt like he could breathe again when the last class of the day turned out to be music. He had been itching all summer to get his hands on that drum set. Besides the basketball, music was what Josh looked forward to most at school.

The day eventually came to an end and Josh met up with Brendon outside by the bike rack. Brendon explained that Joe had rushed off to an after school job and Spencer had gone with Ryan to McDonald’s for ice cream to celebrate the first day of senior year.

“Spence said we could meet them there. Wanna go?”

Josh unlocked his bike from the rack and pulled it out from the tangle of bikes around his. He shrugged. “Fine with me. You wanna go?”

Brendon shrugged, too, though his cheeks seemed a little more flushed than the afternoon heat could be blamed for. Josh made a face. “Dude, you’ve still got the hots for Ryan, I can tell.”

Brendon’s face flushed more. “I do not, I just want a fucking frappe, okay, is that all right with you?”
Josh couldn’t help but to laugh. “Okay, that’s all right with me. Let’s go get a fucking frappe then.”

He climbed onto his bike and coasted down the sidewalk away from Brendon before he could punch him or something, looking over his shoulder to see Brendon glaring after him as he dug his own bike out of the rack. Josh stood up on the pedals and turned his eyes back to the sidewalk in front of him, swerving to keep from hitting a kid that hadn’t moved out of his way fast enough. He was about to stop and apologize when Brendon raced past, hand darting out to muss up Josh’s hair, and Josh found himself pedaling after his friend.

“I’ll beat you there!” Brendon called over his shoulder.

“Yeah, I bet you will!” Josh yelled back, voice hinting.

Brendon held up his middle finger without bothering to turn around, and Josh smiled.
Finally, *finally*, after what felt like an especially long half week to Josh, Thursday arrived. And with Thursday came the basketball tryouts. Not that the other days had been all bad. Josh got to see Brendon and Spencer in second period precalculus every day, and the three of them also shared Spanish class (which they were all equally bad at), music, and art as well. Lunch was proving to be a fun half hour for Josh. The table he sat at with Brendon and Spencer quickly grew more and more crowded with each day, friends from the past school year joining them. Josh recognized them all, though he didn’t know some of them as well as Brendon or Spencer did.

It was their lunch period that afternoon, and Josh was sitting between Brendon and Dallon at their lunch table. Ryan was on the end of the row next to Brendon, and Josh couldn’t help but notice Brendon was sitting extremely straight and very still, leaning ever so slightly in Josh’s direction and arms crossed tightly over his chest. Josh nudged him, amused. He nodded at Brendon’s untouched sandwich before him on the table. “Good luck eating that without using your hands.”

Brendon shot him a deadly glare and Josh laughed, shaking him a little and bumping him into Ryan, who was currently leaning across the table talking to Spencer. Ryan paused to smile over at Brendon, and Brendon blushed a shade of red that Josh was certain matched his own dyed hair. He was shot another deadly glare.

“I swear to God, Dun, cut it out right now or I will smack that stupid grin off your ugly face,” Brendon hissed.

“Dude, chill, it’s cool,” Josh laughed, raising his hands. Brendon turned back to his sandwich and began moodily shoving it in his mouth.

Joe was sitting next to Spencer, laughing loudly, and next to him was a kid named Mikey whom Josh knew relatively well. He looked a little out of place and was listening quietly to the conversations going around the table. He had been on the basketball team last year and was a pretty good player; Josh wouldn’t mind if he tried out again. Dallon had been on the team, too, and had already informed Josh that he was going out for it again. He was a decent player, and what little he did lack in skill he made up for by his height. Josh was insanely jealous, though he would never say that out loud.

Brendon elbowed Josh sharply and Josh let out a huff of air, choking on his bite of sandwich. “What?” he asked in an annoyed tone after he had gotten back his breath.

“Did you hear that?” Brendon replied, voice low and eyebrows knit together. “He’s gonna try out for the team!”

“What are you whispering about?” Dallon leaned over Josh to join the conversation.
Brendon looked annoyed but kept talking, glancing nervously around the room. “He’s trying out for the team today, can he even play basketball?" 

Josh rolled his eyes and interrupted in a moderately loud voice, “Who’s gonna try-”

“Shshshh!”

Spencer actually stopped talking to glance over curiously, and Josh shrugged at him, nodding his head towards Brendon dramatically in explanation. He turned back to Brendon and whispered animatedly, “Who is gonna try out for the team?”

“And why are you acting so weird?” Dallon added, bemused.

Brendon glared at the both of them but answered anyways. “Him. He is. Ryan. He just told Spencer he’s gonna try out. Oh my god, I’m not gonna be able to focus at all, he’s doing this on purpose, I hate him-”

Dallon looked confused. “What did I miss? Why do you dislike him so much?”

Josh couldn’t help but to start laughing as he reached out and ruffled Brendon’s hair, explaining to Dallon, “He doesn’t dislike him, he has the opposite problem.” Brendon smacked Josh’s hand away harshly as Dallon made a surprised noise.

Just then the lights in the cafeteria flicked off and on, grabbing everyone’s attention. Mr. Anderson, the basketball coach, stood at the front of the room, clipboard in hand. “Alright, listen up, kids!” he called loudly over the hushed chattering. “Just a quick announcement and you can go back to your lunches. The boys’ basketball team is having tryouts today, and if you’re interested in giving it a shot—” he chuckled at his pun—“then you are excused from your classes for the rest of the afternoon and can head to the gym straight after lunch. Auditions start in exactly forty-five minutes, so you need to be changed and ready by then. Good? Good.”

Josh felt adrenaline rush through his body. The cafeteria was louder now than it had been before the official announcement, and Josh had to raise his voice to be heard at their table over the din. “I’m so fucking ready for this!”

Spencer punched the air in front of him excitedly. “Same here, man, this is gonna be our best team ever this year, I can tell. I can sense it. With all of us on the team, it’ll rock!” He gestured to the entire table and smacked Joe on the back. “Except for old Joe here of course. Party pooper.”

Joe shrugged. “I suck at basketball, you’d hate it. If I tried out we wouldn’t still be friends afterwards.”

Spencer oohed loudly and even Mikey laughed a little, and Dallon elbowed Josh suddenly. First Brendon and now Dallon; Josh wished his friends would stop doing that. “Look out, Josh, it’s your favorite person coming this way.” Josh peered around Dallon to see two kids heading towards their table through the crowded lunch room. He grunted when he realized who it was.

“Hey, boys. So it’s that time of year again,” Pete said loudly when he had approached, leaning a hip against the table and crossing his arms. Patrick stood beside him, hands in his pockets; he met Josh’s eyes and smiled. Josh returned it as Pete continued talking. “Andy’s out this year which means it’ll be just me and you fighting for first place, Dun.”

Spencer scoffed. “You might be the meanest player, Wentz, but you’re not the best.”

Brendon added his two cents worth. “Well neither’s Josh, so there’s that.”
“Whose side are you on?” Spencer demanded, glaring across the table.

Patrick cleared his throat. “Technically you’re all on the same side. I mean it is the Worthington basketball team. It’s just for practice that you’ll be split into two different teams.”

Pete waved a hand dismissively. “The real teams aren’t those color coded ones for practice. The real teams are for when we play games with other schools. The real team plays. The other team sits on the bench like a bunch of pussies. Gonna be on the bench again this year, Dun?”

Josh gave Pete a hard look. “That’s not fair. It was once, and it was my first time trying out!”

“And he was first on the row,” Spencer added proudly.

“Big deal. First on the bench- that won’t get you anywhere,” Pete retorted.

Mikey cleared his throat and Josh was mildly surprised that he was even getting into this. “You said Andy’s not trying out this year?”

Pete looked down his nose at him and Mikey shrunk visibly back in his seat, the glasses perched on his face making his eyes appear bigger than they really were as he awkwardly averted his gaze down towards his hands. Pete snorted. “Yeah. Changed schools. Don’t you wussies know anything that goes on around here? Pat’s trying out too this year.”

Patrick blushed as everyone at the table looked to him in surprise. While Pete wasn’t exactly well-liked by Josh and his friends, they all knew Patrick was a good guy. Why he hung out with an asshole like Pete, Josh couldn’t understand.

“Hey, I didn’t know that! Good luck, man,” Josh said with a smile, pointedly ignoring Pete.

The rest of the table murmured in agreement and Patrick looked pleased. Pete rolled his eyes. “First place on the team is mine this year, Dun. Just giving you a warning in advance. Don’t get your hopes up too high.” He slipped past Patrick and headed out of the cafeteria.

Patrick looked apologetic. “Sorry, guys. I don’t know why he’s like that, he’s just really competitive. He’s not really an asshole.”

Brendon snorted. “Sure, Pat. He’s been like this all of high school, we’re all used to it by now. Can’t figure out why he isn’t a douche to you, though. That doesn’t add up.”

Patrick laughed warmly. “Well I mean he is kind of a douche to me, too, just. Not as much, I guess. We grew up knowing each other, so there’s that.”

“Well,” Spencer interrupted loudly, stretching his arms above his head. “Maybe Pete should be a bit more concerned about me, I’m a menace when I’m out there on the court. A menace.”

“Well, he’s not wrong,” Brendon muttered under his breath to Josh. Josh grinned, and Spencer glared as if he heard what Brendon had said. Before he could confront him about it, the bell rang, and students began filing out of the cafeteria.

“I better catch up with Pete,” Patrick said, being jostled slightly by the students pushing past behind him. “I’ll see you guys in the changing room!” He dashed off as Josh and his friends stood up, grabbing their trash and trays and joining the crowd exiting the room.

Someone bumped into Josh as he made his way to the trashcan with his tray, and he turned around, annoyed. It was Jordan, bouncing energetically on the balls of his feet. He was already in his gym
“Oh, c’mon,” Josh groaned, eyeing his outfit. Jordan had been excited about the tryouts all week, same as Josh, and every night at dinner he had talked excitedly about going out for the team for the first time. Josh had simply rolled his eyes and ignored him, certain that when the time came he would back out as he had done the past year. Josh had had a feeling that Wentz had something to do with it, and for that he internally thanked Pete. But unfortunately, he didn’t seem to have had the same effect on Jordan as he did last year, and here Jordan was, ready and eager to go. Fucking great.

“You all ready, J? This is gonna be awesome, we’re gonna be teammates!” Jordan exclaimed, still bouncing.

Josh resisted the urge to shove him. They were in school, after all, and he had to act somewhat civilized. At least while there were teachers in the vicinity. “No way are you making it on the team,” he said instead.

Jordan made a face, still unfazed. “Sure I will, I’ve got a fair chance, just as good a chance as you!”

“I am way better than you,” Josh snorted, turning away from his younger brother and dodging another student to make it to the trashcan with his tray. No fucking way was Jordan making the team.

“C’mon, Dun, we gotta move!” Brendon’s voice came from a couple yards away. Josh glanced up from dumping his tray’s contents into the trash to see Brendon tossing a crumpled piece of wrapper from his lunch towards the trashcan beside Josh. “Score!”

Josh laughed at Brendon’s kiddish expression and shot out a hand to grab the wrapper before it could land in the trash. “Not quite!” he called back, stumbling forward and- right into a student dumping their own tray’s contents into the trashcan.

“Hey!”

“Oh, shit,” Josh murmured as he watched an open water bottle on the tray tip and spill all over the person’s pants.

Josh was painfully aware of the other person glaring at him as he tried to avoid making eye contact. He was about to apologize when Brendon was at his side and tugging at his arm. “If we don’t go now we’re gonna be late!” He suddenly noticed the other student standing beside Josh and looking relatively angrily with a water stain all over their front. “What’d you do, piss your pants?” Brendon snickered, but Josh just groaned and turned away, embarrassed, hurrying off and dragging Brendon along with him.

“Who was that? They didn’t look too happy with you,” Brendon huffed as he jogged to keep up with Josh’s fast pace down the corridor.

Josh shrugged. “Dunno, man. It was an accident.”

Brendon shrugged, too, and neither of them said any more as they took another turn down a different hallway, the gym doors within sight. There were several students hanging outside the gym, and Josh could see Ryan and Dallon were among them.

“Spencer and Mikey went on it to change, but we decided to wait for you guys,” Ryan said as Josh and Brendon stopped beside their friends.

“Yeah, what took so long? We don’t have much time,” Dallon added.
Brendon smirked. “Josh knocked a kid into the trashcan. On purpose.”

“You’re such a fucking liar,” Josh hit Brendon in the stomach as he butted past and pushed open the gym doors. “Hey, Ryan, you know what I found Brendon writing all over his notebook?” he said it over his shoulder casually enough, but the look Brendon shot him was mean enough to kill.

“Joshua,” he said sharply, eyes wide and jaw set. Josh just snorted, amused at the color draining from Brendon’s face as Ryan glanced at Brendon with a confused look.

The door to the changing room was just inside the gym on the side wall; it was propped open and excited chatter was coming from inside. The coach was across the gym on the other side of the room, struggling to pump up several basketballs, making sure they were nice and firm. Josh’s excitement grew as he hurried into the changing room.

Spencer was already wearing his P.E. outfit and had apparently taken it upon himself to help Mikey change. Mikey was in his gym shorts, but was struggling at the last button on his sweater and Spencer was pushing his hands out of the way so he could take over. Mikey fidgeted with his glasses nervously.

Josh made his way over to his locker, eyeing the other boys in the room. He grimaced to see Jordan on the other side of the room, talking with some friends of his. The little shit.

Pete and Patrick were sitting on some benches nearby. Pete had his hand on Patrick’s shoulder, and he seemed to be offering advice and encouragement to Patrick, who was sitting extremely rigidly and looking a shade paler than normal. A few other kids Josh didn’t know were hanging around the room, some talking happily, others shifting awkwardly in the corner. They all looked like freshmen, probably in Jordan’s class, and Josh doubted they would be serious competition.

He dug around in the small locker he had claimed at the beginning of the week during their first P.E. class and pulled out his clothes, turning and bumping into Brendon. “No sign of the new guy yet. So far you’re still safe,” he said in a conspiratorial tone. Josh just shoved him out of his personal space and busied himself changing.

A few of the younger kids in the room stared in awe as Josh pulled off his shirt, feeling painfully self-conscious; his colorful sleeve of tattoos were a lot more noticeable when he wasn’t wearing a shirt. Brendon chuckled beside him. “Looks like those scribbles on your arm are still doing it for ya.” Josh grumbled a response as he quickly pulled on his t-shirt.

He had no sooner finished tying his shoelaces when Coach Anderson appeared in the doorway, knocking loudly against the wall. “Okay, kids, c’mon out here, it’s time! I hope you lot improved from last year!” He laughed heartily.

The boys filed out the door, Josh stalling to slip in line behind Dallon so he wouldn’t have to be next to Pete. Pete gave him a knowing smirk. The group followed the coach to the far end of the gym, excited whispering following them the entire way.

“Okay, okay, boys, line up along the line right there,” the coach said, waving a hand distractedly as he grabbed his clipboard. “I’m just gonna go through the line real quick and jot down all of your names, then we can get started!”

Josh crossed his arms and fidgeted impatiently as several names were called out that he didn’t recognize, mixed in with his friends and teammates from past years. Ryan said his name before Josh, and Josh grimaced at how high-pitched his voice sounded when he finally had his turn. When it came down to the actual tryouts, he was nervous every year. Dallon came after Josh, and then another name Josh didn’t recognize, then Mikey. He was even more high-pitched than Josh was.
Poor kid.

The last name called out was another one Josh didn’t know, so it confused him when Brendon was suddenly leaning behind Ryan and pinching his arm frantically.

“Ow, what the hell!” Josh exclaimed, loudly enough for the coach to give him a disapproving look. “What?” he hissed again, lowering his voice. Ryan turned around halfway to see what was going on behind his back; Brendon seemed currently oblivious to the fact that he was leaning into his crush that he had been so awkward around before. He pointed towards the end of the line. “That’s him, the kid I was telling you about, the sports freak! So he did show up!”

Josh smacked at Brendon’s hand. “Would you shut up? Before we both get kicked off the team without even a chance to get on it—”

The coach coughed loudly and Josh, Brendon, and Ryan quickly jumped back to their places in line. Josh was curious about this kid. What was his name again? He hadn’t been listening. He tried peering past Dallon down the line to get a glimpse of him, but Coach Anderson marched past him just then, talking loudly. “Anyways,” he said, eyeing Josh and Brendon harshly as he walked back down the line. “Here’s how this is going to work. We’ll have some typical warmup exercises first, then we’ll run some laps, make sure you’re all in good enough shape. Then we’ll do some dribbling and basic ball drills before starting a small game. Sound good?”

Several of the younger boys replied while Brendon leaned behind Ryan again, grabbing Josh’s attention. “Ball drills,” he smirked. Josh rolled his eyes dramatically, stifling his laughter when Ryan made a shocked face at Brendon and Brendon turned a bright shade of pink.

The next twenty minutes were spent doing jumping jacks and running in place, Coach Anderson throwing out comments and criticism the entire time. Josh grinned mid-jumping jack when he heard the coach raising his voice at Jordan for doing the weirdest jumping jack he’d ever seen. Josh knew his brother wouldn’t have a chance. He thought absentmindedly that he could maybe size up this new kid Brendon kept talking about during the warm ups, but either Dallon was too tall or Josh was too short to see the end of the line. I’ll meet him soon enough, I suppose. During the laps maybe.

Nearing the end of the twenty minutes, one kid had actually plopped down on the ground before time was up, a classmate of Jordan’s, Josh thought, and the coach shook his head, arms crossed. “If you can’t even make it past the exercises then what made you think you could make it on the team? Go back to class.”

“One down,” Brendon huffed, hands on his hips, spitting his tongue out as the kid sulked past.

Josh ignored him as Coach Anderson sized up the rest of the boys. “Okay,” he declared after a minute. “Next round is laps. Run five, go, go, go!”

Brendon and Dallon shot off in obvious competition, and Josh chased after them, bumping into Spencer as he rounded the corner.

“Hey, man,” Spencer said, panting. “Have you met Joseph yet?”

“Who?” Josh panted back, their strides matching.

“The new guy, the one Brendon was on about?”

Josh glanced over his shoulder quickly but all he saw were bobbing heads. “Not yet. I can’t see him right now.”
“He’s pretty skinny, I wouldn’t worry about him.”

Josh shot a glance over at his friend. “I’m not worried about him. I’ve got this.” As if to prove his point, Josh sped up his pace, Spencer quickly falling behind. He rounded another corner, finishing the first lap. The next person in front of him was Pete, and Josh ignored the burning in his thighs to take longer steps to catch up. Pete must have heard someone approaching, because he too quickened his pace.

Josh was within a few feet of Pete for the rest of the laps, one moment pulling ahead, the next falling back behind. Neither of them said anything, though they both kept shooting daggers at each other. They passed Brendon halfway through the last lap, running on either side of him, and Josh swore he finished the lap a step before Pete, though he knew Pete would claim otherwise. He leaned against the wall, panting and avoiding making eye contact. It didn’t really matter anyways; Dallon had beaten both of them.

“Fuckin’ daddy long legs,” Brendon muttered in Dallon’s direction, jogging over to Josh and huffing to a halt. As the rest of the boys finished the lap, Josh was reminded of this Joseph kid he was supposed to be worried about. He eyed all the unfamiliar faces he saw.

“Hey, B, which one’s Joseph?”

Brendon’s interest was suddenly piqued. He studied the group as the final students finished the lap, trying to pick him out. “I don’t see him right now, maybe the pussy couldn’t handle the run- oh, there he is, behind Spencer! Move, you oaf-”

“Good job, kids, you all did well!” Coach Anderson boomed, making Josh jump. He was standing to the side of the gym, surrounded by the basketballs he had earlier been filling with air. He kicked one over towards the boys, and Jordan grabbed it off the ground. “Everyone grab a ball! Just do some basic dribbling, show off whatever moves you know. I need to see how you all handle the ball.”

Brendon smirked. “I’ll show you how to handle th-”

“I swear to god, Brendon, if you don’t stop with these disgusting ball jokes, I will take your fucking notebook and I will show Ryan-”

“All right, Jesus,” Brendon grabbed the nearest basketball and spit his tongue out at Josh before jogging out into the middle of the room, dribbling it. Most of the boys had already found themselves a ball and the gym was echoing with the sound of the floor being struck repeatedly by the thick leather. Spencer passed by and tossed one towards Josh. “C’mon, let’s show the coach what we got, what are you waiting for?”

“If you show the coach what you got you won’t make the team,” Dallon panted as he dashed by with his ball.

Spencer spluttered, indignant. “Brendon’s already corrupted him, too. I’m not that bad, guys!” Josh was laughing as Spencer dribbled his ball after Dallon, further insisting that he was an okay basketball player.

Josh bounced his own ball a few times before heading out into the gym. He felt Coach Anderson’s eyes staring into his back and he tried his best to put on a good show, throwing in all the fancy footing he could think of.

He was doing pretty good, too, until he bumped into Ryan, who had stopped running around and was standing still, ball balanced in place with one foot. “Bro, are you seeing that guy?” Ryan asked
absently, staring across the gym. Josh paused to look in the direction he was gazing. A boy Josh
didn’t immediately recognize was spinning the ball, rather impressively, on his fingers. He eventually
dropped the ball back to the ground—though he was able to spin it a lot longer than Josh could ever
have done—and dribbled it between and around his legs. Josh tilted his head, studying him.

“I’ve seen him before, before school started,” Josh remembered, recognizing the same movements.
“He was playing at the court by my house.”

Ryan made a noise of acknowledgment. “He’s pretty good. That’s that Joseph kid, you know.
Taylor or something like that. I heard Brendon telling Spencer about him.”

“Yes?” Josh said, watching the boy roll the ball effortlessly across his shoulders. So this was him.
Josh couldn’t help but stare as he moved so gracefully around the gym. And then the kid looked up
and was looking directly at Josh. Josh’s stomach flipped and he made a slight groan.

Ryan glanced over at him. “Are you okay?”

“I have seen that guy before,” Josh said, quickly turning his back to the new kid and dribbling the
ball to distract himself from his harsh stare. “He’s also the guy I ran into at lunch today.”

“The guy you knocked into the trash—”

“Brendon was just being an ass, but I did bump into him and I guess I kinda spilled water all over
him. And then I had to rush off without even saying anything and shit.” Josh didn’t know why
exactly this all felt so bad all of a sudden.

The sharp ring of the coach’s whistle interrupted the boys. He waved a hand. “Bring the balls back
over here now, gather around. Let’s keep it moving, we don’t have all day.”

Josh tried to shrug off the heavy feelings draping themselves across his shoulders as he followed
Ryan over to the coach, dropping his ball to the ground like the other boys had. Coach Anderson
was writing on his clipboard as he spoke. “I’m scratching a couple of you, you over there and—” He
pointed to a kid standing in the back of the group. “—and you. I like to give you all a fair try,
especially the newer kids, but sometimes you just don’t have it. Try again next year, boys.” The two
sulked off towards the exit.

“Now for the rest of you,” the coach continued, kicking all of the balls except one to the side of the
room. “The rest of you are going to play a quick game. You know the drill, most of you have done
this before.” He called out several names, splitting the group into two teams. Josh shuffled to the
back of his team, glaring in Jordan’s direction, who had also been put in the same temporary group.
Unfortunately Pete was also on this team. Josh looked longingly across the room to where most of
his friends had been put on the other team. Not that it was a huge deal, these were just for tryouts, but
all the same. Josh felt abandoned.

He noticed someone edging closer to him and turned to see Mikey rubbing at his glasses with the
hem of his shirt. “Hey,” he said shyly when he realized Josh was looking at him. “I just thought I’d
stand near you, Pete kinda looked like he might start messing with me or something. I hope you
don’t mind.”

Josh glanced towards Pete, who was standing at the front of the group, arms crossed, head tilted as
he listened to the coach further explaining the basic rules. “Yeah,” Josh agreed, patting Mikey’s
shoulder. “He’s always liable to start messing with someone, it’s okay. You were on the team last
year, right?” he added, even though he knew he had been. Mikey nodded.
“Yeah,” Josh said again. He wished he were better with words. “Yeah, so you know how Pete works then. Just ignore him, he’s not really as mean as he pretends to be.”

Mikey placed his glasses back on his nose. “Really? But he came over at lunch to intimidate you and everything.”

Josh shrugged. “That’s been going on for all of high school now, every year. It’s turned into friendly competition more than rivalry or anything. I don’t know, I’d probably miss him if he wasn’t here causing shit, honestly.”

Mikey nodded but didn’t look convinced. He changed the subject. “Have you met Tyler yet? I don’t know him too well but he has classes with my brother, so I’ve seen him around a few times this week.”

Josh’s stomach jumped again. “Tyler? Is that his name?” He peered around the group quickly. “Is he on our team this round or-”

A basketball hit him square in the chest and he grabbed at it quickly before it bounced to the ground. “You got that, Dun? Okay, boys, get started!” The coach backed out of the middle of the gym, blowing his whistle. Josh didn’t have time to finish his question or worry about whose team this Tyler was on—though in retrospect, Josh realized he should have gotten a better look at who were his teammates and who weren’t before the game got started—as he dashed off dribbling the ball, dodging past Brendon and racing for the hoop at the end of the gym.

Jordan was jumping excitedly, waving his hands for Josh to pass him the ball, but Josh would rather pass it to Pete than his little brother, so he swallowed any remaining indignation he might have had and headed in Pete’s direction, passing the ball to him quickly before Dallon could get it away from him. Pete nodded as he took it, jumping behind Dallon and running towards the hoop. It happened every year; Josh wouldn’t say he was fond of Pete exactly, but they both knew when to work together and not be assholes.

Brendon didn’t though, apparently. He shoved into Pete as he was about to throw the ball into the net and took off in the opposite direction, throwing a grin over his shoulder. Pete glared and waved at Josh. “Don’t let him pass to Dal, he’s got a clear shot!”

“On it!” Josh turned and, just in time, jumped in front of Dallon as Brendon tried passing the ball. Brendon swerved at the last second, managing to keep the ball away from Josh. Josh cursed as he successfully passed the ball to Patrick, who was also within shot of the hoop. Patrick looked stunned as he suddenly found himself with the ball, and Josh took advantage of his temporary surprise to lunge in his direction.

Pete beat him to it. “Sorry, Pat,” he huffed, stealing away the ball and running back to the other side of the court. Patrick looked offended.

Pete scored the first goal and Jordan cheered loudly. Josh just rolled his eyes as Pete strutted proudly back to the group. Coach Anderson applauded as he approached the boys. “Very good, Wentz, that was pretty good!” He motioned another young boy Josh didn’t recognize to the side, patting him on the back. “How about trying again next year, okay?” The kid looked distraught as they left the gym. “All right,” the coach boomed once they had left. “Wentz, hand the ball to...let’s start with Ross for round two.” Pete tossed Ryan the basketball as the coach hurried back to the sidelines, blowing his whistle to signal the unofficial start.

Mikey surprised Josh by scoring the second basket almost as soon as the round had started. Josh did cheer this time, punching him genially in the arm. Mikey was smiling bigger than Josh could
remember ever seeing him smile before, eyes shining behind his glasses. Brendon scored a point for
the other team during round three, and Josh almost scored the point in round four, but at the last
second before he could take the shot, Patrick stumbled into his way and Josh had to pass the ball to-
unfortunately- Pete, who scored for their team again. Josh tried not to be too bitter about it as the
coach motioned the boys, panting and sweaty, to a group in the middle of the room.

“I’m impressed, kids, I really am. We’re gonna have a good team this year! We have one more round
so let’s make it our best yet. Weekes, you take the ball.”

At the coach’s whistle, the room burst into life once again as the final round started. Josh gritted his
teeth, more determined than ever to make the last shot. He ran along the outside of the group,
mirroring where Dallon was running, waiting for a chance to steal the ball away. Pete raced up,
blocking Dallon and forcing him to pass the ball. Josh was able to steal it away as Dallon was
turning, and he took off in the other direction. He successfully avoided Ryan’s attempt to get the ball,
and dodged past Spencer, the way to the basket clear. He was going to do it. He was going to make
the last shot.

As he was jumping and the ball was leaving his fingertips, aimed perfectly for the net, a movement in
Josh’s peripheral vision caught his attention. Faster than he could even register, a hand darted out and
smacked the ball out of range of the net. Josh stared in shock.

It was the new kid. Tall and lean, all golden skin and short, dark hair, he was there one minute and
halfway across the court in the next, slipping past Pete without a problem. Josh was frozen
momentarily, watching as if mesmerized. How the fuck did I not notice him playing before now?

Josh was startled back into action when he realized that if he didn’t do something right now, the
other team would score. He searched the court quickly, eyes locking with Pete, who motioned to the
far left. Josh nodded and dashed off as Pete headed for the right, signaling to Mikey as he went.
Brendon jumped in Josh’s way, arms outstretched and cutting him off from getting to the new kid,
this Tyler.

“How the fuck did I not notice him playing before now?”

“Fucking asshole,” Josh said harshly, trying to get past Brendon, who just smirked obnoxiously. He
could see over Brendon’s shoulder that Dallon was effectively holding off Pete as well. Mikey made
a valiant attempt to get the basketball back, squeezing past Spencer and Patrick and reaching out a
hand for the ball- just as this Tyler jumped, and the ball soared straight into the net.

Josh threw his hands up in the air as Brendon cheered loudly, Coach Anderson blowing on his
whistle and motioning them all over. Pete shrugged at Josh from across the court, and Mikey
sheepishly approached Josh, scratching at his neck. “Sorry, I almost had him. He was just so fast-”

Josh interrupted him. “Nah, man, he got the ball away from me first, remember? It’s not like it’s a
really big deal or anything either. It’s just tryouts. It’s all cool.”

Coach Anderson was in the middle of his speech when Josh and Mikey joined the crowd gathered
around him. He was beaming. “-all very promising. Those of you who made the team will see your
names posted on the bulletin board Monday morning; team rank will be revealed during practice that
afternoon. Any questions?”

“What about tomorrow, do we have practice tomorrow?” Jordan piped.

“No, no P.E. tomorrow at all. You kids just go home tomorrow after classes and rest up over the
weekend, Monday will come in due time.” Coach Anderson checked his clipboard one last time,
tapping a pen against it. “All right then, boys. It’s five minutes till dismissal, you all are free to go!
Thanks for trying out, kids.”
The group scattered in the general direction of the changing room. Brendon appeared at Josh’s side. “That was so good, man. Did you see that new kid? Dude, he stole your ball, you had that basket and he just appeared out of nowhere and fucking stole it! Isn’t he great!?”

Josh glared at his friend. “You seem excited about him at least.”

Brendon swiveled around, eyes searching the group. “I am, and you should be, too, J. Dude, we will smash every school we play against this year!” He turned back around, slipping in front of Josh into the changing room. “I don’t see him now; he must have left his junk by the door, I think he’s left already. Guy’s like a fucking phantom. I don’t know why he doesn’t introduce himself.”

Mikey was still trailing after Josh. “He’s shy, I think. He’s been hanging out with Gerard and Gerard says he seems shy.”

“Also,” Josh added as he pulled off his sweaty shirt. “Didn’t you recognize him? He’s the kid I bumped into at lunch.”

Brendon laughed loudly. “Well, that might explain why he stole your ball like he did. Embarrassed, humiliated in front of the whole team! Poor Joshie.”

Josh tossed his dirty shirt in Brendon’s face. “Do not call me that.”

Josh’s eyes searched the changing room one last time, just in case they had somehow missed him and the kid was still around. He let out a sigh as he pulled on his clean shirt, ignoring Brendon’s laughter.

*Tyler fucking Joseph. You’re going down.*
Tyler wasn’t hiding from Josh. He wasn’t. Avoiding him, yes, but not hiding. After all, he wasn’t the one who should be hiding. If anyone should be hiding, it should have been Josh. Because Josh was the one who almost ran Tyler over with his bike on the first day of school and Josh was the one who spilled water all over him and hadn’t even taken the time to apologize. And Josh was the one with the douche friends who laughed at Tyler. So if anyone should be feeling bad about themselves and hiding, it should have been Josh, and definitely not Tyler.

At least, that’s what Tyler told himself as he ducked into the lunchroom Monday morning with the intent of checking the list on the bulletin board with the names of the accepted players. He had waited till there was only five short minutes before first period, hoping that Josh and most of the kids who would be interested in the list would already be in their classrooms. He didn’t really need to check the list— he already knew his name would be there— but there was something thrilling about seeing it written down in print. What he hadn’t expected when he entered the cafeteria was every other boy who had tried out for the team crowding around the bulletin board, laughter and talking echoing painfully loud in the large room.

Tyler edged quietly along the wall— it’s not hiding!— and shimmied around a table to the corner of the room, eyeing the situation before him.

Josh, with his bright red hair, was easy to spot at the front of the group. Tyler could make out some of his douche friends at his side. That guy named Pete who had scored two baskets at practice was near the front of the group as well. He was, Tyler begrudgingly admitted to himself, the most likely player at this school to beat him. Not that it was incredibly likely, he was just some serious competition. Several other boys Tyler recognized but didn’t know the names of made up the rest of the crowd, effectively blocking his view of the list. He glanced at the clock. Three minutes till English. It was just the beginning of the second week, but Ms. Moore had already established her great distaste for her students arriving late. Tyler glared at the back of Josh’s red head. This was all his fault, somehow, Tyler was sure.

As he was sorting out his next move, Tyler’s attention was drawn to a boy almost as thin and gangly as he was, standing awkwardly a few feet away from the group with his arms crossed protectively over his chest. He sighed, relieved, when the boy turned and made quick eye contact and he recognized him, his glasses resting precariously on the end of his nose. Tyler shuffled over, hoping none of the others would notice— not that he was hiding or anything, thank you.

Last week, two boys who had been in several of Tyler’s classes joined him during lunch, saving him from the humiliation of sitting entirely alone at the table in the corner on his first day of school. They had introduced themselves as Frank and Gerard and had quickly made Tyler feel comfortable enough to open up to them; by the end of the lunch period, he was feeling slightly self conscious about talking too much, though those fears soon dissipated when they all bonded again over their
music and art periods. During the following days, Gerard had talked affectionately about his younger brother and had pointed him out in passing to Tyler, mentioning that he would also be trying out for the basketball team. They hadn’t been formally introduced, but what the hell, now is as good a time as any, Tyler told himself as he strolled casually over to the group, thankful most of the boys still had their backs to him, too interested in the list and in discussing it vividly with each other to pay him much attention.

“Hi,” Tyler said, stopping next to Gerard’s younger brother. He jumped as if startled and stared intently at Tyler through his glasses, confused, twisting his hands together awkwardly.

“I’m um… I’m Tyler, I tried out for the team last Thursday? And I know your brother.” Tyler felt very much that the situation was reversed; too many times in the past he had found himself wringing his own hands and feeling out of place when spoken to. He felt a wave of compassion wash over him, and he decided to make a valiant effort to make this kid feel comfortable. “You’re Mikey, right? Gerard talks about you a lot.”

Mikey smiled tight-lipped, shoulders relaxing visibly, if only slightly. “He’s talked some about you, too. He uh, he talks a lot.”

Tyler couldn’t really disagree without lying, so he nodded. He definitely didn’t mind, though. Gerard’s endless and amiable chattering throughout the week had really been one of the only things to help make Tyler feel at all welcome at Worthington High School. No, he definitely didn’t mind. He probably would have opened his mouth and said something stupid and awkward then except for the bell ringing loudly from the doorway. Tyler eyed the group of boys nervously as he quickly asked, stumbling over his words: “Hey, man, do you happen to know if I made the team or…? I would check but uh…. ” he motioned vaguely towards the bulletin board.

Mikey seemed to understand immediately, and that made a part of Tyler mad, that another kid felt discluded and out of place like he always did. A different part of him jumped excitedly as Mikey made a noise of astonishment before replying.

“Did you make the team, are you kidding? Of course your name is on there, all the guys are talking about it.”

Tyler made an excited squeaking sound, which in immediate retrospect he was embarrassed about, but Mikey seemed to be blushing from his own previous outburst of surprise, so Tyler guessed they were pretty much even. He was searching his mind for something appropriate to say without sounding conceited when he noticed several of the boys in the group headed in their direction, and, to his horror, Josh was among them.

He reached out quickly and patted Mikey on the shoulder. “Thanks, dude. I’ll see you around, okay? You okay?” He took a few steps backward but nodded his head in the direction of the approaching boys. He knew from Gerard’s rambling that a few kids liked to pick on Mikey on occasion, and though Tyler highly doubted he could do anything to help if he found himself in the middle of a situation like that, the last thing he wanted to do was abandon Mikey, if that was the case. Thankfully, after Mikey glanced over his shoulder, he looked back to Tyler and nodded.

“No, yeah, it’s fine,” he said. Tyler studied his face for a quick second, but he seemed to be telling the truth. “These guys are okay.”

Tyler made an unsure humming sound in reply as he eyed Josh approaching with the other kids. But whatever. He just hoped he could make it to class and snag a seat near the back before Josh could see him. I’m not hiding, I’m just… Tyler argued inwardly with himself as he dashed out of the cafeteria into the empty hallway. He didn’t really have a good excuse.
Ms. Moore glared at him when he arrived and rambled on about tardiness as she informed him he would be getting a demerit, go see the secretary after class, I’m disappointed you chose to be late today, etc. etc. He wasn’t really listening; he had heard her give the same speech to Josh several times last week. He eyed the full classroom pitifully, the empty desk in the front row seeming ten times more intimidating than it should be for an inanimate object. A hand waved from the far back corner and caught Tyler’s eye, just as he had accepted his fate and started trudging to the empty seat. He made a beeline for the back of the room, internally thanking God for Gerard Way as he went. The motherfucker had saved him a seat in the back row.

He slipped into the chair, relieved, heaving a sigh as he slouched down as low as possible without falling off the edge of his chair. Gerard shot him a funny look. “You’re acting weirder than usual,” he whispered, because the one thing Ms. Moore detested almost as much as tardiness was talking in her class.

Tyler shrugged, flipping open his phone and checking for text messages from his friends back at his old school. Nothing. He pouted out his bottom lip a little, and stuck it out even more when Frank leaned over from his other side and snatched the phone away. “Dude.” Frank was whispering, too. Tyler watched his lip ring reflect the light as he talked, waving Tyler’s phone around. “Do you wanna keep this or do you not wanna see it again until Friday?” Third thing Ms. Moore detested more than anything—kids messing with their electronics during class.

Tyler tried to sneak his phone back off Frank’s desk without being caught, but Frank smacked his hand hard enough for Tyler to make a surprised squeak. Ms. Moore was just turning around from the whiteboard to yell at them when the classroom door opened again and Josh and a few other boys paraded in. I guess Josh is good for one thing, Tyler thought smugly as he snatched his phone from Frank’s desk, Frank too distracted with smirking as Ms. Moore began handing out demerits to the late students.

For some reason, the universe hated Tyler. Apparently making him change schools in the twelfth grade and giving him a shared bedroom with his younger brother in the new house wasn’t enough, because he also shared all the same classes with Josh. Fucking nice coincidence.

Tyler was bitching about this to Gerard and Frank during lunch, swirling his plastic fork around in his mug of leftover spaghetti. He had managed to keep out of Josh’s way so far today, but he couldn’t keep it up forever, especially with basketball practice looming closer and closer. He was supposed to be happy about it and Josh was ruining it for him, every glimpse of his red hair during classes making Tyler curl in on himself all over again. On the bright side, Gerard had to point out for him, he also shared all the same classes with him and Frank, and that balanced out the cosmic inequality of the entire situation, right? Tyler wasn’t so sure.

“Fucking thanks,” Frank mumbled, stealing a bite of Tyler’s spaghetti and spilling noodles across the table in the process. Tyler made a vague grunting noise; he didn’t mean to say that last part out loud.

“Not that it’s not great we have classes together,” he tried explaining, reaching his fork out to steal some of Frank’s lunch in return, but changed his mind when he saw the odd colored stew in his sandwich box. “Why are you eating stew with a fork from a sandwich box?”

“Why are you eating spaghetti without sauce? And with no spoon?” Frank quipped.

“You eat spaghetti with a spoon-” Tyler began incredulously, but Gerard cut them both short.

“Douchebag, incoming.” He was speaking in a singsong voice out of the corner of his mouth, and
Tyler would have laughed about it except that one of the kids from Josh’s table was heading across the cafeteria in their direction, the other kids still seated all peering over their shoulders, watching. Tyler fidgeted self consciously.

“Hey,” the kid said loudly, slipping onto the bench next to Gerard. Gerard made a disgusted face and scooted over an inch. The kid followed him, oblivious to the discomfort he was causing. Tyler recognized him but couldn't place his name, not really caring what it was at the moment. Frank glared suspiciously across the table, while Tyler was just grateful Frank had sat beside him. The one thing that would make this situation any more awkward would be if this kid had sat next to hi-

“So Tyler. It’s Tyler, right? Tyler…?” the kid interrupted his thoughts, voice much louder than was necessary, even in the crowded cafeteria.

When Tyler didn’t respond right away, Frank elbowed him and he jumped. “Oh, um, yeah, it’s Joseph.” Tyler didn’t have proof but he was sure that Josh had sent this kid.

The kid raised both eyebrows. “Oh, your name’s Joseph?”

“No, it’s Tyler. Tyler Joseph,” Tyler cursed himself mentally for stammering. He could feel his cheeks turning red beneath the kid’s intense stare. It was getting fucking creepy.

The kid snorted. “That’s kind of a weird name. Why do you have two first names?”

“This coming from the guy named Urie,” Gerard remarked, resting his chin in his palm and eyeing the kid doubtfully. “And Brendon. It’s not even Brandon like a normal guy, it’s fucking Brendon.”

“Yeah, you’re really one to talk about weird names,” Frank added, looking sheepish when Tyler glared at him.

Brendon pointedly ignored them both, still staring straight at Tyler. He wished he’d stop. “What school did you go to before this? Kinda weird for you to switch schools just for twelfth grade.”

The conversation felt so awkward and forced, and creepy with Brendon staring him down like that and the whole table behind him still turned around and watching, albeit a little less conspicuously than they had been before. Tyler could barely gather his thoughts to reply. “Uh, I went to Mansfield, it was a...a private school.”

Brendon didn’t say anything and Tyler waved his hand, embarrassed. He started to ramble. “I switched schools because my dad’s job got relocated to here and we had to get a new house and it’s too far away for me to keep going to my old school, and we couldn’t find any private schools around here that had basketball teams, and my parents are kinda big on the whole basketball scholarship thing for me so-”

“Speaking of basketball,” Brendon interrupted, and Tyler was almost thankful. “I heard you were pretty big stuff back at, Mansville, was it?”

“Mansfield,” Gerard said for Tyler, voice cold.

Brendon ignored him. “You mentioned a scholarship? I mean, I saw you at practice, you aren’t bad, but are you really good enough for a scholarship?”

At first Tyler felt defensive, then confused as he wondered why the hell this Brendon kid would care. “Um....” he said intelligently.

Brendon plowed on like a train, without even pausing to take a breath. “Like don’t you have to have
a pretty clean record to get a scholarship? I mean, it’s not an academic scholarship but still, you gotta be squeaky clean to apply for that shit.”

Now Tyler was really confused. A clean record? What the hell? “Um...what are you-”

Gerard made a scoffing sound. “Look, Urie, if you want to buy something, Tyler doesn’t have it. And Frank and I don’t do that anymore, you know that. Why don’t you stop pestering him?”

Brendon turned to Gerard for the first time since he sat down, raising his hands defensively. “Hey, hey, that’s not what I’m on about. I’d never buy from you losers anyways.”

Tyler’s eyebrows had been furrowed, but they shot up then and his eyes widened. “Wait, are you talking about drugs, um what, no, I don’t- no, no no. Why would you-”

“God, I’m not talking about drugs!” Brendon groaned, very loudly and very obviously.

The kids at his table across the room shuffled worriedly, while Gerard covered his face with his palm and Frank waved an angry hand in Brendon’s face. “Would you shut up, oh my God, you’re gonna make the lunch lady start spreading rumors.”

Brendon sighed, as if it hadn’t been his fault for the whole upheaval in the first place. He said, voice a notch lower than before. “I’m not talking about drugs. Jesus. I was talking about basketball.”

“What does basketball have to do with drugs?” Tyler asked dumbly, brain still in shock.

“I’m not fucking talking about fucking drugs, you idiot, I just mean-”

The bell rang. Finally. About fucking time. Lunch period felt like it had lasted forever, to Tyler at least. He had never had a more awkward conversation than this before in his entire life, not even that time when his sister had found his diary from fifth grade and he had had to explain to her why the fuck he knew about-

Well okay, maybe that had been a little bit more awkward, but still.

Everyone in the cafeteria was gathering up their things and bustling off to their next class. Someone from Brendon’s table called his name and waved for him to come over, and Brendon huffed loudly. “Yeah, well anyways, good talking with you, Joseph, we’ll do it again sometime.”

Tyler sincerely hoped not. He sighed in relief when Brendon finally left and rejoined his friends, leaving the three of them alone at their table. Tyler caught a glimpse of red, of Josh peering over his shoulder at him as his gang left the cafeteria. Tyler scowled and Josh quickly melted into the crowd.

Frank and Gerard burst out laughing. “Dude, that was so fucking weird,” Frank said, thumping Tyler on the back.

Tyler didn’t see what was so incredibly amusing. He scowled again, busying himself with twisting the lid back onto his mug of spaghetti and shoving it in his backpack. “It’s not that funny. Like what was he on about, anyways? Guys, if my parents ever even had any idea that there was a potential rumor about me and like, drugs, I would be dead. It’s not funny!” he insisted as Gerard shot him a sideways glance.

“Come on, druggie, music and art periods await us,” Frank grabbed Tyler’s backpack and headed for the cafeteria door, ignoring Tyler’s protests about wanting to carry his own bag, thank you, and don’t fucking call me that in public, you moron, did you not fucking hear what I just said.
“And after art—” Gerard continued Frank’s thought in that slightly annoying sing-song voice as he and Tyler were the last ones to hurry out into the hallway, “-then there’s basketball practice. Do me a favor and please just beat Urie in the ranking, huh?”

Tyler glared at the world in general. First Josh with his stupid red hair and now Brendon fucking Urie with his drug rumors. Fucking great. Oh well, he’d show them, he’d show all of those egotistical assholes who thought they could play basketball. He’d show them.

“Don’t worry, I plan on it.”

“Dude, what the hell?” Josh shoved Brendon’s shoulder when the music instructor’s back was turned, busy helping Ryan put the headjoint back in his tuba. Josh hadn’t had a chance to confront Brendon about the scene he had caused at lunch yet, and he couldn’t hold back his curiosity any longer. “Seriously, B? What the fuck was that all about? Did you even accomplish anything you meant to?”

“Shut up, of course I did,” Brendon shoved Josh back, slouching in his chair and eyeing the room, most likely for the new kid. It was achingly loud in the band room, tons of kids all blowing and banging on instruments they didn’t know how to play. Josh hated when they had to switch instruments. He fumbled uselessly with the flute in his hands.

When Brendon just kept searching the room, Josh prodded him roughly in the side with his flute. “Well then? What about it? Was Pete telling the truth?”

Brendon sighed, long and loud to convey to Josh his annoyance at him, before making a huge effort of sitting up and turning in his chair to face him. He leaned in theatrically and whispered, “I don’t know what happened back at that Mansfield school he used to go to, but it was a private school. And he said his dad’s job ‘relocated.’ Like sure, why didn’t he go to a different private school here then? He had some excuse but I’m sure that’s what it was, an excuse.”

Josh looked unconvinced. “So basically you don’t know then.”

“No, I do know!” Brendon insisted, waving his trumpet around for emphasis. “He has to go to a public school now because the private schools won’t accept him.”

Josh looked even more unconvinced than before, if that was possible. “The private schools in Mansfield accepted him but the ones in Columbus won’t?”

“Yeah, because that was before the incident!” Brendon sounded one hundred percent convinced.

Josh rolled his eyes and decided to try a different approach. “Okay, say Pete is telling the truth. This new kid—”

“Tyler Joseph.”

“-this Tyler Joseph, he doesn’t look like the type to get all up in someone’s face and start a fight, just because they were competing for first player. He’s too, he’s spindly, Jesus, look at him.” Josh waved a hand vaguely towards the door, where Tyler and two other kids had just sneaked into the room, late. “I think Pete made it all up.”

Brendon was shaking his head. “Nah, man, you can be spindly and still start shit. C’mon, you were fucking there when he stole that ball right from under you. He fucking killed you, dude.”
“Okay, okay, you don’t have to keep bringing that up, all right? The ball slipped, that’s all.” Josh was getting tired of Brendon poking fun at him about that. He hadn’t shut up about it all weekend, getting Josh even more on edge and nervous about this Tyler Joseph kid than he had been to begin with. And Pete sauntering over to their table at lunch to tell them the latest gossip didn’t help either. Apparently, according to Pete- though Josh didn’t consider him an extremely reliable source- this Tyler kid was a really intense basketball player. Like really intense. Like so intense he started a physical fight with another player. Apparently, according to Pete, he would get so powered up during the game that he’d just sort of lose control. And- according to Pete- last year he got in so much trouble that he was expelled, and that’s why he was starting twelfth grade in a new school. At least that’s what Pete had said. How Pete would know all that, Josh seriously questioned.

But after Pete had relaid all this to Josh and his friends and had strolled back off to his own table, whistling, Brendon had taken it upon himself to investigate further and find out how much of it was true and how much of it was just Pete being an asshole. Josh had deemed his investigation futile the moment Brendon had exclaimed loudly enough about drugs for everyone back at his table to hear, but Brendon seemed convinced enough.

But...with Brendon smirking knowingly at him now while swinging his trumpet precariously from his pinkie, Josh couldn’t help but to glance uncertainly back across the room. Tyler was sitting on the floor in the corner underneath the window with his friends, fiddling with a guitar that Josh eyed jealously- seriously, anything would have been better than a flute- and then Tyler was looking up, eyes wandering around the room before locking on Josh’s. His gaze immediately went cold and he turned his attention back to one of his friends, who was grabbing at the guitar resting in his lap. It was the same glare he had shot at Josh as Josh had been leaving the cafeteria that afternoon. Maybe...maybe Pete hadn’t been completely lying about this Tyler kid.

“I mean, what did I even do to him? Why does he hate me?” Josh didn’t realize he had spoken out loud until Brendon made an obnoxious pondering noise and replied.

“Dude, you spilled water on him. You’re the most popular player here. You have fucking tattoos, and red hair. That’s enough to make anyone hate you.”

Josh flailed his flute about indignantly. “Thanks, Brendon, fucking thanks for making me feel better. Such a good friend.”

Brendon just fingered the three keys of his trumpet in a suspiciously sexual manner in reply, waggling his eyebrows at Josh. Josh sighed, slouching down in his chair and letting the cacophony of misplaced flats and off key notes fill his head, hoping that even if he went deaf from the sound it would at least help drown out some of his current worries.

The ranking announcement was kind of a big deal at Worthington. The games they played against other schools throughout the year were some of the most anticipated social events in the high school. So naturally, the gymnasium was busier that afternoon after the bell had rung than it normally would have been. Kids were scattered across the bleachers and around the corners of the room, and Josh felt a small wave of anxiety wash over him as he peered out from the relative safety of the changing rooms. Relative safety because Pete was stalking around the room menacingly, looking way too serious for a high school basketball player and kind of like he might bite Josh’s head off if he got in his way. Also Tyler was lurking beside the row of lockers, and Josh didn’t really feel like getting in a confrontation with him right now either. Who knows, if Pete was right, Tyler might be liable to bite his head off, too.

And on top of all that, Jordan had somehow managed to be selected for the team. Whenever Josh
had spotted him in the hallways between classes earlier that day, he had been bouncing around energetically, bragging loudly to all the girls in his grade and to the boys who hadn’t made it. When Josh had first seen the list he had thought it was a mistake. Whether it was or not, Josh was certain Coach Anderson would think so once he saw Jordan really play. Jordan was currently bounding around the back of the changing room- warming up, Josh figured- and whenever Josh accidentally made eye contact it looked as if Jordan might come over to bug him.

So Josh compromised by waiting awkwardly by the door, not wanting to be bothered by Pete, Tyler, or his dumb little brother at the moment. He exchanged small talk with Spencer and Ryan until the coach popped in and ushered them all out into the gym. The excited voices that had been echoing around the room hushed as the coach blew his whistle, motioning for the boys who had made the team to sit down on the first few rows of the bleachers. Josh stepped up to the second row to sit next to Dallon, hoping his red hair wouldn’t stand out so much if he sat next to the tallest guy in school. Dallon gave him a friendly smile that helped to calm Josh’s nerves, if only a little bit, and he tried focusing on Coach Anderson’s speech instead of all the students behind him, watching interestedly.

It was a simple enough speech that the coach was giving, the same thing each year. From the tryouts last week, he had derived the value of each player and had put together a list of the ranking. It could change as the year went on, undoubtedly it would change quite frequently as different players improved and others fell behind. But that initial ranking, the level of talent that the coach assigned you, that was always an honor, a first impression. Josh knew this from experience. The higher you ranked, the more people liked you.

And Josh really fucking wanted to rank high. Last year he had been so close to the highest, staying player two all year long, even with Pete fighting hard to move up from player three to Josh’s position. That Andy kid had been the first player, and the year before, too. Josh was glad he had moved; now, being in his last year of high school, it was quite literally his last chance to make first player. He had a pretty good chance, too; besides Andy, only Pete had ever been his main competition.

Then Tyler Joseph had happened. And he was really fucking good at basketball, better than Josh. He hated admitting it, but it was true, dammit. Josh was clinging onto some far stretched hope in his mind that maybe, just maybe, Coach Anderson would remember and take into consideration all the improvement Josh had made in the four years he’d been on the team. Maybe he’d give the higher ranking to Josh instead of Tyler because Josh had been here longer, because he knew Josh was a good sport and could work well on the team, he knew the other players better than Tyler did. Maybe-

Coach Anderson’s whistle blew sharp and loud, jogging Josh out of his muddled thoughts. Okay. This was happening, right now. Okay, I can do this.

“I reckon you kids are all pumped as heck to know the rankings, so let’s get down to it!” Brendon was sitting on the bench below Josh and he leaned back between Josh’s knees to mimic the coach in a whisper. “‘Heck.’” Josh kneed him in the side.

The coach was sorting through a box of jerseys he had resting on the lowest bleacher. He pulled out a blue shirt with the words Worthington High School printed across the top and a large number one beneath it in bright yellow writing. Coach Anderson waved it around importantly. “This year, I’m excited to announce that the first player will be-”

Josh uncrossed his fingers when he realized how childish that was. He had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, he knew who it was going to be, he knew; but still he couldn’t help but to hope, just a tiny bit-

“-the star athlete from Mansfield, this is his first year here and we’re glad to have him! Tyler Joseph!”
Coach Anderson dragged out Tyler’s name, holding onto the Y sound in a way Josh felt was going completely overboard. So he was first player. Big whoop. This wasn’t NBA, he didn’t have to make such a big fucking deal about it.

There was only scattered applause from the students who were hanging about, though most everyone erupted into hushed chatter, curiously eyeing him as he made his way from the end of one of the bleachers to stand by Coach Anderson, ducking his head as he took the jersey in his hand. Josh glared behind him when those two kids Tyler had been hanging out with earlier whooped loudly, clapping longer and harder than everybody else, even after all the other applause had died down. Coach Anderson eventually blew quickly on his whistle to get them to shut up.

“All right, I’m sure we’ll all get to know Tyler very well in the upcoming months, and he’ll be a very valuable addition to the team.” The coach pounded Tyler roughly on the back before turning back to his list, grabbing another jersey. “For player two—”

Josh perked up immediately; if he couldn’t be first player, then at least he could—

“-Pete Wentz! Come on up here.”

Josh immediately deemed this school year as the worst one yet. The universe was collapsing. Even with Tyler ahead of him, he could have been okay. But now Pete was ahead of him, too. How did that even happen? Josh had practiced all summer.

Brendon squawked in protest. He turned around, sputtering. “Josh! Wentz beat you, man, what the fuck? What the fuck—”

“I know,” Josh muttered, kneeing him in the back again. “Shut up.”

“And Tyler Joseph beat you, too! Dude, I fucking told you!”

Josh gritted his teeth and ignored Brendon, glaring in Pete’s general direction as he went to stand by Tyler, beaming. He wanted to be mad, to sit and seethe for a while about how fucking unfair it all was, but the coach was already announcing the third player. The next thing Josh was aware of was Brendon glancing back at him awkwardly, wringing his hands as he uncertainly took the jersey the coach was handing him and then stepped into line beside Pete as the steady applause continued to echo around the gym.

Josh stared incomprehensive for a moment, his mind fuzzy, before what had happened finally dawned on him. He almost wanted to laugh. This was a fucking disaster.

“And the fourth player—” Coach Anderson was flipping through the papers on his clipboard, “-is Josh Dun. C’mon up here, Josh!”

Clapping sounded from the bleachers behind Josh, Spencer shot him a thumbs up from several places down their row, and Ryan was turning around on the bench to smile at him, but it took Dallon patting him on the back in congratulations to finally jog Josh out of his dulled mental state and into action. He stood shakily and climbed around Ryan to the gym floor, ears burning with all the people in the room staring at him. He grabbed his jersey from the coach and slipped past Tyler and Pete, fixedly ignoring them both, and stood next to Brendon at the far end of the line. He thought in retrospect about ignoring Brendon, too.

Brendon peeked at him out of the corner of his eye. He actually looked apologetic. “Sorry, man. I literally have no idea how this happened. I know you were like, counting on this, on like, at least beating Pete and shit, and then the coach fucking chooses me for third like what the hell, man? I’ve
only even played for like two years, I don’t know—"

Josh shrugged, pulling a face he sincerely hoped looked casual. “Chill, B. It’s all cool, I don’t really care.”

“You do,” Brendon insisted, but anything else he said was drowned out by applause and random cheering as Dallon bounded into place next to Josh, face split in a huge grin. Brendon appeared to have forgotten Josh’s current distress as he, too, smiled wildly, leaning in front of Josh to give Dallon a high five. Josh mumbled his congratulations as Coach Anderson blew on his whistle.

“Alright, kids, there we have it, this year’s team! These boys have shown great progress over the years I’ve known them. I’ve seen them play pretty well in the past, and I have high expectations for them in the future. And from what I’ve seen from our new student here—” the coach whacked Tyler on the back and Josh hid a grin as Tyler staggered forward a few inches, “I’m sure he’ll go far beyond the standards we have set for the team.”

There was another round of applause as the coach waved his hand dramatically towards Josh and the other four players, and he once again had to blow on his whistle to silence the students a few minutes later. Josh’s focus faded in and out as the coach went on to explain about the five other team members who would be on the bench in official games against other schools, but during practice they would join with the first five players and all be split into two teams.

Mikey got first spot on the bench, and Josh thanked himself mentally for not being a big enough douche not to gather his thoughts for three seconds and smile at Mikey as he walked by to collect his jersey, face frozen in wonder. Josh tried to pay a little more attention after that, just for a few more minutes as the coach announced the last few rankings. Ryan placed second, and Brendon seemed extremely proud as he whooped loudly, then extremely mortified as Ryan walked by, swinging his jersey over his shoulder and winking at him. Josh laughed at Brendon’s red face in spite of himself.

Spencer was called for third spot on the bench, which honestly was an improvement from last year. He seemed satisfied enough anyway as he made his way to the end of the line. Pete clapped so loudly when Patrick was called for fourth place that Josh thought vaguely his eardrum might have broke. He glared over Brendon at the back of Pete’s head but patted Patrick on the arm as he passed. Patrick still looked stunned he had made the team at all.

Josh was still feeling conflicted about his ranking when he realized there was only one person left that the coach hadn’t called yet, and that was Jordan. He smirked as Jordan was finally called up and assigned fifth spot on the bench. If Josh had to be fourth player instead of first and if Jordan had to be on the team at all, Josh was glad his little brother was ranked in the lowest position possible. A small stab of guilt gnawed at him, but he kicked it aside. Whatever. Jordan sucked and the whole team would realize that sooner or later. Preferably sooner.

Coach Anderson let the kids clap and stomp and holler for a few minutes for the full basketball team as most of the boys put their jerseys on over their t-shirts. Josh balled his up in his fist, ears burning at all the attention from the students in the bleachers. He felt like he was holding his breath in as the coach reminded them all that practice started regularly tomorrow afternoon immediately after school, not to be late and not to forget their new jerseys, and finally dismissed them for the day. He escaped into the changing rooms once again, grabbing his bag and hiding his jersey in it, trying to keep his back to the rest of the room as his friends talked and laughed boisterously.

This was mostly a lost cause, because the changing room was suddenly flooded with more people, classmates coming in to congratulate their friends, despite Coach Anderson’s protests for them to wait outside. Josh was jostled against the lockers by several of Jordan’s friends; they were talking so loudly he winced and shoved back at one of them. It didn’t matter anyways, because they didn’t
even notice him. Josh decided to make a beeline for the exit before Pete came over to gloat his victory or anything, wanting only to get out of this fucking school building and go home to his room, maybe play a video game and feel sorry for himself, but he was blocked at the door by those two kids who had been hanging out with Tyler earlier. And then Josh realized Tyler was right there beside him, smiling at his friends and looking stupid in his too-big jersey with the number one printed on it. Josh glared at the shirt.

“Dude, what the hell?” one of the kids in the doorway said. It took Josh a second to realize he was talking to him.

“What?” Josh grumbled, confused and getting edgy when Tyler and the other kid’s attention turned to him, too.

“What’s your problem with Tyler? You’re having a real bad fucking attitude, man.” This guy was really short to be so intimidating.

Josh tried not to let his face turn red at the accusation. He was all too aware of Tyler squinting at him and tilting his head and staring at him with those brown eyes and- wow, they were really brown-

“It’s okay, Frank,” Tyler said, shifting from foot to foot and dropping his gaze. The short kid looked like he was about to say something else, and the other guy looked like he was about to join in, but Josh took the moment to push between them and out of the changing room. There was something in the tone of Tyler’s voice that Josh was unfamiliar with, something that made him feel...almost bad for being so jealous. He pushed the feeling to the back of his mind; he’d deal with that later. He was halfway across the gym, heading for the back exit leading out onto the parking lot, when Brendon and Spencer jogged up beside him.

“Hey, don’t run away now, Joshi,” Brendon said, smiling. “We guys are going to Dairy Queen to celebrate and you have to come.”

Josh turned and noticed Dallon, Ryan, and Mikey trailing towards them. He stifled a groan; the last thing he wanted to do right now was go out and socialize with all these guys when he felt so down in the dumps.

“Nah, man, maybe some other time, alright? Got homework,” he said quietly, trying to escape before the others arrived at the scene, but Spencer grabbed the strap of his backpack, effectively holding him in place.

“What homework, dude, it’s not like any of us do it anyways!”

Josh did groan out loud this time. “Look, I just really don’t feel like-”

“Hi, Josh, you coming with us?” Dallon asked, stopping next to Spencer.

“No, I’m not,” Josh said quickly. “I don’t feel so-”

“Are you still sore about Pete beating you?” Brendon asked loudly, and Josh could feel his face flushing. “It’ll be okay, dude, you know the ranking can change throughout the year, you’ll beat him in no time. And that Tyler kid will crack easy enough, I was just messing with you earlier, come on to Dairy Queen with us.”

“Weren’t you just talking with him? Tyler?” Mikey asked, eyebrows furrowed.

“What’s up with you and Tyler?” Ryan asked at almost the same time, looked confused.
Josh groaned again. “Nothing, I just, the dumb kid doesn’t like me, he was a bully at his old school, and I don’t know, he just comes here and gets first player out of nowhere. He’s just weird, that’s all.”

“But weren’t you guys just talking in the changing room?” Dallon asked.

Brendon interrupted. “Fucking cornered him is what he did. Was he intimidating you, Joshi?”

Josh sent a death glare in Brendon’s direction as Spencer explained. “Yeah, we heard Joseph was a real dick back at his old school. And Josh was totally going to be first player this year till this kid fucked it up.”

Ryan tilted his head, puzzled. “So...you don’t like him because he like-”

Josh tore his backpack lose from Spencer’s grasp and threw his hands up, exasperated. “I don’t know, I just don’t like him, okay? He’s quiet and stalks the halls and glares at me all the time and he only ever hangs out with those weird kids by themselves, and he’s just kind of a creep.”

Mikey bristled suddenly; Josh had forgotten he was even there. “Those weird kids happen to be my brother and one of my best friends since I was little.” Josh’s mind was racing but he could feel it tripping over itself now as Mikey continued. He couldn’t remember ever hearing him talk this much before. “You would’ve known that if you paid half a shit of attention to anyone else but yourself. And for the record, Tyler isn’t that bad either. I think you’re all being awful.” With a finalizing clench of his jaw, Mikey stalked out of the gym in a much more belligerent manner than Josh had ever thought to associate with him before.

There were a few long seconds of silence. Brendon finally broke it, muttering quietly. “Well, shit.”

Josh closed his eyes and shook his head. He had literally just put his foot in his fucking mouth. He was such a fucking loser. He was so fucking insensitive and mean and ignorant, god, Mikey was right, he was so selfish. “See you guys,” he muttered, interrupting his own thoughts before he started to fall apart. He turned away in the opposite direction and headed for the parking lot. He was such a fucking loser.

Fuck, he thought, shoving his hands into his pockets. *Today fucking sucked.*

*And it’s only a fucking Monday.*
Wow, I probably should've stayed inside my house

Chapter Notes

title from The Judge, of course :) OKAY GUYS, i'm back later than ever and i apologize from the depths of my heart for having such a long hiatus. But this chapter's the longest one yet AND, confidentially, you're gonna love it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The days passed, and Tyler didn’t really know what the fuck was going on, but he could roll with it. On the one hand, he felt that he was getting a bum deal; half of the guys on the basketball team were ignoring him, Ms. Moore had taken away his phone twice, and Josh seemed to appear out of nowhere every time Tyler turned the corner.

On the other hand, though, some things were better than they had been before, both in this school and in his old one. For the first time, Tyler felt like he had made some real friends who accepted him and actually enjoyed his company. Granted, it was only Gerard and Frank, and his mother was less than pleased that he had only made two friends in his full month at the new school. Although lately, Mikey had been joining the three of them at lunch, gradually spending more and more time hanging out with Tyler on his own, even when Gerard wasn’t there. Tyler would have to remember to tell his mom about that. He had made three friends.

When Mikey had first started hanging out with him, Tyler hadn’t really thought anything about it. It wasn’t too weird, after all; Gerard hung out with him all the time and they were brothers, of course Mikey would end up sitting with them from time to time. But it was the way Mikey acted during all the basketball practices after school that gradually piqued Tyler’s suspicions. Before, Mikey had spent most of his time with Josh’s group, albeit a bit awkwardly and on the outer edge, not quite fitting in. But ever since he had started hanging out with Tyler, he seemed to be very purposefully ignoring his old friends. Once Tyler had noticed that, he began to notice Mikey skirting around Josh and the others in the hallways in between classes, too.

Tyler had finally brought it up that afternoon during lunch, subtly asking Mikey why he didn’t sit at his old table anymore. Mikey had simply gone all rigid in reply and mumbled something about rumors. Tyler had opened his mouth to press the issue, but Gerard had caught his eye and shook his head, cutting him short.

Tyler decided to ask Gerard about it that afternoon after basketball practice, while Mikey was busy helping Frank cut his bike loose from the rack. The lock was stuck (Frank had claimed it happened often, though Tyler wasn’t completely convinced that he wasn’t watching his friend steal a bike), and he jumped at the opportunity he had alone with Gerard.

“So what’s up with Mikey? Did Josh say something to him or....?”

“Oh, those guys have always kind of picked on him. Brendon and all them,” Gerard replied quickly. Very quickly.

Tyler eyed him suspiciously. “But...they seemed to be okay at the beginning of the year...why is he avoiding them now? He said something about rumors?”
Gerard shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other, but Tyler had learned enough about him already to know that he couldn’t keep himself from talking when he had things to say. Gerard shrugged, eyes avoiding Tyler’s. “So maybe Dun said something to him, but Mikey made me promise not to tell you….”

Tyler waited for what he deemed an appropriate length of time before prompting, “But you’re gonna tell me anyways, right?”

Gerard glanced guiltily over at Mikey, even as he edged closer to Tyler. “Well…it was a couple of weeks ago.”

“What was a couple of weeks ago?”

Gerard was about to spill, Tyler could tell, so he hissed again. “What was a couple of weeks ago? Gee?”

Gerard huffed loudly before dragging Tyler a few feet to the side. Mikey and Frank didn’t notice; Frank had apparently produced a pocket knife from somewhere and was struggling to cut through the troublesome cord. Tyler frowned but was quickly distracted by Gerard’s rambling.

“So yeah, Brendon and his group used to pick on Mikey occasionally, back in the day, nothing too serious, you know. But this year things were better, I guess they all matured a little, you know? But then Dun did say something to Mikey, like around the time the basketball team was officially ranked or something. Mikey’s been avoiding him since then. Which is why he’s been sitting with us at lunch and stuff.”

Tyler thought back to the day he had been named first player. He still couldn’t believe it, couldn’t believe his luck; he hadn’t expected to come to a new school in his senior year and place first. He also remembered how riled up several other people seemed to be because of the ranking. He remembered Josh bumping into him in the locker room and Frank going at him and then Josh just leaving, acting all pissed. Like sure, Tyler could sympathize with the guy; he was a good player, had been here way longer than he had, of course he’d be a bit put out. But then he went and said something to Mikey? But-

“Well, do you wanna know what’s up or not?” Gerard demanded, prodding Tyler’s waist. He continued before Tyler could really form a reply: “Mikey said Dun was talking a lot of shit about you and-

“About me? What was he saying ab-

“-him and his other friends apparently all think you were a real asshole at your old school, like that you were such a problem you were actually expelled. And that’s why you’re at a public school now, in your senior year. And they kind of hate you a bit.”

Parts of what Gerard was saying sounded familiar to Tyler. He voiced his suspicions. “I bet Brendon started this, when he came over to our table that one time.”

Gerard nodded. “That’s what Frank thinks, too. I’m not exactly sure, I mean, he could have, but it sounds more like something Pete or somebody would do.”

Tyler shook his head angrily. “Why would anybody say that? It’s not true, I told Brendon the truth.”

Gerard shrugged. “Don’t take it too hard, man, it’s just something kids say. You know. If it makes you feel any better, Frank and I hate all of them, too. They’re assholes.”
It wasn’t very comforting, and Gerard’s reassurance didn’t stop Tyler from crossing his arms and scowling as he glared out across the emptying parking lot. Gerard patted him on the shoulder and leaned in to say in a quieter voice, “Don’t act weird, okay, don’t let Mikey know I told you. He was afraid you’d be upset.”

“I am upset!” Tyler hissed back, but Gerard elbowed him in the side as Mikey appeared beside them.

“Finally got the bike loose,” he said, adjusting his glasses. Tyler did his best to act casual as Frank circled them on the bike.

“Is that even yours?” he huffed, more to distract himself from his own thoughts than anything else.

Frank shrugged and grinned as he circled back around in front of them. “It is now.”

Tyler was about to tell him off when Gerard intervened. “It’s his, don’t worry Ty. Go on, get on the handlebars.”

“Yeah, come on, Tyler,” Frank chirped, stopping the bike with one foot on the ground. “I’ve tried getting Gerard to ride with me, but bicycles and fun are against his moral standards.”

“They are not, you asshole.” As if to prove his point, Gerard clambered onto the bike before Tyler had made a move to do so. They wobbled off across the parking lot.

Mikey chuckled, grabbing Tyler’s hand and handing him the cut bicycle cord. “It’s not Frank’s bike, by the way,” he said casually before slipping off after his brother and friend.

Tyler spluttered to himself for a moment before stuffing the cord in his pocket and jogging to catch up with his friends. He had a lot to think about.

Josh woke up to the early autumn sun warming his body beneath the blankets. He groaned and kicked his legs, trying to untangle himself, before glancing at the clock on the bedside table and realizing it was a Saturday morning. Or, almost afternoon. His parents would never let him sleep this late unless it was a Saturday. He stopped struggling with the heavy blankets and flopped back down against his pillow, grabbing his phone and scrolling through his new texts.

A new text from Brendon was the first to catch his eye, it’s contents quickly jogging his memory. He sat bolt upright in the bed as he read:

Duuude this time next week we’ll be legends!!!!!! a first game success is a sure way 2 beat Joseph. and against Westerville too bro, this will be easy af they’re pussies

Josh huffed out a laugh as his thumbs flew to type a reply. Yesterday after practice, Coach Anderson had called all the boys over and announced their first game of the season. They would be going against a neighboring high school in Westerville (Brendon was right, in past years Worthington did kick their asses pretty badly) so the competition wasn’t too tough- which was a good thing, because the game was scheduled for next Friday evening.

This was Josh’s chance. If he wanted to be first player this year, he couldn’t waste any time. He would give the game everything he had and it would blow the coach away, and he’d beat Wentz in no time, and then he’d beat Joseph.

Josh hit send on his reply of pointless emojis before it occurred to him that he should get in as much extra practice as possible. During this next week before the game, the after-school practices would be
extended an extra half hour, but what the fuck, you can’t practice too much, Josh decided, leaping from his bed to pull on some jeans and his shirt from yesterday. Grabbing his ball from behind the bedroom door, he took the stairs two at a time.

The downstairs was empty, and Josh sighed in relief as he remembered that today was the day his mom had scheduled his two sisters a dentist appointment, and his dad had promised to take Jordan to the hardware store to pick out some things he needed for a class project. He had the house to himself; better yet, he didn’t have to make excuses to his dad about mowing the lawn later so he could go play some basketball now. He grabbed an apple as he darted out the door into the garage to get his bike.

Josh hadn’t mastered the art of pedaling a bicycle with a ball under one arm while eating an apple any more than he had since the last time he had done this, but his spirits were high and not even the threat of toppling off onto the pavement could deter him. As he coasted to a stop in front of the basketball court, he thanked God that the court was empty. For what seemed like the first time in a while, things were actually going his way.

He dribbled the ball for a while to get warmed up, then shot a few baskets easily. He contemplated texting Brendon or Spencer to see if they could come practice, too (confidentially, Spencer needed it), and he was still trying to make up his mind when he heard the squeak of hinges, the tell-tale sound signaling the gate to the court was being opened. Josh paused his dribbling to peer over his shoulder, and he nearly dropped the basketball.

It was Tyler.

In his basketball court.

Josh thought back to that Saturday before school had started. He had seen Tyler here then, too. He’d almost forgotten about that, but he guessed it meant Tyler lived somewhere nearby, close enough for him to walk to the court, because Josh’s bike was the only one leaning against the chain link fence.

Josh was startled out of his brooding as Tyler made eye contact from across the pavement and froze. Maybe he’ll leave, Josh thought helplessly, mind reeling.

But Tyler didn’t leave. After what felt like several awkward hours of just standing there on opposite sides of the court, staring at each other, he started dribbling his own ball, turning away from Josh and shooting a perfect basket. Josh glared at Tyler’s back. So that’s how it was going to be then. Well fine.

Josh pointedly turned around and shot a basket on his own end of the court. He was here first, and if Tyler refused to leave, then so did he. No one could make him leave his court if he didn’t want to leave. Especially Tyler.

For the next twenty minutes, Josh took great care not to look in Tyler’s direction at all, not even once. He went about his practicing like he wasn’t even there. Tyler was doing the same, apparently, because whenever Josh did happen to accidentally sneak a peak, Tyler always had his back turned as well, paying Josh no mind. But even though Josh was ignoring him for the most part, he was finding himself increasingly annoyed and irritated every time he heard the sound of Tyler’s ball going through the hoop, the chain swinging and clinking loudly in the still afternoon. His mind started to keep count of all the times he heard the ball go through, and without even realizing it, he began to match the score, throwing his own ball through his own hoop, keeping his score even with Tyler’s. Not that he was keeping count- except that he totally was. Whatever, shut up. It didn’t mean anything.
After a few more shots, Josh was mildly aware of his back starting to ache. Normally when he played with his friends, they would take breaks from actually shooting the ball to just dribble it or throw it around, or even take a breather in the grass and mess around on their phones. This Tyler kid was a pretty intense player, but Josh refused to be intimidated, ignoring his tiring body and pushing himself to match pace with Tyler’s playing.

The sound of Tyler’s ball going through the net stopped after another shot, and then Josh could hear the ball beating against the pavement; he threw a quick look over his shoulder to see Tyler doing some sort of fancy dribbling. He was throwing the ball around too quickly for Josh to make out exactly what kind of dribble it was, but it definitely looked more complex than anything Josh could do. Josh didn’t mean to stare, but he guessed he was a bit, because just then Tyler looked up, making eye contact again. He turned away with a smirk, his ball never missing a beat, and did an impressive wraparound dribble. Josh grit his teeth. What a fucking show-off.

Josh had never attempted a wraparound before; he had just started practicing a behind-the-back dribble that summer. He still wasn’t very good at it, definitely not good enough to try it in an actual game, but with Tyler prancing around his neighborhood court and acting all high and mighty, Josh decided it was a good time to practice his own fancy dribbling.

He purposefully turned his back on Tyler once more and started to dribble the ball in a basic pattern, taking care not to trip on his own feet as he steered the ball behind his back. He took even greater care not to drop the ball as well. That would have been the last thing he needed right now, with Tyler of all people there to watch him fail. He would just love that, wouldn’t he, and Josh was not going to give him the satisfact-

-except that he totally was.

Josh tripped on his fucking shoelace. He had flashes of it being halfway undone while he was getting off his bike earlier, but he had ignored it. He hadn’t thought it was that important. Except now as he was falling face first onto the hot pavement, Josh wanted to punch himself in the face. Why is it always me? Why me, why now, goddammit....

He threw his hands out to break his fall, but he still ended up smacking his forehead against the hard cement. The ball bounced a few times before rolling to a stop a few feet away. He glared at it. Josh was hyperaware of the fact he could no longer hear Tyler’s ball anymore. Fucking great, he thought, his face burning, and not just from scraping it on the ground. He struggled to push himself into a sitting position and touched his hand to his face to see if he was bleeding. There was only a tiny bit of red smeared across his fingers, but he could feel the scratches along his cheek. He huffed out a sigh; it probably looked a lot worse than it really was. His mom was going to freak.

After a few seconds, Josh heard Tyler’s ball start to bounce again. Thank you, God. This was embarrassing enough without him witnessing the entire thing. Josh gave himself a couple more seconds to catch his breath before standing up. Or trying to, anyways. The instant he put pressure on his left ankle, he collapsed back onto the ground.

Oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit oh- Josh grabbed at his ankle, only to hiss at the sudden pain that shot up his leg. He prodded it more gently this time. Was it broken? He tugged his pant leg up a little. There wasn’t any blood, that he could see. Wasn’t there always blood when you broke a bone? Maybe it was just fractured. Oh shit...Josh’s thoughts were reeling. The basketball game is next Friday, I don’t have time for a fracture, not even a sprain, this can’t happen right now, I can’t not play, I can’t....

“Dude, are...are you okay?”
Josh jumped and then gasped as the movement caused another shot of pain to go up his leg. His face was so red he could feel it giving him a sunburn. Or maybe that was just from scratching it on the ground. Either way, Josh had never been more embarrassed in his life as he sat on his ass and peered up at Tyler, who was peering back down at him a step or two away, shifting awkwardly.

Josh’s tongue felt heavy as he tried to think of a response other than snapping *go away*. He was more civil than that. He’d try to be, at least. “Yeah,” he settled on eventually, face flushing even more. “I’m fine. Thanks.”

Josh looked back down to the ground, watching an ant march past and hoping to God Tyler would just leave it at that. Better yet, hoping Tyler would turn around and leave the court and go home so Josh could call Brendon or someone to come rescue him in peace, without a fucking audience.

Tyler scuffed his shoe against a tuft of grass growing in a crack on the pavement. “Well, okay,” he said after a small eternity of awkward silence. “You sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.” Josh knew he sounded harsh but he couldn’t help it. He was dying.


Maybe it wasn’t that bad. Maybe he had just tried to get up too fast. Josh felt his ankle with both hands; maybe it felt a little bigger than usual, but it was probably just a super small sprain and he’d be all better in an hour or so and he could play in the game next Friday like nothing had happened. Focusing his attention on all these hopeful thoughts, Josh braced his hands against the pavement and made another effort to stand up. He got up halfway without putting any pressure on his left ankle, then slowly straightened himself out. Okay, he was standing now, that was an improvement. He tenderly set his left foot down and tried to take a step.

This time as Josh’s face scraped against the pavement, he let himself groan out loud. Why did the world hate him again?

Josh had just resigned himself to his fate of dying stretched out on his neighborhood basketball court when a shadow fell across his face. Could he not even die undisturbed, please?

“Dude, you’re not okay.” *Shit*, Tyler. Josh had forgotten he was still there.

He cracked open an eye and glared up at Tyler. “I’m dying,” he admitted. Why not make peace with his nemesis in his last few moments? What did he have left to lose?

Tyler’s mouth did something like a small smile. It was hard to tell when he was upside down. Josh tilted his head to try to see more clearly. He waved a hand weakly. “I am dying,” he repeated, because apparently Tyler wasn’t getting it. He was practically *laughing*.

“I think you hit your head,” Tyler said, kneeling on the ground beside Josh. Josh closed his eyes again. This was so embarrassing. He was suddenly *very* thankful none of his friends were here to see him right now.

Something prodded against his forehead and Josh glared at Tyler again. “Ow,” he complained. “Stop poking me.”

“Sorry,” Tyler didn’t look very sorry. “It’s just, like if you have a concussion or something you’re not supposed to go to sleep, right? You should probably sit up.”

“Oh yeah, I’m just out here for a nap,” Josh replied. It didn’t make much sense even to him in his
groggy state. He wanted to close his eyes again.

Tyler was pulling at the front of Josh’s shirt. “C’mon, sit up. Are you sure you don’t have a concussion? You’re acting kinda weird.”

Josh brushed his hands away and pushed himself up into an almost-sitting position. His head was really throbbing. He tried to stifle a moan.

“You do have a concussion!” Tyler’s voice sounded accusatory, and Josh wanted to retort that it wasn’t his fault, it was Tyler’s fault, but he bit his tongue at the last second.

He shook his head in reply, immediately regretting it as the pain in his forehead worsened. “Nah, my head’s fine.” He was probably lying. Whatever. “It’s my ankle.”

Tyler turned his attention to Josh’s leg. “This one?” he asked, reaching out.

Josh jerked away. “Yes and don’t touch it.”

“I need to see if it’s broken.”

“It’s not broken.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do, it’s my leg and I know it’s not- ow, dammit, Tyler, I told you not to touch it-”

“God, you’re such a baby,” Tyler spat out, holding onto Josh’s knee with one hand to hold him still and trying to feel his ankle with the other. “Stop squirming or it will be broken, you asshole.”

Josh groaned loudly in response, hoping his anger was apparent. God, this kid was a pain in the ass. Speaking of which...Josh fidgeted slightly. Great. I think I bruised my tailbone, too.

Tyler glanced up at him. “What?” His tone wasn’t very friendly.

No way was Josh letting on that he’d bruised his fucking tailbone, no fucking way. “Nothing.” He made sure his tone was just as unfriendly as Tyler’s.

Tyler squinted suspiciously at him before turning back to his ankle. His hands were soft and cool on Josh’s flushed skin. Don’t think that, that’s weird. Josh wondered why he’d thought that.

“I don’t think it’s broken....” Tyler announced, sitting back on his heels. Josh was glad he had finally taken his hands off him.

“I told you it wasn’t broken.” Josh sounded snotty even to himself. “It’s just a sprain, it’ll be fine in a couple of hours.”

Tyler was touching his leg again. Fuck.... “I don’t think so, dude. It’s swelling up really fast. It’ll be a couple of days at least.”

“You don’t know th-”

“I do, my dad’s a doctor.”

Josh snorted. “And my dad’s a plumber, but that doesn’t mean I’ve fixed any faucets lately.”

Tyler ignored him. “You should put some ice on it as soon as you can, and keep it elevated and shit.”
“Okay, cool, thanks, I’ll do that,” Josh said sarcastically, scooting away from Tyler. He tried to stand up again.

“Josh, don’t—” Tyler exclaimed, jumping up and grabbing him with both hands, just before Josh toppled over for a third time.

Josh pulled away from Tyler’s grasp, balancing on one foot. “I can manage, I don’t need help.”

Tyler crossed his arms. “You can’t manage, you do need help. Stop being an ass.”

Josh took a couple small hops in the direction of the gate. A sharp pain burned in his left leg every time it got jostled. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Tyler following him slowly.

“I said I don’t need help!” he gritted out, taking another hop. God, what was his life?

From his peripheral vision, he could see that Tyler had stopped walking and had crossed his arms. “Fine,” he said, voice cold. “Do it yourself then.”

“Okay.” Josh snapped back.

Tyler watched Josh struggle by himself for a few minutes more before throwing his hands up in defeat and sighing. He had managed to hop on only one foot halfway across the court, but now he was starting to teeter dangerously with each hop. It was such a pathetic sight that Tyler couldn’t help but to stride after him. Whether Josh would accept his help or not, Tyler would give it to him regardless. They all thought he was a bully? Well then, he would prove he wasn’t. Not to mention that if Josh took one more step on his own, he’d probably fall over again, and Tyler didn’t know what the fuck he was supposed to do if Josh started crying on him. He looked pretty distressed.

Tyler didn’t say anything, just grabbed onto Josh’s shoulders to steady him. He was probably in the nick of time, too. Josh glared at him, but Tyler had been anticipating that. He tightened his grip and pointedly looked ahead, refusing to give Josh the chance to shrug him off again. When they made it to the chain link fence, Josh reached out and grabbed onto it for support. Tyler let him go, for the time being.

“Thanks,” Josh mumbled. Tyler could barely hear him; he was hiding his face behind one arm. The sun reflected brightly off his red hair, but Tyler could tell his face was red, too. He wondered why he was so embarrassed. He’d just turned his ankle, that wasn’t necessarily anything to be so embarrassed about.

Tyler searched for something to say. “You should...probably really get off your foot. Or it’s just gonna make it worse.”

Josh made another noise from behind his arm. Tyler looked past him and noticed a bike leaning against the fence. “Is that your bike? How far away is your house?”

“Um...it’s past that hill a couple of blocks....” Josh’s voice came out muffled.

The hill wasn’t a very big one, but it was pretty steep. Tyler struggled inwardly for a moment before offering hesitantly, “My house is a lot closer...we should probably go there first. If you’re like...okay with that.” Josh didn’t say anything right away and Tyler fidgeted nervously. He began to ramble, “Because like...well, I mean with the game coming up and everything you should probably do everything you can to help your ankle get better, ‘cause like you can’t even stand on it and if you can’t even stand on it right now then no way can you try and play a game next Friday and the coach
“Okay! Okay, we can go to your house, just please stop talking,” Josh interrupted, giving Tyler a funny look. Tyler tried to read what was in his expression, but couldn’t figure it out before Josh turned away again.

“Yeah, okay,” Tyler said eventually. He glanced around the basketball court, weighing the situation. No way could he help Josh wobble to his house and carry both their basketballs and the bike. “I’ll come back and get the stuff later,” he mused out loud.

The short walk from the basketball court to Tyler’s house had never felt so long. Granted, he had only been living there for a month, but still, his point was valid. He had one arm wrapped around Josh’s waist, the other dangling awkwardly at his side. Josh had an arm thrown around Tyler’s shoulders, and at first it was just uneasy and uncomfortable, but after they had passed the first block, Josh was starting to get really fucking heavy. Tyler was breathing heavily through his nose, trying not to pant and let Josh know just how tired he was getting.

He seemed to be quite transparent though, because the first thing Josh said after they had started walking (or limping, in Josh’s case), was, “Sorry I’m so heavy.”

Tyler opened his mouth to reply but only let out a strained huff. Josh obviously tried shifting some more of his weight off of Tyler, but Tyler intervened, grabbing tighter at his waist. “No, no, it’s okay, I got this. You really shouldn’t put any weight on that ankle.”

A few more strained minutes passed, the two of them breathing loudly. How far away was his fucking house?

“Why are you helping me?”

Josh’s voice startled Tyler out of his own head. “What?” his mouth said before his brain could process Josh’s words.

Josh repeated himself, tone slightly annoyed. “I said, why are you helping me?”

Tyler thought that was a weird thing to ask, but he decided to humor him anyways. He had hit his head, after all. “What did you want me to do, leave you there?”

Josh winced as his ankle bumped Tyler’s leg. “Well, I kinda thought you would.”

“Why would you think...oh.” The rumor about him. Of course. Did they all really think he was that much of a dick?

Neither of them said anything else the rest of the way to Tyler’s house. It was only one more block, but Tyler was infinitely relieved when they at last rounded the corner and the house came into view.

His dad wasn’t home that afternoon, but Tyler was confident his mom would know what to do. He’d sprained his own ankles often enough throughout his life that she was used to it. Tyler helped Josh navigate his way around the moving boxes that were still scattered about the living room and left him sitting on the couch in the corner. He looked extremely out of place, and Tyler definitely felt a little sorry for him. “I’ll be right back,” he promised, scurrying off to find his mom.

Tyler’s mom was more than willing to help fix Josh up. She chattered endlessly as she cleaned the cuts on his face first, then instructed him to remove his shoe and strapped an ice pack to his ankle, expressing how happy she was that Tyler had made another friend. Josh didn’t say anything to contradict her, and Tyler stood to the back of the room, his arms crossed, looking out the window to
avoid having to make eye contact. Tyler’s mom left and came back with some pain reliever and a bandage for Josh’s face, and after getting the phone number from Josh, left once more to call one of his parents to come pick him up.

Tyler stuffed himself further into the corner and tried to melt into the wall. It was just him and Josh in the room now, and part of him wanted to bolt upstairs to his room and hide. He’d done enough. But he knew that that would only make matters worse and more awkward for the both of them. He figured he should make the best of the situation and try to clear some things up.

“I wasn’t expelled, you know,” he settled on saying after a few moments.

Josh had been staring out the window, fingering the unopened band-aid in his hand, and he jumped, startled as Tyler spoke. Tyler wondered if he had even realized he was still in the room. He continued, “I don’t know who told you all that shit, but it’s not true.”

Josh fidgeted for a minute. “I guess I should have expected as much from Pete. He’s always talking shit.”

Tyler tightened his arms around himself and narrowed his eyes slightly. “It’s not Pete’s fault for you believing it.”

The silence of the house weighed down on Tyler as he waited anxiously for Josh to reply. Seriously, where the hell were his siblings? Maybe he had crossed a line by saying what he just had, maybe he had made Josh even more mad than he already was, what if he-

“You’re right,” Josh’s voice was quiet. “I’m sorry. I know I’ve been kind of a dick.”

“You’ve been a lot of a dick,” Tyler said before he could stop himself. He blushed and quickly tried to backtrack. “I mean, um, I didn’t mean you were...I just meant-”

To his surprise, Josh laughed. “No, it’s okay. You’re right.”

They were both silent again, but it was less stained than it had been before. Not easy, but less strained.

“Did you spill that water on me on purpose?”

Josh blinked a few times before replying slowly. “No...did you steal the ball from me during the tryout game on purpose?”

Tyler had to think hard to remember the details of the game. “No,” he said after a moment. “I just stole it. It just happened to be you.”

Josh nodded; he appeared to be thinking. “Are you keeping Mikey from talking to me?”

For a moment, Tyler was confused. “No, he’s just...he’s upset. He doesn’t want to talk to you, so he doesn’t. Gerard and Frank really kind of hate you though, I think. That might be a part of it.”

Once more, Tyler was afraid that maybe he would accidentally set Josh off, and he’d blow up at him. But Josh just kept nodding, eyebrows furrowed. Tyler pushed a little more. “Did you try to run me down with your bike on purpose?”

“Dude, I swear to God that was an accident.” Josh was smiling a bit. Hesitantly, Tyler smiled back.

“So are we...are we chill now then?”
If Josh replied, Tyler couldn’t hear him, because suddenly the doorbell was ringing and his mother was hurrying to open it. A woman flew into the small living room, dragging two young girls behind her.

“Josh! Oh my goodness, honey, are you alright?” Josh’s mom cooed over him and shrieked a little when she saw the scratches on his face. Tyler had never seen someone turn so red from embarrassment before. He hid his smile behind his hand as Josh glared at him over his mom’s shoulder.

“It’s just a sprain, he’ll be fine in a couple of days,” Tyler’s mom reassured Mrs. Dun. “I cleaned the cuts on his face, too, they’re not deep.”

“I can’t thank you enough,” Josh’s mom was saying. “And how did he end up here?” Her eyes fell on Tyler, still hovering in the corner. “Oh, you must be the friend that helped him, aren’t you?”

Tyler smiled, blushing himself as all the attention in the room was turned on him. “Um, yeah, I’m Tyler. He tripped and...our house was closer, so I....”

Mrs. Dun smashed Tyler in a hug, and Tyler choked on his own words, the breath knocked out of him. Josh was smirking knowingly. *Fuck him.*

For the next twenty-five minutes, Tyler and Josh’s moms completely forgot about the fact Josh was supposed to be going home to rest and talked animatedly with each other. Mrs. Dun introduced Josh’s sisters to Tyler’s mom, who exclaimed how beautiful they were and quizzed them on all the basic questions teenagers get asked. Tyler’s mom in turn introduced Mrs. Dun to the rest of her children, calling them upstairs from the basement to meet everyone (*What the hell, they connected the Xbox without telling me!? So that’s where they’ve been hiding....*) Tyler noticed Josh was starting to pull at the ice pack on his ankle, trying to loosen it, and he decided it was time to save the day. Again.

“I’m gonna help Josh to the car,” he announced loudly, hoping he would be heard above all the chatter. No one acknowledged him, but he proceeded to help Josh stand up and wobble out the door, and down the driveway to his mom’s minivan parked along the road.

“Thanks,” Josh said, leaning against his car. “Honestly, my mom could talk forever.”

“Yeah, mine, too,” Tyler agreed. He felt awkward all of a sudden and wasn’t sure why.

Thankfully, Mrs. Dun and Josh’s sisters were leaving the house, Tyler’s mom standing in the doorway waving goodbye. Tyler took a few steps away from Josh and said, “Well, I guess I’ll see you Monday.” He remembered Josh’s ankle. “Or um, or not, I don’t know about your leg. I hope you get better soon.” He could feel himself blushing again. *Goddammit*....

Josh was looking at him funny, and that didn’t help Tyler’s nervousness any. Finally Josh smiled a bit. “Yeah, thanks. See you at school, I guess. Whenever that will be.”

Tyler nodded and turned, almost bumping into Mrs. Dun, who thanked him again for helping Josh. He was able to slip away before she could give him another hug. Once he was back in the house with the door closed, he peeked out the living room window and watched the minivan pull away from the curb. He could see Josh’s red hair in the front seat, the color bright even through the tinted window.

Tyler wondered what that meant.
Josh’s parents made him stay home from school that next Monday and Tuesday. Josh didn’t mind missing his classes, but he was bummed about missing out on basketball practice. His mom kept saying that if he had any mind to play in the game that Friday, then he’d better do what she said and stay off his feet (though Josh had a sneaking suspicion that when the time came, his parents would be pretty adamant about him not playing. Especially when it hadn’t even been a full week since he’d hurt his ankle. Josh tried not to think too far ahead. He’d deal with that when he got there.) He had already called up Coach Anderson and explained the situation, and after a lot of begging, the coach finally agreed that if Josh felt up to it and at least made a couple of practices before the game, he’d be willing to let him play.

Brendon and Spencer had stopped by Monday afternoon with Josh’s homework, and Brendon had excitedly told Josh about something he was working on. He wouldn’t give Josh any more details or elaborate on what he meant at all. When Josh had turned pleadingly to Spencer, he had only shaken his head, a suspicious smile on his face that Josh kind of wanted to smack off him.

Tuesday afternoon, when they both stopped by again with more fucking homework- Josh hated them, honestly- Brendon revealed his big surprise to Josh: he had collected bets on Josh and Tyler for the first game of the year.

Josh was sitting on the edge of his bed, flipping through his history book when Brendon told him. He froze. “You...you collected bets? What...why would-” he spluttered, but Spencer interrupted.

“Yeah, it was great! Everyone knows you two are competing for first rank, it’s fucking obvious. News spreads fast, I guess, ‘cause several kids came up to us during lunch and wanted to do it again this year. Remember when we did it with you and Andy that one time-”

Now it was Josh’s turn to interrupt. He didn’t like the sound of this. “Yeah, that was once, and everyone knew to bet on Andy ‘cause he was way better than me. This is different.”

“Yeah, it’s better!” Brendon plopped down on the bed beside Josh. “Don’t you see, J? This way when you make more baskets than Joseph during the game- maybe even score the winning shot, who knows?- everyone’ll be so pumped, the coach will have to move you up to first rank!”

“And you can teach Joseph a lesson at the same time!” Spencer added enthusiastically. “No way can he come to our school and beat our best player. No way.”

Josh fidgeted uncomfortably. “He’s not that bad, guys....”

Josh hadn’t told his friends what had happened on Saturday afternoon. In his defense, he hadn’t been in school since then, so he hadn’t gotten much of a chance to tell them yet, but he had figured the news would slip out through Tyler one way or another. He wasn’t sure why he thought that exactly, it just didn’t seem like something that could stay a secret for very long. Why is it a secret in the first place? Josh cocked his head as his thoughts ran in different directions. The school’s two main basketball rivals aren’t rivals anymore- big deal. It’s not a secret, you can just tell them. Brendon was saying something, waving his hands in front of Josh’s face, and Josh focused back into the present, determined to explain to his friends why the bet wasn’t a good idea.

Except that Brendon was waving a roll of dollar bills around in the air. “See all this, J? You’ve obviously improved since that bet with Andy. There’s a lot of kids who have bet on you! I’m even collecting some more tomorrow!”

“You know, people have been talking about you two,” Spencer said, kicking at Josh’s basketball laying in the corner. “B and I didn’t realize it was this big of a thing, but apparently that incident about Tyler at his old school has spread around, and now everyone’s dying to see you beat him!”
Josh felt kind of sick. He searched for something to say, anything. “We’re on the same team, shouldn’t the bets be between the two schools and not the players? I don’t think that story about Tyler’s even true, we don’t know that he-”

“Joseph’s a dick, Josh, you said so yourself!” Brendon exclaimed happily, running his fingers through the wad of bills, oblivious to Josh’s discomfort.

“I didn’t say that….” Josh said weakly. His friends didn’t seem to hear him.

Josh just hoped he could explain all this to Tyler before he heard it from the wrong person.

Josh’s parents finally let him go to school on Wednesday, and he was almost thankful to get back to his classes; he was sick of being cooped up in his room. His ankle was feeling almost normal again, except for when he put a little too much pressure on it. He was mildly concerned about being able to give his all on Friday, but that was still two days away. He had plenty of time.

The first thing Josh did his morning back at school was look for Tyler. Simply not being enemies for the past couple of days was a big load off of Josh’s mind. If he had known how carefree it would make him feel, he would have tried to make up sooner. Except Brendon’s little surprise had brought all the stress back down on him again. Josh knew he couldn’t do much to stop it now, but at least he could try to explain to Tyler before they started hating each other again.

He caught several glimpses of Tyler throughout the day, but was waiting for an opportune moment; either he was always sandwiched in between Gerard and Frank or else Brendon and all of Josh’s other friends were all crowding around Josh. With the social status of the basketball team the way it currently was, Josh thought it would be best to talk to Tyler privately before they made a show of anything.

The bell signaling the end of lunch had just sounded when Josh found a chance to slip away from his friends, promising to meet up with them in the music room. He scanned the emptying lunchroom for Tyler and noticed him slipping out the side door into the hallway. Josh hurried after him.

There were a lot of other students in the hallway, but for the most part they were all focused on getting to class before the next bell rang. Josh scanned the crowd for anyone he knew, and when the coast was clear, called out. “Hey, Tyler!”

Tyler was a few paces ahead of him and didn’t stop till he got to his locker. He opened the door and buried his face in it. Josh called out again, coming up beside him. “Hey, Tyler! ...Tyler?”

“I don’t wanna talk to you,” came the muffled reply from behind the locker door.

“What, why? Tyler?” Josh’s mind was reeling with multiple reasons why Tyler was now mad at him again.

Tyler didn’t move from behind his locker. “Everyone in the school is talking about me.”

Shit. “Tyler, look, I had nothing to do with this whole betting thing going on-”

“Am I supposed to believe you? Now everyone thinks those rumors about me are true, and now everyone hates me and this stupid bet thing-”

“Don’t worry about that, it’s not a big deal,” Josh interrupted, looking around nervously. Oh, shit. That was definitely Frank that Josh just saw coming towards them. He looked angry.
“Look, Tyler,” Josh said quickly, grabbing at Tyler’s shoulder to get his attention. “I’m really sorry about all this, the bet, the rumor, everything. I didn’t know any of this was going to happen, I swear. Just...please don’t be mad at me? Okay?”

Tyler was staring intently at him. *Fuck, his eyes are brown. Like really, really br-*

“Okay,” Tyler muttered at last, dropping his head. “Sorry I jumped all over you, I was just upset.”

Josh patted Tyler’s back quickly. “No sweat, man. Look, I’ll see you in practice, okay? I’ll explain more later.”

Tyler only nodded and Josh took the opportunity to dash off before Frank could intervene. A warm brown color was all his mind could think about for the rest of the day, and Josh couldn’t understand why.

Chapter End Notes

kudos and especially comments are so so appreciated, please leave me feedback! y'all might not realize this, but the plot is still really up in the air right now, anything can happen at this point. so ANY suggestions, ideas, headcanons, preferences, etc that you guys have about anything, from major plot arcs to kinks for when they do the sexy stuff, all that stuff could determine the future of this fic! Just a psa! LEAVE! FEEDBACK! love you guys xoxo
Frank slammed the locker door shut, causing Tyler to snatch his hand back before it got caught. Tyler made a point of sighing loudly, even rolling his eyes for good measure as he leaned back against the row of lockers, clutching his books to his chest. He could feel his face starting to heat up.

“What did he want?” Frank demanded, crowding Tyler against the lockers, one arm extended to block his escape.

Tyler’s mind raced for an excuse. It was just Frank after all, he shouldn’t be this concerned with making up some story. Except for the way Frank was glaring up at Tyler and clenching his jaw was really, really intimidating.

“Just because I’m your friend and just because I’m short does not mean I will hesitate to fuck you up, don’t pretend you weren’t thinking it. Now what did Dun want?”

Frank’s apparent ability to read minds was frightening enough to make a small wave of panic wash over Tyler as he stammered out an excuse. “I was not thinking that...exactly...I was just...Dun didn’t want anything, okay?” Tyler would have been wringing his hands if they weren’t busy holding his books. “He was just...talking about the bets.”

“So he did start it then. I knew it,” Frank glared down the hall in the direction Josh had just disappeared. “Gerard and I will deal with him later. But right now you’ve got bigger things to worry about.”

Tyler tried to swallow without being too obvious, hoping to calm his nerves without Frank jumping all over him for that, too. “Bigger things? Like what? What are you talking about?”

The bell rang loudly above their heads. The hallway was now empty except for the two of them, but Frank seemed oblivious to the fact classes had just started. He lowered his voice despite no one else being around. “It’s about Mikey. Gerard told me to tell you to keep an eye out for him in practice today.”
Tyler shook his head, confused. “What’s up with Mikey?”

Frank rolled his eyes and replied sarcastically. “Well, that’s the thing now, isn’t it, we don’t know exactly. He let slip to Gee that something was going on with him and Wentz, but after that he clammed up. Gerard thinks Pete’s bullying him again. He used to do that in grade school, you know.”

“I don’t know, I wasn’t there.”

“Oh, that’s right. Well, anyways, Gerard thinks Pete’s bothering Mikey so Gerard wants you to-”

“Keep an eye out for Mikey, okay, got it.” Tyler decided to interrupt before Frank had him trapped there for the rest of the day. He had classes to get to.

“You promise? Gerard’s gonna be real mad at me if he thinks I didn’t tell y-”

“I’ll watch him, it’s okay, Frank, really. Now can I go to class now, please? If that’s alright with you?” Tyler began to edge his way down the hall, finally forcing Frank to drop his arm so he could leave. He patted the top of Frank’s head as he passed and mussed up his hair. “Don’t stress out about it, Frankie, everything’ll be okay.”

Frank smacked violently at Tyler’s arm, and Tyler snickered as he escaped around the corner before Frank could hulk out on him.

Something was definitely up with Pete and Mikey. Now that Frank had mentioned it, Tyler noticed that Mikey was sticking to himself even more than usual, not even hanging around Tyler for too long. Pete was always all over the place during practices, and he usually did pick on at least three people every time, but today he seemed to be trailing after Mikey more than usual, too, tossing offhand comments that were only vaguely insulting in his direction. He appeared happier than he normally did, and smirkier, too, Tyler thought. So Gerard wasn’t exaggerating the situation.

Honestly though, Tyler wasn’t paying as much attention to Mikey as he had promised Frank he would. As Tyler raced around the room with the other kids on the team, stealing away the ball whenever he could, he couldn’t help his mind from wandering back to Josh. He’d been trying to steer clear of him during the practice, avoiding eye contact and basically ignoring him completely—anything to keep Josh’s nosy friends from figuring them out. Tyler kept feeling Josh’s eyes on him, or else he was just imagining the feeling. There was basically just a lot of tension during the practice, since it was also Josh’s first practice since he had hurt his leg the week before. Part of Tyler felt overly concerned that Josh was going to hurt it again, trying to play so shortly after it had healed, if it had even healed at all. He hadn’t had a chance to ask about it yet.

The coach’s whistle sounded sharply, calling the game to a halt. Dallon dropped the ball to the gym floor, and Jordan swooped in to grab it and throw it in the vague direction of the hoop, whooping loudly as it soared past the hoop and bounced off the wall. Coach Anderson glared at him as the rest of the players rolled their eyes; Tyler hadn’t been too impressed with the youngest player on the team to start with, but he was proving to be more and more annoying as the other players got to know him. A flash of red appeared in Tyler’s side vision and he smirked to himself as he thought that maybe he knew who Jordan took after, if only a little bit.

Suddenly, Josh was right there beside Tyler, his arms crossed casually over his chest. Tyler gave him a look that screamed *What are you doing!?* but the coach was barking out criticism to the team and they all seemed too preoccupied to really notice the two of them standing off to the side.
“How you doing?” There was sweat pooled across Josh’s forehead and he seemed to be scowling a little.

Tyler glanced nervously at the rest of the team. “I thought we were gonna talk later. Emphasis on the later part, Josh.”

“Nah, you’re right, I just thought—”

“What’s wrong, is it your leg?” Tyler interrupted, concerned with just how much Josh still seemed to be scowling.

Josh shook his head defensively. “No, dude, it’s fine, I’ll be fine. Just a little sore. I’ll be perfect in time for Friday.”

Tyler scoffed. “Like always.”

Josh grinned and was about to say something snarky, Tyler was certain, but just then the two of them heard Coach Anderson mention Josh’s name. They both jumped apart at the same time, just as the rest of the team turned to look in Josh’s direction.

“...but he assures me he’ll be completely healed by Friday, right, Josh? You got a medical opinion on that?”

Tyler slipped a few more feet away as Josh stammered out some bullshit about not needing to see a doctor, he’d be fine, etc. etc. Coach Anderson seemed satisfied enough for the time being and went on to explain a few more details about the upcoming game, who would be playing what positions and what time to arrive, the basics. Tyler edged another step further away from Josh for good measure and bumped into Mikey. He turned and smiled; Mikey was already giving him a suspicious look.

Before Tyler could start worrying too much about what that look implied or defending himself from what he wasn’t quite sure, the bell sounded distantly from outside the gym doors, and Coach Anderson dismissed them. Tyler tried finding Mikey in the dispersing crowd, but he didn’t seem to be heading towards the changing room like most of the others. He did see Pete slipping out the door into the hallway with a pretty mischievous look on his face; Tyler had just made up his mind to follow after him and make sure he wasn’t bothering Mikey when someone was tugging on his arm and pulling him in the opposite direction across the gym. Tyler shoved him off and followed on his own when he realized it was Josh, both of their bags thrown over his shoulder. He kept looking over his shoulder, probably concerned about some of his friends seeing them, but they were all in the changing rooms by now. If the two of them hurried outside, no one would even notice they had left together.

Once safely outside in the fresh afternoon air with the gym door closed behind them, Tyler tugged at his bag still hanging on Josh’s shoulder.

“I can get it, thanks,” he said quickly, slinging the straps around his own arms.

Josh looked slightly bemused. “You headed home now? Do you usually walk or—”

“Yeah, I walk.”

“Okay, well, let me get my bike real quick, okay? Don’t go anywhere.” Josh darted off around the side of the building towards the front where the bike racks were located.

A couple younger students came out the gym door beside Tyler, almost giving him a heart attack, but
he didn’t recognize them so he figured he was still safe. He began heading across the back parking lot to the sidewalk anyways, just for good measure. The last thing he needed was to run into Gerard or Frank right now. Suddenly remembering the job Frank had given him earlier that day, he pulled out his phone as he walked and sent a quick text to Gerard, telling him not to kill Frank because he had gotten the message to watch Mikey. He didn’t say anything about Pete. Gerard would ask soon enough on his own. As an afterthought, Tyler quickly sent another message, telling Gerard and the others not to wait for him like they usually did; his mom was picking him up. Hopefully that would keep them off his back for now.

Tyler had just hit send when he was, once again, almost run over by a kid on a bike. It was Josh.

“Hey, I almost dropped my phone!” Tyler exclaimed, initial outrage at almost being killed receding a little when he realized who it was.

“Tough. Where were you going? I told you to wait,” Josh replied as he turned his bike around without getting off so he could pedal slowly next to Tyler while Tyler walked.

Tyler snorted, shoving his hands in his pockets. “You can’t tell me what to do, Josh. I didn’t want my friends to see me. We normally walk to the bus stop together.”

“I thought you said you walked home.”

“I do, Frank takes the bus to his job. It’s like a town away or something.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

Neither of them said anything as they turned down a side street to avoid the road passing in front of the school. It wasn’t an extremely comfortable silence, and Tyler racked his brain for something to say.

“So...what are we gonna do?”

Josh was pedaling so slowly to keep pace with Tyler that the bike was swerving threateningly. Tyler eyed it warily, not trusting Josh not to fall over and onto him. He didn’t want to hurt his ankle, too.

“Like, you mean right now?” Josh asked, steadying the bike for the hundredth time already. “Or like, in general...?”

“Like in general. About school and the team and stuff.” *He’s kind of weird...* Tyler had thought this about Josh before, but the thought was resurfacing.

“Oh. Yeah, well...look, the rumors going around about you, I’m...I’m really sorry about it, really. It’s not fair, it’s actually really shitty, and I know part of it is my fault and...I don’t really know how to fix it right now, I’m sorry.”

Tyler was temporarily stunned; he hadn’t exactly been referring to the rumors about himself, and he definitely hadn’t expected Josh to take the blame like this.

“It’s okay,” he said eventually. “It’s a part of high school, I guess. You know? Kids like to talk. I’ll be okay.”

Josh’s brow was furrowed; he didn’t look satisfied, but moved on to the next issue anyways. “So about the bets, then. Brendon and Spencer kind of got them going...I didn’t know about it before
today, I swear- well, actually, they stopped by and told me about it yesterday, but- I’m not like blaming them or anything, they’re my friends, and I just—"

Right. His friends. Tyler knew it was petty, but his chest kind of hurt at Josh’s words. Josh seemed oblivious as he continued rambling.

“-it’s better all around if we just go along with it, I guess. For now. The games are always a pretty big deal, a little competition on the team is normal. Usually it involves Pete, you know, only this time I guess it’s us.”

“So what, we pretend we still hate each other?” Tyler wasn’t liking the sound of this idea.

“Not hate exactly, just...don’t let them know we’re friends. I know my friends wouldn’t react too well if they found out, and as for Gerard and them, well...they wouldn’t be too happy about it either, would they?”

Tyler huffed. “Frank kind of hates you.”

They fell into silence again, and Tyler was starting to worry that he had somehow hurt Josh’s feelings. “Sorry, dude, I didn’t mean like...that just sounded kind of mean-”

Josh interrupted, swerving his bike and almost running into Tyler. “Why are you apologizing? Dude, seriously, none of this has been your fault. I was the one who...just, it's not your fault, okay?”

Tyler had no idea what to say in response, but just then Josh’s bike did topple over and Josh was dumped onto the grass. Tyler couldn’t help but to burst into a fit of giggles at the sight of Josh sprawled across someone’s front lawn, a few books from his open backpack scattered around him. Josh groaned and threw an arm over his face before speaking, though his tone wasn’t a serious one. "Dude," he whined. "It's not funny...."

Tyler tried his best to stifle his laughter, but then Josh started laughing, too. Suddenly Tyler’s legs were knocked out from under him and he collapsed to the ground next to Josh- well, almost next to him, kind of on top of him.

Josh’s cackling turned into a muffled oof sound, and Tyler went rigid as his face started to heat up. He scrambled off of Josh and onto the grass as quickly as he could, stammering out an apology. Josh was just kind of staring at him.

"I...I really should hurry home now, I guess...." Tyler jumped up so fast he tripped on Josh's bike, abandoned on the sidewalk. "Shit, um...good talk, yeah? I'll see you tomorrow. In English class."

"Yeah, okay," Josh said, his voice strangely blank.

"Alright, bye," Tyler tossed a quick wave over his shoulder to Josh, who was propping himself up on his elbows as he watched Tyler leave. As Tyler started off down the sidewalk, some logical part of his brain was aware that Josh lived in the same neighborhood as he did, and obviously he would be going this way, too, sooner or later, but Tyler ignored that thought and just kept walking. For some unknown reason to Tyler, his heart was having trouble keeping up with him, and he just wanted to be alone.

Thursday came and went, and it was Friday before Josh even realized it. The basketball team was excused from afternoon classes directly after lunch to have a longer practice time (Josh was more
than relieved that he got to miss his Spanish exam.) Josh's ankle started to hurt halfway through practice, but he just clenched his jaw and ignored it. It'll be better by tonight. Coach Anderson talked them through the plan for the game and then assigned them to their positions. Josh, Tyler, and Brendon would be the guards, while Pete and Dallon would be the posts; the bench players would fill whatever spots became available.

Brendon glared at Tyler across the gym as he leaned in next to Josh and muttered about having to play guard.

"It's his fault, you know, Coach only bumped me off post because he's here. I liked playing post."

Josh shrugged, trying to act nonchalant. "Or maybe it's because you suck, B."

Brendon punched Josh on the arm in response, scowling. Josh just laughed him off.

The game was starting right at six o'clock, and Josh's parents had insisted that he come home as soon as soon as practice was over so he could rest his ankle for a couple of hours. Josh had complained that it wasn't necessary (Brendon had invited him and Spencer over to play video games), but his mom had refused to let him play that night if he didn't come home and rest. Josh had reluctantly agreed and had told Brendon he'd have to make it another time. After practice, he watched enviously as Spencer left with Brendon before sighing to himself and gathering up his bag and bike. He would have ridden it home, but, as much as he hated to admit it, even just to himself, his ankle was still really bothering him, and he opted to limp along and use the bike as a sort of crutch rather than try to pedal up and down the hilly route home.

Once he rounded the corner out of the school parking lot, Josh noticed Tyler standing across the road. With his friends. He wasn't sure why, but he felt a little disappointed. He ducked his head down towards the ground and continued walking on his side of the street.

He couldn't hear what they were saying, but the words "worst" and "player" were spoken louder than the rest of the sentences, and Josh glanced back over his shoulder in time to see Frank burst out laughing. Gerard was looking in his direction but quickly looked away snickering when Josh turned around. Mikey seemed to be smirking a bit, too, but he refused to look in Josh’s direction.

Josh inadvertently caught Tyler’s eye just then. Tyler wasn’t laughing; he wasn’t even smiling. His face was carefully blank as he stared back across the street at Josh. After a second, he lifted his head in a subtle gesture, and when Josh was sure no one else was looking, he gave a small wave in return, feeling like the world’s biggest loser. He turned back to the road ahead of him and focused on the sidewalk passing by beneath his feet, the sound of chatter and laughter fading with every step.

Chapter End Notes

sorry for this, the next chapter will see a lot more action (hopefully posting again in a week or so?) I WANT TO HEAR YOUR FEEDBACK so please leave comments below! Things for yall to think about: what color do you wanna see J's hair next???
I didn't come for a fight, but-

Chapter Notes

I'm really excited for you guys to read this chapter! I've been getting so many lovely anons lately expressing their interest in my fic and honestly your comments and messages mean the world to me (I'm writing this for y'all as much as I'm writing it for me 💕) By request of a sweet lil tumblr anon, I've tried to add more Brendon to this chapter, in honor of his birthday recently. You'll definitely be seeing more of him in the future chapters as well

title from Irresistible by fall out boy

(psa: keep in mind this is just teen angst, I love all of these characters, even if they don't get along yet. It's all cool)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Dun household was in a state of disarray all afternoon, and Josh wasn't able to rest his ankle much at all. He refused to mention it hurting to his mom, popping some pain killers instead; she'd never let him play if she knew he was in pain, and not playing was not an option.

Apparently Jordan making the team and playing his first game (Josh seriously doubted he'd get any floor time, but try telling that to his mom) was a big deal to Josh's parents. They fussed over Jordan all afternoon, getting his uniform ready and calling all the relatives to share the exciting news. The phone was eventually shoved into Josh's hands- after a lot of protesting- and he was forced to talk to his great aunt for almost a full hour. He knew he was probably biased, but he couldn't recall his family making this big of a deal when he had first made the team. Stupid little siblings.

When Josh finally got off the phone with his aunt, his parents were already packing everyone into the car. So much for coming home to rest. And to think that all that time he was listening to his great aunt prattle on about God knows what, he could've been over at Brendon's house, stuffing his face with Cheetos Puffs while beating Spencer's ass at Call of Duty. What a waste of a perfectly good afternoon.

When they arrived at the crowded school parking lot, the sun was already hanging low in the sky, throwing long shadows across the pavement. A bus from Westerville was parked alongside the front of the building; the opposing team was already here. Josh fidgeted anxiously until his dad parked the car, and then he was jumping from his seat and dashing towards the front door before his mom could insist on taking a picture of her boys in their jerseys. That was the absolute last thing that Josh wanted right now.

Brendon practically tackled Josh to the ground as soon as he was in the door. The hallways were filled with people, some of them buying snacks at several tables that had been set up in the lobby, some already heading for the gymnasium. How late was it!?

"Dude, what the hell took so long? Coach is looking for you!" Brendon exclaimed as Josh shoved him off. "Westerville's already warming up, c'mon!"

"It wasn't my fault, my parents were making a big deal about it, Jordan and all," Josh huffed out,
though he didn’t think Brendon was really listening; he was too busy dragging Josh by the edge of his jersey through the crowd of people and into the gym. The Westerville team was indeed already warming up; the sounds of chains clinking as the ball was thrown at the net, the squeaking of sneakers on the floor, the cacophony of many excited voices all speaking at once echoed throughout the room. A wave of nerves rushed through Josh as his eyes scanned the bleachers. The first game of the school year always had a big turn up, but the sheer amount of people who showed up for a high school game always shocked him.

The changing room was crowded, too, and not much quieter. Coach Anderson was almost as relieved to see Josh as Brendon had been, exclaiming aloud when Josh and Brendon entered.

“Dun! Thank Heavens, I thought you weren’t going to make it. Why are you late?”

“I-”

“It doesn’t matter, here, listen: Westerville has been warming up for about ten minutes now, I’m gonna go talk to the referee for a quick minute and then you boys get to warm up, got it? You have about thirty seconds, make sure you’re all ready!”

Coach almost ran over Brendon in his rush to get out the door. Brendon snickered, leaning one arm on Josh’s shoulder. “Thirty seconds? That sure is a quick minute.”

Brendon started to ramble on about how many times Spencer died while they played Call of Duty that afternoon and how much Josh should have been there, so Josh tuned out most of what he was saying to try to calm his nerves. He eyed the other players in the room. Everyone was there now; Jordan had just skipped in at the last minute and was pestering Patrick about God knows what. Josh felt an equal mix of amusement and pity for Patrick.

Pete was texting on his phone, sitting on a bench a few spots away from Mikey, who looked extremely uncomfortable to be so close to him, arms crossed protectively over his chest. A pang of guilt hit Josh for not making up with Mikey yet, but those feelings were for another time, not now, not right before the game. A few of the other guys were talking on the other side of the room and—oh. Tyler.

He was in the far corner, standing by himself and pulling his jersey on over his scruffy hair. His skin was tan and gleaming under the harsh lighting of the changing rooms, and Josh caught himself staring a second too late; Tyler finished pulling his shirt on and looked up, their eyes meeting. Josh actually jumped as he turned hurriedly away, bumping conspicuously into Brendon and interrupting him mid sentence.

“-try to impress Ryan tonight, do you think he'll- ow! Dude, what the hell? Are you even listening? You are acting really anxious about tonight, it’s just one game, chill, J—”

“Sorry, sorry,” Josh murmured absentmindedly, shuffling awkwardly as he crossed and uncrossed his arms. He sneaked a glance back over in Tyler’s direction, just to see if he was still- fuck, fuck, he saw me again, what the fuck, I need to chill, what is my prob-

“For real, Josh,” Brendon smacked Josh reassuringly on the back. “You okay? You need to chill. Breathe and all that. You look like you’re about to hyperventilate.”

Coach Anderson nearly knocked the door down just then, blowing on his whistle while trying to herd the team out into the gym. Josh was thankful for the distraction from his own thoughts. The bleachers were fully packed now, though Josh’s eyes easily found his parents and sisters in the crowd. His mom was waving a camera in the air and his dad was trying to get Jordan’s attention to
give him a thumbs up. On second thought, Josh was kind of relieved they were making a deal out of Jordan this year, and not him. That was the last thing he needed.

The Westerville team was seated on the front few bleachers, and Josh and the other Worthington players took their turn to warm up. Josh didn’t really pay much attention to what he was doing, just played the ball when it came to him and passed whenever there was a chance. If he had to be completely honest, the crowds at the games always scared him, just a little. So he spent the next ten minutes focusing only on his breathing, not on all the people watching him and definitely not on how Tyler seemed to keep flashing him encouraging smiles whenever none of the other players were looking. God, why is his smile so, I don’t know, calming? So nice and pr-

Pete bumped into Josh from the side just then, ball in hand, knocking the breath out of Josh and causing him to stumble a few steps. Ordinarily he would have shoved Pete back, but settled on just glaring this time. He was kind of grateful to have those thoughts knocked out of him. What had he been thinking? Tyler’s smile was pr- No. No, he didn’t want to think about that right now.

The practice time was soon finished, and the Westerville team joined Worthington in the middle of the room. Coach Anderson welcomed the parents and other spectators, making a few announcements about future games and events, thanked Westerville for joining them this evening, explained a few key points about the evening, and then turned off his microphone to exchange a few words with the Westerville coach and the referee. Josh wasn’t paying attention; his blood was thrumming in his ears. The game was about to start. Despite everything that had happened and all the intruding thoughts he was having about...well, about him, he still wanted to be first player. This year was his last chance and this was a dream he had been chasing since junior high. Josh would be damned if he let Tyler and his sudden odd feelings about him put a damper on this dream. And damn that smile.

Josh was jostled into line then, Dallon elbowing him excitedly in the side just as the referee’s whistle sounded sharply throughout the room, signaling the game starting. The other players around him sprang into action, Josh quickly following. The other team had grabbed the ball already, but Pete was after it with a vengeance. Dallon successfully blocked the player, giving Pete his chance to steal the ball. Josh smirked widely as Pete was forced to quickly pass the ball off to him, Pete’s grimace only fueling him as he turned and weaved his way between the players across the court. The basket was almost within reach and Westerville had yet to make an actual good move to stop him or bar his way. Josh was just contemplating throwing the ball, even though it would be a long shot, when Tyler appeared in the corner of his vision, several feet ahead of him with a clear path to the basket. His mind was split instantly in two: pass the ball to Tyler and let him make the first basket? Or...making the first basket...that was a big deal. And Josh wanted to be first player. God, did he want it. And really, it would be like killing two birds with one stone. If he played hard, then the fact that he and Tyler were actually friends wouldn't be half as obvious than if he didn't play giving his all. It was an easy choice, really.

Josh couldn’t hide his smile as he pointedly ignored Tyler’s outstretched hand, and, still a yard away from making what would be considered a wise shot, launched the ball from his fingertips.

The victorious clanging of the metal net and the ball smacking loudly against the gym floor was almost impossible to hear above the sound of the buzzer and the crowd erupting into cheers. Brendon and Dallon appeared beside Josh, pounding him on the back and shouting their approval, the players on the bench equally excited (Spencer was standing on the bench, waving his arms in triumph.) Even Pete looked impressed. And Tyler- Josh tilted his head, confused. The expression on Tyler’s face was not what he had been expecting. He had very obviously chosen to elevate himself instead of putting the team first, they all knew it, that’s just how the game goes sometimes. He’d taken a risk, taking that shot, but it had payed off. Josh had also known that it might hurt Tyler, just a little bit.
The truce, almost friendship that they had created was still so young and fragile, and then he went and pulled a stunt like this. Sure, Josh had expected Tyler to be a little put out.

Tyler’s arm were crossed. He was smirking.

*Oh, shit.* Josh knew what that grin meant.

The competition was *on*.

The buzzer signaling the second quarter sounded as the crowd began to quiet down, and there wasn’t any more time to think before the ball was being passed among the players towards Worthington’s hoop. Josh dashed into action, his eyes spotting Tyler on the other side of the court, running in the same direction. Tyler met Josh’s eyes and his smirk widened; Josh watched him warily as he cut across the court to steal the ball.

Tyler successfully stole the ball from the Westerville team and passed straight by Josh, refusing to pass the ball to him, opting instead to pass it to Pete. Who, Josh noticed bitterly, was in a much less advantageous position than he was. Pete only went a few steps before jumping to throw the ball over an opponent's head, scoring another point for the home team.

Josh glared at the back of Tyler’s head as he made his way towards the ball. Brendon had managed to claim it before the other team could, and when he was blocked by two players, he made a quick jump to the side to pass to Josh. Tyler jumped at the ball just as Josh did, but Josh managed to grab a hold of it before Tyler and took off towards the net. He tossed a haughty look over his shoulder in Tyler’s direction.

One of the better Westerville players barred Josh’s way to the net, and he was forced to make a quick pass to Dallon, glaring as Tyler headed in that direction as well. The opposing team managed to steal the ball as Dallon was passing it to Tyler, and though Pete made a valiant effort to block their shot, Westerville scored their first points of the game, and the crowd once again broke out into cheers.

The third and fourth quarters continued much in the same way, Worthington in the lead and Westerville only barely managing to keep up. Pete scored again, and Dallon made a pretty impressive basket, too. Josh came close several times to winning the team some more points, but either Westerville always intervened or Tyler somehow managed to get in his way. The damned bastard was *still* smirking.

During the break, Josh downed two water bottles while Spencer gushed excitedly about the lead their team had taken, and Brendon claiming that Josh needed to step up his game some if he didn’t want his friends to go broke paying the bets they were going to lose. Josh ignored those certain remarks, his own desire to advance to first player enough to keep him doing his best. Tyler was obviously giving Josh space, standing near the opposite end of the bench, talking quietly with Mikey and refusing to look in Josh’s direction at all. At the beginning of the year, Josh would have been seriously pissed about the trouble Tyler was causing him during the game. But now...sure, it was pissing him off a little, but at the same time, Josh kind of...he kind of *liked* it.

Josh noticed with dismay that his parents were carefully picking their way down the crowded bleachers in his direction, and he immediately began to panic, embarrassing thoughts and memories of his parents gloating over him after past games rushing into his mind. Thankfully, the buzzer signaling the second half sounded right then, and Josh slipped into the group of boys standing around Coach Anderson, hiding himself from view of his parents. He bumped into Tyler, who gave him an infuriatingly pesky grin, but Josh didn’t return it, just crossed his arms and turned away as the coach sorted out who would be going back on the court and who would sit it out. Dallon offered to sit the second half out to give Mikey a chance to play, and after the coach verified the players, he ushered
them back onto the floor.

The first quarter was more intense than the previous half had been. Coach Anderson had reminded them during the break that the Westerville team was probably going to revamp their efforts to match the points during this next quarter, so they needed to be prepared. Josh was prepared, he was always prepared to kick a mediocre team’s ass, but after he made a quick jump to block a Westerville player’s shot at the basket and landed heavily back down on his feet, a sharp flash of pain flared up in his left ankle. He tripped and teetered to the side, bumping into Brendon, which thankfully stopped him from falling to the ground.

“Whoa, dude, are you okay?” Brendon huffed, grabbing at Josh’s arm to steady him.

Josh felt a little woozy at the pain, though it wasn’t bad enough to keep him from playing. “Yeah, I’m okay. Just tripped.”

Brendon seemed dubious. “Is it your ankle again? I thought you said it was all better. Man, if you’re not gonna be able to play-”

“I will be able to play. I’m playing right now, aren’t I?” Josh shot back. He didn’t have time to hear Brendon’s response because a Westerville player was heading in his direction with the ball, aiming for a shot. Josh gritted his teeth and ignored the ache in his leg, jumping to stop the ball at the last minute and knocking it back to the ground.

Both teams gave their all in the quarter, and the buzzer sounded before any more points could be scored for either team. Josh wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand while he eyed the players on the floor. Tyler had the ball already and scored for Worthington before the second quarter even really had a chance to get started, only a minute after the buzzer sounded. Josh caught a glimpse of the smirk Tyler threw in his direction and was filled once again with the urge to beat him, to impress him. A relatively small looking Westerville player currently had the ball and was running in Josh’s direction. They make it too easy, Josh chuckled to himself as he stole the ball away without even trying, and, refusing to acknowledge the growing throb in his ankle, took off for the opponent’s hoop.

As he had expected, Tyler appeared in his side vision. A player from the other team was blocking Josh’s way, and Tyler had a clear opening several yards to Josh’s right. Ordinarily, when Josh wasn’t trying to prove himself, he would have passed the ball to Tyler, no doubt about it. But this wasn’t one of those times, and he was trying to prove himself. So, instead of passing the ball, he quickly dodged the player, stepping in Tyler’s direction. At the same moment, obviously thinking Josh was planning to pass the ball, Tyler took a stride towards Josh. They collided in a tangle of arms and legs, the ball falling from Josh’s grasp and bouncing a few feet away.

The referee’s whistle cut sharply through the din, and Josh groaned out loud as several faces appeared above him from where he was lying on his back on the cold floor. Tyler had fallen, too, but at least he had been lucky enough to not fall flat on the ground; he was sitting on the floor next to Josh, rubbing at a growing bruise on his arm, but he was smiling, almost laughing. Josh sat up and rubbed at his face, trying to hide from all the people watching from the stands. Coach Anderson hurried to the scene, reprimanding the Westerville players for pressing in so close and telling them to give the boys some space. He made a face at the other Worthington players crowding around, too, but didn’t enforce that they leave.

“What happened here, Joseph, Dun? We not on the same page tonight or what?”

“Sorry, Coach, just some mixed signals, I guess,” Tyler said, climbing to his feet. Josh could see Brendon glaring at the back of Tyler’s head.
“Alright, let’s get it together, we gotta rake in some more points and fast if you guys expect to win tonight,” Coach Anderson said with his hands on his hips. “C’mon, Dun, get up, let’s finish this quarter.”

The room began to feel normal again as the crowd eased back into their chattering and Coach Anderson crossed the room to refer quickly with the referee. Brendon shoved past Tyler, elbowing him hard in the side as he made his way over to Josh, who, embarrassingly, was still sitting on the floor.

“That was so not cool, dude,” Brendon snapped in passing at Tyler, leaning down to pat Josh on the shoulder. “Hey, J, c’mon, you heard the coach.”

Josh took a steadying breath, not sure if his face was more pale with pain or red from blushing. Brendon patted his shoulder again and Josh flinched. Oh, shit. This is bad.

“What? What’s broken?” Brendon looked panicked. ”Oh my God, Coach! Coach Anderson! Josh is hurt! His leg is hurt!”

If Josh wasn’t mortified before, he was now. “God, Brendon, don’t tell the whole world—”

“What’s wrong, Dun?” Coach Anderson was squatting next to Josh, reaching out to inspect his leg.

“Don’t touch it, it hurts!” Josh snapped out before he even realized he was speaking.

“This is all Tyler’s fault, did you see him, Coach?” Brendon was squatting on Josh’s other side, shooting daggers at Tyler. Tyler was hovering a few feet away from Josh, fidgeting nervously. The same pain Josh felt was written plainly all over Tyler’s face, and in that moment, Josh’s chest hurt more than his ankle.

“And just ran right into him, he wasn’t even fucking looking—”

Pete’s voice chimed in from somewhere behind Josh. “Shut the hell up, Urie, you can’t blame him like that! It wasn’t Tyler, it was all Josh, did you see him hogging the fucking ball—”

“Hey, language, guys, okay?” Coach Anderson waved an angry hand at Brendon and Pete. “It doesn’t matter who’s fault it was! Urie, Wentz, go take a walk or you can both sit on the bench for the next quarter.”

Brendon glared once more at Tyler and the coach, too, before patting Josh on the back again- lighter this time- and sulking off towards the bench. Pete didn’t say anything else, just turned and stomped away. Josh wondered vaguely why Pete cared so much about defending Tyler, but his mind was quickly focused back on the pain in his ankle as he shifted on the ground.

The referee and Westerville coach approached Coach Anderson, asking if they needed to get a stretcher. Josh’s “No!” was spoken louder and harsher than he had intended for it to be, but Coach Anderson, thankfully, seemed to understand. “I think we’ve got it under control. Give us five minutes and we’ll continue.”
The two men left and Coach Anderson wrapped an arm around Josh’s shoulders. “Let’s get you off the floor, huh, Dun? You say you think it’s broken?”

Spencer, full of pent up energy, popped up on Josh’s right to interrupt. “Josh, are you okay? Here, I’ll help.” He threw an arm around Josh’s shoulders and helped Coach Anderson haul him up off the ground.

The sharpest pang of pain yet hit Josh as he hopped in place on one foot, trying to keep his balance. Josh’s face heated up immediately from all the eyes in the crowd directed at him, but he did his best to ignore them and focus on getting off the middle of the damn floor.

Tyler was still standing awkwardly to the side, and Coach Anderson signaled for him to come help. “Joseph, I want you to help Smith get Dun to the changing rooms, call for the nurse when you’re done. She should be around here somewhere, alright? If it is broken, get his parents, he should go see a doctor.”

Tyler only nodded as he replaced Coach’s position beside Josh. His grip on Josh’s waist was gentle.

*I think I hit my head again. I hope I did. If I didn’t, that’s a really weird thing to think...God, why is it literally always me....*

Josh’s ankle hurt with every step- or, hop- that he took, and he couldn’t help himself from letting out hurt little noises every time his leg was jostled. Spencer kept up an endless rambling about nothing in particular as they walked, something about the game, Josh thought, but he couldn’t really remember. He wasn’t listening. He was only hyper aware of Tyler’s grip on his waist, the way he minutely but surely tightened his fingers every time Josh inadvertently let out another whimper. The ruckus of the gym faded behind them as they finally reached the relative safety of the changing rooms.

Brendon was waiting there for them. How he had managed to sneak away, Josh didn’t know; all he knew was that the way Brendon was glaring at Tyler was resentful enough to kill. Josh suddenly felt the overwhelming urge to step- if he could walk, goddammit- in front of Tyler to shield him from the obvious wrath Brendon was raging with.

“Coach said to call the nurse,” Spencer announced as he helped Josh collapse onto a bench, seemingly unaware of the level of tension in the room, though he, too, seemed cold in regards to Tyler. Tyler had retreated to the corner by the door as soon as they had entered the room, and Josh was warily watching Brendon watch Tyler. He didn’t put it past Brendon to do something irrational.

No one said anything for a moment, then Spencer broke the silence. “Okay, well...I guess I’ll go get her, then. Stay here, Josh-”

Josh glared up at him. “I’m not going anywhere,” he panted. Apparently hopping on one foot was a lot more strenuous than walking with two.

“-I’ll be back with the nurse in no time, okay? It’s not broken, is it? I don’t see any blood. If it is broken, I’ll get your parents and-”

“Just go get the nurse, Spence,” Brendon interrupted.

“I’ll get her,” Tyler spoke for the first time since they had gathered in the changing room.

“Yeah, no, I don’t think so, you’ve done enough,” Brendon snapped, stepping in front of Josh with his arms crossed. “We don’t need you to help anymore. Why don’t you just leave it, okay? This is all your fault.”
“My fault?” Tyler’s voice was thin and wavered a bit, but his face was steady. “Excuse me, how is this my fault?”

Spencer chimed in, taking a step forward. “Brendon’s right, you’ve been butting heads with Josh since the beginning of this year. That was totally a foul play out there.”

“That’s not fair, the ref didn’t call that. You can’t blame me for this,” Tyler spluttered, indignantly. “It was an accident, it was no one’s fault–”

Brendon snorted, moving closer to the corner where Tyler still stood. “Of course you’d say that! You know the school’s got some bets going on, you don’t fit in here, no one likes you, so of course you’re gonna do everything you can to be in the spotlight, even if that means physically harming our best player–”

“Hey, guys, it’s not his fault….” Josh couldn’t stand how small Tyler looked standing alone in that corner for a second longer. His stomach was twisting, and it wasn’t from the pain in his ankle. He was shocked at how quiet his own voice sounded.

No one seemed to hear Josh, though, as Spencer added to Brendon’s speculations, and voices began to rise. Tyler squared his shoulders as Brendon advanced another step, and Josh was getting seriously worried when suddenly the door to the changing room swung open, and Coach Anderson stepped in, followed closely by the school nurse.

“Hey, what’s going on in here, boys? Who was supposed to be getting Ms. Wilson?”

Brendon and Spencer quickly retreated, muttering excuses, while Tyler silently sulked further into the corner.

Coach Anderson waved a hand dismissively, his brow furrowed. “No matter, I guess, she’s here now. You wanna take a look at it, Ms. W? It’s the right leg, I think, eh, Josh?”

“Left,” Josh mumbled. He felt sick.

Ms. Wilson knelt by the bench to gently feel Josh’s ankle. Her touch was soft, but he still hissed the second she touched the swollen flesh. He wished there weren’t so many people in the room with him. He really didn’t feel like having an audience right now. Weren’t they supposed to be playing a game, anyways?

A few seconds later, Coach Anderson seemed to get a similar idea. He cleared his throat loudly and ushered Brendon and Spencer back towards the gym, instructing them to figure out who the five players for the next quarter would be. Josh watched them longingly as they left; he had just wanted to play tonight, damn it all, and then his dumb leg had intervened.

“It’s not broken,” Ms. Wilson declared, interrupting Josh from his pitying thoughts. “I believe it’s fractured, but I’m not sure, it’s hard to tell. Could just be a bad sprain.”

Fractured, oh shit, oh shit. Oh shit, oh sh-

“Coach?”

Josh hadn’t realized Tyler was still in the room, but his racing panic slowed immediately as Tyler stepped forward from the corner. Huh.

“My dad’s here, he’s a doctor. An orthopedist, actually.” Tyler fidgeted in place, not meeting Josh’s eyes. “I can go get him, if you think that would help?”
“It would, actually,” Ms. Wilson suggested.

Coach Anderson nodded in agreement and slapped Tyler on the back, hard enough to jolt him forward a step. “Alright then, very good. Run and get him, then join us back on the floor, Joseph, we’ll need you if Dun’s not gonna play.”

“I’m sorry,” Josh offered, but Coach Anderson either didn’t hear him or just ignored him as he left the room, followed by Tyler. Ms. Wilson instructed Josh to rest his leg up on the bench, keeping it elevated, and gave him an ice pack to put on it until a doctor told him what to do next. She was exiting the changing rooms just as Tyler was coming back in, his dad close behind him.

“Hi, there, I’m guessing you’re Josh?” the man said kindly as he knelt beside the bench. He talked just like Tyler did, and Josh didn’t feel as on edge as he had before. He nodded, still a bit self consciously. Tyler retreated to his corner, his eyes cast down.

“Ms. Wilson said it might be fractured? Does that mean I have to wear a cast and everything?” Josh voiced some of his fears as Mr. Joseph carefully pulled off Josh’s shoe and prodded at his ankle. His skin was a bright purple color now. Josh sincerely hoped it looked worse than it really was. Because it looked bad.

“Does this hurt?” Mr. Joseph asked as he pressed on a part of his leg.

Oh my God, what the fuck, I’m dying, I am gonna die-

“N-not a lot...just a l-little….”

“Dad, you’re hurting him,” Tyler stepped out of the corner suddenly to lean over his dad’s shoulder, peering at Josh’s ankle as Mr. Joseph pressed down on the other side of his leg.

“How about here?”

Yes, that fucking hurts, what the hell!? Josh had never felt closer to fainting in his entire life as pain screamed up his leg. His jaw was clenched tight to keep from crying out, and he was struggling just to get out the words that yes, that hurt, please stop.

“Dad,” Tyler actually reached out and pulled on his dad’s sleeve gently. “That’s obviously hurting him, Dad, don’t do the whole doctor thing now, just figure out if it’s fractured or not.”

Mr. Joseph chuckled at Tyler’s rambling, but pulled his hand away nonetheless. Thank God. Josh sighed audibly as the pain lessened. Not a lot, but enough so that he wouldn’t start crying in front of anybody.

“I can’t tell for certain without doing some x-rays,” Mr. Joseph said, standing up, “but there is a significant chance of it being fractured. Weren’t you the one Tyler helped just last week, hurt your ankle playing basketball then, too, right?”

Josh nodded, embarrassed. “Yeah, that...was me...it was just a sprain, and I felt fine after a couple of days, I didn’t think this would happen….”

“Even with just a sprain, the bone is weakened and is easier to hurt again more seriously. I highly suspect a fracture. How about you come to my office tomorrow, first thing in the morning, and we’ll do some x-rays to make sure, okay? We’ll probably want to put a cast on it for a while-”

“A cast?” Josh exclaimed, shifting in his seat only to cringe as yet another flash of pain hit his ankle. “Does that mean I have to have a surgery? And crutches? What about the team? I can’t be on
crutches for too long, I’ll get rusty, I have to practice—"

When Mr. Joseph interrupted Josh, his voice was firm. “You’ve done enough practicing for this past week, I think. Several weeks off this ankle will do you a lot of good.”

“But—"

“You might not need a surgery. Most fractures just require a cast and a lot of rest. Now if you cooperate, you might be able to continue playing on the team in only a month or so. But only if you’re willing to work with me on this, alright?”

Josh huffed. He did not like the sound of this. But the way Tyler was staring so intently at him melted some of his resolve, and he eventually let out a sigh. “Alright...if I have to....”

Mr. Joseph seemed satisfied. He nodded. “Good. I’ll get your parents. You should go home now and rest your ankle, keep it elevated, ice it every hour or so. And don’t put any pressure on it, you hear me? Not until I know more of what’s going on. I’ll see you tomorrow, then, bright and early. I’ll explain everything to your parents for you.”

Mr. Joseph left the room, and Josh slumped forward in his seat, sighing as he tried to reposition his ankle with as little pain as possible. Anything to keep from having to meet Tyler’s eyes.

“You’ll be okay, Josh,” Tyler said quietly after a minute of awkward silence. “Don’t worry, my dad knows what he’s doing.”

Josh shrugged his shoulder. “Yeah...."

Another minute of silence. Muffled cheering could be heard from the gym.

“You should get back out there,” Josh said, motioning towards the door. “The team really needs you.”

Tyler shook his head, shuffling his feet. “Nah, not without you, that’s not fair.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Tyler. Don’t listen to Brendon and Spence, they’re just too protective, that’s all. I shouldn’t have tried to play tonight anyways, not after hurting my ankle last week. I totally deserved this.”

Tyler shook his head again. “Don’t say that, Josh. You didn’t deserve it, it just happened, unfortunately.”

Josh didn’t know what to say, so he didn’t say anything, just looked at his hands resting in his lap. Why was his chest so light?

A hand fell onto Josh’s shoulder, and he startled for a second, looking up into Tyler’s face. His brow was furrowed, his eyes filled with concern. Whoa...they’re really brown....

“I am sorry, Josh. No matter who’s fault it was.” Josh couldn’t recall ever hearing Tyler sound more serious. They were staring at each other- I wonder if he ever notices my eye color like I notice his- and Josh was starting to get really fidgety with all the pressure of maintaining eye contact when Tyler’s lips perked into a small smile then, easing the tension as he added, “You gave me some pretty tough competition tonight, y’know. Until you fell over again.”

“Stop,” Josh whined, smacking Tyler’s hand off his shoulder. Josh was smiling.
The door opened, ending the conversation, and Josh’s dad came in, his face worried. “Josh….,” he sighed, his tone condescending. When he noticed Tyler in the room, he saved whatever reprimanding he had been planning to do for later, and instead came over to help Josh to his feet- or foot- and collected his other shoe and ice pack.

“Our mom’s going to stay here with your sisters to watch Jordan finish the game,” he said as Tyler hurried to hold the door open for them.

“Jordan’s playing?” Josh asked, disbelieving.

“Sure is.”

Josh almost felt like laughing. His dad was urging him along at a pretty quick pace, considering his being on only one foot, but Josh slowed down to turn and say goodbye to Tyler, hoping none of the Worthington players were watching.

Tyler was already gone.

Chapter End Notes

POOR JOSH. i, too, have had the misfortune of fracturing my ankle once, and i'm still feeling it years later. so of course i would channel this into my fic :P

your input, from kudos to comments to tumblr messages, keeps this story progressing! please share your thoughts, friends! update coming soon :)
Worthington won the game by a considerable lead, Tyler scoring another two times before the night was over. The crowd cheered, and Coach Anderson seemed excited enough; after the game, Mikey, Gerard, and Frank all crowed about how great Tyler’s playing was, but none of that really made Tyler feel any better about the rest of the team either glaring at him or ignoring him completely. He left his friends as soon as he could to go find his family in the bleachers. He just wanted to go home and sleep.

But of course, that being the one thing Tyler actually wanted to do, he found himself tossing and turning all night, unable to stay asleep for more than twenty minutes or so at a time. Finally he could sense the sun streaming into his room, dancing across his closed eyelids as a muffled alarm came from Zack’s corner of the room. Tyler ignored the sounds of his brother getting up and ready for the day and just rolled over to face the wall and cover his head with a blanket. It was a Saturday, after all. Even if he couldn’t get any real sleep, he was not getting out of bed yet.

Seven o’clock ticked by slower than ever, eight o’clock, and then eight thirty. Maybe if he stopped checking the time on his phone every five minutes, he’d actually be able to sleep. Tyler finally gave it up and kicked his covers off with a lot more energy than he was really feeling, not bothering to change out of his pajamas as he trudged downstairs.

The kitchen was alive and bustling already, his three siblings sitting around the table in actual daytime clothes and his mom putting more bread in the toaster. He was mildly surprised to bump into his dad as he entered the room.

“Well, if it isn’t our champion player!” his dad exclaimed as he edged around Tyler, standing in the doorway, to grab his briefcase. “I didn’t think we’d see you for another couple of hours yet.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be at work?” Tyler’s mind was still groggy. He rubbed some sleep out of his eye.

“Weekend hours,” his dad reminded him, stuffing a loose sheet of paper into his jacket pocket.

“Tyler, good morning, honey! Come get some breakfast,” his mom called from the table, setting a place for him. “You must be hungry after that great game last night!”

Tyler suddenly remembered; maybe that’s the reason he’d been unable to rest all night long. “Hey, Dad,” he tried to keep his voice lowered as he followed his dad through the living room towards the front door. He wasn’t sure why, but he didn’t really want all his siblings to listen in. “Dad, are you gonna take care of Josh today?”
His father nodded distractedly, digging through his pocket for the car keys. "Mhm, he’s got the first appointment, at nine. Here, hold this, would you?" he handed his briefcase to Tyler to dig more thoroughly through his pockets.

Tyler chewed on his bottom lip as he contemplated what to say. What to do. He wasn’t so sure if this was such a good idea. "Um...can I go with you? I’ll just sit in the corner out of the way, I won’t be any trouble."

His dad finally found the keys and took his briefcase back from Tyler. "You want to come with me? To the office? I don’t know, Ty, don’t you want to just relax today? You don’t want to spend your Saturday cooped up in a doctor’s office."

"Maybe I should just stay home. Josh probably doesn’t care anyways, and I... "I just thought it might help. If I was there, you know. Josh seemed kind of nervous last night."

His dad opened the front door and strode down the driveway towards his car. Tyler padded along behind him, stepping on the bottoms of his pajama pants with every step. (They were hand-me-down pajamas from Jay. If wearing your younger sibling’s clothes could count as hand-me-downs.)

"How about it, Dad?" Tyler pressed. "I was there the first time he hurt his ankle and last night. I helped those times, I could help now, too, right?"

Unlocking the car door, his dad tossed his briefcase inside and looked back up at Tyler. He seemed to be thinking. "You know, actually...you may be right. Your friend did seem rather anxious. A familiar face might do a lot of good."

Tyler had to bite back his initial response to keep from sounding too happy. "Great! I’ll just go get my shoes, I’ll be right back!" He raced back to the house, his dad yelling after him to hurry up, for Christ’s sake, he had to be at the office in twenty minutes.

Tyler raced to his room and hurtled himself back down the stairs as his dad honked the horn outside. He grabbed a piece of toast from the counter as he raced through the kitchen, thanking his mom and calling over his shoulder that he was going to the office with Dad and he’ll be back soon.

His mom’s protests followed him down the hall, but he didn’t take the time to explain further as he pushed through the front door and down the driveway, back to his dad waiting in the car, the engine idling.

His dad gave him a funny look as Tyler slid into the passenger seat. "Pajamas?"

"You were the one in such a big hurry, c’mon, you’ll be late!"

His dad shook his head in amused confusion as he shifted gears and backed out of the driveway. It was okay, though. There was an excited- no, hopeful- feeling in Tyler’s chest and a smile on his face that nothing could deter.

Josh’s dad had to work that Saturday, so his mom was the one to help him into the car and drive him to the doctor’s office, following the directions Mr. Joseph had given Josh’s dad the night before. Josh slumped down in the front seat, staring glumly out the window at the obnoxiously bright and sunny morning. His ankle hurt. Fuck it, his whole leg hurt. He was tired of hopping everywhere. He was tired of hopping around with a hurting ankle while not knowing fully what was wrong with it in the first place. Confidentially, it was kind of scary, not knowing. But x-rays scared Josh, too, so it was a lose-lose situation either way.
He wasn’t mad though. Or grumpy, or pissed, or even annoyed. A bit anxious, sure, a bit disappointed about missing the game last night, especially since Worthington had won (Jordan wouldn’t shut up about it.) But he wasn’t mad; he was too tired to be mad.

And so Josh sat, quietly resigned to his doomed fate, whatever that may be. If Tyler’s dad had to amputate his leg, well then he could go right ahead and do it. Josh wouldn’t stop him.

Oh. Tyler. Since the incident the previous night, Josh had been doing his best to think only about how sore his ankle was (and how sickly awesome the bruise was) and not about Tyler. Not about how fucking gentle his arm had been around his waist when he had helped him to the changing rooms—fuck, okay. Whenever those kind of thoughts had floated to his mind as he had lain in bed last night, he had tossed about under the covers (as much as he could, what with a supposedly fractured ankle anyways), trying to remember the rush of pride he had felt when he had scored the first basket earlier that night, the mixed excitement and anxiety the crowd had made him feel, the way Brendon had angrily confronted Tyler—oh, shit, Tyler again. He kept coming up in Josh’s thoughts. He had tried all night to think about anything except that.

Josh’s mom eventually found the building they were supposed to have arrived at ten minutes ago, and Josh sighed quietly to himself as she hurried around the car to help him hop inside. Might as well throw away the last few shreds of dignity he had left. Why not?

Mr. Joseph’s office was on the third floor, and Josh had never been more relieved to see an elevator at the end of the hall than he was now. Thankfully, besides one other woman sitting in the corner, quietly reading a magazine, the office was empty when Josh hopped in. His mom abandoned him in the entry to sign in with the secretary, and Josh hopped himself over to the nearest seat, plopping down heavily and cringing as his ankle knocked the chair’s leg. His ankle was so swollen, he had spent several minute’s worth of trouble trying to put on a shoe that morning. Josh himself didn’t really see a point in wearing a shoe on his hurt foot if he wouldn’t be walking on it, but his mom had insisted.

Josh had just picked up an interesting looking comic from a nearby table when his mom hurried over from the secretary’s desk, telling him that Mr. Joseph was set to see him right away. Josh forlornly tossed his comic aside and let his mom assist him down a short hallway and through an open door into a small room overlooking the parking lot.

Josh quickly scanned the room. It looked like any other doctor’s office he had been to. “Is this where they do the x-rays?” he asked his mom, eyeing a strange looking contraption in the corner of the room.

“Hm,” his mom seemed distracted, trying to steady a clipboard against the wall as she continued to fill out some information for the secretary.

“Where’s Mr. Joseph?” Josh hopped around in a semicircle on one foot and peered across the hall towards another room. “Maybe they do the x-rays in there—”

“Josh, I’m trying to fill this out, hush.”

Josh gave the back of his mom’s a head a disdainful glance before hopping over to the exam table nearby and hauling himself onto it. It was surprisingly difficult with only one foot, but he managed with adding only minimal pain to his already aching ankle.

There was a rap on the door and Mr. Joseph was bustling in, his own clipboard in hand. He introduced himself to Josh’s mom and the two of them spent at least ten minutes discussing Worthington’s win last night. At least it felt like ten minutes to Josh, his anxiety building with every
passing minute.

Finally Mr. Joseph turned to Josh and started asking him some routine questions, scribbling something down on his clipboard occasionally. He instructed Josh to remove his shoe from his hurt leg, and Josh gave his mom an *I told you so* look as he gently pulled his shoe off, dropping it to the floor.

The next five minutes felt like an eternity to Josh as Mr. Joseph proceeded to poke and prod and push at Josh’s ankle. Tears quickly sprang to Josh’s eyes, but he refused to acknowledge how much it was actually hurting. Every time after Mr. Joseph pressed on a different part of Josh’s ankle, he’d stop and ask if it hurt. Josh only nodded mutely each time, praying that this part of the procedure would end soon.

When Mr. Joseph finally stepped away to discuss his thoughts with Josh’s mom, Josh sighed contentedly in relief. *Okay, that wasn’t so bad. X-rays can’t be worse than th-*

“Josh, your mom and I are going to fill out a few more papers,” Mr. Joseph announced, reaching out a hand to help Josh off the exam table. “You can use that crutch there in the corner and wait in the room across the hall, we’ll do the x-rays there.”

Josh leaned gratefully on the crutch as soon as the doctor and his mom had left the room. Even with just the one crutch, it made crossing the hall a hell of a lot easier.

An even larger examination table was in this room, standing tall and sinister in the middle of the room. It was all sleek and shiny metal and intimidating. Josh hovered awkwardly in the doorway for a minute before hobbling over to the table and using the step stool beside it to climb on top. He leaned the crutch against the table and pulled out his phone, checking for any new messages from his friends for the first time since the game last night to distract himself from his nerves.

It wasn’t the best idea. His inbox was full. Twenty-two messages from Brendon, six from Spencer, even one from Pete. Mostly all about the game. Mostly all about his ankle. A few about Tyler. Josh scrolled through them absentmindedly, not paying much attention to any of them in particular, when someone cleared their throat in the small room and Josh almost dropped his phone.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.” It was Tyler. *What is he doing here?*

“What are you doing here?” Sometimes Josh’s mouth had no filter.

Tyler seemed unfazed, crossing the room to hop up onto the examination table next to Josh. “I came to give you moral support.”

Josh was unsure how to feel about this development. “Really? Thanks, man- are you wearing pajamas?”

Tyler’s face turned bright pink. “Oh, I was kinda rushed this morni-”

“Are you wearing *spiderman* pajamas?”

“Hey, they were my little brother’s, okay? Give me a break.”

Despite his nerves, or maybe because of them, Josh started to giggle. Tyler tried to look mad, but Josh could see the smile breaking through on his face.

"So like...how's your ankle? Is that sick bruise still there?"
Josh tentatively lifted his leg an inch for Tyler to see. It hurt to move it so Josh doubted that Tyler could really see just how awesome the bruise was. "It's all blue and black now," he announced.

"Dude," Tyler murmured reverently, and Josh grinned proudly.

After the initial awe wore off, the silence started to linger a bit too long for comfort, and Josh fingered his phone idly, wishing he knew what to say. Wishing he knew how to act more *casual* for fuck's sake. *Why do I feel so nervous? It's just Tyler; no big deal*....

“Who you talking to?” Tyler motioned at Josh’s phone laying beside him on the table.

Josh glanced down quickly at his phone as yet another irate message from Brendon loaded in his inbox. He powered it off, stowing it in his pocket. He shook his head as he looked back over to Tyler. “It’s not important.”

Tyler’s smile lit up the whole room, and Josh’s chest started to feel funny again. Maybe he should get an x-ray of his chest, too.

“Well, listen, Josh,” Tyler’s voice was light, and he reached out to pat Josh’s knee. Josh stiffened immediately, but Tyler didn’t seem to notice. “My dad’ll be real quick. The x-rays don’t take long, you’ll be okay. You’ll probably only need a cast anyways, no surgery or anything. Don’t freak out too much, okay? Deep breaths.”

Josh fought the blush trying to creep into his cheeks. “Yeah...yeah, okay.”

“I mean, hey, at least you get to miss a few days of school, right?”

Josh could only nod as Tyler smiled at him. His eyes were practically sparkling; their brown shade felt so familiar.

Josh suddenly didn’t feel so anxious anymore.

Several x-rays, two crutches, and one cast later, Josh decided that fracturing your fibula was, despite the week of school he had had strict orders from Mr. Joseph to miss, not worth it.

It was a close call, he admitted. On the one hand, he got out of attending a lot of boring lectures, avoided every kid in school staring and whispering about him being on crutches, postponed the drama among the other basketball players about the incident, and got to sleep in. On *weekdays*. For a *full week*. On the downside, he was stuck mostly in bed every day, his mom insisted that he do his homework, and he would miss several basketball practices.

Not that being at school would fix missing basketball practice. Josh had resigned himself to missing at least a month’s worth of practice ever since Mr. Joseph had shown him that x-ray. Josh had felt kind of faint at the sight of it. The bone had fucking *snapped*. (Alright, so he was being a baby, but he'd never broken- fractured- a bone before. He had a *right* to be a little freaked out when someone was waving pictures of the damn bone under his nose.)

It was Tuesday afternoon, and basketball practice had just ended- Josh knew because Brendon had just snapped him a sneaky picture of Ryan, shirtless, in the changing rooms, with a full line of heart-eyed emojis pasted over it. Josh was slumped in bed, his Spanish text book open and forgotten on his lap as he played around on his phone, and he snorted out loud at the snap. He screenshotted it- just in case he ever needed ammunition- and sent a picture of his cast in reply, tapping in a frowning emoji, just for emphasis.
Brendon and Spencer had stopped by Monday afternoon to say hi and to draw on his cast (Spencer had drawn a penis, but Josh had to scribble over it so his mom wouldn't freak out.) Josh had been glad to see them, even though they had brought him the homework for that day. Neither Brendon nor Spencer were in Josh's English or literature classes, so no homework there, though Josh dreaded the huge amount of reading and grammar he'd have waiting for him when he was finally allowed to go back to school.

The two of them had promised to stop by again on Wednesday with more homework, so Josh had that Tuesday afternoon to himself. Brendon snapped him a video of Ryan looking confusedly at the camera, a muffled “What are you doing, Brendon?” as Spencer came into view and threw a towel at the camera, promptly ending the snap.

Josh shook his head, smiling as he turned off his phone and went back to his Spanish homework.

Had to get it done sooner or later.

Thirty minutes of Spanish phonics and Josh was slouched so low against the headboard, he was practically lying down, when there was a knock on the door. He sat up quickly, trying to look alert; the last time his mom had come in and had found him messing around instead of studying, it hadn’t turned out too well.

The door opened, and his mom leaned in. “Josh, sweetie? Your friend is here, he brought you some more homework.”

“Brendon?” Josh grabbed at his phone to double check his messages. He was certain Brendon had said Wednesday.

“Hi.”

Josh’s hand froze as he looked up at Tyler standing in his doorway, clutching several books to his chest. Josh’s mom smiled at him and thanked him for stopping by before disappearing back down the hall. Tyler stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

“I brought your English homework. And Brit lit. We have a lot of reading about the Cavalier poets. It’s pretty boring.” Tyler walked over to the side of the bed; he was just wearing a hoodie over his basketball jersey and shorts, and Josh tried not to stare at the sweat still shining on his neck.

“Ugh, I hate Brit lit. I mean...thanks for bringing it, though,” Josh stammered out, blushing.

Tyler set the books on the edge of Josh’s nightstand, pushing a few things out of the way to do so, and Josh silently cursed at himself for the disorderly state his room was in. His stuff was everywhere.

If Tyler noticed how messy Josh’s room was, he didn’t say anything, just bounced down on the side of the bed, pulling his legs up to sit cross legged. Josh was a bit taken aback by how at ease Tyler seemed, but not in a bad way. He was glad they were getting more comfortable around each other.

That thought brought on another, less pleasant one. “Hey, Tyler, I hope the guys at school aren’t like. Blaming you or anything...are they?”

Tyler’s face remained carefully blank, though his eyebrows furrowed slightly. “Well...they’re just acting like they normally do, for the most part. Pete’s actually kind of leaving me alone, which is new. Honestly, Brendon’s being the biggest asshole- oh, sorry, no offense, I didn’t mean to uh....”

Josh shook his head. “Nah, it’s okay. I know.”

Tyler nodded, shifting on the bed. He glanced at Josh’s cast. “So how you liking the cast? Hey, I
didn’t know you could draw on plastic casts—"

“You can’t, not really.” Josh shrugged, grabbing a sharpie off his nightstand. “It wipes off really easy until it dries. You wanna?” He held out the sharpie.

Tyler’s face lit up like a little kid’s as he snatched the sharpie away from Josh before he had even finished asking. He slipped lower down the bed to lean over Josh’s leg, uncapping the pen.

“Be gentle though, don’t press too hard,” Josh warned, tensing himself for the pain to hit.

Tyler scribbled on the cast as gently as when he had helped Josh limp to the changing rooms the night of the game, and Josh immediately relaxed. Well, as relaxed as you could be when your crush was—

Whoa. Whoa, whoa, whoa. What the fuck did I just...did I just say...I didn’t...he’s not...that’s not how it is, that’s not right. Why the fuck did I think that? What the hell is wrong with me, I must not be getting enough sleep or something. He is not my—

“Josh? You okay? Oh my God, am I hurting you? I’m sorry, I was trying to draw lightly—”

Josh jumped, startled out of his panicking. “What? Oh, no, sorry, you’re fine. I was just...just thinking....”

Tyler stared at him with a concerned look on his face for a second longer before shrugging and turning back to his drawing on Josh’s cast. “What were you thinking about?” he asked absentmindedly, the marker sliding against the plastic sounding a lot louder in the pronounced silence.

Even though Tyler wasn’t looking at him, Josh’s face started to turn red. “Um, y-you know, just. Just school and shit, nothing important.”

“Don’t worry about your homework or anything, I’ll bring your English and literature assignments again for you, maybe on Thursday? Ms. Moore’s assigning another book report that afternoon, so the sooner you get the details on that the better.”

Josh nodded faintly, his eyes wandering to Tyler’s profile as he continued to studiously scribble on Josh’s cast. *His eyelashes are seriously long, what the hell. Wow.*

Tyler sat back triumphantly, capping the marker. “There! I’m not really an artist, but...whatever.”

Josh leaned forward to study his cast as Tyler pointed to an awkward stick person next to Spencer’s scribbled out penis. “That’s you, you’re playing basketball. See, there’s the ball, and that’s supposed to be the hoop. And that’s me there.”

Josh couldn’t help it; he burst out laughing.

Tyler looked offended. “Hey…it’s not that bad, okay? It’s better than *that.* What even is that?” He pointed to the scribbled out penis, and Josh tried to stifle his giggling.

“I’ll admit, your drawing is better than the others. By a tiny bit.”

Tyler didn’t look convinced. He tossed the marker at Josh’s head, though Josh had a feeling he missed on purpose. He fumbled to catch the marker, smiling brightly at Tyler.

Tyler climbed off the bed then, and Josh felt his spirit immediately sink, but he didn’t make to leave
the room, just wandered over to the window and peered out. The sun streaming in through the glass spilled brightly over his face, making his skin practically shine- not that Josh noticed.

“I like your tattoo,” Tyler said suddenly, leaning against the wall.

“What?”

Tyler smirked and repeated himself more slowly. “I said I like your tattoo. When did you get it?”

Josh rubbed self consciously at his arm, all too aware of Tyler studying his skin. “Oh, uh...a kid who used to come to our school, Andy, you might have heard about him? Yeah, well, he had an older brother who had just started working at a tattoo parlor, and he offered to give me a free tattoo if I’d let him practice on me and...it’s kind of a bizarre story, I know. It was my sixteenth birthday, and I was a bit high, so...don’t judge me too hard or anything.”

Josh glanced anxiously at Tyler, but he only looked amused. On the verge of laughter, actually.

“Your sixteenth birthday? You let him practice drawing a tattoo on y-”

“I said I was high!”

Tyler did start laughing then, and Josh would’ve been a bit put out, but he was too busy relishing the light sound of Tyler’s adorable giggling to care.

Okay, weird thoughts again, Josh. Stop it. That’s just...weird...stop looking at him so much, dammit.

As if Josh had been thinking too loudly, Tyler quieted down and tilted his head as he continued to look at Josh. “Well, I...better go now, I didn’t tell my mom that I was coming here. She might freak out if I’m too late, you know, typical mom stuff.”

Josh noticed Tyler was wringing his hands, and his smile faltered a little, but he nodded. “Yeah, sure, I get it. Moms. Mine’s the same way.”

Tyler nodded, too, edging awkwardly towards the door. “Right. Well...good luck with your leg. I mean...I hope it gets better soon. Just you know...stay off it and everything.”

Josh nodded again, and Tyler darted for the door, waving a quick goodbye before disappearing down the hall. Josh opened his mouth to say goodbye, but Tyler was already gone.

A few moments later, it occurred to Josh that he should probably try to finish some English homework, but he wouldn’t be able to concentrate anyways, he knew. He looked back down at the new drawing on his cast instead, and for some reason, couldn’t stop thinking about it for the rest of the day.

Wednesday morning crept by painfully slow. Josh was starting to go stir crazy; his ankle beneath the cast was starting to itch badly, the sensation seeming to grow the longer he was cooped up all alone in his room with orders not to move around. Even with the crutches, he was only supposed to use them to go to the bathroom and stuff. Josh started to think that this hell would never end, especially as he bitterly eyed his growing pile of schoolbooks and homework on his bedside table. He’d rather do anything than start in on all that homework. So he spent the morning laying spread eagle across the bed, ignoring all his itchy skin and thoughts relating to school and his stupid, broken leg. There were more pressing issues on his mind that demanded his attention.
Ever since Tyler’s visit Tuesday afternoon, he was all Josh could think about. Well, if Josh was being honest...Tyler was all he had been thinking about for a while now, in some way or another. Since that Saturday morning at the doctor’s office, since the basketball game when he had fractured his leg, since the day they had walked halfway home from school together, since that day in the neighborhood basketball court when Josh had made a fool of himself and twisted his damned ankle in the first place and Tyler had helped him home. Since maybe even that late summer day before school had started and Josh had seen the then nameless Tyler playing in his basketball court. The more Josh thought about how he’d thought about Tyler, the more he thought he had thought about him.

God, that makes no sense, I need to go outside. I’m getting claustrophobic, these walls are too close. When can I go back to school? Shit, I never thought I’d want to go back. I wonder what Tyler’s doing right now- stop it, Josh. That’s weird.

Even though Josh was struggling with himself internally over this issue- he had a sinking feeling in his chest. He knew. Even if his stupid head wouldn’t admit it to himself yet. He knew.

Josh had originally hoped that when Brendon stopped by with his homework that afternoon, it would be a welcome relief from the thoughts going back and forth in his mind. No such luck. Brendon had been lying across the foot of Josh’s bed for thirty minutes now, scrolling through his phone and blabbering about anything that came to mind, and all Josh could think about was him. He couldn’t stop, goddammit, he couldn’t turn his thoughts off or think about anything else.

“-and Spencer wanted to play video games again, but this is Ryan we’re talking about, he actually asked me during lunch to come over to his house after school, so I told Spence I’d kick his ass another time, but then he-”

“Brendon,” Josh interrupted suddenly. He couldn’t stand it anymore. He had to say it.

Brendon stopped mid sentence to breathe for the first time since ten sentences ago and peeked over at Josh, not bothering to sit up. He looked mildly interested, at best. “What?”

Josh, too, took a deep breath then. “I think I have a crush.”

Upon hearing his words, Brendon did sit up, looking twenty times more interested. “Oh?” He was grinning, and Josh briefly doubted the security of this idea. But Brendon was his best friend since first grade, after all….

Josh decided to proceed with caution. He nodded. “Yeah. I think so. I can’t think about anything else.”

Brendon shoved Josh’s knee on his good leg and pressed, “Well? And, and? Who is it, tell me.”

“Nah, I don’t think so...I’m not really sure yet, I just had to get it off my chest-”

“No way, dude, no.” Brendon sat up straighter and prodded Josh’s leg with more urgency. “You can’t just tell your best friend you have a crush and then not give names.”

Josh huffed incredulously. “The last time I had a crush and I told you her name, you announced it to the entire school during lunch and proceeded to ask her out on a date with me, for me!”

“That’s not fair, man, we were in sixth grade, c’mon!” Brendon gave Josh what Josh assumed was probably his most sincere face, but Josh wasn’t buying it.
“Sure, B, like you’ve changed that drastically since sixth grade.”

“I have!” Brendon insisted. “I won’t tell, I promise, just tell me. You know my crush, you know all about Ryan, why shouldn’t I know all about yours? This is unjust!”

Josh just shook his head. “Look, it’s hard enough to figure out the way I feel, much less worry about you, too. And it won’t end with you, you know that. Spencer will know within an hour, and then Dallon, and Patrick, and Patrick will go straight to Pete, and if Pete knows, then I might as well just—”

“Okay, okay, fine,” Brendon threw his hands theatrically in the air. “Fine. Don’t tell me. I’ll figure it out on my own anyways. You’ve always been so easy to read. I’ll figure it out sooner or later. Just you wait, Dun.”

Josh felt a little panicky. “Don’t knock yourself out….”

Brendon got up from the bed then and reached out to ruffle Josh’s hair. “I gotta go. See you Friday after school, okay? I’ll bring more homework. Hey, your hair’s fading, y’know that, right?”

Josh shoved Brendon’s hand off his head. “Yeah, I know. Don’t pet me.”

Brendon snickered as he made his way to the door. “And don’t forget to do the homework I brought you.”

“Fuck off.” Josh smiled and waved a quick goodbye.

Brendon had just disappeared into the hall when he leaned his head back into the bedroom. “Hey, Josh, tell me, does your crush’s name start with a ‘P’? How about a ‘B’?”

Josh threw his shoe at the door. “I said fuck off!”

He was smiling. His heart felt light.

Pathetic as it might be, the first thing to cross Josh’s mind Thursday morning was that Tyler had said he would stop by again that afternoon. English and literature homework be damned- he was going to get to see Tyler again. He could bring him all the homework he wanted, and Josh would still be happy to see him.

If Josh thought Wednesday afternoon had passed slowly, then Thursday crawled by. His nerves wouldn’t stop. He wanted so badly to go outside and ride his bike, shoot a few baskets. Those things always helped calm him, but, of course, he couldn’t do either of those things; he couldn’t even go downstairs to watch TV. After hobbling down the hallway with one crutch to use the bathroom, Josh collapsed back on his bed, dropping his crutch to the floor and grabbing a text book. Might as well. Anything to distract himself from his heart jumping every two beats.

Hours later, Josh slammed his precalculus book shut with a definite air of finality and shoved it off the bed, the book thumping satisfyingly on the floor. He had actually finished three days worth of homework. Confidentially, Josh was quite proud.

He became suddenly aware that he was starving. He pushed some more school books off his bedside table to read the clock, surprised that it was already past four- oh, shit.

Josh frantically eyed his bedroom. It had somehow gotten even messier since Tuesday. Which, Josh
acknowledged, probably wasn’t too unexpected, since he kept throwing his things on the floor. But it was only because he was unable to walk easily, that was his excuse. Still...his room was a mess...and the clothes he was wearing hadn’t been changed since...Monday? Josh sighed and forced himself up off the bed, grabbing his crutch off the floor to steady himself. Clean room, change clothes...Josh hectically began kicking stuff under his bed (an exceptionally hard thing to do when one leg was in a cast and the other was supporting him) while at the same time searching the room for some clean clothes.

Ten minutes later and the floor was mostly clean, and Josh was standing shirtless in front of his open closet door, tennis shoes and books and movies and CDs spilling out from inside. Goddammit, are there no clean clothes in this fucking bedroom? What the hell, this is so not cool-

There was the sudden sound of someone fumbling with the door knob, and Josh jumped, startled, tripping on his own goddamned crutch and falling on his ass on a pile of clothes he had somehow missed during his cleaning spree. Josh was one hundred and ten percent aware of how ridiculous he looked right now, and he had an immediate sinking feeling in his chest. He knew who it was; he didn’t even try to get up the split second before the door was opened.

“Josh? Your mom told me to bring you up some-” Tyler stopped in the doorway and in mid sentence, too, a glass of milk and a plated sandwich in his hands, wearing the same hoodie over his shorts and jersey like the last time he had stopped by. He stared down at Josh sitting on the floor, shirtless, in a pile of dirty clothes, a mess of things spilling out from the closet, and his crutches lying haphazardly beside him. Josh looked up at Tyler forlornly.

Tyler took a hesitant step into the room. “Um. Josh? Are...are you okay?”

Josh sighed, then nodded, his face reddening.

Tyler took another unsure step into the room. “What are you...doing...?”

For some reason, out of all the other times Josh had embarrassed himself in front of Tyler, this was the worst. Maybe it was because he was half naked, for Christ’s sake. Dammit, where are my clean clothes!?

“I was, um...” Josh glanced around his semi-clean room. “...cleaning?”

To Josh’s horror and further embarrassment, Tyler started laughing. God, why is it always me? Why is it always him?

Tyler was still grinning as he crossed the room to set the plate and glass down on the bedside table, and Josh kicked himself mentally as he hauled himself up from the floor, bending back down to grab a crutch.

“Josh, can I ask you a question?” Tyler helped himself to Josh’s bed, plopping down and leaning back against the bed frame.

Josh stood beside the bed, fidgeting awkwardly with his crutch. “What?”

“Are you always this clumsy, or is it just me?”

Josh turned bright red, and Tyler started to giggle again. Josh didn’t answer the question, because he actually had an unironic answer.

Not that he could just come right out and say it to Tyler’s face....
He settled on just a quick shrug, and Tyler seemed satisfied enough, a wry smile still on his face. He reached out and patted the spot on the bed beside him, and Josh immediately turned an even brighter shade of red. Do not take that out of context, Josh, that is sick….

Josh tossed his crutch across the foot of the bed and gracelessly sunk onto the mattress next to Tyler, sitting as close to the edge as possible without toppling off. Tyler gave him a funny look and handed him the plate he had brought.

“Your mom made you a grilled cheese. She said you hadn’t eaten lunch yet, and I offered to bring it to you since I was coming up anyways.”

Josh took the plate quickly, trying not to stare too long at Tyler’s hand as it brushed against his in passing the plate. “Thanks.”

Tyler nodded. “Sure. Oh, here’s your homework by the way.” He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. “It’s mostly about that book report we have to do. On Robinson Crusoe.”

“Oh, I like that book,” Josh exclaimed as he bit into his sandwich, relatively surprised the report was on a book he could actually enjoy.

Tyler beamed. “Me, too! We can exchange notes later if you want. There’s some other cool books I’ve read that I bet you would like, I’ll show you some time.”

Josh’s heart raced at the prospect of him and Tyler hanging out again in the future, just because Tyler wanted to, and not because he felt responsible for delivering Josh his school assignments.

“So are you ready to come back to school this Monday then? My dad says you can, you just need to use your crutches for a while still.” Tyler elbowed Josh lightly in his bare side (Where the hell is a clean shirt?) and Josh tensed up at the contact, but managed to act somewhat casual.

He shrugged, trying to talk around the bite of food in his mouth. “I’m kind of ready, I guess. I just...I don’t know, everyone’s gonna stare at me and everything.”

Tyler cocked his head and furrowed his brows. “What’s wrong? Why would they-”

“You know, because of the cast and crutches and all that.”

“But...don’t you like the...I mean, I didn’t think you were bothered by people’s attention and stuff.”

Josh shook his head, confused. “Why would I...why would you think that?”

Tyler took his turn to shrug, pulling at a loose string on his shorts. “Well, the first time I saw you the first thing I noticed was your hair. It was like...flaming red. And then there’s your tattoos. Red hair and colorful sleeves don’t really scream introvert.”

“I’m not an introvert,” Josh snapped, a bit more harshly than he had intended. “I’m just...it’s...whatever, it’s not a big deal. Just because I like color doesn’t mean I like lots of attention, and just because I don’t like lots of attention doesn’t mean I’m an introvert either.”

Josh glanced quickly at Tyler, worried he had accidentally offended him, but Tyler was nodding, a look of enlightenment and...something else that Josh couldn’t read written across his face.

“I get it. So it’s like...how you express yourself.”
Josh blushed *again* and was about to deny it, but Tyler leaned his head jokingly against Josh’s bare shoulder just then, and Josh was, frankly, extraordinarily disappointed in himself for how quickly his last defenses melted.

“It’s okay, Josh, I won’t tell anybody,” Tyler said in a sing-song voice. Just as quickly as he had leaned against him, he was gone, grabbing the empty plate off Josh’s lap and placing it back on the nightstand.

“So what if you dyed your hair again?” he proposed, handing Josh his glass of milk. “Want this?”

Josh took it and held it awkwardly as he processed what Tyler was saying. “You think I should?”

Tyler nodded enthusiastically, bouncing the bed in the process enough that the milk in Josh’s glass sloshed a bit over the edge. “Yeah, dude, I do, it’s a great idea! I mean, you said it yourself, when you start school again next week, the kids will all be staring at you, so like. Go ahead. Be you. Then you know, it will kind of be worth it, you know?”

Josh glanced uncertainly at Tyler. He looked so earnest. Wow, his eyes are like…annoyingly brown….

Josh nodded, still not completely convinced. “I guess it’s an okay idea.”

“It’s a *great* idea!” Tyler bounced the bed hard enough this time that a lot of milk sloshed over the edge, onto Josh’s sweatpants and stomach. He gasped a little- that was really cold milk.

“Oh, shit, I’m sorry,” Tyler apologized frantically, jumping up off the bed- and sloshing more milk in the process. “I’ll go get a towel. Which way is the bathroom?”

“Uh, it’s down the hall, to your left. Chill, dude, it’s okay,” Josh almost laughed as Tyler darted comically fast out of the room.

In the short time that Tyler was gone, Josh found himself thinking less about the spilled milk drying on his lap and more about Tyler’s hands again, about his brown, brown eyes, his little giggle-

Josh heard the staircase creak out in the hall, and he tried to peer around the doorway to see, though the angle made it impossible.

“Hey, is that you, Ty-”

“Hey, man!” Brendon virtually *skipped* into the room, and Josh sat straight up so swiftly that what little milk was left in his glass splashed out onto his lap and the bedspread.

“Brendon!? What the hell are you doing h-”

“I was passing by, I was on my way to Ryan’s house, and I just had to stop in and tell you!” Brendon was beaming so brightly, he was thankfully unaware of how panicked Josh was.

“Oh?” Josh managed to stutter over the single word, glancing worriedly over Brendon’s shoulder at the open bedroom door.

“Yeah, dude, remember how I told you that on Tuesday Ryan and I hung out at his house because his parents were out, and he had to finish cleaning the garage before they got back, and I went over to help him, and afterwards we did our homework together- well, anyways, apparently he really sucks at calculus so since that’s obviously my good subject-”
“I thought you were awful at calculus,” Josh interrupted, hoping to hurry Brendon along with his story and get him out of here before Tyler came back from the bathroom.

“Well, duh,” Brendon exclaimed, a smile stretched widely across his face. “But Ryan doesn’t know that! Besides, dude, if things go my way, we won’t be spending too much time doing homework if you know what I mean, we’ll be doing each other.”

“Okay, okay,” Josh’s blood pressure was already high enough with anxiety right now without Brendon’s disgusting allusions adding to it. “So you helped him with his math, big deal.”

“Yeah, but like since I’m not good at calculus, it was really obvious, like, dude, he had to know I was lying, but he asked me again today during basketball practice to come over to his house and help him—” Brendon waved his fingers in dramatic air quotes around the word help, and Josh cringed.

“Is that all you stopped by to tell me?”

Brendon nodded enthusiastically and opened his mouth to say more, but Josh quickly intervened. “Right, well, if you’re going to help him, shouldn’t you hurry on over there? His house is still like fifteen minutes away, you better hurry on or else he’ll think you’re not—”

“Dude, you’re right!” Brendon made a show of smacking himself on the forehead and doubled back towards the door. “Thanks, J, I just had to let you know, I told Spencer already, and he says that—”

“Yeah, yeah, hurry, Brendon, okay?” Josh mentally shoved Brendon out of his bedroom. Tyler was bound to walk around the corner any minute now.

“Oh, incidentally,” Brendon’s tone changed all of a sudden, and Josh eyed him suspiciously. “What?”

“I bumped into Patrick today, he says he knows who this alleged crush of yours is.” Brendon waggled his eyebrows at Josh, and Josh’s stomach dropped.

“Pat doesn’t know anything…. Does he? No way. Brendon’s just bluffing, he just wants me to spill something…. ”

“Yeah, man,” Brendon said loudly, leaning against the doorway and cocking his head. “He saw you talking to her last week, but don’t worry, he hasn’t told anyone else but me. C’mon, admit it, Joschie.”

Her. He is bluffing. A wave of relief rushed through Josh, just in time for it to be once again replaced with anxiety as he remembered Tyler would soon be returning, and very apt to bump directly into Brendon. That would not be a desirable situation to try to explain away.

“Sure, B,” Josh said, faking confidence he didn’t really feel. “I’m not telling you, not on your life.”

Brendon sighed dramatically. “Fine, okay, be like that. I will figure it out, mark my fucking words, dude. Joschie.”

Josh was about to explode at Brendon to leave when Brendon spat his tongue at him and disappeared down the hall, the stairs creaking as he thudded down them. Josh slumped against the headrest. Thank God.

Tyler appeared suddenly in the doorway, towel in hand. “What was he doing here?” he asked, his voice low.
Josh, relieved, motioned for Tyler to come on in. “He was just passing by and stopped in real quick. He’s gone now, though. We’re good.”

Tyler plopped down on the bed next to Josh and looked curiously at the spilled milk drying on Josh’s lap. “I didn’t think I spilled that much, did I?”

“What? Oh, no, that was me. I’m kind of clumsy, I guess.”

Tyler- to Josh’s even further horror- started to wipe at the stain on Josh’s sweatpants himself, and Josh quickly grabbed at Tyler’s wrist, taking the towel away and dabbing at his own lap. The last thing he needed was for Tyler to put his hands anywhere near his-

“What’s the matter?” Tyler asked, grinning suddenly, and for one awful second, Josh was terrified of what Tyler was going to say. “Brendon’s gone now, you can relax. Joshie.”

Josh relaxed immediately, if only slightly, and groaned. “Ugh. You heard that?”

Tyler laughed. “Yeah, I heard that. I heard...enough.”

A strange look crossed Tyler’s face just then, and Josh was about to ask what was wrong when Tyler shook his head, mischievous smile reappearing.

“So. About your hair. What color next, hm? Red again?”

Josh huffed, surprised at the topics Tyler’s mind continued to randomly jump to. “I’m not really sure, I haven’t thought about it much. It doesn’t make too much difference, I guess, since I can’t get out to the store before Monday anyways. My mom would never buy that stuff for me, she hates when I dye it.”

Tyler turned his head as he watched Josh continue to clean up the milk with the towel. “I could buy it for you, if you wanted.”

Josh paused and looked up uncertainly at Tyler. “Really? You wouldn’t mind?”

“Nah, not at all,” Tyler looked more excited than Josh was. “Just tell me what color to buy, and I’ll stop by again- maybe Sunday afternoon?”

Josh started to grin; Tyler’s smile was contagious. “Well, I mean, sure, if you really don’t mind going to the store just for me and wasting a Sunday by stopping by again.”

“I don’t mind!”

Secretly pleased with Tyler’s apparent eagerness, Josh tossed the towel aside and reached into the nightstand’s drawer to dig out his wallet. He tossed Tyler a crumpled ten. “Just buy the cheapest brand, okay? Whatever you can find will be awesome.”

Tyler folded the dollar bill neatly in half and tucked it into his pocket. He stood up from the bed, glancing at the clock on the nightstand as he did so. “Okay. What color again?”

Josh hesitated, unsure. “Um...I don’t know, just...could you, like...surprise me?”

Tyler’s jaw dropped a little. “Really, dude? You trust me that much? I just buy whatever color I want, and you put it on your head?”

Josh chuckled. “Sure. Why not?”
Tyler still looked amazed as he wandered towards the door. “Right, okay. I’ll do that. I need to get home now, but I’ll be back Sunday afternoon after church, alright?”

A genuine smile spread across Josh’s face. “Sure thing, Ty. See you Sunday.”

Tyler’s smile was just as bright halfway across the room as it was when he was sitting directly beside Josh. “Sure thing, Joshie.”

The next instant, he disappeared down the hall out of view, and Josh slumped back against the wall, his face aching from smiling so much that entire afternoon, leg itchy from being stuck so long in a cast, his ass a bit sore from falling on it again, and his lap still a little soggy from the spilled milk.

He didn’t really mind at all.

Chapter End Notes

so J's cast is plastic, like those strap on casts, just to let you know. they itch like SHIT. too bad i didn't have anyone to draw a penis on mine for me. that would have been cool.

i'm working a job and doing school full time, so updates may come slow, but they'll be steady. i'm writing every day, and your feedback, ESPECIALLY comments, really gives me the boost i need. LOVE YOU FRIENDS
it has been WAY too long, i know, my deepest apologies to everyone! HUGE FUCKIN SHOUT OUT to all my anon friends on tumblr the past few weeks, the messages you sent me really pushed me to finish this! fair warning that Pete is a bit of a dick and there's a minor panic attack !

EDIT: guess who fuckin changed the chapter title? me! title from Air Catcher by our boys

Her.

Tyler glared viciously at the rows of boxed hair dye on the shelves in front of him, his hands fisted in his pockets. He was still wearing his suit from church, and he felt keenly overdressed standing in the random aisle at Walmart. He had never been aware of just how many different brands and colors of hair dye existed. The pink was nice.

Her… . His thoughts kept going back to it, to the conversation he had overheard that Thursday afternoon. He had been halfway back to Josh’s room from the bathroom, with a towel in hand, when he had heard Brendon’s voice, stopping him dead in his tracks as a quick panic overtook him. But then his brain had processed what Brendon was saying. Josh had a crush. Josh had a crush, and it was on some girl .

Tyler had been unable to think about anything else since, his thoughts persisting through the next school day and the weekend and even throughout the service that afternoon. It made him...mad? And the funny part was, Tyler didn’t even get why he was feeling this way.

He scanned the row of dyes again. The green was pretty cool, too. Why should I feel like this, though? So what? Josh has a crush. I’ve had crushes before, everyone gets crushes. This shouldn’t affect me. God, I’m acting like I like- no. No, that’s not it…. Josh has a crush, and I don’t care the least little bit. I don’t. Really . Why should I?

Tyler was annoyed at how much he didn’t believe himself. He reached out his hand for one of the boxes, still hesitating over the color. Pink? Her....

He nodded suddenly and reached a shelf higher, snatching a box of blue hair dye from its row.

The entire bus ride from Walmart to his neighborhood, Tyler argued inwardly with himself about his current situation. The only logical reason for him feeling potentially upset about Josh having a crush on a girl was if he himself had a crush on- but that wasn’t the reason, it couldn’t be. He pushed those thoughts away immediately, though he continued to worry over things in his head as he got off the bus at his stop and began walking down the road towards Josh’s house, shopping bag tucked under his arm.
Hey, wait, I know why I’m upset. Josh told Brendon about his crush, but he didn’t tell me. I thought we were- well, I just thought we were getting to know each other well enough for him to tell me, too. Of course. That’s why I feel this way. Not because I...well, yeah.

Tyler found himself so busy thinking that the next time he looked up, he was standing in Josh’s driveway. He had made the trek to this house enough times in the past week that it was almost first instinct to turn right at the bus stop instead of left, towards his own house. Tyler pondered briefly if there was any significance in that before shrugging the notion away and hurrying up to the front door, reminding himself to act at least a little put out that Josh hadn’t confided in him about his crush as well.

After ringing the doorbell several times, Tyler started to worry that maybe Josh’s parents had dragged him to church after all, and that they were all still away. Maybe I should wait? Or should I just come back later? I can text him! Oh, I don’t have his number. Hey, I should get that, why don’t I have his number yet?

Tyler opted for knocking on the door instead. Maybe they just couldn’t hear the bell-

The door was flung open suddenly, and Tyler jumped back, startled, almost dropping the Walmart bag. Josh stood in the doorway, in pajamas and one crutch, his hair messy, and his face looking a little flushed. He was panting a little, too.

“Oh, hi,” Tyler grinned. “I didn’t think anybody was home!”

Josh huffed. “You didn’t have to knock the fucking door down. I was coming. It’s just a bit hard with, you know, crutches and a broken leg.”

“Oh, okay, sorry! I didn’t know you could do the stairs yet. That’s an improvement.” Don’t forget to be a little put out.

Josh nodded once, and Tyler was about to reprimand him for not sharing this secret crush with him, too, when Josh suddenly looked Tyler up and down, noticing his suit.

“Hey, man, you look good.”

Tyler’s mouth was already opened to speak, but he stopped abruptly, completely taken aback by the compliment. He could feel his cheeks starting to turn red, and he cursed at himself mentally.

He tugged awkwardly at the knot in his tie, the material suddenly seeming too tight for comfort. Trying to avoid eye contact, he shrugged as he stammered out whatever he could think of. "Um, y-yeah. Thanks, um, you know. Church and all. You look good, too."

Tyler registered with horror what he had said the second he had finished saying it. Josh made a show of glancing down at his own outfit, his boxers- extraordinarily and unnecessarily tight boxers, in Tyler’s opinion- and baggy t-shirt, before looking back up, a sly grin growing on his face as an even deeper blush grew on Tyler's.

Tyler waved his free hand, trying desperately to backtrack. "I mean, um, shit, I didn't mean...I just meant...you probably would look...like, you’d probably look okay if you were wearing a Sunday suit, too, um...I didn't mean-"

Josh started to giggle at Tyler’s rambling, effectively cutting him off. "It's whatever, dude," Josh said, amusement in his voice, and Tyler shrugged one shoulder, still not making eye contact and wishing his blush would just go the fuck away. Thankfully, God must have decided to have mercy on Tyler then, seeing as it was Sunday, because Josh suddenly seemed to notice the Walmart bag.

"Hey, is that the hair dye? Let me see!" he reached out a hand for the bag, but Tyler quickly stepped
back, clutching the bag protectively, grateful for the change of conversation and jumping on his chance to cover up his last statement.

“Nope, sorry, dude, it’s still a surprise.” Josh made a pouting face at Tyler’s words, and Tyler was caught off guard with the sudden jump his heart took. Dammit, why does he have to make that face? Why is it bothering me in the first place? Oh shit, what if I like h-

“Give it to me, please,” Josh interrupted Tyler’s worrying, holding out the word please until Tyler finally rolled his eyes and tossed the bag at him to shut him up.

“Fine, there.” Tyler tried to sound disinterested, but he couldn’t help smiling to himself at the excited expression on Josh’s face as he quickly pulled the box from the bag.

“Dude!”

Tyler pulled at his tie again, trying to read Josh’s expression. “I hope the color’s okay, I wasn’t really sure, you know...you don’t have to do it if you don’t want to-”

“Dude, are you kidding? This color’s awesome, I love it!” Josh was already trying to open the box, and Tyler beamed.

“Well, I bet it’ll look great,” Tyler stifled a giggle as Josh’s crutch slipped out from beneath his arm and clattered to the floor in his haste to open the box. “I can’t wait to see it tomorrow.”

Josh abandoned the box suddenly, his fingers stilling as he quickly looked up at Tyler. “What do you mean tomorrow? You’re staying to help, right?”

Tyler blinked, searching for words. “Um, I...you want me to stay?”

Josh hobbled a step back, clearing the doorway and waving a hand dramatically at Tyler. “Like I can get back up the stairs with both the hair dye and my crutch. You have to rinse your hair when you’re done dying it, and I don’t wanna get in the shower, I’m afraid I’ll slip.”

Tyler stared awkwardly at Josh as he edged past him into the house. He was starting to sweat a little. “So you want me to...?”

“Help...rinse my hair? In the sink?” Josh tilted his head, seemingly unaware of the position he was putting Tyler in.

Tyler hid his growing blush again by bending over to pick up Josh’s crutch, wishing he could kick himself with it.

“Stop being weird. He just wants you to help dye his hair. No biggie.

“You good?” Josh closed the front door and elbowed Tyler as he hobbled past. “Give me my crutch back, and you take the box, okay?”

Tyler followed Josh slowly up the stairs, trying not to stand too closely behind him or rush him. He was obviously still getting used to doing stairs with one leg. There was a point halfway up when Tyler almost giggled out loud, but stopped himself at the last second- the last thing he needed right now was for Josh to get mad at him for laughing. And besides, Tyler had just noticed how nice of an ass Josh had, because damn those were tight fucking boxers. And his legs. Oh my god, what the hell am I thinking this for, friends don’t think this kind of shit about friends-

Josh stumbled on the last step and without even thinking, Tyler shot out a hand to grab onto Josh’s waist.
“Whoa, you okay?”

Josh let out a quick, nervous laugh and pulled away to regain his footing on the upstairs landing, and Tyler’s hand retreated embarrassingly to his side. *God, why am I so awkward?*

“You can just leave your jacket and shit on the bed, okay? You don’t want your tie getting wet.” Josh snatched the box from Tyler’s grasp and continued on down the hall towards the bathroom while Tyler made a beeline for Josh’s bedroom, thankful for the few seconds he had to himself to gather enough of his nerves to act nonchalant. *Why am I so fucking anxious right now? Chill, bro.*

Tyler peered around Josh’s room as he shrugged out of his stiff jacket and draped it on the unmade bed. He had looked around a bit the past few times he had stopped by, but he hadn’t had a chance to really look. This was where Josh *lived*.

Struggling with the knot in his tie with one hand, Tyler nudged his foot at the basketball lying in the corner on top of a pile of clothes. *Poor Josh. It’ll be a while before he can really play again.*

The closet door was half open; dirty clothes were still spilling out from inside, effectively keeping the door from closing. Tyler caught a glimpse of a poster on the inside of the door, and slipped it open a couple more inches to see. The words *I want to believe* and an ominous looking space shuttle decorated the poster. Tyler smiled, wondering what it meant. A ripped page from a notebook was tacked next to it, covered with little sketches; some aliens, a basketball, a pathetically ugly stick person Tyler assumed was Brendon, judging by the ridiculous grin. Tickets to a Red Hot Chili Peppers concert; a printed copy of a selfie of Josh, Brendon, and Spencer when they were several years younger; a sloppy list of what appeared to be an ongoing score of Call of Duty games Josh had won; another picture of Josh and...a girl Tyler didn’t recognize. A scrawled note in swirling cursive was written in sharpie across their bodies (Tyler definitely didn’t notice how intimately the girl’s arm was thrown over Josh’s shoulders, and how delicately Josh had his hand resting on her waist.) *I forgive you for having two left feet, Joshie! Lots of love xo.*

Tyler made a sour face at the picture and the note, shoving the closet door as closed as it would go. He turned his back on the closet and looked around the rest of the room, tossing his tie on the bed next to his jacket.

It was a relatively small room, the bed, dresser, and night stand taking up most of the space. Granted, it probably felt a lot smaller than it really was due to the mess Josh had lying everywhere. A messy row of books lined the sill of one of the two windows, and several piles of video games were stacked in the corner of the room, leaning precariously against the wall. A pennant flag for Worthington High School was draped above the bed, and a letterman jacket hung on a peg on the closet door. The dresser’s surface was stacked with CDs and an old CD player, the glowing red numbers blinking *TRACK 07* over and over. Tyler would have snooped through the games and music Josh had, but he had already stalled long enough. Josh was probably already wondering where the hell he had gone.

Tyler kicked off his shoes before making his way down the hall, unbuttoning the cuffs of his shirt to roll up his sleeves. There were several framed pictures on the wall, and Tyler slowed down to take a look; he had been so preoccupied eavesdropping on Josh’s and Brendon’s conversation the last time he had been in this hallway that he hadn’t even noticed the photos.

One picture showed two young girls standing together in front of the house. In another, one of the same girls looked even younger, holding a baby on her lap. There was a picture of four children in front of a Christmas tree, and Tyler snorted out loud in disbelief when he recognized the chubby cheeks, squinted eyes, and devious grin as a very young Josh among them.

“Tyler, what are you- hey, what are you laughing at?” Josh was standing in the doorway to the
bathroom, leaning on his crutch and giving Tyler a glare.

“Nothing,” Tyler tried to keep a straight face as he waved a hand at the picture. “Just looking at the family photos, that’s all.”

Josh squinted his eyes accusingly. “You were laughing.”

Tyler bit his lip to keep from smiling too big. “You were a cute kid, that’s all. I wasn’t laughing. A super cute kid. I bet your mom loved you.”

Josh rolled his eyes dramatically. “Stop it.”

Tyler smiled unabashedly once Josh had turned his back, his cheeks aching slightly. Dammit, a fucking adorable kid. It figures.

The bathroom already smelled faintly of bleach when Tyler finally suppressed his smile and giggling enough to enter. Josh was sitting on the closed toilet lid, his crutch leaning against the wall, and he had just opened the box of dye and was messing with a pair of rubber gloves. He tossed one to Tyler.

“My family will be home in less than an hour so we have to hurry, okay? My mom’ll try to stop me coloring it again if we’re not done when they get back.”

Tyler could only nod, because Josh pulled off his t-shirt then, causing more of a distraction to Tyler than Tyler had anticipated it would. His skin was light and pink, creating a stark contrast to the tattoos on his arm. Tyler tried to look without it looking like he was looking- God, I’m a mess.

Josh seemed unaware, thankfully, and Tyler tried to fight the blush growing on his face as he busied himself with pulling on his one glove. He had seen Josh shirtless before. Lots of times. After basketball practice when he was changing in the locker room, just a couple days ago when he had sat right next to him on Josh’s bed and could feel the heat radiating off his skin-

Ew, God. Get it under control, Ty-guy. That is just plain creepy. You don’t think this kind of thing about friends. You don’t think this kind of thing about Gerard or Frank or Mikey, so why the hell are you thinking it about Josh? Stop it. For real.

Tyler finished reprimanding himself mentally and focused his attention instead on Josh’s hands, one clad in rubber glove, as he squeezed at the bottle of dye. The box’s other contents were scattered across the counter, and Tyler reached out for the paper instructions.

“So what do you want me to do?” he asked, studying the picture guide. “I’ve never done this before, so I don’t know how to do it really.”

Josh didn’t reply, just unscrewed the lid from the dye and stuck the cap between his lips as he tested some of the dye on his finger. The liquid was so dark it looked black, and Tyler started to seriously doubt that the finished color would be as light and sky blue as the box had promised.

The picture guide proved unhelpful, and Tyler discarded it, noticed his one sleeve was still buttoned, and busied himself with that instead. His mom would murder him if he got any of that dark blue dye on his Sunday shirt. He tugged at the stiff material, trying to drag his sleeve up his arm and out of the way.

“Hey, Ty-” Josh’s words were muffled as he spoke around the cap in his mouth- “go to my room and get my phone, we can play music or someth-”

Josh glanced up at Tyler then, and the cap slipped from his mouth and clattered on the floor. His eyes
seemed to rake over Tyler quickly as he continued, stammered, “My phone... in, in my room, it’s on the floor, I think? By the dresser.”

Tyler tilted his head curiously at Josh as he finished rolling up his sleeve, but Josh had leaned back over the hair dye, dutifully preparing it. Tyler didn’t ask questions, just slipped out of the bathroom in search of Josh’s phone.

When he returned, Josh had emptied the bottle of dye into a disposable bowl and was stirring it with a small brush. The dark color had already splattered across Josh’s hands and the counter, and Tyler cringed at what his mother was going to say about his shirt when he finally got home that afternoon, but oh, well. Nothing to be done about it now.

Josh was standing with all his weight on his good leg, leaning against the counter and turned slightly away from Tyler. Tyler held out the phone to him. “Here you go.”

Josh waved his hand a little. “Could you do it? I’ll get dye on it. Passcode’s 0618, just put it on shuffle.”

It took Tyler several seconds to begin operating effectively enough to actually type in the numbers; Josh had just told him his password. To his phone. Who the fuck does that!? Tyler was secretly pleased, though a snotty voice in his head insisted, I bet Brendon knows the passcode, too, it’s no big deal. Tyler opted to ignore it.

Love Bites by Def Leppard started to play; Josh groaned, and Tyler nodded his head a little, smiling at Josh’s reaction.

“I didn’t even know I had that on there,” Josh said bashfully, hiding his face in his shoulder and trying to cover up, but Tyler only laughed.

“Anyways, here,” Josh slid the bowl of dye across the counter towards Tyler and hopped a step over to make room, facing the mirror over the counter. “So it’s pretty simple, right, what you do is take this comb here and dip it in dye, and basically you just comb it in, that’s all there is to it. I’ll show you.”

A fleck of dye hit Tyler’s cheek as Josh lifted the comb to his hair, and Tyler tried not to stare too long at Josh’s arms as he lifted them above his head to paint in the dye.

“You kinda start at the roots, you know? And comb out. I can’t really reach the back very well so that’s why it’ll help with you here.”

Tyler nodded and waited until Josh had finished the strand of hair and handed him the comb. The bathroom was small, but Tyler slipped behind Josh- the toilet lid was knocking into the back of his knee, but Tyler didn’t dare stand any closer to Josh’s bare back, he was practically flush against him as it was- and, comb in hand, selected the strand of hair next to the other freshly painted strand. Goddamn, his hair is soft, what the fuuuuuu-

“Hey, this is kind of fun,” Tyler couldn’t stop the small giggle in his voice as he stroked the brush through Josh’s dark, still slightly red tinted hair.

“Just try not to get it on my neck, it can stain your skin for like weeks-”

“Woops, too late.”

Josh huffed out a laugh, and Tyler peaked up through his eyelashes at Josh’s reflection in the bathroom mirror.
Josh was already looking at him. He squinted his eyes. “Jerk.”

Tyler spit his tongue out and started to rap along to *Nothin’ On You* before Josh could spit his tongue back.

“Regardless of the things in my past that I’ve done-”

“Oh, my *God*, you are the *worst*,” Josh laughed out loud and purposefully jerked his head to the side, just as Tyler was grabbing another strand of hair. The brush streaked across Tyler’s hand, the dark blue dye smearing across his fingers.

Josh’s laugh sounded so melodious and his eyes seemed to actually shine so much that Tyler couldn’t stop himself from laughing, too.

“Jackass! Look what you’ve done, I’ve got this blue shit all over my arm! If you don’t like my singing just *say so*,” Tyler said snarkily, dipping the comb back in the dye and waving it in front of Josh’s face.

Josh shrieked and ducked back away from the comb, grabbing at Tyler’s arm, his fingers curling around Tyler’s forearm, the dye smearing over them both. *His hand’s so warm,* Tyler’s thoughts seemed to slow down to a crawl as he laughed at Josh’s reaction. *God, he smells so, so...so fucking good,* goddammit-

“Oh, shit,” Josh’s giggles faded, though he was still grinning, as he pointed at Tyler’s shirt in the mirror. “Dude, you’ve got dye on your shirt.”

“And whose fault do you suppose that is?” Tyler crossed his arms, only to swipe the brush across Josh’s back, a faint blue streak in it’s place.

Josh’s mouth opened in shock and Tyler burst into another fit of giggles.

“Tyler, what the fuck,” Josh turned around in the tight space to face Tyler, grabbing again at the brush in his hand. “You’re making a *mess*, it’s like you’re *trying* to get it on everything!”

Tyler was still giggling uncontrollably when it hit him how fucking close he and Josh were standing. Their chests were less than an inch apart in the tight space, Tyler’s forearm clasped tightly in Josh’s hand as Josh pried at his fingers, trying to steal the comb. Tyler became vaguely aware of the fact that he was several inches taller than Josh, and that Josh’s eyelashes were a lot longer up close, and that if Josh looked up right then, their faces would only be like, an *inch* apart.

These seemingly random thoughts were still surfacing in Tyler’s mind when Josh was finally able to grab the comb away from Tyler in his daze. Josh was grinning, a white-toothed smile that spread across his whole face, and when he looked up at Tyler, Tyler swore his eyes were the...the *warmest* shade of brown he had ever seen in his whole life, ever, and all he could do was stare back.

Tyler didn’t know if it was mere seconds or a full minute later when the muffled sound of a door slamming shut and people’s voices drifting up the stairs broke the stillness, and Josh huffed out a small laugh before glancing away and turning back to the sink. *Fuck,* Tyler wasn’t even certain if Josh had been staring back at all, maybe he had just made eye contact like a normal human being and *Tyler* had been the one with the fucked up senses and misconceptions. *Wait,* misconceptions about *what*? The smell of the hair dye suddenly seemed too strong and overwhelming, and Tyler started to feel his skin prick with claustrophobia. He edged out from behind Josh to stand next to him at the counter instead.

Josh was re-dipping the brush in the dye again, careful not to get any more on his fingers. He
glanced over at Tyler; his expression was neutral, and Tyler couldn’t read it at all.

“I guess that’s your family then,” Tyler said, his voice sounding too high and weak, but he was getting desperate trying to find something to say in the growing awkward silence. *Is this an awkward silence? What if it’s just a normal silence, but I’m making it an awkward silence? What if I’m freaking out, and there is nothing wrong? What is wrong, anyway?*

“Yeah,” Josh’s voice startled Tyler. It sounded so much lower than his own. “Church went kind of long today, honestly I thought they’d be home like thirty minutes ago.”

Tyler noticed a streak of dark blue dripping down Josh’s neck. “What about your hair? Wanna finish it?”

Josh eyed his hair in the mirror, shaking his head slightly. “My mom will get suspicious if we take too long. Maybe you can just help me finish the back part real quick, the roots and all that, and then you can go on home. I can finish the rest.”

Tyler nodded and took the brush from Josh, taking care not to spill any more of the dye than they already had. Neither of them spoke as Tyler combed at Josh’s hair, though Josh whimpered once- he fucking whimpered , Tyler had trouble breathing for a couple of seconds afterwards, and he had no fucking idea why- when Tyler pulled too hard at a tangled strand of hair. The dye only started to drip once, the stream of liquid rolling slowly down the nape of Josh’s neck, so dark in contrast to Josh’s pale skin. Tyler watched in fixation for a moment before pausing his work to swipe it away with his forefinger. Josh tensed at the sudden touch- or maybe he didn’t, Tyler couldn’t tell. Either way, Tyler wiped the dye off his finger onto his Sunday shirt, his mom’s future scolding be damned, and finished dying the roots of Josh’s hair as quickly as he possibly could. He needed some air.

“Thanks, man,” Josh said when Tyler set the comb down a little too harshly on the bathroom counter. “Thanks for helping. And you know, thanks for like, getting me the dye in the first place. Going out of your way to buy it for me and stuff.”

“It wasn’t any trouble, I wanted to,” Tyler interrupted. He wasn’t sure why he was blushing.

Josh nodded, searched for something to say. “Well...thanks again. I guess I’ll see you in school tomorrow. With blue hair.”

Tyler nodded, too. “Yeah. Don’t worry about it, about anything, it’ll be okay. People won’t stare at the crutches or anything as much as you think, it’ll be cool.” He was starting to ramble, he knew it, but once he started he could never stop. “Just act chill. And I’ll be there, so...but we’re not...we’re not like, like...people don’t know we’re friends, right? Are we still...like is this still a secret, or...?”

A quick flash of something- Tyler couldn’t tell- seemed to cross Josh’s face before he looked down and busied himself with the box of hair dye, tugging at the label. A part of Tyler wished Josh would look at him and another part was thankful he had looked away. “Yeah, no, I’m not sure, man, like...it’s just the guys all think we’re not cool and stuff, and last I checked, Brendon seemed pretty pissed at you, and Pete’s mad at me , and with all the bets and stuff, I don’t know how that all worked out...it might be better- just for now, you know? - if we just...don’t like...broadcast it...you know?”

Tyler nodded, even though Josh wasn’t looking at him. “No, yeah, sure, I get it, that’s what I was thinking. Yeah, that’s fine, I was just...I just wanted to make sure.”

Josh nodded, too. “Yeah. I guess.”
One of Josh’s siblings stomped up the stairs and down the hall, and a bedroom door slammed. Tyler took that as his cue. “Well, I better go now. Fuck, I’ve still got homework to finish for tomorrow. I’ll see you at school...okay?” Tyler reached for the door handle, eyes still on Josh.

Josh nodded again, still looking down at the hair dye box, still picking at the label. “Yeah, sure, man. See you.”

Tyler closed the bathroom door behind him and headed straight for the stairs, glancing once more at the baby picture of Josh in the hallway. He said hello and goodbye to a slightly surprised, but still very courteous and polite Mrs. Dun in the kitchen on his way out the front door, when he could finally fill his lungs with clean air again.

There was a light breeze outside, dancing across his warm and flushed skin through his thin shirt, and Tyler suddenly remembered his jacket he had left on Josh’s bed. The thought of going back upstairs and maybe bumping into Josh again felt, for some strange reason, too much to bear. Tyler made up his mind, strode down the driveway, and started down the road towards his own house. He could get his jacket anytime. He had walked all the way to the neighborhood basketball court before he realized that he had started crying.

The sun had just set, painting Josh’s room in a soft blue haze, the young night accentuating the blue of his hair. He hadn’t bothered turning on the bedside lamp, liked it better when he couldn’t see clearly. Tyler had left that afternoon without taking his jacket; after Josh had finished dying his hair on his own and rinsing it out, he had hobbled back to his room and had found the jacket still thrown across his bed.

It was hanging on the back of the closet door now, on top of Josh’s letterman jacket. He hadn’t exactly sniffed Tyler’s coat when he had picked it up, but the jacket smelled like Tyler; a safe and cozy scent of peppermint shampoo and lilac laundry detergent, and only slightly of sweat, a husky undertone that definitely wasn’t a bad one. Josh loved it.

It was only several minutes past eight, but Josh had already brushed his teeth and called goodnight down the stairs to his parents before locking his bedroom door and collapsing on his back in the middle of the bed. His skin was tingling. It had been tingling since Tyler’s hands had first gently brushed against his skin and ran tenderly through his hair hours earlier. His touch had set Josh’s entire body on edge. He had been holding back for hours. His hand was light over his boxers, delicate, tracing. He wanted it to last; he wanted the lingering ghost of Tyler’s fingertips on his neck to last. God, Tyler’s hands...just thinking back to how close they had been standing in the bathroom that afternoon, to the soft tug of his hands in Josh’s hair, the way Tyler had kept looking at him in the mirror...it caused Josh to inadvertently push his hips upwards, searching for more contact from his own hand. He had one arm thrown casually beneath his head as a pillow and his eyes were closed, and he took a deep breath to calm himself down for a moment.

His shirt had ridden up, and Josh ran his fingers through the soft hair on his lower stomach, pretending that it was...Josh’s mind raced back to that afternoon, when Tyler had first come into the bathroom, and Josh had looked up at him and had gotten dizzy by how quickly turned on he had gotten. (Hell, it had been embarrassing, but Josh hoped to God that he had covered it up okay, keeping his back to Tyler while his dick had tried to sort itself out. It wasn’t a full out erection or anything, okay, I’m not that creepy, it was just...it definitely jumped, a tiny bit, that’s all. Ugh, leave me alone.) But Josh hadn’t been able to help himself. When Tyler had walked in in his dress shirt with his fucking sleeves rolled up and collar still upturned from loosening his tie, and his eyebrows
furrowed and lips pouting- Josh hadn’t been able to fucking help himself, okay? A thousand racy thoughts had sped through his mind, and he hadn’t been able to shake them off all day.

And so here he was, alone in his room on a Sunday night, inching his hand down his boxers, his dick leaking through the fabric, mind and body completely consumed with thoughts of Tyler.

Josh’s body started to tense as he wrapped his hand around his dick and moved it slowly, and he was embarrassed at how quickly he could feel his release building. He’d barely touched himself. Thinking back suddenly to the time Tyler had stopped by earlier that week and spilled milk on him and then proceeded to wipe it off his pants for him, Josh’s hand involuntarily quickened, moving up and down and rubbing at the foreskin with every pump. He let himself groan out loud, but only softly. The last thing he needed was for his siblings to hear him.

He continued stroking softly after he came, his boxers definitely disgusting now, eyes half lidded, staring at the ceiling fan in the dim room turning around and around on the lowest setting. Everything was slow and warm and hazy, and blue and brown, a gentle brown that occasionally shimmered gold, that made Josh feel, for the first time in a while, very, very content.

Josh was having second thoughts.

Shit, third or fourth thoughts. Fuck everything.

His mom had dropped him off at school, right by the front door so he didn’t have to walk any further than necessary. It didn’t help that they were fifteen minutes late; now Josh would have to parade into his English class in front of everyone with his stupid crutches and stupid blue hair. Josh said goodbye to his mom and tried to look as casual as possible as he hobbled inside. His mom had insisted on him taking both crutches, even though Josh was fairly certain he could manage with just one, but when his mom had her mind made up...besides, she was still steaming over Josh’s new hair, and he figured he might at well try to accommodate her wishes to make up for it.

Josh dallied in the secretary’s office for as long as he could, filling out the paperwork for being late and even making small talk with Mrs. Hampton. Anything to avoid having to go to class. Granted, it did take him genuinely longer to make his way down the hall to his locker with his crutches. His arms were tired, goddammit. After stuffing his things in the locker and fiddling for an extra minute with the lock, Josh readied himself mentally, tucked his crutches under his arms, and headed towards his homeroom.

Once outside the door, however, Josh was unsure. He checked the hall clock. There was only fifteen minutes left...no way could he go in this late. He wouldn’t be able to face his classmates, Pete and Patrick and Gerard and...and Tyler. Josh shook his head and eyed the closed door one last time before turning away and shuffling back down the hall.

Tyler glared around the lunchroom. She was here, somewhere.

She. Her. Her . Fuck her, whoever she was. Fuck Brendon, too. Fuck this whole damn school.

Fuck Josh .

Tyler didn’t understand why he felt so...so hostile about things, about Josh’s crush, this mystery girl, but he did. He couldn’t help it. He didn’t understand any of his feelings lately, none of it made any
Besides feeling confused, Tyler felt anxious. It was Josh’s first day back at Worthington. That meant somehow, surely, Josh was going to find out about… Tyler felt a wave of nausea rush through him. He’d made a mistake, not telling Josh about the team. The first Monday after the game, after practice, Coach had pulled Tyler aside and told him something, something Tyler hadn’t even relayed to his family yet. He didn’t know how to tell them. He didn’t even want to think about it himself, let alone tell his parents about it.

And it didn’t involve just him, either. It involved Josh. Which is the main reason why Tyler hadn’t told him about... this. He didn’t know if Josh was going to stop by practice after school to talk to Coach Anderson or not, but if and when he did... Tyler wondered briefly if he had made a terrible mistake in not telling Josh, but after all, what could he do about it now?

Tyler sighed and temporarily gave it up, turning moodily back to his cold slice of leftover pizza. Gerard was rambling on to Frank and Mikey about this awesome new local band he had discovered over the weekend, and how the lead singer used to go to this school two years ago, and she had tried to sell Gerard pot once.

Frank wasn’t having it. “No way. No chick’s been into that here for the past decade, at least.”

Mikey looked satisfied to remain neutral and just watch the argument as Gerard shook his head, insistent. “Just because she didn’t try to sell you any doesn’t mean she didn’t sell it at all.”

“Dude, two years ago you looked twelve, she wouldn’t have even talked to you.” Frank snorted. “It probably wasn’t even pot, just a frigging mothball or some shit. You were a pretty stupid kid.”

“I didn’t buy any, I just said she tried to sell it to me.”

Tyler chewed methodically at a pepperoni and tuned out the conversation, glancing back out at the crowded cafeteria. The day was half gone already, and he had yet to even see Josh; he hadn’t shown up for English that morning. Tyler had thought with the blue hair and crutches and cast and the whole basketball team and the bet makers all anxious to see him again, he would have at least caught a glimpse of him, somewhere, sometime. Maybe he hadn’t come to school that day after all. Tyler started to fidget.

Mikey elbowed him. “What’s up? You’ve been acting weird all day. Looking for someone?”

“No,” Tyler replied almost immediately, sharp enough to cause Gerard to glance across the table at him in mid sentence curiously. Tyler lowered his voice. “No. I’m just...just nervous about the test in music today.”

Mikey squinted his eyes behind his glasses. “You’re great at music theory, and that’s what’s always on the test. You’ll do fine.”

Tyler stuffed a bite of pizza in his mouth to keep from having to say anything. He shrugged instead. Mikey kept staring at him, and Tyler could feel himself starting to grow frantic. I mean... it’s not like I’m hiding anything, not really. Why am I so on edge? I wish I could just relax-

“What’s on your hand?”

The blue stain on Tyler’s fingers immediately caught his eye, and he shoved his hand into his lap, laughing awkwardly as Mikey just stared blankly at him. “Oh, it’s just, just some paint. I was painting at home last night.”
Mikey’s expression was unreadable and his voice monotone. “You’re an artist?”

“Yeah- no, no, not really, I was just...I was painting my room.”

“Oh.”

Thank God for Gerard, because just then he flicked a corn chip across the table at Mikey. It bounced off the rim of his glasses, falling onto his tray of food, and he glared disdainfully at his brother as Frank started to laugh.

Suddenly a commotion in the front of the cafeteria caught Tyler’s attention, and he swiveled in his seat to see what was going on, his interest mildly peaked; his thoughts were still too consumed with worrying about Josh’s absence to be more than only a little interested in whatever could be going on.

Tyler changed his mind when a flash of blue appeared in the small crowd.

Without thinking, he stood up and peered over several students’ heads, trying to get a better view of what was happening. Tyler was vaguely aware of Frank asking him what he was doing, but he had more important things to think about right now.

There was a loud voice, and though Tyler couldn’t make out what they had said from this distance over the usual chatter of the lunchroom, he knew by the sneering tone that it was Pete. He was saying something to Josh, standing way too close for comfort; Josh was leaning on one crutch, making him appear smaller than he was- Pete seemed to be towering over him. Tyler grabbed his empty tray and made for the nearest trashcan as an excuse to get closer. He could feel his blood pumping.

“-such a coward, and you’re playing the martyr? Come on, Dun, this game is getting really old. ‘Oh, poor, Josh, he hurt his leg, it’s Tyler’s fault!’ Listen, Dun, you’ve-”

Tyler couldn’t explain it, but a sudden white hot anger flushed through him at breakneck speed. During the week of Josh’s absence, Pete had mostly ignored Tyler, as had Brendon and Spencer and most of the other guys on the team, giving Tyler the impression that, for the most part, any hard feelings about how the accident had occurred during the Friday night game had dissipated. But, judging by the way Brendon had just elbowed his way through the spectators to stand between Josh and Pete, angrily shoving Pete back a step, well...Tyler guessed he had thought wrong.

Tyler glanced back at his table. Gerard and Frank were once again engrossed in conversation, completely oblivious to the small scene going on, and Mikey seemed busy on his phone. Tyler emptied his tray, and instead of going back to his friends, edged closer to the gathering, trying to get within earshot.

Pete was still running off at the mouth, as per usual, only now Brendon’s angry protests were being thrown back, adding to the confusion. The lunchroom was pretty loud on a regular basis, so the argument wasn’t the center of attention, though Tyler was getting nervous about how many people were starting to listen in.

“-no way is the coach putting you back on the team, not for a long time-”

“Well, of course not, he broke his fucking leg,” Brendon’s arms were crossed. “When it’s healed, then he’ll be back on, just like before. You’re fucking kidding yourself, Wentz, if you think there’s a snowball’s chance in hell Coach would let a player as good as Josh go.”

Pete snorted. “Urie, you’re full of shit. I hope you feel fucking satisfied, Josh. Your little plan didn’t work, by the way. I’m first player now, nice try.”
Tyler’s face turned red. *Oh, shit. There it is.*

Tyler could see the confusion in Josh’s face as he asked, “What plan? What do you mean you’re first?” just as Brendon spoke over him at the same time, “Shut the hell up, Pete, you weren’t gonna fucking say anything.”

Tyler suddenly felt too close to the whole scene for comfort. He wished he could retreat back to his table, but his feet seemed glued to the floor.

Pete was still talking. “Whatever, he was gonna find out sooner or later. Yeah, Dun, I’m first player now, not you. You went to all that trouble for nothing, your scheme totally backfired. So you got Tyler suspended from the team for interference, big deal; *you still aren’t first player.*”

*Uh-oh.*

Tyler could hear Brendon babbling on to Josh, trying to explain that he was sorry he hadn’t told him about being off the team, stressing the fact that Coach had said it was only *temporary,* until he was completely healed, and that it practically didn’t even count as being off the team anyways. But the expression on Josh’s face made Tyler’s stomach drop. He looked so *mortified, so sad, so confused.* Tyler wasn’t trying to be vain, but he knew that being temporarily off the team wasn’t what was making Josh feel this bad.

*I should have told him, I know I should have told him, but he wouldn’t have forgiven himself; he’d have been so fucking upset, I just didn’t want him to worry about it….*

That’s when Tyler realized Josh had noticed him standing there. They held eye contact briefly, lasting less than a second before Josh was turning and leaving the cafeteria, his crutch tapping the floor, leaving Pete standing in victory and Brendon turning to him angrily to continue the argument.

Tyler stood there next to the trashcan for a moment, using every ounce of his self will to keep himself from *not* running wildly through the cafeteria, in front of everyone, after Josh in a desperate last attempt to ease the ugly truth. To try to explain why he had kept this from him in the first place.

Tyler closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them again, Pete and Brendon were still in their corner of the lunchroom arguing, though the janitor seemed to be eyeing them warily now. *Finally, where the fuck have all the teachers been? Useless.* Gerard and Frank still weren’t paying much attention to Tyler’s growing absence, and, as much as Tyler really, really, *really* wanted to go find Josh, he forced himself to walk casually back to his table. There were too many people around right now, and Josh didn’t want them to know; Tyler would do it, if that’s what Josh really thought was best.

Tyler slid back into his seat, and Mikey looked up from his phone. “What was all the noise about?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Tyler tried to keep his voice low, hoping Gerard and Frank wouldn’t hear. “Pete and Brendon were arguing about the game or something, I think.”

“Was that Josh I saw? Is he back now?”

Tyler shrugged, avoiding eye contact. “Dunno. Probably. It’s been like, what, a week?”

Mikey shrugged, too. “We’re still not talking, so I wouldn’t know. Does he have blue hair now? I thought I saw blue, I didn’t recognize him at first.”

The bell rang then, and Tyler sighed inwardly with relief, standing up quickly from the table. “I think
it’s blue now, I don’t know, I didn’t really see. I’ll see you in the music room, okay?” Grabbing his phone, Tyler didn’t wait for a reply and darted out of the cafeteria. He kept his eye out for a flash of blue as he made his way down the hall, but Josh was nowhere to be seen. Tyler’s heart sank.

_Fucking great._

Twenty minutes later, Tyler was sitting at one of the tables in the music room, tapping his pencil worryingly as he tried focusing on the music theory test. It was hopeless. He knew all this shit, but he couldn’t concentrate; Josh’s seat across the room was empty.

Tyler glared at the back of Pete’s head, sitting at the table in front of him. Gerard was seated beside Tyler, chewing anxiously on his pencil (he hated Theory.) Frank was sitting across the room next to Patrick, and it appeared to Tyler like Pat was letting Frank cheat off his own paper.

But Josh’s seat...Josh should have been there. He really dug music. He wouldn’t have missed a test unless something was really, seriously wrong.

Tyler slammed his pencil down on the table harder than he meant to, and Gerard jumped.

“Sorry,” Tyler said in a low voice, standing up. “Bathroom.”

He exited the room as quietly as he could, before the teacher, busy at his computer, could stop him. He didn’t know where he was going exactly, but he knew he had to find Josh, if he was even still at school. Tyler didn’t know where else he would go, still being on crutches, obviously.

He checked the bathrooms on the main floor, but Josh wasn’t there. Bathroom stalls used to be Tyler’s go-to place in his old school whenever he felt a panic attack coming on or started to dissociate. Josh couldn’t be in the gym either, because the younger grades were having their physical education the same hour. Tyler checked the stairwells, and even the janitor’s closet when he passed. The hallways were mostly empty, much to Tyler’s relief, as he continued wandering them, his own anxiety and regret growing with every step. _I should have told him._

Tyler was running out of places to look when something slamming into a locker made him startle. It came from a relatively dead hallway around the corner, with an emergency exit at the end and no classrooms. To Tyler’s knowledge, most of the lockers in that section weren’t even used, because they were too far away from classes to be of any use.

When Tyler rounded the corner and saw Josh, _finally_ , his entire body was flooded with a huge sense of relief. Just as quickly as the feeling had hit him though, it turned into one of panic almost immediately.

Josh was panting for breath, and he seemed to be holding onto one of the lockers for support. Tyler saw one of his crutches lying on the ground, the source of the noise he had heard. Josh was pressing his head against the locker, his chest heaving. Even from the distance Tyler was standing, he could tell Josh was panicking.

Then Josh banged his head against the locker, his other crutch falling to the floor, and Tyler heard himself call out. “Josh!”

He wasn’t even aware he had moved from his spot at the end of the hall until he found himself standing at Josh’s side, grasping his shoulders and turning him around to face him. He was crying, his face red and patchy. He didn’t seem to see Tyler as he let his head fall heavily back into the locker.
“Josh, stop!” Tyler shook him by the shoulders before thinking maybe that wasn’t the best idea, compromising by holding tightly onto his arms to keep him still. “Stop it, Josh, look at me! Calm down!”

He was shaking, so hard it was difficult to hold him steady and upright. “Shh,” Tyler cooed as he helped lower Josh to the ground, kneeling down in front of him.

“Josh, look at me. It’s okay. I know I should have told you, I’m so sorry, I just didn’t want you to...it’s all gonna be okay, please stop crying, I...breathe like, really deep, okay? Slow breaths. You gotta stay calm. Understand?”

Josh was nodding, which Tyler took for a good sign, tears still streaming down his face. Tyler didn’t realize until that minute just how much he fucking hated to see Josh’s big brown eyes glistening from crying. It felt so wrong.

Tyler moved one hand from Josh’s arm up to his face, cupping one side of it. He was really flushed, his skin hot against Tyler’s fingers. Josh’s eyes met his for the first time since Tyler had shown up. Tyler flinched. He looked so hurt. Like a fucking puppy.

Hesitating only a second, Tyler moved his other hand up to Josh’s head, fingers resting in the newly colored hair. He tugged at it gently, petting him- only a tiny bit. I’m just trying to soothe him, I hate seeing him like this....

When Josh’s breathing started to come more regularly, and the shaking had died down a little, Tyler leaned forward a of couple inches to press his forehead tenderly to Josh’s. His face was damp and sticky. Josh’s eyes were staring intently at Tyler’s, and Tyler felt one of Josh’s hands come up and wrap around Tyler’s forearm.

“Calm down,” Tyler tried to sound authoritative and calm himself, even though on the inside he was seriously freaking the fuck out. Josh was sitting almost perfectly still now, eyes locked on Tyler.

A sudden shuffling sound caused Tyler to glance up quickly, pulling his head away from Josh’s. The hallway was empty, though Tyler eyed it warily for a moment. Josh sniffed and took a deep breath, catching Tyler’s full attention again. He let go of Tyler’s arm and rubbed at his face; Tyler let his own hand fall back down to his side.

“Sorry,” Josh’s voice was hoarse. He cleared his throat. “Sorry for that. I didn’t mean to....”

Tyler shook his head. “It’s okay, I get it. Don’t apologize. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Josh sniffed again. “How did you...why aren’t you in class?”

Tyler’s face reddened slightly. “I was...I was worried about you.”

“You were looking for me?”

“Yeah. I wanted to skip music today anyway.”

Josh laughed a little, and Tyler’s heart soared. Only for a moment though, because Josh’s brows furrowed once again.

“So...you were suspended from the team.”

Tyler paused. “Yes.”
“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I haven’t told anyone. Well, I mean, outside of school, no one knows. My family, I mean. I don’t know how to tell them, really.”

“But…” Josh shifted a bit on the floor. “You were suspended after the game, after what happened. Pete said-”

“Pete says a lot of things,” Tyler snapped before softening his tone. “It’s not your fault, Josh. Seriously, it’s not.” He sighed. “Look, you know the...the rumors about me?”

“About at your old school?”

Tyler nodded. “Yeah. Well, I guess the coach heard about them somehow, some parent complained or something. He didn’t say it, but I think he doesn’t want a bad reputation ruining the whole team or something.”

“But they were just rumors. No way would Coach kick you off for that. It’s because of what I did during the ga-”

“What happened during the game, that was just an excuse to kick me off the team, Josh. It wasn’t you, okay?” Tyler’s voice was harsh, but he wanted to get his point across. “It wasn’t you.”

Josh didn’t look completely convinced, but before he could protest, the bell rang loudly over their heads, causing them both to jump. The distant sound of students chattering grew slowly louder.

Josh grabbed at his crutches, and Tyler helped him to his feet.

“Do you want to go home now or…?” Tyler was about to reach out and steady Josh, but let his hands fall awkwardly to his side when Josh seemed to manage on his own.

“Nah, I...I don’t wanna cause any drama. Well, I mean...any more than I already have.”

That’s when Tyler realized Josh was embarrassed. He wasn’t meeting Tyler’s gaze anymore, he was actually shuffling his feet a little.

“Josh, look at me.” Tyler waited patiently until Josh glanced up at him through several loose tendrils of blue hair. “It’s okay to...to feel things. You don’t always have to be sorry about it. Not with me.”

A small light appeared in Josh’s eyes at Tyler’s words, and Tyler felt all the breath in his body rush out of him in a single beat.

He finally understood.

Staring down at his friend with blue hair and a cast covered in ugly doodles, with his skin red from crying and a snotty nose, and his eyes so, so, so brown, Tyler knew.

Oh, boy, am I fucked.

Chapter End Notes

like i mentioned, i received a lot of super SUPER nice anons on tumblr; pls don't
hesitate to drop me a message! messages and comments, things like that really keep the fire burning, yknow what i'm saying? ily
because of you i might think twice

Chapter Notes

Guess who doesn’t know the meaning of deadlines! Or release dates! C’est moi!

Yeah I’m actually really, enormously sorry about the incredibly long wait, but here at last is chapter 9! this has got to be the longest slow burn fic ever, and i’m sorry about that, too. Kiiind of...not really....

title from WDBWOTV <3

(hey what do you know, this accidentally became the longest chapter yet! cool beans!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Beebo: Lol did you see that stupid tie TJ was wearing on Sun?

J: I wasn’t at church remember. what up broken leg. don’t try cheering me up

Beebo: Cmon Joshie don’t be emo abt it. Coach won’t replace u

J: i have to use crutches for at least 2 more weeks

J: and i have to keep the cast for at least a month, probably longer

J: and then i have to “take it easy” for like half a year

J: i’m fucked

Beebo: …

Beebo: yeah man ur right, ur fucked

J: fuck u

Beebo: hey you said not to cheer you up

Josh dropped his phone onto the coffee table, letting it thump loudly against the surface and slumped back against the sofa, frowning. Jordan glanced at him from the other end of the couch.

“Don’t throw your phone like that, you’ll scratch the table.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

“Stop being a bitch baby about everything.”

One of Josh’s little sisters, Abby, interrupted from the recliner in the corner. “Don’t say that word, Jordan.”

Josh ignored her and glared at his brother. “You’re the bitch baby, shut up.”
“Stop saying that word, I’m telling Mom!”

Jordan sneered back at Josh. “Just because you’re off the team doesn’t mean you can act like a dick, it’s not my fault.”

Abby sighed. “Mom!”

Josh groaned loudly and turned the volume up on the TV to avoid his siblings and to prevent his mom coming in from the kitchen and yelling at him—inevitably she would yell at him, he was certain. Oldest sibling and all that. He always got yelled at.

It was Saturday afternoon, mid October, the first day off after Josh’s return to school earlier that week; cast, crutches, blue hair and all. People had stared and talked about him all week, half his teammates—Ex-teammates…. Josh thought bitterly—rallying around him in support that gained him unwanted attention, and the other half viciously ignoring him. And verbally attacking him, as in Pete’s case. The number of nasty looks Josh had received in the hallways that week was unbelievable. And then there was the whole school’s building excitement about the next basketball game coming up soon. It made Josh upset all over again every time he had to think about it. He had never been so ready for Saturday before in his life, ever.

Except that now his little brother and his little sister were annoying him. All Josh wanted to do was to be left alone to lounge on the couch feeling sorry for himself and watch Hilary and David battle it out on HGTV. He would list this condo, personally.

Josh’s other sister appeared around the corner from the kitchen, snacking on a bag of popcorn. “Mom’s on the phone, she says to shut up and stop yelling at each other, she can’t hear.”

“We weren’t yelling, Ashley, Josh was picking on me.”

Josh thought he showed an impressive level of tolerance as he pointedly ignored Jordan, picking his phone back up off the table and tapping open random apps as a commercial started to play. Ashley said something in a reprimanding tone, but Josh successfully tuned out what she had said, scrolling through Twitter faster than he could read any tweets. Why can’t they all hang out somewhere else and let me fucking watch HGTV without being bullied? God, little siblings are fucking goblins.

Josh shushed his siblings suddenly as Love It or List It came back on, the featured couple looking around their refurbished home in openmouthed amazement. He turned the volume up a few more notches to drown out Jordan’s protests at being shushed, when he felt his phone on his lap vibrate. Josh glanced down absentmindedly, assuming it was Brendon bothering him again, but an unknown number showed on his screen.

Hey :) Is this Josh?

Josh was so intent in studying the number that he didn’t hear the couple’s decision to love their home instead of moving to the far better semi-detached. Three dots appeared on his phone screen, and Josh watched curiously as the unknown person typed.

This is Tyler.

Josh choked on the breath of air he had just taken. Tyler was texting him. Tyler was texting him.

“Oh, God…….” Josh muttered out loud, thumbs hovering uncertainly over the keyboard.

Ashley plopped down onto the sofa between Josh and Jordan. “What is it?” she asked in a disinterested voice, tossing more popcorn into her mouth.
Josh turned away from her, leaning into the arm of the couch, and tilted his phone closer to his chest protectively. “N-nothing,” he said, sweat starting to break out on his forehead as he eyed the texts once again. Tyler wasn’t typing anymore, presumably waiting for a reply to verify that this was indeed Josh’s number. Josh wondered how he had gotten ahold of it. Sure, he had been wanting to exchange numbers so that they could text for some time now, but every time he thought about bringing it up, he chickened out. It shouldn’t have been such a big deal, Josh knew this, but asking for your crush’s number, whether your crush knows they’re your crush or not, is inconceivably harder than asking a friend or a casual acquaintance. Josh cursed silently at himself.

Things that first week back at school between Josh and Tyler...they had been different. Possibly a little strained. Josh wasn’t sure. After he had found out so suddenly from Pete- *Fuck you and your first player, Wentz* - that not only himself, but Tyler, too, had been kicked off the team, he had had a complete meltdown. Thinking back about it actually embarrassed Josh. He hadn’t meant to go off the deep end and skip class and panic out in the hallway, but that’s what had happened. And then Tyler had showed up, and that happened. Josh almost wanted to laugh at how mixed up his emotions were, at how many different emotions he had inside him recently. It was enough to make his head spin.

The whole time Tyler had been there in the hallway with him, comforting him and touching him-Josh would be lying if he didn’t admit that he thought about Tyler’s hand pressed to his face, his palm so assuring and warm against his cheek, almost once every hour, on the hour- and talking to him, it helped to ground Josh; it helped bring his entire world, spinning wildly around and out of control, back into familiar territory, back into its crooked place in his currently very messed up situation.

And the entire time that Tyler had been there beside him, all Josh could think about was how much he lo- how much he liked him. Yeah, he liked him a lot.

And it wasn’t like it was... easy for Josh to admit that to himself. That he liked, really, really, really, really liked Tyler. After all, he was just a stupid and confused twelfth grader who hadn’t had a girlfriend for all of highschool, it wasn’t like he was used to this sort of thing. A charismatic and good looking guy like Tyler, he had probably had loads of girlfriends his entire life. Maybe even boyfriends, too. Josh hoped so, at least. Or he thought he did.

While Josh had resigned himself to the fact that he lo- liked Tyler, he wasn’t certain that crush was the right word for what he felt anymore. Josh had had crushes before, and it had always been different than this. In eighth grade, with his last crush, after a bit of persuading from Brendon and Spencer, Josh had marched right up to Debby and had told her that he thought she was cute, and would she like to hang out after school. Things had moved right along, with little to no interference from his brain suggesting stupid reasons to not.

With Debby, even before she had known he had liked her, Josh’s brain hadn’t stopped him from making flirty and suggestive comments; his brain hadn’t worried about whether or not she would be scared away as a friend, his brain hadn’t warned him to play it safe in case she got freaked out. His brain hadn’t had really much of a say at all in the matter, Josh had just gone with his gut. If she liked him, good; if not, okay then, he’d try a bit harder. No sweat.

But Tyler. Tyler. With him, it was different, somehow, it had been from the start. Their friendship had already had such a shaky start to begin with, Josh was terrified of making a mistake, of messing it up somehow, of scaring Tyler away. Of Tyler realizing maybe Josh wasn’t the cool, laidback guy Tyler probably thought he was. Probably. Though Josh seemed to have a habit of trying to prove him wrong at every turn as of late.

Either way, Josh was finding it progressively more and more difficult to refer to Tyler as his crush.
Whatever the fuck *that* meant.

Josh huffed annoyedly, all these thoughts gnawing at his mind and making him irritated. The TV was too loud now. He half muted it and tossed the remote control onto the coffee table with a loud thud.

All three of Josh’s siblings protested at one time, and Josh threw his hands up in frustration. “God, just leave me alone!” He pocketed his phone and grabbed a crutch, limping through the room and out the door to the front step, where he collapsed on the pavement.

There was a gentle breeze, and though the leaves were starting to change color and the nights were getting colder, the late morning sun was still warm enough to keep Josh from freezing in his gym shorts. Josh hoped briefly that the neighbors weren’t looking. Yikes.

He decided that he didn’t care about the neighbors anyway and shoved his crutch to the sidewalk beside him, glaring at it for good measure. Then he pulled out his phone again, turned it on, and stared at the texts from Tyler.

After the initial shock, Josh would have replied in a fumbling heartbeat to the texts, relieved beyond belief at *not* having to be the one to ask for Tyler’s number. But right now, Josh held back, uncertain.

The problem was, Josh felt *guilty*. He felt *guilty* for helping to perpetrate the rumors about Tyler before he even knew him, he felt *guilty* for accidentally insulting Mikey and for not having made up yet, he felt *guilty* for the bets that were placed on him and Tyler, he felt *guilty* for the rivalry that split the entire team-heck, the entire school- in half, he felt *guilty* for ruin Tyler’s chance at making good on the team and possibly getting a scholarship or whatever else it was he wanted, he felt *guilty* for fucking *masturbating* to him, he felt *guilty* for Tyler feeling like he had to fix everything because he thought it was somehow his fault in the first place, because *goddammit* it wasn’t Tyler’s fault.

And it was obvious Josh had made Tyler feel uncomfortable that week. Josh knew it. When he had had that breakdown in the hallway, and Tyler had comforted him, Josh knew that he had let too much emotion show on his face. *You don’t always have to be sorry,* Tyler had said to him. *Not with me.* Those last words had resonated in Josh’s mind, so loudly that he hadn’t been able to help the look of pure adoration that had escaped from his chest and danced across his face. He had let too much fondness leak its way into his smile, into his eyes, he had known even then, he could feel it. It would have been the perfect moment, Josh thought, as perfect as it could have been directly after having a panic attack, except for that after Tyler’s words and Josh’s reaction, Tyler had pulled back.

Sure, the bell had just rung and the other students would have found them if he hadn’t moved, but Tyler had stepped away from Josh almost immediately, suddenly seeming unwilling to make eye contact with him anymore. He had barely muttered a goodbye before dashing off down the hallway, leaving Josh alone with his worries once again.

If that had been it, Josh might have been able to overlook that now and reply with charisma and ease to Tyler’s texts. But it hadn’t been just the one time. It had been *all week.*

And, *yes*, Josh understood that they “weren’t friends” to everyone else, and that they couldn’t let their guard down at school, there were too many people around. But in passing in the hallways, even when surrounded by his friends, Josh had always glanced out of the corner of his eye at Tyler, ready and willing to make knowing eye contact with him, maybe share a quick smile if Brendon hadn’t been looking. But Tyler had always kept his head down. And during lunch on Tuesday, Tyler had been right in front of Josh in line, but he hadn’t even turned around, not even a little bit, even though
Josh had muttered hi when he had first gotten into place behind him. Josh had hoped that maybe Tyler hadn’t heard him. And when Josh’s mom had picked him up Wednesday afternoon, they had past Tyler in the parking lot. No one had been around to spy on them, and Josh had waved a bit as they drove past; but Tyler had been looking the other way. Purposefully, Josh had then feared and was now certain.

And in music class on Thursday afternoon, the instructor had asked Tyler to hand out papers for the pop quiz. As he had set Josh’s paper down on his desk, Josh had glanced up quickly, smiling ever so slightly, but Tyler had turned away before their eyes could have met. And on Friday, when there had been a fire drill, the most Tyler had acknowledged Josh had been to push the door open wider than normal so that it swung open a moment longer, allowing Josh to get through with his crutches. Tyler hadn’t even looked back to check on him.

And of course, being a school week, Josh didn’t expect Tyler to stop by his house after school very often. Not even Brendon or Spencer were able to drop by that week. But then, Josh argued to himself, they had a reason: the coach was apparently, according to Spencer’s texts, cracking down on the team a lot harder now that two of the best players were off it. The next game was scheduled for the end of the month, and Coach said that they had a lot of progress to make before then. But Tyler- which was more or less Josh’s fault, Josh couldn’t help reminding himself- was off the team; he didn’t have an hour long practice every day after school. On top of that, Tyler lived quite literally only two blocks away. And only last week, he had seemed more than happy to stop by and say hi. So, what the hell had changed?

Josh eyed the simple texts once more, as if staring hard enough would give him answers to all of his questions. Twenty minutes had passed since he had received the first text. Josh imagined Tyler, only a mile away if that, in his own house in the same neighborhood, maybe sitting on the front step, too. Maybe he was eyeing his phone anxiously, waiting, just like Josh was doing. Josh wondered if he had told his parents about being off the team yet. The thought made Josh a bit uneasy. He really hurt for Tyler.

But then again... Tyler had been the one to text him, hadn’t he? Of course he had. Josh chewed on his lip studiously, convinced sending a simple message via phone should not be this fucking hard. If anything horribly wrong had happened between them, due to Josh’s apparent reveal of more-than-bros emotion, or the drama with the team, or God knows what else- if Tyler didn’t feel as warmly about Josh now as he used to just a week ago, then he wouldn’t have gone to the trouble of figuring out Josh’s number and sending him a text on Saturday morning in the first place. Right?

Josh decided his reasoning was sound enough. If he acted like nothing was wrong, (Besides, oh, you know, getting yourself and your new best friend kicked off the team and breaking your damn leg and several friendships at the same time….) then maybe nothing was wrong after all. Maybe he had just been reading Tyler wrong all week. Maybe Tyler had only been doing what he had thought Josh had wanted him to do- act like they weren’t friends, keep up the appearance of high school rivals. Of course! That was why Tyler had come off as so distant that week. It must have been.

Taking a deep breath of the crisp, late morning air, Josh hit reply.

Tyler had fucked up.

Bigger than he had ever fucked up before in his entire life- yeah, okay, sure, he wasn’t thirty years old or anything, he was still pretty young. Tyler was certain he’d fuck up a whole lot more later on down the road, but throughout his seventeen years of life, this was the biggest fuck up of all fuck
ups, ever, hands down, no competition.

Tyler had fallen in love.

And Tyler had absolutely no fucking idea what to do about it.

He paced quickly back and forth in the hallway outside the doorway to the sitting room, chewing on his lip and his phone heavy in his pocket. Josh hadn’t replied yet. It had been exactly twenty-eight minutes (and forty-one seconds), and Josh still hadn’t replied yet. He had a broken leg, cast, and crutches for Christ’s sake, what the hell could he do on a Saturday morning beside mess around on his phone? And Tyler knew Josh had seen his texts, the Read notification had glared up at Tyler from his phone screen before he had turned it off angrily and shoved it in the pocket of his sweat pants.

Maybe he’s mad at you. Shut up! No, he isn’t. He was the one who insisted on acting like we’re not friends, he wanted you to ignore him- wait, so you admit that you were ignoring ignoring him then...? Like not just pretending, you were actually ignoring him...? Tyler continued to stalk back and forth down the hallway, mulling the incidents of the past week over in his head. He knew the exact moment that things had started to go downhill, because he knew the exact moment that he had realized he was in fucking love with his best friend- Wait, is Josh my best friend? Fuck, he is, isn’t he? Tyler had had a crush this entire time, and he hadn’t even fucking realized it until it had turned into love. Wow, that’s sappy. I hate myself sometimes.

Tyler knew it was probably a pretty big statement for a senior in high school to make, but god be damned if he didn’t make it anyways. Josh’s first day back at school, when Tyler had found him in a mess on the floor in that deserted hallway, face splotchy from crying, freshly dyed blue hair, crutches, and all. When Tyler had pressed their foreheads together, and Josh had grabbed onto Tyler’s forearm like it was an anchor and stared so deeply, so completely into Tyler’s eyes that Tyler had thought he was physically, literally going to drown- that’s when he had known. High schooler or not. That’s the second he had realized what a total idiot he was for not recognizing his feelings sooner. And it had all just hit him so fast, he hadn’t known what to do, how to react, and, Tyler feared, he had reacted rather badly.

Ignore Josh, ignore the problem, right? It was a cowardly way out, Tyler had known this as soon as he had dashed off and left Josh in the hallway as the bell had started to ring, but come on, can you really blame him? Tyler had justified it a bit by recalling Josh’s idea of keeping up the appearance of rivals to protect themselves from their friends and uphold their reputations they supposedly had in the high school scene. Not that mine is all that great right now, anyways, but...the point is valid...somewhat....

And so Tyler had ignored Josh, had done so all week quite successfully; but on Friday night when Gerard had invited him out to the movie theater, as Tyler had been sitting there in the dark, sandwiched between Mikey and Frank, he had been terrified to discover that he wasn’t paying an iota of attention to the movie, because he was too busy feeling utterly, utterly alone and depressed. Love was scary like that.

He fucking missed Josh.

That’s it, that’s all there was to it. Tyler missed his best friend, he missed his crush, he missed the guy he kinda fucking loved with all his young heart, and, well. Tyler wasn’t willing to go through another week like that one.

Tyler’s mind had churned during the rest of the movie, quickly devising his next course of action in Operation Get-Josh-Back. During the end credits, while Gerard and Frank had been excitedly
discussing alternative motives of the antagonist, Tyler had peaked at Mikey’s phone as he had quickly typed in his passcode and began texting someone (Tyler had noticed with mild interest that Mikey had stealthily tilted his phone so that Tyler could no longer see what, or who, he had been texting.) But only with mild interest though; Tyler had had a lot of bigger, more important things on his mind. Like remembering Mikey’s passcode until they had all walked to the McDonald’s across the street to get apple pies as a late night treat, and Mikey had gone to get refills for everyone, and Tyler had thrown his plan into action, seizing the opportunity to sneak Mikey’s phone off the table and scroll through his contacts.

He had still had Josh’s number listed. It had taken Tyler a bit longer to find it than he had hoped, because Mikey (or Gerard, Tyler rather suspected) had changed the name to Butt-hole. Thankfully the picture hadn’t been changed, and Tyler had stealthily added the number to his own phone before Gerard or Frank had spotted what he had been doing. They had still been arguing over ulterior motives.

So it had been sneaky, and maybe even a little bit lowdown of Tyler. So that’s love. So what.

By any account, that’s how Tyler had ended up that Saturday morning, breaking a mall outing with Mikey in favor of furiously pacing the front hallway in his pajamas, counting the seconds it took Josh to reply back, and overanalyzing everything for the sixth (or is it seventh now?) time.

Tyler continued to tread the same invisible path as he muttered to himself, going over again the possible reasons why Josh still hadn’t replied. After another agonizingly long minute of silence from his phone, Tyler dug it back out of his pocket and tossed it onto the carpeted steps and wandered into the living room. God, he had to clear his mind and calm down a little. This was driving him crazy.

The radio was on, and his mom was sitting on the couch and leaning over the coffee table, pieces of colored paper scattered everywhere before her, scissors in hands. Since moving to Worthington, his mom had found a job as an elementary school teacher’s aide, and so far she was taking the job very seriously. Tyler eyed the red and green and orange leaves she was cutting out, the extra scraps of paper scattering across the floor.

“Oh, hey, Ty,” she said, glancing up. “Hey, are you doing anything? Wanna help cut some leaves?” Tyler moved to the edge of the couch as she finished another leaf. “I’ll draw them if you cut them out for me, hm? These scissors are too tiny.”

Happy for a distraction, Tyler perched on the arm of the couch and took the scissors his mom handed him. He noted with interest that the dark blue stripe of hair dye was still visible on his wrist. That stuff really did take a long time to rub off. He wedged the small pair of scissors onto his fingers and retorted, “That’s because these are for like, five year olds, Mom.”

His mom nodded. “Nine year olds, but you’re right. We lost our scissors during the move, I think. Might be in Madison’s room somewhere. Your father was helping her get the duct tape off the dresser last night. You know, I don’t think taping those drawers shut during the move was a good idea, your dad is smart, but I don’t think that that was one of his better ideas—”

“Mhm,” Tyler hastily chopped at the paper his mom handed him, only half listening to whatever it was she was saying. He couldn’t remember. He was too busy straining to hear if his phone had gone off with a notification out in the hallway.

“Hey, mom?” Tyler interrupted, if only with slight hesitance. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure, honey, what is it?”
Tyler let one leg dangle off the couch, toeing at the scraps of autumn colored paper splayed across the floor, eyes down. “Mom, did you...when you were a kid, I mean, like me, like in high school, right...did you ever have like...did you ever get a crush on someone? On a friend?”

His mom didn’t look up, just continued tracing a new leaf onto an orange sheet of paper as she replied. “Oh, I probably did, at one time or other. I had a lot of crushes on the older students, when I was a freshman.”

“Yeah, but did you ever like, get a crush- a really, really bad crush, like a I-want-to-spend-all-my-time-with-you-forever crush, on a friend?” Tyler chewed his lip anxiously. So that’s how he felt about Josh, huh? It felt so...exuberant, saying it out loud.

Tyler’s mom didn’t respond right away, and Tyler felt his cheeks starting to pinken, so he quickly continued talking, trying to make his mom understand. “It’s like, I didn’t really care about h- I mean, um...I didn’t care about them that much, at first, but then we started talking, or I don’t know, it just happened, and we became friends and stuff and now like...I have a couple other friends, you know, and I really, really like them, obviously, but when I hang out with them, it’s like I just wish J- I mean, I just wish that this other friend of mine was there, too, you know? But like...it’s kind of complicated, because h- their friends don’t really like me, so we can’t be too friendly in front of the other kids at school, you understand? And like, I was feeling really weird about it all for weeks until recently, like just this past week, and I realized why I had been feeling that way, and it’s ‘cuz I like like h- them. You...know? Kind of?”

Tyler’s mom finally set down her pencil and smiled slyly up at him, and Tyler groaned, his face a proper shade of tomato red now, and he grabbed a pillow off the sofa, burying his face in it. “Mooooooooooooom ....” He whined.

She laughed suddenly, lightly, and patted his knee. “Oh, Tyler, sweetie, I’m not making fun of you, I’m sorry. C’mon, put the pillow down. So you like this girl, hm?”

Tyler’s voice was muffled from behind the pillow. “More or less.”

“More or less....”

A few seconds with only the radio playing, and Tyler peeked out from behind his pillow. His mom was tapping her pencil against her thigh, staring intently out the window.

After another second, Tyler prodded, “What should I do? What did you do?”

“Well, honey, believe it or not, I wasn’t very popular in high school, I didn’t make many friends.”

“Well, honey, believe it or not, I wasn’t very popular in high school, I didn’t make many friends.”

“Oh.”

“I had a lot of crushes, sure, but the only one I can ever recall having on a friend, well- truthfully, that was your father. I’m sure that’s not the kind of advice you’re looking for. And that’s not the kind of advice I’m offering, either.” She poked Tyler’s foot with the pencil, smiling. “You hear me? You’re not allowed to even think about getting married until you’re at least thirty-five.”

Tyler groaned again and retreated behind his pillow. “Moooooooo.” Thinking about marriage and his crush on Josh at the same time made his face level up another ten shades of red.

His mom laughed lightheartedly and reached out to pull the pillow away from him. Tyler clung onto it tightly, until she stopped pulling and just shook her head at him. “I can’t tell you what to do in this
situation, sweetie. Feel it out for yourself, you’ll know what to do. And if you do decide to tell your friend, even if they don’t feel the same way, if they really are your friend, I’m sure they’ll understand.”

Tyler tossed the pillow aside and made a pouting face, resting his cheek on his palm. “I don’t know, I just...I don’t wanna mess anything up…. You know?”

Tyler’s mom smiled sweetly at him. “I do know, Ty. I felt the same way with your dad. I haven’t heard you mention her before, though. Who is she?”

Tyler squirmed uncomfortably and shrugged. “Oh, you know, just a kid in my grade. We share the same classes.”

“Is she a friend of Gerard’s? I like that boy. He’s so polite.”

“They don’t know each other that well. Mikey knows them a bit.” Tyler was starting to doubt the security of this plan. Maybe he shouldn’t have said anything.

“I’m so glad you’re making friends here,” his mom picked up a new sheet of paper and began scribbling another leaf onto it. “You can bring her around sometime, just to hang out or something. I’ll make you guys some pizza rolls.”

Tyler snorted. “Maybe.” As an afterthought he added, “I do like pizza rolls.”

Tyler’s mom laughed. “Think about it, hm? Don’t be shy about it all, love.”

Tyler was about to retort that he was not nor never will be shy about having a crush, but just then the basement door crashed open in the hallway, and the excited chatter of Jay, and some of his friends sounded in the kitchen, and the pantry door also crashed open.

Tyler’s mom sighed heavily. “Would you please go and tell your brother not to eat the jello in the fridge? It’s for the kids in my class. If you guys want jello, I can make a new batch, but tell him not to touch what’s in the fridge!”

Tyler rolled his eyes dramatically but pushed himself off the couch anyways to go yell at his youngest brother. He passed the foot of the staircase and was almost to the kitchen, his mouth already opening to yell at Jay not to touch their mom’s jello, when suddenly there was a quiet message alert from his phone resting on the step. Tyler tripped over the legs of his sweat pants he backtracked so fast, grasping frantically for his phone and unlocking it, sinking onto the steps to read the new text.

Hey, it’s me

Josh was still typing as Tyler stared hard at his phone, the screen only a few inches from his nose.

How did u get my number??

Tyler’s fingers flew to respond before he could think otherwise.

Got it off Mikey’s phone

He quickly added:

Hope that’s OK

He doesn’t suspect anything
Tyler chewed on his lip, watching the three dots as Josh, somewhere in his own house, maybe lounging on his bed listening to music or playing video games, typed a reply.

*It’s chill. I was gonna give it 2 u anyways*

*What r u doing?*

Tyler’s heart skipped a beat at the question. So maybe Josh *was* okay with...with everything. With Tyler acting a bit distant that week, a bit strange. Heck, maybe he hadn’t *even* noticed. They had both been busy, after all. And now Josh was *texting him back*, and actually engaging him in a conversation. He could have just ignored Tyler’s text, an unknown number and all that, but he *hadn’t*. Sure, it wasn’t like a *huge* deal or anything, but still. Tyler could dream. Leave him alone.

*Nothing, i’m bored. Hbu?*

Not the most intricate of replies, but Tyler wanted to test the waters before *completely* diving in. He wasn’t *completely* tactless, thank you.

*Same old*

Josh was still typing, and Tyler continued to stare. The conversation was either going to die out entirely now, or else it would-

*Wanna be bored over at my house?*

“Fuck, yes!” Tyler couldn’t contain his burst of excitement as he jumped up from the steps, almost dropping his phone.

“Tyler?” His mom’s voice sounded from around the corner, slightly muffled by the wall. “You didn’t just say what I think you did, did you-”

Tyler didn’t reply, just thundered up the steps to get his hoodie from his room before hurtling himself back down, struggling to pull his jacket sleeves on without setting his phone down.

“Mom, I’m going out, I’ll be back for dinner!” Tyler waved as he passed the living room, not taking the time to stop or glance in, or to listen to his mom’s questioning response. He had a sudden concern that Jay and his friends had already finished the jello in the kitchen, since he hadn’t bothered to tell them not to, but he pushed the worry away and shoved open the front door, a light rustle of a fall breeze cooling his burning skin. Tyler only paused in the doorway for a moment to hurriedly tap out a reply to Josh’s last text.

*On my way.*

A pretty girl with waving brown hair answered the front door after Tyler rang the bell for the second time. She had Josh’s eyes. Tyler tried not to stare.

“Um...yeah? You one of Jordan’s friends?” she asked.

Tyler could see into the living room behind her; Josh’s younger brother and another girl were peering towards the door with interest.

“Oh, hey, Tyler,” Jordan said from the couch, not bothering to move. “He’s not my friend, Ash, he’s just on the team. Was on the team. Hey, what are you doing here?”
Tyler shifted awkwardly; he hadn’t been prepared for three Dun children, none of whom were Josh, to be the unofficial greeting committee the second he walked in the door. He hadn’t even been invited indoors yet, actually.

“I, uh...I was just...I came to see Josh?” Tyler stammered, glancing anxiously from one sibling to the next. He noticed a sudden look of curiosity appear on Jordan’s face, his eyebrows drawing together in a very Josh-like manner. Tyler could smell potential trouble.

He waved a hand dismissively, aiming for nonchalance. “Just for, you know. Homework. Physics project. We’re a...we had assigned partners, so....”

The girl at the door shrugged before turning and heading to the couch, where Jordan still seemed to be watching Tyler suspiciously. Tyler edged into the room and closed the door behind him.

The other girl was sitting in an armchair across the room. She smiled sweetly at Tyler, and Tyler was surprised by how identical it was to Josh’s smile. She waved towards the staircase. “Josh is in his room. You can go on up if you want.”

“Um...yeah, thanks....” Tyler stuffed his hands in his pockets as he crossed through the middle of the room, fully aware of Jordan’s eyes on him the entire time.

“Josh never does school work on the weekends,” Jordan commented, and the older looking girl, Ashley, laughed once.

Tyler stammered out, “Y-yeah, well...wait until you get McAuley for physics. He’s pretty...pretty insistent on turning in projects on ti-”

“Yawn, Josh’s friend. We don’t really care.” Tyler squinted his eyes at Ashley. Looked like Josh; a lot meaner.

“I don’t not care,” the other girl chirped, continuing to smile sweetly- very sweetly- at Tyler, and Tyler suspected her, too.

As for Jordan, he didn’t respond; he just looked Tyler up and down suspiciously, so Tyler took his chance and dashed up the stairs to safety, taking the steps two at a time. Once alone in the upstairs hallway, he breathed a sigh of relief.

Josh’s door was halfway open, and Tyler could hear the opening sequence of Call of Duty playing on repeat. Modern Warfare. Tyler couldn’t tell which one, but then again, since the move, he hadn’t really had a good chance to play his video games.

Tyler was uncertain whether to knock or to go straight into Josh’s room, so he hovered awkwardly in the doorway for a moment, hoping Josh would notice him. Josh was bent over the floor in front of the dresser, almost hidden from view by the unmade bed, trying to untangle the cords of the controllers. Or at least that’s what Tyler guessed he was doing, judging by his frustrated cursing. Tyler compromised by rapping gently on the open door and clearing his throat.

“Hey, can I come in?”

Josh jumped and turned around, glancing over the edge of the bed. He was smiling that ridiculous only-Josh-Dun-could-get-away-with-smiling-this-big smile that Tyler realized just then that he secretly adored , maybe even more than he adored pizza rolls. No, yeah, definitely.

“Hey, Ty, get in here. You scared me.”
Tyler pulled the door shut behind him and shrugged out of his hoodie, dropping it to the floor by the wall. He decided to play it cool and help himself to Josh’s bed, sprawling on his stomach on top of the sheets to peer down at Josh and the mess beside him on the floor.

Josh was utterly adorable, Tyler noticed. He was wearing another set of tight boxers, a bright red color, and Tyler wondered if he would even bother wearing pants out in public if it were socially acceptable not to. Not that Tyler minded—his thighs looked exceptionally good in tight boxers. (And now that Tyler knew that he liked Josh, he was allowed to think those kinds of things. A little bit allowed, at least. At least he didn’t have to feel as guilty about it anymore.) A wrinkled Iron Maiden t-shirt and scruffy blue hair completed his look, plus a frown of exasperation as he tugged at the cords. Tyler hid his smile behind his hands.

“So...your little bro seemed kind of...I mean, does he know about us?” Tyler voiced the tiny worry that had been lurking at the back of his mind, hoping it would also help distract him from focusing too intently on Josh’s thighs.

Josh looked up at Tyler for the first real time since Tyler had entered the room and landed stomach down on the bed. Their faces were quite close, Tyler realized in a sudden panic, and the urge to either shove his face closer or to haul himself further away hit him simultaneously. Before he could do anything stupid, Josh spoke.

“About us?” Josh smirked and raised an eyebrow teasingly, and Tyler turned beet red, going completely rigid to keep himself from doing something extreme. Like kissing him on his goddamn mouth.

“You know what I mean,” Tyler rushed on in explanation. “Jerk.”

Josh giggled, his smile literally lighting up the dim room. He shook his head. “Nah, I haven’t told Jordan much. All he knows is what he’s heard going around on the team, I guess.”

Tyler’s face screwed up in concentration. “So...he thinks we hate each other then.”

“Yup.”

“Or at least that we’re like, athletic rivals or whatever.”

“I guess.”

“And he thinks I purposefully interfered during the game to get you hurt.”

“It doesn’t matter what he thinks-”

“No, I know,” Tyler interrupted. “I’m okay, I’m just...just trying to get things straight. It’s just, if I come over a lot, he’ll start to figure stuff out, right? Would he say anything to anyone?”

Josh made a scoffing noise, but otherwise acted completely disinterested. “Who would he tell? No one on the team talks to him.”

Tyler shrugged. “That’s true, I guess. I’m just...I guess I’m just a bit paranoid, that’s all.”

Josh finally freed the two controllers from each other and sat back with a sigh. “Yeah...so...you plan on coming over a lot then, hm?” There was a hint of something in his small smile, Tyler was sure, but he couldn’t place it.

Tyler shrugged. “I mean, if you want me to.”
Josh stood up and set one of the remotes on the bed in front of Tyler in response, then clambered onto the bed next to him, taking care not to put any pressure on his hurt ankle. His bare thigh got awfully close to Tyler’s face in doing so, and Tyler froze even more solidly in horror, praying to God to give him the self will to get through this. Not that he would actually do anything, just. It would be a whole lot fucking easier if Josh would put some damn pants on.

“Problem?” Josh had settled on his stomach beside Tyler, his own controller in hand, and was looking curiously at Tyler out of the corner of his eye and through a strand of blue bangs.

Tyler stammered awkwardly for an embarrassingly long moment before waving a hand in the general direction of the television screen. “Um...what game are we...what game is this?” Tyler knew perfectly well what game it was. Call of Duty was his specialty.

Josh squinted his eyes at Tyler, but replied neutrally. “Modern Warfare 3. I need to practice, Brendon will never let me live if I can’t get past this one mission.”

Tyler must have still had a dazed look on his face, because Josh continued. “You play much? It’s fun, you’ll get the hang of it.”

Josh pushed play on the menu and started skipping through the intro scenes as Tyler tried not to fidget, one hundred and ten percent aware of how close he and Josh were lying on his bed, the sheets tangled around their legs. Josh’s arm was pressed against Tyler’s, and Tyler could feel Josh’s side swell a bit with every breath he took. God, I’m going too far...I really need to chill. Stop focusing on Josh’s body and pay attention to the damn game- oh, yeah, and maybe tell him you’re an amateur expert at any and every Call of Duty game before you have to start lying about that, too. Come on, Ty-guy, you’re not some awkward, pre-teen high school girl with just a stupid little crush- well, I mean, technically, you do have a stupid little crush and you’re being pretty awkward, too. Technically. But for God’s sake, don’t pretend that you don’t know how to play-

Josh’s hand was suddenly on Tyler’s, and Tyler startled, looking up quickly at him, but Josh’s eyes were on the controller as he pointed to the different buttons and explained what they did. He leaned his head in closer to Tyler’s as he did so; Tyler could feel his breath on his neck and loose strands of hair prickling his forehead and his shoulder pressing even more solidly into him now than before, and Tyler heard himself making surprised, unknowing sounds as Josh continued to explain the controller. Whatever. It doesn’t matter. Letting him explain isn’t a big deal, he doesn’t have to know I know....

Yeah, okay, I’m pathetic. It’s okay, I already know that, too.

“You got it? Everything make sense?”

Tyler swallowed hard and nodded, hyper aware of the warmth of Josh’s hand against his own skin-holy shit, he’s still touching me, Josh is still touching me, he hasn’t moved his hand yet, he’s not even trying to-

Josh pulled his hand away and abruptly ended Tyler’s thoughts, just in time for Tyler to refocus enough to choose a weapon and start shooting at the enemy pressing in from all sides on the screen in front of them.

It was harder than Tyler had anticipated, pretending not to be good at Call of Duty. Not only was he battling an entire rogue military force, he was battling his own overly competitive spirit as well, which was infinitely more difficult to subdue. But the proud and elevated, and slightly surprised look that appeared on Josh’s face every time he beat Tyler was totally worth it. Which was saying a lot - Tyler was really fucking competitive. But the way Josh’s eyes lit up, brighter and browner than Tyler
had ever believed was possible, that small, sideways grin- no, yeah, hard as it was, it was worth it.

They had been playing for about an hour and were in the middle of a particularly difficult aerial operation when a message alert sounded from between them, almost lost amidst the explosions and wind from the helicopter propellers coming from the screen.

“Come on!” Josh yelled, blasting an enemy soldier out of the door of a flying aircraft, oblivious to the text. “Ty, we’re losing!”

Tyler let a stray bullet hit him in the shoulder and paused to let his character revive himself, stealing a glance at the phone lying on the bed next to Josh’s elbow.

*Dude! Serious headway w Ryan, just fuckin wait till I tell u!*

A disturbingly suggestive row of emojis followed the text, and Tyler checked who had sent it with a raised eyebrow.

“Who’s Beebo?” he asked, voice lost amidst Josh’s string of curses as his character suddenly lost an arm.

“Ty, quick, don’t let him advance or you’ll lose your-”

The enemy tossed a grenade at Tyler’s character, and the entire aircraft he was on exploded.

Another message alert. Tyler glanced again at the phone as his side of the screen faded to red.

*So hows ur crush coming along?*

If Tyler hadn’t been paying attention before, he certainly was now. A wave of heat flushed across his body.

*What was her name again? it’s Sarah right, in 11th? or Jenna? or is it Tatum?*

The message alerts had finally caught Josh’s attention, too, and after hurling a grenade towards an enemy helicopter, Josh tilted his head down quickly to read the texts showing on his phone screen, just as another text came in.

*Is she a senior? oh my god is it Debbie again? tell me it's not*

Tyler could feel Josh tense suddenly, and then Tyler tensed, too, as Josh looked up, and they made what Tyler considered to be very awkward eye contact. Josh looked away just as quickly as he had looked at Tyler, snatching his phone off the bed and stuffing it under the pillow on his other side, out of sight.

In the time that they had both been preoccupied, Josh’s character had been blown up as well, and the game was reloading their mission, the relative silence of the screen compared to the previous battle sounds enormous and echoing.

Tyler shifted restlessly as muffled text alerts continued to sound.

Josh sighed heavily before laughing sheepishly and sitting up on the bed. “Um, hey, you think you could go downstairs and get some snacks maybe? I’ll just see who that is texting me and then we can replay this mission...okay?”

Tyler would have protested; one, because he liked being the one in charge, and he *abhorrered* being bossed around; and two, Josh’s siblings were still downstairs and he’d have to pass through the
living room again to get to the kitchen. But the facts that Josh still had to use crutches, one of Josh’s friends was still sending him disgusting texts about Josh’s secret crush, and the pouty look Josh was currently wearing, outweighed Tyler’s reasons for not doing what Josh had asked.

Tyler shrugged and slid off the bed to the sound of even more text alerts, and made a beeline for the door. He glanced behind him as he went; Josh was already reaching for his phone.

Tyler pointedly ignored Josh’s siblings as he treaded through the living room to the kitchen, being sure to keep his head down, though he was painfully aware of the youngest girl’s- what was her name? - eyes following him.

Mrs. Dun was at the kitchen table going through some receipts when Tyler ducked in. She looked up and smiled, then did a double take and asked, “Oh, you’re that Joseph boy, aren’t you? Your father was the one who looked after Josh’s leg! Oh, yes, I remember your face now! Hello, dear, how are you? Paying Josh a little visit?”

“Um, yeah, we’re a…we’re playing video games.” She talks as much as my mom. If Josh and I keep hanging out, I bet they’ll be best friends real f-

“Oh, not that war game I hope, it’s always so violent.”

Tyler was unsure as to which war game Mrs. Dun was referring, seeing as how most games involved war to some extent. Even Mario Kart. At least when you’re playing with my siblings. Jesus.

“Uh…no…it’s not too violent. Actually I was just coming to get some snacks, if that’s alright.”

Mrs. Dun jumped up and started rummaging through the pantry. “Of course, dear, of course, what do you guys want, some oreos?”

Tyler tried not to snatch the carton away. “I love oreos, thank you, Ms. Dun.”

Back in the upstairs hallway, arms full of oreos, cheese sticks, and ritz crackers, Tyler kicked Josh’s door open with his foot wide enough for him to get in and kicked it closed behind him.

Josh was still lounging on the bed, lying on his stomach and fiddling with a rubix cube. He looked up as Tyler dumped the snacks on the bed.

“Hey, what did you get- oh, fuck yeah, oreos!”

Tyler handed the carton to Josh, trying desperately not to stare at his ass as he did so. When Josh was lying on his stomach like that, wearing boxers like that - Oh, shit, those are really short, too, what the hell-

“Um….” Tyler coughed awkwardly, his face red, and Josh looked up at him with minor concern as Tyler stammered, “So…so who was it? Texting you, I mean. Anything…wrong?”

He didn’t mean for the tone of accusation to cling to his words, but Tyler would be damned if he knew how to control shit like emotions.

If Josh sensed it, though, he didn’t show it, just ripped open the carton of oreos and pulled a cookie out. He shrugged one shoulder as he replied. “Nah…. It was just Brendon. He was just, um…he mentioned the next basketball game, against Northpointe, I think. What is it, in two weeks? I don’t think I’m gonna go. I don’t think I can stand to go and not play, y’know? How about you?”

Josh rolled over onto his side to face Tyler still standing at the foot of the bed, his t-shirt riding up on
his stomach as he did so. It caught Tyler’s attention immediately, the visible stretch of pale, smooth
skin, his belly button, a few dark wisps of curly hair beneath it and along the line of his boxers.

“Still haven’t told your parents, then? About being off the team, I mean?”

Tyler tore his eyes away, embarrassed, and kicked at a pile of clothes on the floor. “Not yet. It means
as much to them as it does to me, I think, being on the team. I...I don’t know how to tell them, really.
And with the game coming up...I don’t know how to keep hiding it from them.”

“Your siblings haven’t ratted you out?”

Tyler shook his head. “They don’t know either.”

Josh munched thoughtfully on another oreo, shaking his head slowly. “This isn’t going to work, you
know. You and me. You got kicked off the team, and you don’t want your parents to know; we’re in
drastically different friend groups at school, and there’s nosy dicks like Pete messing about. Not only
all that, but there’s my little siblings and your little siblings, and c’mon, who can trust little siblings?
And then Brendon’s always asking me about- never mind, it’s just...it’s not going to work forever.
And if you hang around here, with me, I mean; Jordan doesn’t know how to keep his fucking mouth
shut, and Brendon and Spence like to drop by whenever they want all the time, and.... It’ll be kinda
tough. All of this, you know? You do know that...right?”

It was a lot to process, all at once. Of course, it had all been building up for a long time, Tyler
realized this, but still. It was a lot. Half of Tyler just wanted to curl up and go to sleep and stop
thinking about anything. Or maybe go home and hide in his room and not to go to school and avoid
getting into any deeper trouble with Josh and his clique by hanging out with him behind everyone’s
back, and the both of them lying to all their family and friends.

But instead, Tyler let out a quiet breath of air and slumped down onto the bed, mirroring Josh,
stretching out on his side to face him. Josh was looking at him almost as if he... as if he had been
unsure if Tyler was going to stay or not. Tyler hated to think for even a second that Josh had any
doubts about that.

It was an accident, Tyler totally didn’t mean to do it, but he reached out a finger and poked the
exposed part of Josh’s stomach. In a friends way. Friends do that. Totally.

Josh made a funny face, and Tyler giggled, grabbing for an oreo to give his hands something normal
to do before he made this weird. Or any weirder, at least. He kept his eyes focused on the cookie in
his hands as he pulled one side away from the cream, feeling Josh’s own eyes on him the entire time.
“I don’t...I know it’ll cause a lot of drama or whatever, if anyone finds out right now, but....”

Tyler trailed off and forced himself to look up at Josh. They were lying really close, and Josh’s eyes
were really fucking brown. Tyler was pretty sure that Josh was cuter than a puppy. Even a really,
really cute puppy. Definitely.

Josh was watching him aptly, lips slightly parted- yes, Tyler noticed that, okay? He was just
observing, that’s all- and Tyler struggled to find the right words to continue his thought. “Yeah, I...I
know it’s probably better if we don’t do this- whatever this is, but...honestly? I don’t think I care.”

Josh snorted and buried his face in one arm against the sheets, and Tyler suspected he was laughing.
He made a hurt face. “What?”

Josh shook his head and smiled at Tyler with- admiration? Something?

“Nothing. It’s nothing. Sorry.” Josh didn’t look all that sorry to Tyler.
Josh reached out then unexpectedly and ruffled Tyler’s hair before leaning halfway off the bed to grab something from the floor. Tyler remained still in comical surprise at Josh’s sudden show of playful affection, trying quickly to recover as Josh resettled himself on the bed. He waved a game in Tyler’s face.

“I’m tired of Call of Duty. You like Mario Kart?”

Tyler grinned and snatched the box away. “Sure. But I’m gonna beat your ass.”

Josh snorted again. “As if you could.”

“I will.” Tyler’s eyes darted to Josh’s with assertion. Just as Tyler started to fear things were going to grow awkward, and he felt a blush growing on his face—Well, fuck, that was an awful choice of words, what the hell’s my problem? - a sly grin suddenly appeared on Josh’s.

“Fine,” he said, and Tyler noted with satisfaction the challenging tone in Josh’s voice. “Prove it.”

Chapter End Notes

There should be another two chapters posted this month! I’ll aim to post the second one on or around the 25th as a CHRISTMAS PRESENT for y’all. Conveniently, the timeline in the fic is almost current with ours, so that’ll be fun, a Christmassy chapter at actual Christmas time!

It’s not for another few chapters at least, but i wanna get your guys’s opinion. Now, I’m sure there’s a careful, tactful way of phrasing this, but nobody got time for that, so, to put it bluntly, who tops and who bottoms?? I’m obv all for versatile relationships, and I def have my own opinions/preferences, but I just wanted to see what u guys have to say about...this.... ;))

Once again as always your commitment and support mean EVERYTHING to me, have i made that clear enough, they mean EVERYTHING!!!!!!!!!! Pls leave your thoughts below!!!!! <333333333
Josh didn’t go to school that Wednesday. It was the first time that he could recall being actually excited about having a doctor’s appointment.

After nearly a month, he finally had doctor permission (Tyler’s dad is the fucking best) to ditch the crutches and return to a relatively normal life.

Sure, he still had to wear the cast, and his ankle definitely still hurt a little if he put too much pressure on it all at once, but Dr. Joseph had said that that was okay and that he could go back to walking on two feet. Like humans are supposed to do.

And come on, what high school student in their right mind would complain about taking a full day off from school? Not Josh, that’s for sure.

On Thursday, Josh didn’t even mind going back to school again as much as he had originally thought he would, because he could actually walk. Fewer people stared at him in the halls, too. All in all, Josh was pretty grateful. When he walked into his homeroom that morning, he didn’t miss the smile that instantly bloomed across Tyler’s face when he looked up from his desk and noticed Josh entering- a couple minutes after the bell rang, but whatever. Josh couldn’t be bothered about stuff like that when Tyler was smiling at him like he was the best thing he’d seen all week. (Yes, Josh was fully aware how naive it was to assume shit like that, but he could have hopes, okay?)

School kept them both pretty busy, and unfortunately, separated, but Tyler was still the most pressing issue on Josh’s mind that Friday afternoon as the last bell rang. After all, it was the weekend, and all of Josh’s other buddies were way too busy preparing for the game the next week to hang out, so that meant it was a clear shot for him and Tyler to just chill. Together.

Josh had just finished stuffing his books into his locker (fuck homework, am I right?) and had turned around to make a beeline for the exit when Brendon appeared out of nowhere, hurling himself at Josh. Josh threw out an arm to steady himself against the row of lockers as he cursed loudly, shoving Brendon away.

“What the fuck, Brendon, I literally just got rid of my damn crutches! It’s like you’re trying to kill me or something. You might at least have the decency to do it on a Monday morning and not a Friday afternoon, thank you very-"
Okay, okay, drama queen, I’m sorry,” Brendon huffed out, his face beaming. He didn’t look sorry at all, not in the least. He had already changed into his sports jersey and shorts, ready for basketball practice. Josh tried not to be to too bitter about being clad in an oversized black hoodie and sweatpants and cast, and not his jersey, too.

He grimaced away the notion before tenderly testing out a little pressure on his leg, making sure Brendon hadn’t broken it all over again. Josh sent a halfhearted glare in Brendon’s direction.

Brendon was still grinning wildly at Josh with that bright, mischievous expression that only Brendon could pull off, and Josh began to grow wary. “Why do you look so happy? Stop, it’s annoying.”

“Whatever, you’re just mad ‘cause you’re not getting any from your mystery crush.”

Josh paused a moment in slight concern. He could never tell how much Brendon really knew; he was kind of hard to read. Josh decided he didn’t know much, probably, and rolled his eyes before shuffling down the emptying hallway. Brendon trailed after him; he was almost skipping. Almost.

Josh looked him up and down with amusement. “And I suppose you are getting some from your crush?” he quipped in mild interest at most.

Brendon just raised his eyebrows, face split in a toothy grin, and Josh stopped suddenly and turned to face him, his interest definitely more piqued now. “No way, dude...seriously?”

“Way, man. So I’ve been going to his house after practice like every day almost for like, the past two weeks, right, to help him with his calculus homework.” Brendon waved his fingers dramatically in air quotes around his last phrase. “And by now it’s obvious that he knows that I know that he knows that I suck at calculus, like I suck major ass at it-”

Josh was about to interrupt and remind Brendon how gross he was, but Brendon plowed on before he could.

“-and we hung out all day Saturday, and I swear to God there was like, so much sexual tension, he kept hinting around-”

“Wait a minute, Ryan was hinting around?”

“Okay, so maybe I did most of the hinting around, but either way it must have gotten the message across, because literally, dude, I swear to God, it was so hot, he-”

“Um,” Josh intercepted, only half joking. “Try and keep it PG, okay? I’m not too interested in the details.”

“But, J, I have pics!”

“No, no , oh my God, absolutely not ,” Josh frantically waved the phone Brendon had pulled from his pocket away and resumed making his way down the hallway to the front doors. “No pictures , God, Brendon, the hell’s your problem? You think I wanna see that shit?”

“Dude ,” Brendon appeared unfazed, as he usually was. “We had sex , dude, we fucked , me and Ryan! He fucking digs me, man! After like four fucking years , he actually digs me! I can’t believe it-”

“Me either.”

“Josh , c’mon!”
Josh huffed out a laugh, anxiously hoping that the few students— or teachers, oh God— still around the hallway weren’t listening to this certain conversation. “Alright, B, I’m proud of you, man, really. So you like... actually... like you did it then? For real?”

Brendon pushed the front doors to the school open as he shrugged and replied. “Well, like not like, anal or anything yet—”

“God! Okay, tact, Brendon, I don’t really feel like discussing the details of gay sex with you right now, if you don’t mind. I was trying to be tactful.”

Brendon raised his eyebrows at Josh, looking way too smug. “You were asking me if I had anal sex.”

Josh rolled his eyes so hard that it kind of hurt and headed to the front curb near the bike racks to wait for his mom to pick him up. She was still insistent on him not walking too far on his hurt leg, and Josh didn’t mind, not really. It was getting kind of cold to walk home anyways. The curb was kind of damp, and there were a few leaves stuck to the pavement, but Josh opted to ignore that as he settled himself down to wait.

Brendon remained standing and cocked his hips suggestively, his tone dripping— as per way too usual— with sarcasm. “Whatever, Joshi, you just mad you missed your chance at all this.”

Josh started laughing, half in embarrassment and half in disgust as Brendon made a thrusting motion with his hips. “Okay, okay, stop. That was a long time ago.”

“Dude, I thought we weren’t gonna talk about that.”

Josh raised his hands, his cheeks warming. “You brought it up.”

“The rules don’t pertain to me.” Brendon didn’t seem too uncomfortable— did he ever?— but he quickly changed the subject nonetheless. “Anyways— no actual sex sex yet, but listen, he literally just sucked me off during last period in that empty classroom in the basement, you know the one—”

“Brendon—”

“can’t keep his hands off of me, literally, like, dude, you have no fucking clue, Ryan gives the best fucking blowjobs ever, holy—”

“Fuck you on about, Urie?”

Both Josh and Brendon jerked around at the new voice. Pete had just come out the front doors of the school, a grimace on his face as he made his way towards them, stopping a good few yards away. “Coach says to get your ass to practice now, Urie, or you’re off the team, too. Like little Joshi over here.”

Josh shrugged, turning his attention to his phone instead. Whatever. He was getting used to Pete by now. Kind of.

Brendon sneered loudly. “Fuck you, too, asswipe.” He clapped Josh on the back and said under his breath, “I gotta run, text you later.”

“No details,” Josh reminded Brendon as he sulked off after Pete.

Josh watched the last remaining students as they collected their bikes and found their cars, the parking lot emptying quickly before him. Where the heck is my mom? Is it that hard to be on time?
C’mon, give me a break, I have a crutch! Oh, wait...well, I had a crutch. I have a cast! He sent a short text to his mom, reminding her that, oh, yeah, school’s out, mind stopping by? Please?

After another ten minutes of sitting alone in the damp, cool afternoon with no reply from his mom, Josh sighed heavily and heaved himself back up onto his feet. A dull ache throbbed up his leg, and he winced, resting most of his weight on his good leg as he started off across the parking lot.

He had only made it a block away from the school, when Josh realized that he shouldn’t have expected to be able to make it all the way home on his own. His leg really, really hurt. Dr. Joseph had told him that his leg would get tired easily and that he’d have to slowly build it back up again. But it was cold and he had been tired of sitting, and he wanted something to do. It was Friday afternoon, and who wanted to spend it waiting at school to be picked up?

There was a crunching of gravel and the sound of brakes behind Josh, and his hopes soared that maybe it was his mom, finally. It wasn’t, but when Josh saw who was peering out the open window at him from the driver’s seat, he was totally one hundred and ten percent okay with that.

“Joshua Dun,” Tyler exclaimed in a tone strikingly similar to Josh’s sister when she got mad at him. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Josh tried not to smile too big as he shrugged stupidly. “Um...walking home?”

Tyler stared at him with a disapproving look on his face, and Josh stammered on. “My mom was gonna pick me up, but she was late. I mean, I texted her and everything, but….”

Tyler raised one eyebrow.

“It was cold, I didn’t want to keep waiting!”

Tyler rolled his eyes, and Josh heard the car doors unlock. “Get in.”

Josh smirked, secretly super, super pleased. “Nah, I’m good.”

“Josh, get in the damn car!”

Josh huffed out a laugh and reached for the door, climbing into the front seat, suddenly very grateful for the blast of heat that hit his face. It was kind of freezing outside. He rolled the window up, willing it to go faster.

“Seriously, man,” Tyler was saying, pulling back out into the road. “My dad said you didn’t need crutches anymore, he didn’t say to go on a fucking joy hike.”

Josh grinned lopsidedly, a little disbelieving at Tyler’s mild outburst. “Shit, dude...I didn’t know you cared so much.”

“I care.”

Tyler’s sharp tone sounded defensive, if only a little, so Josh quickly amended his comment. “No,
The next week passed quickly, though emotionally it was a roller coaster for Tyler. The next basketball game was that Friday evening, looming closer and closer, and he had yet to tell his parents that he was off the team. To put it frankly, Tyler was terrified of how they would react. He had all
but ruined his chances of getting a scholarship, and no way could he afford college without one. It was a miracle none of his siblings had caught on yet, but Tyler wasn’t knocking it.

While one part of Tyler was anxious about being off the team because of the consequence it promised, another huge part of him simply missed playing. He really, really, really fucking enjoyed the game, and getting kicked off the team was totally unfair. Coach Anderson and everyone else at this fucking school is a douche. So with another competition coming up, and Mikey being on the team, and half the school anticipating it, it was pretty damn hard for Tyler not to get too down about being excluded from it all.

And then there was another, even more secretive and protected part of Tyler; the part that was as giddy and excitable as a kid with their first crush, and as romantic as one of those black and white Cary Grant movies his mom loved so much. The part of him that made him think of brown irises as he went to bed every night and blue hair during every lecture and test, of giggles and squinted eyes every lunch break, of colorful tattoos and pale skin spotted with freckles every time he looked out the window. Tyler had started to borrow his mom’s car to drive to school a lot more often, for the sole sake of being able to use it as a legitimate excuse to drive Josh home. (It had been working, too; every day since that past Friday, Tyler had driven Josh home, never without pulling through a fast food drive through for an after school snack. It was easily becoming Tyler’s favorite part of the day.) Any chance he could get some alone time with the boy that made him feel this good, Tyler would take it.

And then there was the flip side. There was always a flip side. The ever growing, nagging feeling gnawing away in the back of his mind, that he had to tell him or he would lose him.

But what if he doesn’t feel the same? What if I scare him away? What if we’re not friends anymore? What if he freaks out, what if he hates me, what if he laughs? Josh wouldn’t laugh at me. I don’t know that. He might. But he wouldn’t, not Josh, I know him. No. But he could double cross me and laugh. What if he’s like, ultra straight? No way, not with the whole punk thing going on. There’s straight punks, though...yeah, but he’s really... handsy with that Brendon. Ew. But even straight guys can be handsy with their best friends. Well, yeah, sure but...what if he’s homophobic? Not Josh. But he could still be like...weirded out by it...so wait, am I gay? No, I’m not like, totally gay, I’m more...you know what, it doesn’t even matter, I like Josh, end of story. It doesn’t matter who else I liked before. Or after. No, no, no after. It’s Josh. Tyler, don’t be stupid, you’re in high school, Josh is not the end all. He’s just a crush. You’ll finish school and go off to college and find a wife and never even remember him. He’s just a crush. That’s all he’ll ever be, because you shouldn’t ruin everything by burdening him with your stupid “feelings.” Don’t tell him, it’s not worth it. He’s just a crush. But I love him. Don’t say that, you like him. You’re too young to know what real love is. But...then why do I feel this way?

Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid....

Yeah. It had been an emotional week.

Finally, despite all of Tyler’s emotions fighting themselves and dragging their feet, it was Friday, and the world around Tyler had trekked on in its painstakingly normal routine. Gerard had skipped school that day for God knows what reason, and without telling Frank, apparently, because Frank had been sulking around even more than usual, muttering under his breath and kicking stray chairs in the lunchroom out of his way. Both Tyler and Mikey simply stared silently at him as he dramatically flung himself down into the seat next to Mikey.

“You finished?” Mikey asked stoically after a couple of seconds.

Frank glared over at him. “No. You have a shit brother, you know that, right.”
Mikey nodded sympathetically, and Tyler stifled a chuckle by taking a sip of his coke.

Frank picked at his lunch for a short amount of time before sulking off again, probably to hide in an empty classroom somewhere. Tyler didn’t try to stop him.

His phone buzzed, and he snatched it up quickly, a smile breaking out across his face.

J: Ur punk friend looks mad

J: he knocked my lunchbox off the table

Tyler snorted quietly, trying not to attract Mikey’s attention. He glanced up across the lunchroom towards Josh’s table. Josh was grinning subtly at him, and Tyler’s heart soared.

T: lol which punk friend

J: the short one

T: i have 2 short punk friends, b more specific

Tyler sneaked another glance in Josh’s direction and could barely maintain himself at the look of disbelief on Josh’s face.

J: HEY

J: I am not short

J: you’re just a frigging green bean

J: and I’m not a punk

J: UR the punk

Tyler was tapping out a snarky reply when Mikey’s voice made him jump.

“Who you texting?”

Tyler almost dropped his phone in his haste to dim the screen. “My- um, my mom.”

Mikey raised both eyebrows above the rims of his glasses. “You’re texting your mom? Now? What for?”

Tyler shifted guiltily, pocketing his phone as discreetly as possible when your friend’s staring you down from across the lunch table. “I dunno, I just...who are you texting?”

Mikey set his own phone down calmly and folded his hands on the table in front of him. “Tyler...what’s up with you? You seem kind of...distracted lately. Like, all the time you’re...you seem like you’re sneaking around and hiding things. We are friends, you know, you can...you can tell me stuff. If you need to.”

Tyler shrugged one shoulder, his eyes sliding across the room to Josh’s table of their own accord. Brendon had an arm slung around Josh’s shoulders, and Josh was laughing with his friends, his phone no longer in sight. Tyler tried not to glare.

Mikey glanced out across the lunchroom but didn’t seem to find anything of interest, turning back to look at Tyler.
Tyler sighed. He knew Mikey meant well, really, he did, but...this was something he couldn’t talk about...wasn’t it?

“There’s nothing to tell,” Tyler settled on saying, hands playing with the cap of his coke bottle. “Sorry if I’ve been weird lately, it’s just...um...you know, with the game and everything, I’m just...I’m a bit out of it. Sorry.”

Mikey shook his head slightly, still studying Tyler, and Tyler squirmed under the scrutiny.

A moment later and the bell rang loudly, and Mikey finally looked away. “See you later, Ty. I’m gonna go find Frank.”

He patted Tyler on the back as he passed behind him, and the light touch felt like the weight of the world, or at least like, a third of it. Tyler was starting to feel guilty as hell for hiding things from his friends, especially from Mikey. Maybe it was just his older brother syndrome coming out, but he felt like he was disappointing him or something. Whatever. Tyler brushed the feeling aside- for now- and walked as casually as possible past Josh’s table on his way out of the cafeteria.

Arctic Monkeys was blasting from the radio when Josh climbed into the front seat of Tyler’s mom’s mini van. The Worthington High School bus had just pulled out of the parking lot, packed full with the basketball team and Coach Anderson leading a victory chant- though whether or not they would win with two star players off the team was yet to be determined.

Tyler smiled over the console at him, but Josh was fairly certain that he could detect a fleeting look of disappointment on his face. Josh smiled back and knew the same look was on his own face. They both sat in silence for a minute in the empty school parking lot, No 1 Party Anthem playing in the background.

“I’m sorry,” Josh murmured. He hadn’t meant to say it, not exactly, but he had.

“Dude,” Tyler said, putting the gear in drive and rolling out of the parking lot. “Don’t start.”

Josh sighed. “No, really, man, I...have you told your parents yet? What’s going on there?”

Josh could see Tyler grimace, his eyes trained on the road ahead of them. “Nah. They’re not going to the game tonight anyways, so I didn’t see the point in telling them...yet...I’m still trying to figure out how to tell them, so. Until I have to....”

Josh watched out the window as they turned towards their neighborhood. “So, wait...you’re not going home yet, then, right? Then you wouldn’t have to tell them, they’d know .”

Tyler made a sudden, sharp turn, pulling up alongside the curb next to the basketball court and turning the ignition off.

“What are we doing?” Josh turned around in his seat to watch as Tyler climbed out of the car and opened the trunk. He pulled out a basketball.

“Come on,” he said, forcing a smile. “We might as well pass the time having fun.”

“Uh....” Josh unbuckled his seat belt but stayed in his seat. “Hello, Tyler, I can’t really play, my leg’s still fractured , you know.”
“I realize that, Josh,” Tyler said, his voice sarcastic. He smiled again, this time more genuinely, and Josh felt his own mouth starting to turn up a little, too. “We’re not gonna play a game. But I can still teach you some real moves, you know. Like how to dribble.”

Josh scoffed, but before he could reply, Tyler had slammed the trunk shut and was jogging off towards the court.

Josh couldn’t have not followed him, even if he had wanted to.

It was dark, and the temperature had dropped to an uncomfortably low degree; the street lights had flickered on almost an hour ago, illuminating the court in an unnaturally bright white, but Josh hadn’t noticed any of those things as much as he had noticed the red splotches across Tyler’s cheeks as he dribbled the ball back and forth between his legs, his jeans stretched tight against his thighs as he moved, the white cloud of air every time he exhaled, the soft grunting noises he made on occasion and the soft giggles when Josh tried to imitate some of his better moves, only to have the ball slip from his grasp and bounce away from them.

Josh had been trying to spin the ball on his finger, then transfer it to his next finger and then the next and back again, spinning it the entire process, for about the twentieth time now, only to have the ball go flying to the ground again, rolling all the way across the court and into the grass. Tyler burst out laughing as he chased after it, and Josh took the moment to catch his breath, trying desperately not to blush. Not that you would be able to notice, his face was red enough from the cold already. His fingers were kind of numb.

Tyler came jogging back, spinning the ball on his pinkie, and Josh rolled his eyes.

“Oh, please,” he complained, crossing his arms. “Fucking show off. Don’t even fucking say it, Tyler, I know, I su-”

“Dude, you suck,” Tyler’s face was split in an ass eating grin. “That’s like the gazillionth time you’ve tried to do that!”

He tossed the ball towards Josh suddenly, and Josh snatched out a hand to grab it, only to trip on his shoe lace. He stumbled a step, but managed to catch himself before falling. Again. Whoa, that’d be embarrassing as hell.

Tyler was keeling over with laughter. “Oh, my God, Josh!”

Josh threw the ball at Tyler’s head, then crossed his arms and tried to look unperturbed. Tyler managed- of fucking course - to catch the ball before it hit him.

“Josh,” Tyler gasped out in between girlish giggles, jogging up beside him and holding onto Josh’s shoulder as if he couldn’t catch his breath for laughing. Josh pouted, and Tyler wheezed. “Oh, my God, Josh, you’re so cu-”

Josh froze.

So did Tyler.

Or at least Josh thought he did. Josh’s heart felt like it was tripping, continuously, as he tried in the very short period of maybe two point five seconds to process what was- possibly- happening. Or what had almost happened.
Then Tyler was taking a step back, his hand leaving Josh’s shoulder, cold air rushing against Josh’s skin beneath his jacket. “Clumsy. You’re so clumsy, Josh.” Tyler wasn’t looking at Josh as he spoke. He took a few more steps back before bouncing the ball once against the pavement.

Josh let out a soft breath of air. He was freezing. “Yeah,” he agreed. He didn’t even know what Tyler had said, except that it hadn’t been what he had thought he was going to say, so what did it matter?

“C’mon,” Tyler said into the sudden silence, his voice high but seemingly loud in the abandoned basketball court. Josh watched the breath leaving his lips with every word. “Let’s go get Krispy Kreme, and then I’ll take you home.”

Finals. They had a lot of finals before Thanksgiving break, and projects and exams and research papers and essays due. Another two basketball games, against East Side and Slate Hill respectively; Tyler’s entire family was visiting from all over Ohio for the holiday, and he knew that Josh’s family was busy organizing a food drive for the hospital, Josh had told him so. Josh had also told him about another tattoo appointment he had to add to his sleeve (without his mom knowing, obviously), and Tyler’s dad had volunteered Tyler and his siblings to babysit his secretary’s toddlers for a week—thanks a lot, dad. Tyler was really busy, and so was Josh. It was totally normal that they hadn’t been able to hang out much since—well, since that night. And as for texting, well...who has time for that? Sure, they had texted a bit, but as Tyler’s mind had very well pointed out— they were both busy. Even now, even though it was the Saturday at the end of Thanksgiving break, and all of Tyler’s relatives had said their goodbyes and had left that morning. Even though he had found time to invite Mikey over to play video games that afternoon. Even though Tyler knew for a fact, because his dad had said so after he had visited the hospital for work, that the hassle of the food drive run by the Duns was officially complete. Even though Tyler knew Josh was spending a lazy Saturday afternoon several blocks away, playing video games, too, with Brendon and Spencer, because Josh had posted a picture on Instagram.

Okay, so maybe they weren’t currently that busy….

Tyler pulled at a strand of his hair and sighed. Excuses. A stupid, bullet point, mental list of nothing but fucking excuses, and he knew it. Pathetic. I’m pathetic.

“You’re thinking again, I can almost hear your brain churning,” Mikey stated dryly, thumbs working the remote control as he ran Tyler’s car off Rainbow Road with no signs of remorse.

Tyler punched Mikey’s arm, but it didn’t derail his car, unfortunately. “Yeah, thinking of ways to beat your ass. Rainbow Road is my specialty.”

“Then why are you losing?”

As if to further prove Mikey’s point, Tyler’s car reloaded on the screen only to spin on a banana peel. Tyler huffed disappointedly.

Mikey won the race by two laps and sat silently until Tyler had finished the course. “Look, Tyler, for real...this is like, the first time in weeks that you’ve actually answered my texts, and the first time in like, a month that we’ve hung out. And you keep turning me and Gee down when we ask you out.”

Tyler chewed his lip, eyes intently reading and rereading the score on the screen in front of them. He didn’t want to have this conversation.
“So...you wanna talk about it? Or are you gonna keep brushing off your friends and mope around for the rest of the year?”

Tyler let out a loud sigh and muted the television. The repetitive victory tune playing was getting annoying. Mikey was waiting patiently on the couch beside Tyler, his eyes studying Tyler’s face, but somehow not in a confrontational way. Tyler was grateful for that.

It dawned on Tyler then, as he glanced around his basement, the scene overwhelmingly comforting; the heat blasting from the vents and the familiar grip of the remote control in his hands, one of his favorite sweatshirts keeping him warm and sitting next to one of his best friends- why not? Why not? Why not just tell him? What harm could it do?

Tell him what? Tell him about his new friend, about Josh, about a secret crush, about his newly discovered undying love for his best friend? What?

“I….” Mikey was still watching him expectantly, and Tyler caved.

“I...I have a sort of crush...on a guy...a guy from school, we’ve been, uh...hanging out and stuff....”

Mikey nodded, looking only a tiny bit smug. Honestly, Tyler couldn’t really blame him. “So that’s why you haven’t been acting yourself lately.”

Tyler crossed his arms and squirmed. “Was I that obvious?”

Mikey barked out a laugh louder than Tyler had ever heard him make before, and he covered his mouth afterwards, though he was still smiling. “Um, yeah, I would say so. But maybe that’s just me.”

Tyler groaned. “Ugh, no...we haven’t been hanging out that much recently, for different reasons, I guess...the last time we did, I almost spilled the beans, I almost called him cute to his face , oh, God, I would have died. Like I was actually close to death-”

“Tyler, chill-”

“-and he knew it, he knew I almost said it, I’m sure he did, how could he not know? That’s why we’ve not talked much lately. Shit, shit, shit , I’ve ruined it, I’ve ruined everything , I’ve made it too fucking awkward for us to hang out anymore, that’s why-”

“Tyler, look...I don’t know who you’re talking about, but if it’s just a crush-”

Tyler hadn’t realized how much he had longed to tell someone until he had finally opened up a little- and now he didn’t know how to stop, his words rushing into a run on paragraph. “Yeah, technically, it is a crush , but it’s a really, really bad one- like, crush doesn’t even feel like the right word anymore, ’cause I like like this guy, like I really like him, and I just wish I could tell him, because who knows, maybe if I lay everything out there on the line and tell him how I feel, he’ll like me back; but at the same time, I’m terrified that he’ll freak out, and we won’t be friends anymore, which would suck major ass, because he’s the best friend I’ve ever had, and I don’t want to lose what we do have just because my dumb ass heart went and got too involved, and what if I’ve already ruined it by slipping up at the basketball court and he realized what I was about to say, oh, God-”

“Basketball court?”

“I...um....” Tyler’s brain was tripping several yards ahead of him, and he had yet to catch up. Typical. Good job, Ty. “Um, yeah, we were, uh, we were just walking home...we passed by, so we...stopped to talk for a bit, you know.”
If Mikey suspected anything, he didn’t let on, just asked harmlessly enough. “So...you gonna tell me who it is, or…?”

Tyler squirmed around in his spot on the sofa, debating. *Should I…?*

“I just didn’t realize you had made many friends at school besides like, me and Gee, and Frank. Not to be mean or anything.” Mikey added hastily.

Tyler shook his head. “No, it’s okay. I haven’t, not really, it’s just...he just kind of *happened* ...do you know what I mean?”

Mikey seemed to blush suddenly, but it was gone in the next instant as he resettled himself more comfortably against the armrest and replied softly. “Yeah. I know what you mean.”

The basement door crashed open, and Madison’s voice sounded from the top of the steps. “Hey, Tyler! Mom says it’s time for dinner, and if your friend is staying then he needs to call his mom!”

“Okay!” Tyler bellowed back annoyedly, though in part he was grateful for the end to this certain conversation; he didn’t want to make it awkward by refusing to tell Mikey who this secret friend of his was.

But thankfully, Mikey didn’t seem too bothered by the fact that Tyler was uneasy about giving names. As Tyler stood up from the couch to turn off the television, Mikey followed suit, tossing his controller onto the couch. “Thanks for like, telling me, bro. And you can be more...like, open and stuff, you know? Like you don’t have to *hide* as much as you think you do. If it’s because he’s a boy, then—”

“No, it’s not that, really, it’s just…” Tyler shifted awkwardly at the foot of the stairs. “It’s not like I want my *entire* family knowing just yet or anything, but...that’s not the biggest of deals to me.”

Mikey smiled a bit. “Good.” After a short moment, he added, “So like, don’t hesitate anymore to come to me, then, if you want. I could give you advice maybe.”

Tyler flipped off the lights, and they made their way up the stairs in the dark. “Like you know anything about secret, gay crushes on best friends,” he said teasingly.

“More than you think,” Mikey replied back.

Tyler was on the verge of over analyzing whatever it was Mikey had been alluding to, but they were having hamburgers for supper that night, and it quickly slipped from his mind.

Chapter End Notes

NEXT CHAPTER IS COMIN SOON and it's gonna be a doozy! everyone have an AWESOME Christmas alright????? LOVE U!!!!!! Send me season's greetings by leaving ur comments, thoughts, or questions down below <33333333
Happy 2017, friends!!!!!!! here's a new chapter for the new year!
the chapter title is from "Miserable at Best" bc WHY NOT make things really, really emo, am I right? Just...the whole song. I think it kinda fits for this chapter

So, I kind of have like, a problem that I wanted to like...talk to you guys about, I guess...you know? Brendon, I swear to God, I’m being serious right now-”

Brendon held his hands up in surrender, a look of shock on his face. “I wasn’t gonna say a word!”

“Shut the fuck up, you were totally thinking it,” Josh glared at his friend from across the table.

Spencer threw himself down into the booth next to Josh, setting down the tray with their burritos and tacos onto the table. “Hey, what’d I miss?”

“ Took you long enough,” Brendon grumbled, grabbing three tacos from the tray.

“I told you this Taco Bell is shit, but someone was in the mood for burritos. You didn’t even order a goddamn burrito-”

Brendon cut Spencer off by rolling his eyes with maximum attitude. Josh stifled a sigh. He had gone out after school with his best friends for a very specific purpose, and he wasn’t going to waste the opportunity just because Brendon was being...well, Brendon.

“Josh wanted to ask us for some life advice,” Brendon informed Spencer, taking a sip of Josh’s coke.

“Oh?” Spencer turned to face Josh before Josh could grab his drink back from Brendon. “What’s up, Joshie? Did your mom find out you flunked pre-calc?”

“What? No-”

“Did she see your new tattoo?” Brendon suggested. “Did she find out about the concert last month?”

“Did you crash your dad’s car? Is Debbie texting you again?”

“Did your sibling rat on you about that thing with the principal?”

“Did your dad see your report card? Or did they find out about last year when we ditched that whole week of school?”

“Oh, God, did they figure out why you were always deleting the family computer’s history when you were in junior high after I sent you that youtube video-”

Josh tried not to yell; he didn’t want the other customers in the restaurant listening in, too. “God, no, what the hell? What is wrong with you guys? No, it’s not about any of those things.”

“Oh,” Brendon looked disappointed. “Well, damn it, Josh, we covered all the exciting stuff. What
could you possibly want our advice for besides all that shit?"

Josh stuffed a bite of burrito into his mouth and took his time chewing before bothering to respond. “Look, guys, it’s about...okay, it’s about my crush, right-”

Brendon almost jumped out of his seat, slamming his fists against the table. “Dude, this is even better than your parents finding out about that video I sent you!” His voice was high with excitement, and several people at the table across the room glanced over at them.

“Yes, c’mon, Josh, spill,” Spencer joined in. “It’s been long enough, we’ve been fucking waiting and waiting for you to finally-”

“Um, I don’t recall telling you about my crush, Spence,” Josh pointed out.

“We both know that you knew big-mouth Brendon would tell me about it the second after you told him.”

“Hey, I object!” Brendon said.

“Shut up,” Spencer dismissed him and nudged Josh’s shoulder. “So...about your crush, Josh...?"

Josh took a deep breath, trying to calm the nerves that had been going haywire inside of him for weeks, ever since that night. The last real time he and Tyler had hung out. The night he had thought, for one glorious second, that Tyler had actually liked him back.

“It’s, um...it’s kinda complicated.”

“Please don’t make me twist your arm,” Brendon huffed.

“Don’t make him do it,” Spencer advised.

Josh struggled to find the right words to explain without revealing everything. “Basically, I’ve liked this friend of mine- you don’t know them- for, God, it’s been months now, I guess. I like them. I doubt they like me. I think I kind of freaked them out a couple weeks ago, I don’t know how exactly, I guess I just...I guess I was too obvious or something, because it feels like we’ve been ignoring each other for a couple weeks now, since Thanksgiving break. And...I just don’t know what...like, what to do. I feel like I need to do something.”

“Mhm,” Brendon had his hands folded on the table in front of him, tacos forgotten, nodding his head and looking very thoughtful. “What are your intentions, Josh?”

Josh tried not to blush. “What?”

“Like, your end goal? What do you want from this crush? Do you wanna just like, go on a couple old fashioned dates- we all know how conventional you are- or do you want an official girlfriend, or do you just wanna get some-”

“No, hear me out! I’m trying to help. After all,” Brendon leaned back in his seat looking way too smug. “I’ve had quite a lot of success lately in the romance department. With Ryan.”

“Yeah, we know, we know,” Spencer voiced Josh’s thoughts. “You’ve told us all a million times. Please spare us.” “I just...I don’t know what I want exactly, I just know that I like them, and I wanna know if they like
me back. Without ruining our friendship.” Josh added, in case Brendon needed verification on that.

“Well, does she already have a boyfriend? Does she- did she- hang out with you a lot?” Spencer helped himself to a sip of Josh’s drink, too, and Josh didn’t even bother trying to stop his friends anymore.

“Well, no- about the boyfriend, I mean,” Josh said. “Not that I know of. They never mentioned anyone else. And we hung out like...a lot...after school, all the time. Except not lately, you know.”

“Oh, shit!” Brendon exclaimed suddenly, and both Josh and Spencer jumped.

“ What? ” Spencer asked annoyedly.

“I’ve got a plan!” Brendon’s eyes were gleaming in a definitely-not-good way that Josh knew way too well.

“I don’t know, B.”

“You haven’t even heard my plan yet!”

“I don’t have to to know that it’s probably a little crazy and not at all lowkey, which is what I’m trying to be.”

“It’s not crazy, it’s actually a totally chill and tested method. It’ll work, for sure.”

Josh looked to Spencer, and Spencer shrugged. “It might work. He is with Ryan, after all.”

“Exactly! Thank you, Spence! You boys need to pay attention to daddy!”

“Ugh, okay, we will listen to your plan,” Josh conceded. “But only if you promise never to call yourself that again.”

“Yeah, we’re eating,” Spencer added.

Brendon ignored them both and elaborated on his plan. “Okay, Josh, listen to me. What is the big annual social event that happens every year at this time, before Christmas break? What is the announcement every teacher has been making at the end of every class for the past week? Hm? Ring a bell?”

Josh started to fidget nervously, glancing over at Spencer. “Um...yeah, the, uh...the Christmas junior-senior prom...? I don’t get it, what does that have to do with-”

“Don’t be stupid, J! This is the best idea I’ve ever had, and that is saying a lot, because- let’s be real here- I always have good ideas.”

“ What, Brendon?”

Brendon leaned over the table and lowered his voice, as if Josh’s secret crush may be hiding somewhere nearby, eavesdropping. Josh let his eyes drift over the other people in the restaurant for a brief moment- just in case.

“This is absolutely foolproof,” Brendon was saying, way too excited about all of it, in Josh’s opinion. “So there’s the prom. So there’s a dance. So your secret crush is sending mixed signals. So? Ask someone else out with you.”

Josh eyed Brendon silently, and Spencer waved an irritated hand in the air. “ So?”
Brendon rolled his eyes heavily and muttered something under his breath. “So. Voila! Josh’s mystery crush sees him at the prom with another girl, Josh completely ignoring said crush, and she either cracks and admits her feelings for Josh, or on the extreme off chance that she doesn’t find my homeboy Josh’s attentions flattering- well, then nothing happens. But that’s not likely, I don’t think, not from what you’ve been sayin, J.”

Josh was already shaking his head before Brendon had finished talking. “No, no way, that’s not a good idea. I don’t think so, Brendon. Maybe it’s your style or whatever, but it doesn’t feel right for me, I don’t think I should—”

“Aw, c’mon, J, there’s no excuse not to at least try it! What can it hurt? You don’t even have to wear your damn cast anymore, you seriously have no excuse not to go to the dance, so why not go with my plan?”

“Hey, yeah, B’s right!” Spencer interrupted, shaking Josh’s shoulder suddenly. “He’s totally right! If this girl doesn’t dig you, then nothing’ll happen, she won’t care you took someone else to the prom. But if she acts weird at all, even if she doesn’t call you up at midnight to admit her undying love for you or whatever, then it’s still an obvious sign that she probably likes you! This plan can’t go wrong!”

“But—”

“Look, I’ll even get a girl for you,” Brendon said, pulling out his phone in a dismissive gesture, as if that was the biggest of Josh’s worries.

“What? No, wait; stop, Brendon, don’t do that,” Josh tried to stretch across the table and grab Brendon’s phone, but Brendon leaned back out of reach, fingers tapping away.

“Josh, my dude, chill. This is the only way for you to know, it’s the logical next step,” Spencer nudged at Josh’s half eaten burrito in front of him. “Just chill, eat your burrito. The prom’s next Friday, so you have a whole week to prepare yourself.”

“But…” Josh said miserably, picking up his burrito and eyeing it disdainfully. His appetite was gone. “I’m not so sure...are you guys sure this’ll work? Is this actually a good idea? What if—”

“Ha!” Brendon exclaimed triumphantly, still tapping at his phone. “I just texted Jenna, she says- and I quote- ‘Josh Dun? That cute jock with the tats and blue hair? Totes!’”

Josh blushed a deep shade of red, slightly horrified. “Brendon! For real? Did you have to text her already? God.”

“What?” Brendon pouted at Josh like this wasn’t all his damn fault. “Don’t you like Jenna? She’s hot.”

Spencer whistled and elbowed Josh. “Dude, she’s legit the hottest girl in school.”

“What’s the deal?” Brendon added, disinterested. “She’s not your secret crush, is she?”

“What? No-”

“Then no problem! Look, she totes wants to go with you, so what are you crying about? I just solved your problem for you, you’re welcome. You should be buying me lunch.” Brendon leaned back, grinning smugly.

Josh spluttered, disbelieving. “I am buying you lunch!”
“Well, then win-win.”

Brendon started to ramble on to Spencer about the test he had flunked the other day, while Josh blinked down at his burrito, brain churning quickly, feeling as if he had been cheated somehow.

He had a very bad feeling about this.

A car horn sounded outside, and Tyler tripped down the stairs, buttoning his suit jacket while trying to pocket his phone at the same time. His mom appeared in the hallway.

“Tyler! Your friends are- oh, there you are!” She beamed, looking him up and down. “You look so handsome! You look just like your father when he was your age. Chris, come here, doesn’t he look handsome?”

Tyler’s dad came out of the sitting room and leaned in the doorway, nodding. “Ty, you look great, son. You’ll knock her off her feet.”

“Dad.”

Jay came running in from the kitchen to stand behind their father, and Madison clambered down the stairs behind Tyler, bumping into him. Tyler sighed loudly. “Guys, you don’t all have to make a big deal about it, it’s just a dumb prom—”

“Mom met Dad at their graduation ball!” Madison suddenly felt the need to remind Tyler, straightening his tie from behind him and patting at his hair. “This one strand won’t stay down, honestly, Ty, did you even—”

“It’s fine—”

“Didn’t you throw up last prom?” Jay mused.

“Shut up!”

“Now, Tyler,” Tyler’s mom began, and Tyler sighed, hopping down the last two steps to the floor, away from his sister’s reach. “Make sure to be polite to the teachers, maybe try to socialize with some new people, make some new friends. If someone asks you to dance- you know girls sometimes do that nowadays- be polite and say yes, or just- don’t be rude about it, honey. And don’t slink around outside the building, alright, God knows what types could be at that public school. Just be safe, alright? Call us before you leave, remember to be home by eleven. And be sure to thank Gerard for giving you a ride, okay, sweetie? Oh, and if you find out about Zack’s plans changing or anything, and he isn’t going to spend the night at his friend’s house after the prom, let us know when you call, you might need to drive him home, too. Okay?”

Tyler had been nodding the whole time. He knew it all already. “Okay, okay, I will—”

“Don’t forget about your brother, I don’t want him stuck at that school overnight, you hear me?”

“Yeah, I won’t forget.”

The car horn sounded again, three times in a row. Tyler bolted for the door.

“And!” Tyler’s mom added, following him over and straightening his tie herself, too. “If you do much dancing, you dance like a gentleman, you hear me? Like a good, Christian boy. None of this
modern dancing that you see on television—"

“Mom!” Tyler exclaimed, horrified.

Tyler’s dad chuckled. “Kelly, I don’t think that’s gonna be a problem with Ty-guy, he’s a good kid. I’m more concerned about Zack.”

Tyler’s mom ignored his dad’s last comment. “I know Tyler’s a good kid, dear, but I’m just reminding him! You never know all the types at these kind of schools. And no alcohol, Tyler. Don’t let me find out that you’ve been drinking—”

“They don’t even have alcohol there, Mom, it’s a high school. That’s illegal.” Tyler leaned forward and quickly kissed his mom on the cheek before pulling the front door open. “Don’t worry, Mom, I’ll be fine. Bye, guys! See you later!” He dashed out the door and down the driveway to the road before his mom could stop him again.

It was dark and cold, and the sky was covered in heavy gray clouds; Tyler had heard on the news channel earlier that it might snow, and he shivered, hoping it would hold off for a couple more days. Once it started snowing in Ohio, it never liked to stop.

Tyler climbed into the back seat of Gerard’s car, an old looking Subaru that made funny but concerning noises every three minutes. Tyler was used to it by now, but one thing he had learned in the past few months was to always buckle the seat belt if Gerard was behind the wheel.

Mikey was in the back seat, too, drowning in a suit that was several sizes too big for him and wearing a grimace on his face.

“It’s Gerard’s old one, mine was too short,” Mikey said in greeting to Tyler, already in defense to whatever mild, joking comment Tyler might have been about to make. Frank waved hello in the rearview mirror from the passenger seat at the exact moment that Gerard hit the gas, before Tyler had even fully closed the car door. They sped out of the neighborhood and down the road towards the high school.

Frank had made a date last minute with some new girl at school, Lindsey or something, and Gerard had been insisting for the past month that he was not going as anyone’s date, though Tyler knew that he was very chummy with a guy in their class named Bert, who was always getting on detention and who never sat or talked with anyone at all during the school day, even Gerard, who occasionally claimed that they were best friends, which in turn always pissed Frank off. When and how Gerard had gotten to know Bert, Tyler didn’t know.

As for Mikey, he was going stag, like Tyler. Tyler didn’t understand this; during the past week alone, two different girls had come up to Tyler and asked him about that shy guy with the glasses he hung out with. Tyler had excitedly told Mikey of this after each incident, but Mikey had just brushed it off, saying he wasn’t interested. But now, eyeing him sideways in the back seat, Tyler didn’t miss the way that Mikey had neatly combed his hair that night, and there was definitely a strong scent of cologne that everyone in the car seemed to be purposefully ignoring, and Tyler was one hundred percent certain that the smell was coming from Mikey. He’d have to keep an eye on him during the evening.

The high school, all lit up and beckoning in the cold, dark night loomed into view as they rounded the final corner, and Tyler felt that painfully familiar dread wash over his insides once again. He’d been feeling that way a lot lately, if he was being honest. And he’d be lying if he didn’t admit that it was in direct response to an absence from...well, from Josh. The few half-assed texts they had sent back and forth over the past weeks simply weren’t enough compared to all the time they had started
spending together. Tyler had even started walking to school again, despite the growing cold he despised so much, just so he could spare himself the bitter disappointment when Josh would turn down a ride. He knew he would, and he wanted to avoid that kind of awkward confrontation as much as possible. Not a single night went by where Tyler didn’t curse himself for slipping up in the basketball court.

But then again, Tyler consoled himself, if he treaded carefully enough, he might be able to mend things. Nothing had been officially or severely severed, it had just been a little slip up. That’s all. Once the rush and craziness of the holiday season passed, and the new semester at school started, Tyler was more than hopeful that he and Josh could slowly start hanging out together again. Like they used to. Like they should.

But all those pressing thoughts were hastily stuffed into the back corner of Tyler’s mind as Gerard squealed the car to a stop in one of the last parking spaces available. They were a couple minutes late, and they could hear the muted music coming from the gym as they weaved through the parking lot towards the front doors.

Once inside the building, a couple teachers directed them down the hallway to the gym, where the doors were propped open, and Tyler was taken aback by how quickly Mikey dashed off towards the crowded gym. Frank was visibly excited, chatting away to Tyler, who had no idea what he was saying, though he did notice Gerard slink off back outside.

Some popular upbeat pop song was blasting way too loudly from a small stage that had been set up in front the of gym’s changing room’s door, with a DJ that looked half asleep. He looked vaguely familiar, maybe one of the kids that Josh’s group hung out with occasionally. Joe or something, Tyler didn’t know.

There was another table nearby with snacks and punch, and a few teachers and chaperones milling about the edges of the room; Tyler spotted Coach Anderson trying to dance- hopefully as a joke- and turned away quickly, embarrassed. He bumped into a random girl he didn’t recognize, who smiled briefly at him before dashing off with another student. Tyler hadn’t realized Frank had left.

Tyler officially hated proms. He had always disliked them, but that dislike had finally turned to loathing when he had- yes, Jay had been right- thrown up on his date’s shoes in eleventh grade. Tyler still had nightmares about it sometimes.

He edged towards the refreshments table, where Mrs. Hampton and Ms. Wilson, the secretary and school nurse, were helping to pour punch and keep the paper plates and plastic silverware fully stocked. Tyler grabbed a plastic cup of punch to give himself something to do and idled over to the end of the bleachers, trying to appear casual and not like he wished he would drop dead. That would be convenient.

Tyler gulped his punch and eyed the crowd of students from his relatively safe and hidden position. The gym was big enough and crowded enough that Tyler thought maybe he could make it; if he could only make it through maybe an hour and a half without spotting him among the other students, then maybe, maybe, he would be able to sneak out early and he would be okay-

Who did Tyler think he was kidding, anyways?

Just as the survival thoughts were running through his head, Tyler saw him, choking a little on his sip of punch.

Josh was out there on the dance floor, in the middle of it all- of course he was, Tyler knew he would be. His blue hair looked bluer than it had been before; maybe he had re-dyed it, or maybe it was just
the lights. Even from the distance at which he was standing, Tyler could see the black dress shirt Josh was wearing beneath his jacket, with no tie or anything; he was wearing black ear gauges instead of the red ones he normally wore, and black skinny jeans- Tyler could tell- and Tyler smiled despite himself and his anxiety when he saw that Josh was wearing sneakers. Tyler’s own smile faded as quickly as it had appeared when he looked back up and saw the smile plastered over Josh’s flushed face, white teeth flashing in the crowded room. Several of Josh’s gang were hanging around, and that Brendon was right next to him, too close, laughing in Josh’s ear about something that Tyler would never know about or be a part of, and the sharp pang of jealously that punched Tyler in the gut surprised even himself. How petty could he be?

A lot, apparently, because the feeling skyrocketed in the next instant, and Tyler felt physically sick. Like, going-to-throw-up-again-just-like-in-eleventh-grade-thanks-a-lot-Jay-for-reminding-me sick. A streak of pretty, white blonde hair had caught all of Tyler’s attention.

The girl moved close to Josh in a comfortable and confident way that meant they knew each other, this wasn’t the first time that they had talked during the night. As soon as she had appeared, cup of punch in hand, Brendon had slinked back a few steps closer to- Is that Ryan? Ugh, what the fuck is going on…? - a boy a few paces away, with a knowing and gleaming look on his face that Tyler loathed, and he actually lurched a little when he saw Brendon wink at Josh. His Josh.

And then it got worse, because that girl was all over him, in a short black dress with a flowing skirt and a high collar with no sleeves that showed off her tanned arms and long legs; the solid black of her outfit, even her shoes black, in sharp, stunningly beautiful contrast to her straight, shining light hair. She was a little taller than Josh. She was striking and stunning. She was beautiful.

Tyler kinda hated her.

Red alarms of panic went off in his head as the girl put her free arm around Josh’s shoulders, pulling him closer as she swayed her hips in a languid, hypnotizing manner. She put the cup of punch to her lips- bright, red lipstick- and took a small sip. Tyler narrowed his eyes as he watched the girl staring right into Josh’s eyes the whole time, and Josh was staring back. Then she- Oh, God, oh, Jesus, just kill me, please - held the same cup up to Josh’s mouth. Tyler looked down at his shoes then, very suddenly; they were old and a little scuffed- actually, they were hand-me-downs from his little brother, whose feet had always been bigger than Tyler’s despite the several year age difference. Jay had had to get bigger shoes a year ago and so their mom had insisted on reusing the old pair by giving them to Tyler. Tyler had been adamant, explaining to his mom again and again that that was not how hand-me-downs worked, the oldest sibling should never be forced to wear the youngest sibling’s clothes, it wasn’t ethical, it wasn’t just; but, typical, his mom would have none of it and had made him use them anyways. Tyler kinda hated these shoes-

Tyler was surprised when a small splash of- water? punch? - dripped over the shoes he was currently staring at so intently.

Well, check that off the bucket list. Threw up at prom, check; cried at prom? Check.

Tyler tried to stifle his heavy breathing as a couple more splashes appeared on his shoes. Stop it, goddammit, not now; not now, Ty-guy, God, not now, not now, not now! Please, dear Lord, help me, this…I…I don’t want to have to…I can’t do this, why did you have to….

Tyler heard an ugly cracking sound and looked over at his hand; the cheap, plastic cup was broken in his hand. At least it was empty.

He set the mangled cup down on the bleacher seat next to him and wiped a rough jacket sleeve across his face. His nose was running. Tyler peeked up through his wet eyelashes at the spot where
they had been.

Teachers, teachers, where were the damn chaperones? That was grinding, she was legit grinding on him, that wasn’t allowed! Front to front dancing only! Tyler wished suddenly that his mom had signed up as chaperone. Tyler’s eyes scanned the rest of the gym frantically, looking; for what he had no idea. Mikey, or Frank. The back door. The principal. A hangman’s noose.

What Tyler saw next happened so fast and so naturally that his brain almost couldn’t process it. He stood as if frozen for several long moments- minutes, possibly ten; or maybe it was only for a few seconds, Tyler couldn’t tell- as his eyes unwillingly focused on Josh. And her.

She was kissing him.

It felt like something snapped inside Tyler’s chest just then as he tore his eyes away, back down to his shoes, and he took off along the bleachers, sticking as close to them as he could and trying to avoid everyone in the damn gymnasium, in the damn world. He peaked up and saw the back door, a sliver of the dark night and parking lot visible through the small window in the door. He had to get out. Maybe Gerard had left the car unlocked, and he could lie down in the back seat; his head felt dizzy.

“Hey, Tyler, what’s up?”

A friendly arm reached out and clasped Tyler on the shoulder, and Tyler instinctively recoiled away from it, almost tripping backward over the lowest bleacher bench. Patrick was smiling genially at him, head bobbing to the music.

“I haven’t seen you for a coupla days! You come alone or did you bring a date?”

Tyler looked out across the gym floor in a blurred daze, trying to remember how to breathe. Don’t look at Josh, don’t look at him, don’t look-

“Tyler, are you okay? You don’t look good at all. Dude, are you...are you crying?”

Through the tears in his eyes that he hadn’t even realized were still there, Tyler caught a glimpse of Pete pushing through the crowd towards them, and his instincts kicked in again. Pete hadn’t been outright mean to him as of late, for whatever reason, Tyler didn’t know; but the last thing he wanted right now was an audience. He brushed Patrick’s hand off his shoulder and tried to mumble an excuse about feeling sick, but he couldn’t form any words. He stumbled off for the back door again, tears blurring his vision, feeling bad about leaving Patrick so rudely on top of having his heart ripped out of his chest. What a night. Adding Pete to the mix would only make it all worse. He had to get out of there.

The door banged shut behind him, but Tyler doubted anyone inside had even noticed, what with all the noise. The cold air he hated so much was actually, for the first time, a relief. It added to how miserable Tyler felt and made it harder to cry, though his eyeballs didn’t seem to be getting the memo, because they kept on trying. Tyler scrubbed his sleeve across his face for a few minutes, letting the rough material scratch at his skin until his whole face felt like a frozen, wet, raw mess.

Gerard’s car wasn’t where they had left it. Tyler stumbled blindly around the dark parking lot for about fifteen minutes, peering at different license plates with the flashlight on his phone, until he was certain that Gerard and probably that Bert had left the school premises. Tyler was too wasted to care. He started walking home.

There were too many cars and pedestrians still out and about on the main roads, and Tyler felt funny
walking down the sidewalk alone in a suit with a tear stained face, even though nobody could see his face; so he cut through a small neighborhood, wanting desperately to be alone, alone from Josh and alone from that girl and alone from his friends and the high school and Ohio and whatever else was out there in the world. He glared up at the night sky in disdain.

He couldn’t go home either, not yet; his parents and siblings would ask too many questions, would be too overbearing. He wouldn’t be able to breathe. Tyler worried briefly about Zack. He hadn’t noticed him at the prom, but it had been pretty crowded; he’d probably get home okay, or else he would spend the night at his friend’s house. Nothing Tyler could do about it now.

Tyler’s neighborhood was quiet, the way it should be. He tried to turn off his mind and just follow his feet, wherever they were taking him, and when he looked up, he was only mildly surprised for about half a second to find that he outside the basketball court.

The streetlights were on, that especially bright one lighting up the biggest part of the court. Tyler would have preferred the lights to be out, for it to be all dark so the world or at least the neighbors couldn’t see him, but it would have to do. Tyler was so exhausted he didn’t think he could take another step if he had wanted to. And he really, really didn’t.

He walked slowly to the middle of the court. He had made friends with Josh here, kind of. That spot right there was where Josh had tripped that late summer day and twisted his ankle for the first time, and Tyler had grudgingly helped him home. Tyler had since formed the opinion that that had been the best decision of his life, the start of it all, helping his rival over to his own house, despite both of their egos. He wasn’t so sure anymore.

*That* was where Josh had stood, trying to spin the ball the fancy way Tyler had shown him; and *that* was where he had done that funny little dance that one time, trying to make Tyler laugh; and *that* was where the sunlight had reflected so perfectly one afternoon off Josh’s red hair- it had still been red, then; and *that* was where Josh had tripped on his shoe or shoelace or whatever it was that made Joshua Dun fall; and *that* was where Tyler had been when he had-

Tyler scuffed his shoe against the uneven asphalt. *God, what am I doing? How did I get here?*

He couldn’t really feel his hands anymore, it was so cold, and his nose wouldn’t stop running, but Tyler felt himself drop slowly to his knees and then to his back, stretching out on the ground. There was a little pebble under his head digging into his skull, but he was too tired to move it. The sky was blank, and very dark. As he stared up at it, a couple more tears slipped out of the corners of his eyes, running into the crevice of his lips due to him lying down. Tyler tasted salt.

It was funny, lying there on the basketball court in his suit in the middle of December, his mind unwillingly replaying that evening’s tragic events; Tyler couldn’t really remember the most of what had happened, what had made him so upset, his mind singling in on a few, solitary and miniscule details.

The light reflecting off Josh’s eyelashes as he had looked up at the girl as she had held the cup to his lips. Her little black flats; she had been about an inch taller than Josh, even in flats. Josh hadn’t been wearing a tie- *Why wasn’t he wearing a tie? Dummy.* The smudge of red on Josh’s face, at the corner of his mouth and smearing up to his dimple, his *dimple*, after she had kissed him.* Or did Josh kiss her? It doesn’t matter. Josh and kissing happened, and it didn’t involve me.*

It started to snow, tiny little flakes that hit the pavement and melted instantly. They speckled across Tyler’s face, cold, prickling sensations. Tyler felt very, very tired.
Josh was still in bed. He could hear his parents downstairs banging pots in the kitchen, getting ready for church. It was the Christmas service that morning, and they insisted Josh not miss it. His mom wanted him to wear his candy cane tie, but no fucking way.

Josh sprawled on his side in bed, the covers tangled around his legs, his fan spinning on low despite his frosted window and the thin layer of snow outside. He stared at his phone as the texts from Brendon appeared, one by one, before replying.

J: idk

Beebo: idk? is that it!?????? smh

Josh didn’t respond right away, and another text from Brendon appeared.

Beebo: no seriously what happened, did it work

Beebo: did ur crush do anything, does she like u? don’t kno yet????

Beebo: u gotta tell me J don’t leave me in the dark bud, or else i’ll send u those pics of Ryan

J: no!

J: ....

Josh erased the beginning of his new text; he had been about to try to explain, but...what was the point? Tyler didn’t like him. Tyler didn’t like him, and everything was pointless.

J: nah

J: it didn’t work

Beebo: details! it didn’t work or she doesn’t like u or u don’t kno or what

J: she doesn’t like me

J: no biggie

J: thx tho

Josh turned off his phone before he could see Brendon’s reply. He’d hear it all again at church in an hour. God, he was dreading it. Merry fucking Christmas. He dragged himself up into a sitting position on his bed and eyed his messy room sleepily. It had snowed after the prom on Friday night and all day Saturday. Josh loved the snow, the way it made the earth look so quiet and clean and how crisp the air was and how fun it was to play in. But after the prom, he hadn’t felt like doing anything. He had slept away most of his Saturday.

Brendon’s stupid plan hadn’t worked. It had just fucked everything up. Josh wanted to be mad at Brendon, and maybe Spencer, too, but he knew it was own his fault, really. He couldn’t blame them, that wouldn’t be fair.
Somehow Jenna had gotten his number on Friday night—Probably from Brendon. God, what a dick—and she had sent him several texts the day after, none of which Josh had yet replied to. Don’t get him wrong, Jenna was a super cool kid, she was chill and nice and hot and popular, and basically everything everyone at school wanted to be like. And Josh would have had a relatively good evening with her, if it hadn’t been for his damn crush on someone else.

On Tyler.

Josh had been looking for him as soon as he and Jenna had arrived that night (Jenna had her own car and had picked Josh up at his house. He had been slightly embarrassed and even intimidated about it, but. What can you do?) Despite spending the majority of the prom searching the crowd for Tyler, Josh had only glimpsed him once, talking to Patrick. He had had his back to Josh. Tyler hadn’t even seemed to have been looking for him—why should he have been anyways? What makes you so special? But...you’d think he’d at least say hi...since we haven’t hung out lately or anything. But then again maybe I made it too awkward that night at the basketball court, and he hates me a little bit now. What did I even do? God, I’m such a mess. He probably thinks I’m a creep, I started getting too close, and he had to break it off. Why can’t I have nice things? Josh had spied Tyler over Jenna’s shoulder as they had danced; he had been about to excuse himself to go say hey, but then she had kissed him again and...well, Josh was only human, okay? It had effectively distracted him—despite his not wanting to have been distracted in the first place, unless that distraction had been Tyler—long enough for him to lose sight of Tyler. He had kept an eye out for him the rest of the night, but to no avail. He had probably been off having a great old time with his other friends, not thinking about Josh at all. He had probably had his own date, too! Josh was still bitter about that fact, that faceless date Tyler had probably taken to the prom, some cute, handsy girl. God, it wasn’t fair.

There was a brief rapping on the closed, bedroom door before it cracked open, and Ashley leaned into the room. “Josh, you better hurry, Mom and Dad don’t want you to miss church again, remember? They’re already warming up the car.”

“Ohay,” Josh huffed, annoyed. “Close the door.”

Ashley rolled her eyes but didn’t say anything as she left his room. Thank goodness.

Josh forcefully dragged himself out of his bed and wandered over to the window, wiping it clear with his hand and peering out at the snow, the bright morning sun reflecting bright white off of every surface. It felt wrong for it to be so sunny and glorious outside when Josh felt nothing but the shadow of a great cloud of depression over himself on the inside.

Well, that’s kinda selfish of you. Just ’cuz you’re depressed doesn’t mean everything else has to be, too.

Ten minutes later, smashed in the back seat of the car between the window and Abby, Josh stuffed his headphones into his ears to try to block out the happy, Christmassy chatter of his family. He rested his chin grumpily on his palm as he leaned heavily on the armrest to avoid sitting too close to his little sister and stared out the window at the dirty slush on the pavement. He thought about ditching church and lying out there in the snow and staring up at the sky as the white little flakes floated down to earth. He thought about the prom, about Jenna’s blonde hair. He thought about Brendon, and how happy he had looked that entire night, finally being able to take Ryan to the dance. He thought about the punch he had ended up spilling on himself, when Jenna had tried to hold the cup for him. He thought about Tyler.

He thought about how Tyler had probably been on the other side of the gymnasium, dancing with some girl, probably several different girls who all had little crushes on him; he thought about how Tyler had probably not even thought of Josh all night; he thought of how good Tyler had looked in
his suit, even though Josh had only seen him for a second. Josh missed him, the times they had spent together. He missed him.

*That’s over now.*

Josh fingered his phone in his hands mindlessly, turning it over and over. He looked down at it. He was aware that his family were all still talking, that his mom had started singing Christmas songs at some point, but it was all vague in his mind. He eyed his phone suspiciously.

After another minute, he turned it on, scrolling through several different text messages until he got to the right one. He opened the conversation and read the last text.

*Jenna: i hope u had fun too :(*

Josh’s dad made a slow turn into the church parking lot, and Josh looked up at the steeple all covered in a thin layer of snow. He thought about Tyler again.

His fingers moved heavily as he finally gave in and typed out a reply to Jenna’s texts.

After the Christmas service, Josh stood in the back of the church, waiting miserably for his parents to finish talking to everyone while he listened to Brendon ramble on about who knows what. He wasn’t listening. His eyes wandered emptily around the auditorium, avoiding eye contact with anyone. He just wanted to be left alone, to go back home to his room and curl up on his bed.

Over Brendon’s shoulder, Josh spotted Tyler’s mom leaving one of the pews, and then suddenly there he was himself, following close behind her. Tyler looked up blankly, and he and Josh made eye contact.

Josh panicked for a second, but Tyler’s eyes didn’t jolt away immediately, though his gaze didn’t linger either; it was like he looked at Josh, and then, simply, looked away. Unfazed, unconcerned. Apathetic. *Distant.*

Josh dropped his own gaze down to focus on the buttons of Brendon’s shirt. They looked a little blurry.

He wondered how he had ever gotten to feeling this empty.

*Chapter End Notes*

Any thoughts? new chapter soon :) luv u all <333333
It was snowing. There was already at least a foot on the ground, and it was still coming down, soft and not cold at all. The basketball court was empty, except for Tyler. He was standing directly in the middle of the white covered pavement, staring at Josh with a lopsided smile on his face as Josh trudged through the snow towards him. Josh couldn’t move very fast, his foot was in a cast and the snow seemed to be holding him and his crutches down, and it was agitating him, because all he wanted was to run to Tyler.

“Before next year, J,” Tyler said in a singsong voice. He was too far away. The sun was shining on the tanned skin of his arms, enticing Josh. *Where’s his jacket, the dummy. Isn’t he cold?*

“Come *on*, Josh! Forget those damn crutches, I told you you don’t need them!”

“I like you,” Josh said, stumbling, surprised to see his own breath in the air before him.

“Well, duh,” Tyler giggled. It was kiddish, high-pitched. “I like you, too. Josh!”

“Yeah?”

“Josh!”

“What, Tyler?”

“Josh!”

Jenna was shaking Josh’s shoulder. “Oh, my God, did you seriously fall asleep? The movie wasn’t *that* boring, was it?”

Josh blinked a couple times, the bright white of the snow fading rapidly to the heavy darkness of the movie theater. *How did I get here?*
“I thought it was a good movie! Honestly, boys.”

“I, um...sorry...” Josh stood up clumsily as Jenna grabbed her purse and started buttoning up her coat. “I was just...I had a late night, I think.”

“You think?” Jenna laughed. “You’re funny, Josh. And cute. I forgive you for falling asleep on our first date.”

“Was this a date?” Josh’s mind was still too fuzzy with sleep to remember what was going on.

“Well, not officially, I guess. But it’s the first time we’ve gone out together, so in technical terms, it’s a date.”

“Oh,” was all Josh said as he mindlessly followed Jenna out of the theater. _God, I’m out of it._

What movie did we watch again?

There was a cold wind outside, but Josh didn’t bother zipping up his hoodie as he followed Jenna to her car, hands stuffed in his jean pockets. He let out a tiny huff, just to see if he could see his breath. He could.

Jenna blasted the heat as soon as she started the car and headed off slowly down the snowy road. Josh flipped the radio on to the same Christmas carols it had been playing all month, repeating the same few to the point of being obnoxious, but Josh didn’t mind, not really. He loved Christmas songs, and it only happened one month out of the whole year, so why not enjoy it? Only once Elvis finished the chorus of Blue Christmas did Josh remember that it was Tuesday afternoon, and it was Christmas Eve.

He made a noise of surprise, but Jenna was chattering on about something- the movie? the prom? school?- and didn’t seem to hear. She groaned loudly, though, when Elvis began crooning the second verse. She reached out a hand and turned off the radio.

“All they do is play the same old songs over and over, honestly it gets so annoying!”

Josh didn’t reply, just squinted his eyes at the control button, seriously considering turning it back on again. He liked that song. But he still felt too drowsy to actually reach out his hand and do it.

The drive home to Josh’s house seemed to take three times longer than it should have. He tuned out Jenna’s ongoing rambling and stared out the window at the passing snow drifts, trying to straighten out his own head- why did everything feel so fuzzy? The past few days seemed to him to have passed in a complete blur. The last thing he remembered solidly was making eye contact with- with him at the Christmas service. Everything after that, in all truth, seemed so unimportant to Josh that he had partially forgotten it, just waking up and eating and sleeping and going through the motions of his day out of habit, completely unaware of his surroundings.

Josh caught sight of his reflection in the sideview mirror. There were always slight bags under his eyes- he was a teenager, come on- but they appeared much bigger and more visible than usual. He figured he hadn’t been getting much sleep lately. And for Josh, that was just plain weird. Josh loved his bed.

He couldn’t quite remember what exact events had taken place that had been the cause of him and Jenna going to the movie theater, either. Had he asked her or had she asked him? Did that even matter in the long run? He hadn’t called it a date, had he? Was this considered leading her on? What was Brendon going to say about all this? What about Tyler?

_Forget him. That’s not going to happen, and you know it. Look at you, you’re making yourself sick._
over this. Honestly just forget him. You need to move on. It’s Christmas, stop being a scrooge.

Finally, finally, after what felt like a goddamn hour to Josh, Jenna pulled up to the curb in front of his house, and Josh quickly said goodbye, see you later, yes, I’ll text you, merry Christmas, before slipping up the steep driveway and into the garage. He breathed out a sigh of relief as Jenna’s car rolled out of sight. Sure, she was nice, and yeah, she was hot, obviously, and super pretty, but...that didn’t seem to have as big of an effect on Josh as one might assume it would.

The kitchen was warm and smelled strongly of freshly baked gingerbread. The television was on around the corner in the living room, and Josh stood in the doorway a moment, content to just stay in this exact spot and moment in time forever. It was so cozy and nice he could almost forget about all the troubles weighing down on him and making his anxiety shoot to all kinds of new levels and about Tyler. Almost.

“Joshua, close the door, you’re letting out the heat! It’s freezing out there!”

Josh’s mom had just come up the stairs from the basement, a dusty holiday platter in her arms. She set it on the kitchen table and glanced over at Josh.

“Where in heaven’s name is your coat!? Do you know that it is twenty-eight degrees out there right now, young man? And there’s a wind! You’ll catch pneumonia if you don’t watch out.”

Josh closed the garage door behind him and hopped onto the counter next to a tray of gingerbread men, careful not to hit his head on the row of cabinets behind him. His mom glared at him but didn’t tell him to get down, so Josh didn’t say anything, decided not to push his luck. He picked up a cookie and broke the head off.

“Josh!”

“What?”

“Those aren’t for us, they’re supposed to be a Christmas present!”

“There’s more.”

“Don’t you eat them all.”

“I’m eating one!”

“Don’t talk back to me.”

Josh huffed and shoved a piece of cookie in his mouth, chewing moodily. Mrs. Dun carried the platter over to him and set it in his lap, handing him a wet rag. “Can you clean that up a bit? I want to give the cookies on this tray, it has the cutest little snowmen on it.”

Josh, in his personal opinion, thought the snowmen were ugly and looked more like zombies for Halloween than snowmen for Christmas, but didn’t say as much to his mom. He picked up the rag and wiped it across the platter instead.

“Have you finished your Christmas shopping?” his mom asked, using a spatula to pry the cookies from the tray. “How was your date?”

“It wasn’t a date,” Josh corrected quickly, then changed the subject. “And no, not really. I...I kind of forgot about presents.”
“Oh, Josh,” Mrs. Dun sighed. “It’s tomorrow, how could you forget about that? Your sister got you a very nice present this year, and you can’t even remember to get anything at all?”

Josh couldn’t think of an excuse, so he sneaked another gingerbread cookie from the tray.

Mrs. Dun whacked his leg with the spatula, and Josh almost dropped the platter he was holding with one hand. “Mom!”

Josh’s mom ignored him and started to hum a Christmas song, taking the relatively clean platter from Josh and placing it on the table, stealing away the tray of cookies before Josh could take another.

Josh sat for another minute on the counter, staring at the wall opposite him as his mom continued to hum, her voice mingling with the sound of the television. Josh wondered what Tyler was doing.

His phone in his pocket buzzed with a new text, and after a moment’s delay, Josh decided to check it in case it was Brendon or Spencer, though he had a feeling it was- yep, Jenna.

_I swear the movie was pretty good xx_

Josh ignored it, unsure of how to reply, and hopped off the counter, drifting towards the living room. He didn’t want to talk to Jenna, or to Brendon or Spencer or his mom, or anybody. Not right now.

“Josh?” His mom called him back, and Josh stopped in the doorway.

“Hm?”

“Why don’t you come with me, I’m just about to head out now and pick up your father’s present from the department store. I ordered him that new suit, you know. You could pick up a little something for your siblings, maybe something for Brendon. You haven’t forgotten your friends, too, have you?”

“Um….”

“Come on, you can get your brother that new video game or something, maybe get Abby that phone case she’s been wanting? Come on, Josh, you need to get them all something for Christmas.”

Josh opened his mouth to protest, but his mom continued on.

“You’ve been acting so...so out of it lately, sweetie, is something wrong? I want you to be happy, especially now! It’s Christmas! Come on, going out with your mom will do you some good. I’ll let you drive the car.”

“Uh, no, that’s okay, you can drive,” Josh interrupted quickly.

“So you’ll come? Oh, good!”

Mrs. Dun let Josh have another gingerbread cookie before twisting cling wrap around the Christmas platter, so Josh couldn’t stay pissed too long about having to go out again. Better than staying home, he guessed. All he would have done anyways was lie on his bed and stalk Tyler’s Instagram. _Ew, I need a life._

The roads in the neighborhood weren’t so icy as they were simply bumpy with inches of dirty snow and loose gravel packed down against the pavement. The main roads were better- they had been treated with salt- and most of the snow was heaped in piles along the curb, making driving pretty easy, pretty normal. Josh slumped in the passenger seat without a seat belt, listening to the same
Christmas song on the radio his mom had been humming earlier and watching the houses pass by. They were almost out of their neighborhood when Mrs. Dun turned before the main road, and steered the car slowly around a curve and up a small slope, a dead end street his family didn’t go down very often, had no need to. Josh, however, knew it well. He sat straight up in his seat.

“Mom, you missed the turn. Mom? Where are we going?”

“Oh, I was just going to drop off those cookies before we go to the department sto-”

“But, but I have to get...I have to get presents for people!”

“I know, Josh, I’m only dropping them off real quick.”

“But Christmas is tomorrow, if I d-don’t get busy right now, then I, I’ll just-”

“It’ll only take a minute. What’s wrong with you? I’m taking them to Kelly- oh, you know, Mrs. Joseph? Mr. Joseph, your doctor, the one who fixed your leg-”

“Yeah, Mom, I think I remember that-”

“Don’t get snappy with me, Josh. Besides, your little friend might be home, you can say hi.”

They pulled up into the driveway in front of Tyler’s house. Josh slumped even lower in his seat. “I’ll just wait here.”

“It’s too cold, you’ll get sick. Come on in, it’ll only be a couple of minutes. Tyler’s probably home, come on, Josh, stop being such a wet blanket.”

Josh’s mom all but physically dragged him up the walk to the front door. She made Josh hold the platter of gingerbread while she rang the bell. Josh’s eyes jumped around frantically, his mind thrumming with thoughts of escape. Escape route, gotta get outta here, how can I blow this place with an armful of Christmas cookies? Shit, why do I get myself into these situations? Shit, shit-

Jay answered the door. Josh knew him from Tyler’s mentions of him only, but he looked like Tyler, even though he was probably a full foot taller and fifty pounds heavier. He had the same eyes. Josh felt incredibly awkward, so he kept his own eyes on the floor as he followed his mom down the hall and into the kitchen, saying hello politely to Mrs. Joseph when she hurried in from the living room.

Jay disappeared down to the basement, and Josh hoped very much that if Tyler was down there, too, he’d stay there. Just until Josh had time to escape back out to the car and hide.

Mrs. Dun fell easily into genial chatter and gossip with Mrs. Joseph, and Josh set the platter of cookies down gently on the counter, afraid that if he didn’t do so soon he would drop them. He considered edging back towards the hallway, seeing what his mom would do. Maybe he could sneak out, maybe she’d let him.

Josh had just made up his mind to get out of there and had turned around towards the hall when he heard footsteps and saw a familiar hand on the banister, and then Tyler was padding down the hallway towards him. Josh’s heart and mind both froze as he opened his mouth as if to say something, but no sound would come out. Tyler suddenly noticed Josh standing there, and he froze mid step, the two standing each other off at opposite ends of the hall.

“Oh, um...I...w-what are you…? What are you doing here?”

Josh felt a strange ache in his chest at hearing Tyler’s voice. It seemed to him so exasperatingly long
since they had last talked together, not to mention hanging out. Josh tried to smile, but he was pretty sure it looked more like a cold grimace than anything remotely friendly.

“I, um...I was just- I mean my mom, she, uh, she...she brought you some gingerbread. Your mom, your family, I mean, for you guys. As a...a present. For Christmas.”

“Oh.” Tyler wasn’t not making eye contact, but it felt weak and fleeting. Josh had the sudden urge to cross the space separating them and shake Tyler by his thin shoulders and demand to know what had gone wrong between them, was it his fault, did he do something…?

Before he could, though, more footsteps sounded on the stairs, and then Mikey was leaning over the bannister. “Hey, Ty, if you wanna just- oh, um...hey, Josh.”

Josh suppressed a sigh, shifting awkwardly. Could this get any more terrible?

“Hey...my mom was just...dropping some cookies off, we were just leaving. I was just, I was...going outside....”

Both Josh and Tyler’s moms came out of the kitchen just then, and Mrs. Joseph patted Josh on the back. “Well, hey, looks like the gang is all here, huh? You know you’re welcome to stay, Josh, if you want. The boys were playing video games, I think, weren’t you, Ty?”

“Um, no....” Tyler’s attention was shifting between his mom and Mikey, skipping over Josh completely. “We were just...just playing some board games.”

“Oh, well, that sounds fun! You wanna stay, Josh? You’re more than welcome to!”

“It’s fine with me, honey, if you want to,” Josh’s mom added.

Josh felt so frustrated he almost wanted to cry. He felt crowded, too; too many people pressing in on him, all of the attention focused on him. He was looking at the faded runner beneath his feet, but glanced up briefly at Tyler before forming a reply. Tyler wasn’t looking at him.

“Oh...no thanks, Ms. Joseph, I...I have some stuff I need to do...Christmas shopping and all...thank you, though....”

Josh felt miserable and kept his eyes trained firmly on the floor as Mrs. Joseph clapped him on the back again. “Oh, of course, well, that’s fine, dear! Just so long as you know you’re always welcome, come over whenever you like-”

Josh nodded politely and tried to smile at her as he slipped away towards Tyler, making to pass him and stand by front door. Don’t look at him, don’t look at him, don’t look at Mikey either, that’d be awkward, too; don’t look at Tyler, don’t.... Tyler didn’t step over to make room for Josh as he passed, but Josh could feel him leaning away as he edged around him. Josh’s heart fell a little lower. If that was even possible.

It took Josh’s mom forever to say goodbye as Josh waited, arms crossed, at the front door. She had asked Tyler something about the basketball team, and for a moment Josh had tensed, unsure of how that situation had been progressing for Tyler. He couldn’t see Tyler’s face, only his back, but had heard him reply that everything was going well. So he still hasn’t told his parents....

Mrs. Dun asked him and Mikey something about the prom and school, and Josh’s tension level continued to rise. His mom was getting pretty close to some risky territory. Mikey still didn’t know that he and Tyler were friends- well, that they had used to be. That is, after they hadn’t been. (Whatever. It’s complicated.) Tyler’s shoulders seemed to tense a little, too, at least it seemed so to
Josh. Either Josh’s mom or Tyler’s could say something casually, anything - Mrs. Joseph practically already had. Does Mikey suspect anything? - at any moment, and that would change everything as they knew it. And Josh wasn’t ready for that to happen yet.

“Mom?” Josh tried interrupting her as politely as he could. “Shouldn’t we hurry up and get going? Dad’s suit...?”

Tyler took the break in conversation to turn away from the moms in the hallway and start towards the stairs. Josh couldn’t help but watch him as he did, half hoping that he would look up and make eye contact with him, just one last time, but Tyler kept his face studiously turned away from Josh as he quickly rounded the end of the staircase and climbed the stairs, brushing past Mikey. Josh’s mom was saying goodbye to Mrs. Joseph as Josh opened the door, disappointment weighing heavily on his chest, and he glanced back one more time. Mikey was still on the stairs, and he was looking at Josh from behind his glasses and messy bangs. Josh shifted awkwardly, embarrassed that he still hadn’t gotten around to making up with him sooner, and a little more concerned just then, possibly, with just how much Mikey might be putting together. Josh lifted one side of his mouth in an attempted smile, though he felt utterly miserable, and Mikey didn’t return it. He turned quietly and plodded back up the steps after Tyler.

A deep and unexpected stab of jealousy suddenly hit Josh full on as he and his mom made their way back to the car. Mikey got to hang out with Tyler casually on Christmas Eve, got to play board games with him up in his room- Josh hadn’t even seen Tyler’s room, let alone hang out in it with him. Why does Mikey get to be friends with Tyler like that? Like it’s so...so easy, and uncomplicated. Why can’t it be like that for me and Tyler?

Josh climbed back into the car and glanced up at the house again. Because Mikey isn’t a dumbass with a crush, that’s why.

Josh hated himself sometimes. Especially now.

“Okay, round five goes to me, so that’s...three for you and two for me. Wanna play something else now? I’m bored with Battleship.”

Tyler was perched on the edge of the window sill, one leg drawn up against his chest and looking out the window. Mikey looked up at him from the bed a space away. “Ty? Wanna play Trouble again? Or Clue?”

“Hm? Oh, sorry, I wasn’t...I didn’t hear you,” Tyler glanced at Mikey and smiled but quickly let his gaze turn back to the window. Josh had just gotten into the car, and it was backing out of the driveway. Tyler thought maybe he could see Josh looking up at him but dismissed the idea just as quickly. Of course he wasn’t. Tyler’s heart was heavy.

“Tyler?”

The car disappeared down the road and out of sight. Tyler let out a little sigh and tilted his head to look at Mikey. Why couldn’t he be in love with someone whom he was on good terms with and wasn’t so hard to understand, like Mikey? Why couldn’t he have fallen for someone who was maybe, um, into guys? That would’ve helped. That would have saved him some heartbreak. Tyler tried his damned best to shove his emotions to the back of his mind- which had been considerably easier before Josh had suddenly showed up at his house, disrupting absolutely everything about the shaky peace Tyler had been trying for days to come to. Josh didn’t like him like that. Learn to live with it. Though it was so much easier to try believing that when Josh didn’t randomly turn up in his
Tyler shook his head, trying and failing to rid his mind of the image of Josh’s face, of Josh, Josh.

“Yeah, sure, let’s play Clue. I’m Mrs. White.”

Mikey didn’t move, just squinted his eyes at Tyler.

Tyler felt his cheeks growing hot, despite the cold of the window pane pressing through his sweatpants and chilling his body. “What? Don’t you wanna play Clue?” He had the growing sense of dread that Mikey knew something, knew too much.

Mikey didn’t say anything.

Tyler rolled his eyes dramatically and stood up, struggling desperately to act casual as he crossed his arms over his chest. “Fine. Okay, I know what you’re thinking, it’s okay. I’m cool with it.”

Mikey raised his eyebrows at that, and Tyler continued.

“**You** can play Mrs. White. It’s okay.”

Mikey almost laughed, fidgeting on the bed as Tyler climbed on next to him. Tyler grabbed the Clue box off the floor and shook it a bit. He was surprised by how much his hands were trembling. “I’ll be Professor Plum if you want to be Mrs. White so bad.”

Mikey eyed Tyler for a long minute, apparently weighing whether or not to discuss whatever it was that was on his mind- and Tyler knew damn well what it was. And Tyler **also** knew that he did **not** want to discuss it with him. Not now. He tried to convey as much through his own eyes as he met Mikey’s stare, with some internal struggle. Mikey could be pretty intense if he wanted to.

Finally Mikey shrugged, looking away and reaching for Mrs. White. He handed the tiny figure to Tyler. “You can have her. I’ll be Scarlet.”

Tyler laughed shakily at that. Maybe he could at least pretend that things were a little normal again. Though he doubted it.

It was a little before dinner time when Tyler drove Mikey back to his house across town. It had started snowing again and was already dark, despite only being half past five. Both Tyler and Mikey had decided that they were tired of Christmas music for the time being, so they listened to a Maroon 5 album in silence as Tyler drove carefully down the main road. When they reached the Way household, Tyler pulled up alongside the curb and turned the music down to say goodbye.

“You wanna come in for a minute and say hey to Gee? Frank might be in, too, I don’t know.”

Tyler waved a hand. “Tell them I said merry Christmas and all that. I really should hurry home, my mom’ll yell at me if I let my supper get cold.” **And I’ll break down in an emotional mess if I have to face another person right now.**

Mikey nodded and unbuckled his seat belt, reaching for the door handle before stalling a moment. He looked over at Tyler; Tyler couldn’t see his eyes because of a nearby streetlamp reflecting off his glasses, but he had a feeling that he knew what was coming.

“Tyler, I...I’ve told you before, you *know* you can-”
“Talk to you about anything, yeah. Yeah, I know, Mikey. Thank you.” Tyler meant it; he hoped that Mikey knew that. But he couldn’t talk about it, not now. Not yet.

Mikey smiled restlessly. “Yeah….”

Tyler drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and glanced about the car, unable to look at Mikey’s face. His heart was breaking. “I, um…I’ll see you around. ‘Kay? Have a good holiday, alright?”

For an awful minute, Tyler thought Mikey would think he was brushing him off- which, well, he kind of was, but still- and slam the car door and leave without replying. But instead, Mikey suddenly leaned over the console and gave Tyler a loose-armed hug, surprising him. Tyler flailed awkwardly for a second, unable to really hug him back due to the awkward angle, so he settled on patting Mikey’s shoulder with one hand. When Mikey sat back, Tyler’s face was bright red.

Mikey smiled warmly at Tyler. “Ty, you are so…I don’t know. I don’t know what you are. Never mind. Have a nice Christmas, okay? Have fun with your family. And try to be happy, jolly, okay? It’s Christmas! Text me.”

Tyler nodded, at a loss for words. What? Why is he looking at me like that?

Mikey looked like he might try to hug Tyler again, so Tyler held out a fist instead for Mikey to bump. He unlocked the car doors afterwards, hoping Mikey would get the hint.

He did, to Tyler’s relief, and he wished him a merry Christmas again as he climbed out of the car.

Alone, at last, Tyler let out a breath and watched Mikey disappear into his own home. A haphazard string of lights were strewn across the front porch, and there was a trail of smoke coming from the chimney. It looked cozy and homey and nice. Tyler turned off the CD then, cutting She Will Be Loved off in the middle of the chorus. He didn’t want to listen to anything right now. He imagined he could hear the dead silence of the snow falling. He liked that sound.

He drove home slowly, more slowly than was necessary, his thoughts in a better and kinder place a hundred miles away- which, of course, wasn’t really a hundred miles away, more like one or so. It was only that far to Josh’s house, after all.

It was the end of an era. Or at least it felt that way to Tyler. The end of the era of his life of incredible friendship with Josh. The love of his life. Sure, Tyler knew he was being melodramatic- probably, a little bit, maybe- but this was his first big heartbreak, okay? He was allowed to feel this way, goddammit. Tyler had never met anyone like Josh before, and he felt like it was all such a goddamn waste, to get to know such a tiny bit of him and then have it all ripped away. It was a real downer to feel like this during the holiday season, Tyler found.

Tyler loved Christmas time as much as the next guy, don’t get him wrong, he did, really. But the holiday break seemed to pass in a blur of dull, aching emptiness, and Tyler was at least thankful for it passing quickly. Try as he might, it had been next to impossible to find any alone time to mope about his feelings in a household filled to the brim with loud and overexcitable siblings, too many presents, and an unbelievable amount of Christmas cheer. Going back to school almost seemed like a relief. Tyler hoped that if he just had time to feel sad and sorry for himself, he’d be able to get over it finally and enjoy the rest of the school year with the new friends he had made since coming to Worthington. It wasn’t all bad.
Of course, being back at school had its downsides. Two major ones, and probably some smaller ones, too, smaller ones like homework and getting his phone confiscated during class and Gerard bugging him again to keep an eye out for Mikey because Pete was acting suspicious, as per usual. But as for the major downsides, they were pretty major, Tyler felt. For one, he had to be around... him again. In like, every single goddamn class. Not that seeing him in person could be that much worse than thinking about him day and night for the past two week break. It couldn’t be that much worse, right? Tyler hoped not. And besides, he was supposed to be getting over it. Stay focused, Ty-guy.

As for the other downside, well. It was the first day back at school, the first week of the new year, when Tyler realized that the first game of the new year was only another ten days or so away. He had been so caught up in trying to avoid Josh at every turn that he had completely forgotten about being off the team, and, oh, yeah, my parents don’t fucking know yet. It was only a matter of time before they would find out. And every time Tyler thought about, he knew with a sinking, sick feeling that he was making the situation so much worse than it could have been by stalling the truth. He should have told them months ago. The thought didn’t help Tyler feel any better.

It was lunch break, and Tyler was mulling all this over in his head for about the hundredth time that day, when the name Josh jogged him out of his trance. Frank was laughing about something to Gerard across the table, and Tyler tuned into the conversation, cheeks inadvertently pinkening.

"-just so stupid, like really, dude? What the hell are you thinking? It’s just so annoying, he thinks just ‘cause he gets away with the blue hair and shit he’s teacher’s pet. Like what is this, grade school?"

“Daycare,” Gerard snickered.

"Hey, we should dig up those pictures again, those photos Pete took of him and Brendon, remember that? God, what was it, seventh? Eight, I don't even know. Remember those? Print 'em and put 'em on their lockers, man, that'd be hilarious. They'd be fuckin’ expelled."

"Yeah, for real this time," Gerard wheezed. "That was fuckin' crazy, honestly. Like, really Urie? Airdropped? Fucking kidding me, man."

"Shot himself in the foot," Frank agreed. "Like how stupid do you have to be."

Tyler shifted uncomfortably, trying not to act too interested, but at the same time what the fuck? What are they talking about? Tyler didn’t like the direction this conversation seemed to be going, at all. What about Josh and Brendon? He glanced over at Mikey, but Mikey seemed engrossed on his phone, oblivious to everyone at the table.

Tyler cleared his throat quietly, interrupting Frank’s plan to steal Pete’s phone. “That’s not a great idea, guys.” He doubted Frank would actually go through with it, he was all talk, but still. It made Tyler uneasy to listen to them.

Gerard looked curiously at Tyler while Frank raised his eyebrows sarcastically, both of them turning towards Tyler. "Well, fine then, since you're so concerned about my reputation apparently. I won't steal his phone. Hey, y'know, Gee, I won't even need to, he'd probably jump at the chance to bring this shit back up, he's always down to mess with Dun and Urie."

"I...none of that's a great idea, Frank," Tyler insisted, his face heating up, voice quiet in the wake of Frank's growing enthusiasm.

Frank stared at Tyler with that look on his face that had initially frightened Tyler, though he knew better now. Mostly. “Well, look at you, I thought you hated the guy.”
Something in Frank’s tone made Tyler defensive. He squirmed under both their gazes. “I do- I mean I don’t, I don’t hate anyone, I just...I mean, you’ll get in trouble. If you do that. With...with the principal....”

Frank huffed. “No we wouldn’t, she doesn’t do her job anyways, she doesn't even speak English, you know. Hey- Ty, have you seen those pics of Dun? Have you heard about that time, we were only freshman or something, but it’s still so funny, fuckin' idiot Brendon fucking airdropped this shit of Dun and-”

“Why don’t you just leave him alone, he’s not bothering you guys.”

The lunchroom was just as loud and busy as it had been a minute ago, but it seemed to Tyler like everything had gotten a lot quieter. Gerard was staring blankly at him, which quite honestly unnerved Tyler a great deal more than he would care to admit, and Frank’s expression was one of slight confusion, and a little bit of shock.

“I...I gotta go...see you later....” Tyler didn’t bother grabbing his tray, didn’t bother seeing if Mikey had been listening in, just got up from his seat and weaved around the tables and students towards the exit. He needed some air, he needed some space. He needed to get Josh out of his head .

“Tyler? Wait a minute!” Tyler could hear Mikey’s voice behind him, but he didn’t stop, hoping Mikey would get the hint and leave him alone. He risked a glance over his shoulder to see Mikey making his way after him and almost bumping into a passing student, and when Tyler turned back around, he himself collided chest to chest with another student.

“Oh, shit, sorry, sorry, I-” Tyler stammered, then froze, his face only inches away from- Oh. Of fucking course- Josh.

Tyler choked on his own tongue while Josh just stared slightly up at him, his eyes so much more brown than Tyler had even remembered. How do eyes actually legit sparkle? He’s a fucking angel . His lips were definitely more pink and chapped than Tyler had remembered, too.

“I, um, I...” Tyler realized awkwardly that they were still standing almost on top of each other from when they had collided a moment before, and that...Josh hadn’t moved away...Tyler’s hopes spiked up a dozen miles in the span of a nanosecond. Maybe-

“Hello ,” Brendon appeared beside Josh, arms crossed. “Lose something, Joseph?”

Tyler noticed suddenly that they were directly beside Josh’s clique’s table, and every face there was turned to stare at them. White-hot emotion flash flooded Tyler’s entire body when his eyes landed on- what’s her name, Jenna? - sitting at their table, watching curiously.

“I was just, I didn’t...I didn’t mean to...I mean I was....”

Tyler’s attention jerked back to Josh when Josh’s head finally turned away, his eyes on the floor. Brendon pulled him back and away from Tyler, sneering at him. Tyler watched as Josh sat back down at their table, keeping his head turned the other way; it made Tyler’s heart plummet back down dizzily in his chest. He felt even worse than he had before.

Brendon was just opening his mouth to say something, but Tyler didn’t want to hear it. He was done here. He brushed past Brendon, avoiding his eyes, and escaped from the lunchroom and into the empty hall, unsure if Mikey was still following him or not. He hurried down the hallway, casting a glance over his shoulder as he took turns at random, searching for a place to hide for a while. Just until lunch was over. He’d be okay by then. Probably.
The gym doors loomed up suddenly to his right, and Tyler made a sharp turn and dashed into the empty room. It was cool in the gym, but it was warmer where the sunlight was coming in from the windows high up along the walls, streaming down over the bleachers and in patches across the floor. Everything seemed so silent in a loud way, except for the faint whirring sounds coming from the boiler room nearby. It all felt familiar and comforting. Tyler felt like he could breathe again, being in there alone. There were some basketballs lying on the floor across the room, and Tyler didn’t have to think twice before jogging across the gym and scooping one up. He hadn’t played basketball in forever.

Tyler had hoped that shooting baskets in the far hoop across the gym and warming himself up by running around would cheer him up, help him to forget his problems. It was really peaceful, after all, the bright, happy sun shining in and trying its damnedest to make Tyler happy, too. But while focusing on his dribbling and spinning, Tyler found his mind, as per fucking usual, dwelling on all his issues and inner conflicts. And Josh. Mostly on Josh. And this was only Monday.

Tyler let out a sigh of acceptance and, aiming the basketball, launched it from his fingers.

Almost two weeks later, in the cafeteria- two weeks? One week. Is it two? Oh, my God, it’s two, isn’t it? It doesn’t feel like two weeks, it feels shorter. Or...does it feel longer? God, I don’t know anymore. What day is it? Wednesday. I think...no, Thursday. Oh, yeah, it’s Thursday, ‘cause the game’s tomorrow, right. I knew that, duh- Josh was scrolling on his phone, completely tuned out of his friends’ conversations at the table and lost in his own thoughts.

Does it count as stalking if I check his instagram every day? What about his snapchat? No, not really...friends do that. Even not-friends do that. I even check Pete’s. Well, sometimes. But this isn’t stalking...right? Right. Probably not.

But Tyler hadn’t posted anything on snapchat that day, or the day before, or the day before either. In fact, if Josh really thought about it, Tyler hadn’t posted on snapchat (and he loved snapchat, Josh happened to know) or instagram in...a month? Almost a month. Josh was getting a bit concerned.

Not that that was any of his business. Tyler was his own person, off doing his own thing, not really caring about Josh, and Josh should respect that and move on. It was just a crush, and it had only existed for like, a week. Okay, more like...a month. Maybe two. Or...three....

Josh had really expected to be over this by now. January was half over, for God’s sake. He and Tyler had technically fallen out over a month ago- a sharp pain still shot through Josh’s heart when he thought about that. But Josh tried not to think about it too much. If he didn’t think about it, or Tyler, or basketball, or the classes they shared, or the basketball court by his house, or the street next to his where Tyler lived or the fact Tyler wasn’t posting on his social media or...if he just didn’t think about any of those things, then Josh could function day to day like a fairly normal human being, for the most part.

Still, Josh couldn’t help but feel a cavity in his chest, even then, as he tapped through snapchat, his slice of pizza cold and forgotten with his friends all joking and laughing around him, Brendon on his one side and Jenna on his other.

Oh, yeah. Jenna. Sometimes Josh forgot she was there, even though she had started spending more and more time with him and his friends while at school, joining them at lunch and tailing after them in the halls. She texted him a lot, too, come to think of it, and had started sitting next to Josh in all of their classes. Brendon said that they were becoming an item. Josh wasn’t sure he liked that.
It wasn’t Jenna’s fault, Josh knew. She was nice enough. He liked her. Brendon and Spencer and Ryan and all the guys liked her, too. She was fun to have around. But something Dallon had said just the day before had hit Josh like a train, and ever since being confronted with it, he hadn’t been able to stop worrying over it.

*You and your girlfriend coming to watch the game this Friday?* Dallon had asked the other day after school. They had been leaving the building with the other guys; Jenna was there, too; and he had asked it simply enough, but it had stopped Josh dead in his tracks. *Girlfriend? Girl-friend? Like a girl who’s a friend, or like...a girlfriend as in a girlfriend girlfriend? Like...a fucking girlfriend?*

Josh had broken out in a cold sweat as his eyes had shot over to Jenna, but she had acted as if she hadn’t heard, or maybe she genuinely hadn’t. Brendon and Spencer and Ryan hadn’t reacted to the wording, either. The rest of the way home, Josh had contemplated what that could mean. Had they all just pretended not to notice Dallon’s slip of the tongue? Or...had it been true? Had his choice of the word *girlfriend* not disturbed anyone in the slightest because to all of them, *it was true?*

That had freaked the fuck out of Josh.

He eyed her now, at the lunch table next to him, as casually as he could. She was smiling and handing her packet of Skittles across the table to Spencer. Josh glanced down her body and noticed that she was indeed leaning towards him a bit. And she was sitting pretty close to him, too. Their thighs were touching. He looked the other way to Brendon, to compare- but Brendon was practically flush against him as well, his arm *definitely* resting on Josh’s part of the table. But that was just Brendon. Josh couldn’t compare Jenna to Brendon very accurately. Brendon had no sense of personal space.

Josh sighed to himself and looked blankly out across the cafeteria. He tried to find Tyler amidst the other students, but it was too crowded. Tyler *was* out there, though, *somewhere*, probably with Mikey, as per usual- though Josh hadn’t seen much of Tyler at all that week. The last time he had even been within speaking distance with him was that first day back at school, during lunch, when they had quite literally bumped into each other. It hadn’t ended well, Josh hadn’t even been able to think fast enough to find something to say- not that he could have really said anything anyways, the whole gang had been *right there*, and Josh would have blown his and Tyler’s cover for sure.

Despite all of that though, Josh found himself wishing that he and Tyler *did* bump into each other again, just once more. *Anything* was better than barely seeing him for almost a full goddamn week. It was almost like he didn’t exist.

A sudden weight across Josh’s back made Josh jump slightly, coming back to his senses.

Jenna had thrown her arm around his neck, her fingers playing with the string of his hoodie. *That’s normal, right, girls always hug and touch people, right? Even friends. Right?* She leaned her head on his shoulder. *Friends, just friends, just friends, friends, friends.* She grabbed his hand from his lap with her free hand and laced their fingers together, humming lightly before laughing at something Ryan had said. Josh could feel himself sweating as he shifted uncomfortably. No one else at the table seemed to be aware of his current distress. Was the sight of Jenna clinging to him like a *girlfriend* would do to her boyfriend *that normal* to all of them?

Ryan was sitting across from Brendon, speaking in a monotone voice about something funny his teacher had said the other day. His hands were on the table in front of him; and across from him, Brendon was slumped onto the table, one hand propping up his head, and the other playing with Ryan’s hands. Ryan didn’t seem to notice as he looked out at the other people at the table, telling his story, but Josh noticed one of Ryan’s own hands grab gently at Brendon’s fingers, holding them still. After a second of struggling, Brendon freed his hand to keep pulling at Ryan’s fingers and messing
with the tattered sleeve of his jacket. Ryan didn’t stop him.

It was disgustingly sweet to Josh, in a really, really envious way. No one else at the table paid Ryan and Brendon any attention— they did, of course, as two friends, but not to the fact that they were now a couple and were able to do cute couple things together. Like handholding. Josh let himself imagine for a moment that Tyler was there across from him, with his tanned, thin hands on the table between them. Josh imagined touching them, and it not being a big deal. Except to him. To him, it would be a bigger deal than if aliens landed on earth. Hell, landed in Ohio.

Suddenly there was a gentle hand and cool, soft fingers at the nape of neck, and Josh jerked violently in surprise, violently enough to bump the table and slosh Spencer’s soda over the brim. Ryan stopped talking, and Jenna let her hand fall away as she leaned forward to peer into Josh’s face. Josh could feel all of his friends’ eyes on him as the table fell silent.

“Josh, are you alright?” Jenna asked, a small, concerned smile on her lips.

“I, um…it’s just….” Josh took a deep breath, trying to reel his emotions back in. He glanced up across the table, but that was a bad move— Spencer and Dallon were staring at him with the same concern that was on Jenna’s face— God, I must look horrible, am I that obvious? - and Josh quickly averted his focus, eyes trying to find a safe place to land. He tried to slow his breathing.

There was a pressure on his knee, not Jenna though, Josh could tell immediately. Brendon’s hand squeezed gently, and he leaned in, speaking softly enough for only Josh to hear. “Hey, man, what’s up? You okay?”

Josh glanced over at him, his heart beating way too fast. It took too much energy to meet Brendon’s eyes for more than a second at a time, so Josh found a stain on Brendon’s collar to stare at instead. There, that’s good, this will work.

Brendon could read Josh’s face, Josh knew he would be able to, and Brendon cleared his throat loudly, forcing a laugh. “Nah, he’s fine, it’s okay, guys. We’re just gonna go take a breather real quick, it’s too crowded in here. Keep telling that story, Ry, we’ll be right back.”

Brendon stood up quickly and tugged at Josh’s arm, his steady grip on Josh’s bicep the only thing keeping Josh from mentally blacking out. It was so much easier to just mentally black out. But Josh didn’t, as much as he wanted to, forcing himself to get up and let Brendon lead him out of the cafeteria. He heard Jenna say something but didn’t know what, and he didn’t reply.

Out in the hallway, Brendon didn’t stop pulling Josh along behind him until they rounded the corner and were out the back door. It was freezing, obviously, it was even snowing a tiny bit, or maybe it was just the wind blowing snow around that was already covering the ground. Josh couldn’t tell. He only had a thin hoodie on, but the biting cold helped a little to clear his head. At least he could breathe again.

Josh slumped down to the damp pavement and let his head bang back against the wall, hugging his arms around his chest. Some snow brushed into his eyelashes, and he blinked them away. Brendon stood next to him, leaning against the brick wall of the building as he dug around in his pocket. He held a small box down to Josh, offering him a cigarette, but Josh shook his head. He didn’t like smoking— he’d only done it once, maybe twice- and it always made his head too foggy. Brendon offered him gum instead. Josh took a piece but only fingered the wrapping idly, not opening it. He stared out blankly across the back parking lot, covered in a layer of snow that the snow plows hadn’t cleared away yet.

After a few minutes of silence, Brendon cleared his throat, startling Josh out of his trance. “So...what
was that back there? What’s up?”

Josh hung his head and studied the gum wrapper in his hands. He shrugged one shoulder, even though he wasn’t sure if Brendon could tell or not from his standing position. “I’m just...just going through some things. Dealing with some things.”

Brendon made a scoffing sound and waved his cigarette around, smoke dissipating in the snowy wind. “Well, obviously, you’re not dealing with ‘some things’ very well.”

Josh didn’t reply.

“Well? Wanna talk about it?”

Josh opened his mouth to say something, but...what? Say what?

“Like look, dude, I’m not trying to pry or whatever, but you should just like...open up about whatever it is, you’re not acting like yourself, you haven’t been acting normal since like, the beginning of December or some shit. I don’t know, man.”

Josh bristled suddenly, and it wasn’t because of the cold. “I’m sorry I’m not acting normal enough for you, Brendon. I didn’t realize it was such-”

“I’m just saying, dude. Don’t be so emo. You should open up, I’m your best friend, you should-”

“No, don’t pull that card,” Josh interrupted.

Brendon didn’t say anything for a moment. “What card?”

“You know what card, the best friend card.”

The silence between them was incredibly tense, and growing tenser. Brendon’s voice was tight when he spoke. “I am your best friend, Josh. Don’t you get that? Because you’re acting like shit. Ever since we-”

“Brendon, I just need-” Josh threw the piece of gum on the ground and waved his hands angrily, “-some fucking space. Jesus. I’m sorry, okay?”

Brendon fidgeted next to Josh for a few seconds before tossing his cigarette on the ground between them and grinding it roughly with his sneaker. “Fine. Do it your way.”

Brendon turned and stalked back to the door, and Josh glared at the footprints he left in the snow.

“You always do,” Brendon added harshly before letting the door swing shut behind him.

Shit. Josh watched the piece of gum he had dropped slowly disappear under the snow as the wind continued to blow and shift the drifts around. Well, that...could have been handled better....

Guilt crept up into Josh’s chest, and he seriously considered running after Brendon and apologizing. But a small, selfish part of him couldn’t help but blame Brendon, at least a tiny bit, for what had happened between him and Tyler. So that’s what all this is about then? Tyler? From them not being able to openly be friends to the disaster at the prom to the run-in last week. He wanted to blame someone.

Yeah, well. That would be you, buddy. If you wanted to blame someone....

Josh sighed.
The next day, the day of the game, Brendon didn’t talk to Josh at all. He sat near him in the couple of classes that they shared though, near enough not to raise Spencer or any of their gang’s suspicion too much, which Josh was pretty thankful to him for, honestly. The last thing he needed right now on top of everything was for the whole clique to know that him and Brendon weren’t currently on good terms. They hadn’t had an official falling out or anything; they had little tiffs like this all the time—after all, when you grow up with someone, when you’ve been best friends since first fucking grade, well. You’re bound to have some arguments from time to time.

Still. Josh felt pretty fucking bad about it.

They didn’t talk at lunch either. Josh sat quietly and scrolled on his phone while the rest of the table talked excitedly of the game that evening. Brendon sat across from him, relatively quieter than usual, but not enough for anyone to notice. Well, besides Ryan. Josh noticed Ryan saying something to Brendon under his breath, and he glanced back and forth between the two of them a couple of times, but he didn’t press it. Thankfully.

The game that night was all the way out in Hamilton, almost in Cincinnati, so the team was leaving on the bus directly after school. Josh cut his last class to hang out by the back door, waiting for the team so that he could wish his friends good luck (and he hadn’t studied for that test in his last class, so...it was a win-win by skipping,) Dallon had tried all afternoon to talk Josh into coming along to watch, and Jenna really wanted him to go, too, but Josh just didn’t feel emotionally up to it. And the way Jenna kept talking about how fun it would be for them to go watch together and all, Josh had a sneaking suspicion that it would be labeled as a date. Ever since the movie theater last month, Josh had been treading along extra carefully, avoiding outings if it just involved the two of them. He did not want to lead her on, but he didn’t know what to say to her to explain that, since they weren’t officially a couple or anything. Everyone just apparently assumed that they were.

The school bell rang loudly above Josh’s head, and he could hear the bus out in the back lot, its engine revving. He hid behind some lockers- lowkey, though- when he saw Jordan running down the hall like a maniac. A wave of bitterness washed over him, that his kid brother got to be on the team (on the bench, but still) and attend all the games. Jordan dashed out the door to the bus, passing Josh without noticing him. Pete jogged down the hall a moment later in his jersey and no jacket (moron, it’s like twenty degrees out there), and Patrick was close behind. Josh stayed hidden until Pete was out the door, and he gave a small wave when Patrick passed by with Dallon.

“You sure?” Dallon called, nodding towards the bus. “Coach wouldn’t mind if you ride with us.”

“Nah, I’m good,” Josh tried to smile. “You better hurry.”

Brendon and Ryan were close behind the other players, holding hands, Josh noted a little spitefully, and Ryan smiled when he saw Josh.

“Bye, man, we’ll miss you. The team sucks without you, it really does. Doesn’t it, Bren?” Ryan dropped Brendon’s hand to elbow him in the side.

Brendon crossed his arms and shrugged, eyes looking out the glass door. “It kinda sucks.”

“It kinda sucks a lot. Right, Bren?”

“Nah,” Josh said, forcing himself to at least try to make an effort. “Not with B as head guard.”

Brendon huffed loudly and rolled his eyes dramatically before pulling Josh into a quick hug. “Okay,
so it really sucks, a lot. Fuck you, it’s your fault, you know. Leaving me with Pete.”

Josh laughed a little into Brendon’s shoulder. He loved him. “Just don’t let Wentz make the winning shot, okay?”

“Never,” Brendon smirked, and then more quietly so Ryan wouldn’t hear: “We are going to talk about this, by the way, you know that?”

Josh tried not to grimace. “Sure.”

Coach Anderson blared the horn outside, and Josh quickly muttered a goodbye as he let Brendon go and watched him and Ryan hurry out the doors. The heavy, sullen weight that Josh had been slowly getting used to in the past months crept back up into his chest, cold and familiar. Josh sighed, zipping up his hoodie and shouldering his backpack. Oh, well. At least he had gotten out of that test.

He was halfway down the hallway when someone called his name.

“Hey, Josh? C’mere a second!”

Josh turned around, surprised, and—

“Mikey? What’s up? Hey, wait, aren’t you going with the team? They’re all in the bus already, I think Coach is ready to go—”

“Shut up and listen.”

Josh had never heard Mikey speak with such conviction and authority before. He was more than a little dumbfounded, and there wasn’t a chance in hell that he’d admit it then, but he was a little intimidated, too.

“Okay...what is it?”

Mikey closed the last few steps between them and grabbed one of the straps of Josh’s backpack, pulling him back down the hallway a bit towards the deserted area nearer the back door. He looked serious. But then again, he always did a little bit. It was hard to tell behind those glasses.

“Listen. Do you like Tyler?”

Josh’s stomach somersaulted into his throat, and he swallowed the urge to throw up. His blood temperature probably legit dropped to that of outside in the span of like, two nanoseconds. Josh opened his mouth and tried to remember how to speak English.

“I...you...y-you’re asking if I, if...if...do I like...if I...w-what? What?”

Mikey rolled his eyes almost as hard as Brendon could, and that was fucking hard. “I said, do you like...Tyler?” He spoke very clear and slowly, pronouncing each word so sarcastically that Josh was almost as surprised about that as he was about what Mikey was asking him. Almost.

“I...I heard what you said, I just...I just don’t...like, um...I mean, like, where are you g-getting this? Like...w-what is this, I don’t understand why you...I mean, me and Tyler, we...we don’t, we’re not...I mean, everyone knows we’re like...rivals, and...rivals don’t, they don’t...everyone knows that—”

“I know what everyone else knows, and I want to know this. Do you like Tyler?”

Josh’s heart was beating so hard it actually hurt. Like it was legit bruising his ribcage. “Y—you mean
like... like ...like...?"

Mikey nodded slowly, as if Josh was a little kid. “Yes. Do you like like Tyler?”

Josh’s brain was whirling; he felt physically sick. What the fuck, where is this coming from? What does he want, like is this some sort of...sick joke? Is this something those emo kids he hangs out with planned? Frank what’s-his-name? I swear to God, if it fucking is-

The bus horn sounded outside again, three long times in a row. Mikey shifted anxiously and glanced over his shoulder towards the back door.

“Josh, for real, I’m in a hurry, just fucking tell me. Do you fucking like Tyler Joseph?”

Josh opened his mouth, but nothing but more stammering came out.

Mikey pursed his lips, his grip still on Josh’s backpack strap tightening. He looked on the brink of just letting it go, shoving Josh away and running outside to join the team, and leaving Josh in a suspended state of blind panic.

Instead, Mikey closed his eyes for a second before staring Josh down as he appeared to pick his next words very carefully. “Look, because if you do, I...I wouldn’t even be asking you this in the first place if it wasn’t for Tyler. I mean, you and me, we’re not really friends, are we, not really. But Tyler, he...he’s the best friend I’ve ever had, and I love him, but lately all I wanna do is strangle him.”

Josh made a confused face and was about to interrupt, but Mikey plowed on.

“Look, I know about you guys, okay? I’ve known ever since you dyed your fucking hair blue. You guys thought you were so slick, but you weren’t. You might’ve fooled everyone else in this damn school, but not me. I’m not blind, you know. I’d have to be to miss it, honestly, you guys are pretty sloppy about it. You’re both so obvious, it makes me cringe sometimes, really. Not just the fact that you’re friends, but that you both...well, that Tyler at least really likes you. Like he really, really likes you.”

Josh was vaguely aware that his mouth was hanging open a bit, but he was concentrated on Mikey’s words far too much right now to even care.

“Like I said, I wouldn’t be telling you this ordinarily, it’s not my place to interfere or whatever, except that Tyler, well, he’s my friend. So I know, I can tell, and I see it all the time. He is fucking miserable. He has been, for weeks. He just mopes around and bottles up his feelings and lies, all the time. And friends shouldn’t have to do that. It’s only because I care about him so much that I’m risking telling you this. He can’t go on like this, he just can’t. I won’t let him. And honestly? I have a very strong idea that you like him back. Don’t you?”

Josh’s brain wasn’t even tripping over itself anymore, it had tripped a long time ago and had facepalmed the floor. Josh tried desperately to breathe again. “But...how did you know? We didn’t...we were only ever friends, secret friends, we never...how could you possibly know that I...”

A wave of uncertainty passed over Mikey’s face, and he dropped his hand from Josh’s backpack strap. He let out a heavy sigh. “I knew you guys liked each other because you...well....”

Another long blare from the bus outside. Mikey let out his string of words in an embarrassed rush.

“I knew you guys liked each other because you were acting just like me and Pete were acting, okay? Me and Pete, we’re...we’re together, and...it’s a fucking secret, though, okay? Not even Gerard
Josh, in his stunned and dying mind, started to laugh silently. This was crazy. This wasn’t real, this was just a crazy dream.

“-but that’s how I knew, okay? I know about this kind of thing. Secret friends, secret crushes…but seriously now, Josh. If you like Tyler, then please just…and if you don’t, for God’s sake, please just...tell him, okay? Tell him kindly, like a good friend would, and help him through this, because he is so desperately in love...he needs you to explain, if you don’t like him back, okay? He can’t keep going on like this, and if you would just fucking explain to him that you don’t like him, then-”

“B-but I do, I do, I really...I really do,” Josh had been trying to intervene for the last full minute but couldn’t make his mouth form any words.

Mikey froze mid-sentence and stared at Josh in what Josh felt was a totally new light. “You...you do?” It was Mikey’s turn to stammer and look surprised. Josh liked it.

“Yes. God, just...where is he? Do you know?”

The bus horn sounded repeatedly, but Mikey didn’t seem to hear. “Tyler? Yeah, he’s, uh...he’s in the gym, I think. He was with me when I changed into my jersey, he’s...I think he’s still there, he...he wanted to shoot a few baskets....”

Josh had started nodding as soon as Mikey had said Tyler’s name, and he felt what had begun as a small spring in him explode into...fucking Niagra Falls. It was like downing fifteen Pixy Stix in a row, it was the biggest rush of frantic and desperate adrenaline that Josh had ever experienced in his entire life. And it was the best fucking feeling.

Josh clapped Mikey on the shoulder, a huge grin spreading across his face. God, he couldn’t stop...he couldn’t stop smiling. His cheeks were already aching. He kept patting Mikey’s shoulder like an idiot.

“Mikey, man, I...thanks, thanks a lot, I just...I’m gonna go, you better...the bus....”

Coach Anderson had had his hand on the horn for the last entire minute, one solid, long blare, not even letting up any more. Mikey looked almost as surprised at all of this as Josh still felt. He clapped Josh back and nodded. “Sure, no problem, I’ll...I gotta go now, but...yeah, Tyler should be in the gym still, if you hurry, you might-”

Josh had already taken off down the hallway at a sprint.

There were a few students still in the hallways, and Josh weaved about them and skidded around corners, smacking a few lockers with his backpack as his mind seemed to chant gym, gym, gym.

Why is this school so fucking big, I just need to get to the goddamned gym, I just need to....

Josh had never been so ecstatic to see the double doors leading to the gym in his entire life. He didn’t slow down, just charged through the middle, both doors swinging widely open and clanging shut, echoing in the vast room. On the far side of the gym, Josh’s eyes focused in immediately on Tyler, his back still to Josh, dribbling a ball.

There he was! It had been so long, it felt like so long since Josh had last been near him, and really, all the times before, they had never been that good. There were some times, sure, back before the prom and shit, but they dimmed grossly in comparison to this, to this feeling, right here, right now.
Josh almost fainted.

But not now! He could faint anytime, anywhere, but not now. For now, get to Tyler. That’s all that mattered.

Josh started off across the wide stretch of the gym, slowly at first, trying to remember how to walk, then he broke into a jog. Walking was too slow, and he needed to be there where Tyler was now.

Halfway across the gym, and Tyler finally heard Josh’s footsteps above the steady sound of his basketball on the cement. He turned around, and it was like in slow motion in Josh’s mind. An imaginary halo appeared around Tyler’s head.

“Josh? What are you….”

Josh’s heart soared at hearing Tyler’s voice, his voice! It was high and strained and shaky and raspy and made Josh want to melt in a puddle at Tyler’s feet. He was almost there now, almost to Tyler. It occurred to Josh that he didn’t have a plan, that in the time that he had made his way to the gym, he could have- should have- been planning out what to say in his head; figuring out his exact words so that he could sit Tyler down on one of the bleachers and explain in full to him about Mikey confronting Josh just a few minutes before, about why he had brought another girl to the prom and had stopped texting him and why he had acted so strained on Christmas Eve when he and his mom had stopped by, and…. Yes, it occurred to Josh briefly that he should have planned out what the fuck he needed to say, what he needed to do.

But he hadn’t. It had only been about one second since Tyler had turned, confused, and said something, something, Josh couldn’t remember; but it felt like a full hour to Josh. It felt like it took that long for him to finally be within actual speaking distance of Tyler. Josh still didn’t know what to fucking say- so he didn’t say anything. He didn’t even try to. He didn’t stop a foot or so away, either, but instead closed the space between them, always too much fucking space.

“Josh? I-”

The blood rushed like a tsunami by Josh’s ears as he collided with Tyler, throwing out his hands and grabbing the collar of his shirt, pulling him closer to him, pulling him up against him and banging their mouths together so roughly that Josh actually hit his forehead against Tyler’s- hey, that actually hurt - but who fucking cared? Who could care when Josh had finally, finally, after five fucking months, finally had his mouth on Tyler’s? Who could fucking care? Certainly not Josh.

Josh’s backpack was falling off his shoulders, and he heard the basketball Tyler had been holding drop to the floor, bouncing beside them, and then- and then he felt Tyler’s hands grabbing at his shoulders, fisting his hoodie and tugging frantically. For one sickening, god-awful second, Josh thought Tyler was trying to push him off, push him away. But then his entire body shot into goosebumps as he felt a warm wetness swipe across his bottom lip, and then Tyler’s tongue was in his mouth, and Josh moaned so loudly that he was certain it echoed throughout the entire gym.

Tyler was indeed pulling and pushing at Josh, but he certainly wasn’t trying to push him away; he was trying to hold Josh in place as they stumbled blindly against each other. Josh made a noise of surprise into Tyler’s mouth, his eyes shooting open as Tyler pushed in his tongue deeper and ran it across the roof of Josh’s mouth. It tickled; Josh hadn’t done this for years, he wasn’t used to it, embarrassingly. He let out a laugh, well- if you could consider it a laugh. Tyler’s mouth kind of choked it off into a high-pitched whine before it could really get out. Josh tilted his head back to lessen some of the sensation- not that he wanted it to stop, God, no, never- but it was just so much fucking sensation, and Josh wasn’t sure he could handle it, he couldn’t, it was too much, he was going to burst. But Tyler pressed even closer to him, having the advantage of an extra inch of height
as he stumbled closer against Josh and bore down on Josh’s mouth, not letting up at all.

Josh dropped one hand from Tyler’s collar to his waist, sliding his hand up and down over his side. His shirt rode up a little, Josh could feel it, and he jumped at the chance to touch Tyler’s smooth and overheated skin, running his hand up and down. God, he could do this forever. For a fucking eternity. Josh’s other hand found the back of Tyler’s neck and then his hair, his fingers tracing through the short strands, holding his head close to his. He didn’t ever want to be away from Tyler, ever again. God, how did they fucking survive all this time?

One of Tyler’s arms wrapped around Josh’s waist as they continued to kiss, and Josh forced his own tongue into Tyler’s mouth. Tyler bit down on his tongue lightly, whether intentionally or on accident, Josh wasn’t sure, but Josh let out a little cry— that hurt, okay? Kissing is dangerous- and Tyler immediately started sucking on his tongue, turning Josh’s cry into a long whimper.

The next thing Josh was aware of was a basketball between them at their feet, and then they were tripping, falling, the both of them.

Again, seriously? Come on, Josh thought mid-fall.

Only this time, Tyler was there with him. Falling was infinitely more enjoyable when it was mutual, Josh found. That’s poetic. Shut up.

Josh’s kneecaps smacked the floor, sending jolts of pain down both legs, but he was lying on top of Tyler, one knee between Tyler’s legs and one hand still behind his head, having prevented him from smacking his head solidly against the hard floor.

For a horrifying second, Josh worried Tyler was hurt. He studied his face. Are his eyes kind of dazed? Isn’t that a concussion? God, what if he-

“Are you okay?” Josh murmured, his own voice surprising him by how low it sounded.

Tyler’s face lit up, even more than it usually was, and Josh felt his heart melting all over again. God, I lo- I like him. I like him. So fucking much.

“Maybe. Kiss me again,” Tyler said in answer to Josh’s question. He didn’t wait for Josh to move, just took Josh’s face in both his hands and pulled him down against his mouth.

Josh didn’t complain.

Chapter End Notes

SURPRISE!!!! that's an okay Valentine's day surprise, right???? i hope so! i've been shown an INCREDIBLE amount of amazingly kind support the past few weeks, so a HUGE MOTHERFUCKIN THANK YOU to EVERYONE who left kudos, a comment, a message on tumblr, or even just for reading this fic, my baby, THANK YOU! it all means THE FUCKING WORLD TO ME!!!!!!! you guys! are the BEST of the clique! don't tell everyone else i said that...you didn't hear it from me....

and so frens! this is certainly...a mile marker for the boys, to say the least. after 87k, gosh golly!!!! not just anyone would stick around like you guys have done...i love you guys.... SO there is a LOT of supa good sweet and funny and smutty and sexy and
angsty (oops, did i say angsty? ha ha i didn't mean thAT! of cOUrsE not..... .. ...) stuff coming up in the next several chapters, so i REALLY REALLY HOPE that you'll continue being the best fanclub ever and stick around!!! AS ALWAYS, THANK YOU FRIENDS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! <333333 let me know your inner most thoughts and feelings about this update!!!!!!!!
before the world catches up

Chapter Notes

FINALLY!!! ANOTHER UPDATE!!! friends, i'm so sorry for the long wait! this is a super long chapter to make up for it <3

OKAY SO GUYS!!!! GUESS WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENED TO ME??? GUESS WHAT THE FUCK!!! so i was at MY neighborhood basketball court the other day...riding my skateboard...and guess! what! the! fuck! happened!!!!! i fucking TRIPPED :) and i SPRAINED :) my fucking :) ANKLE :) YEP :)(((((((( just like ya boy Josh in this gottamn fic :)))))))) um KARMA MUCH???? i went to the doctor yesterday and thankfully it's not fractured or broken or anything, but it was because of the fact i can't fucking WALK and have to sit in the same gottamn place all day that i FINALLY finished this chapter so. GOOD PROBLEMS???? let me say this tho- i'm legit going to edit the past chapters and make Josh bitch a bit more about how much sprained and fractured ankles HURT. because DAMN DANIEL. THEY HURT.

(one more thing as well! a couple of you commented on the last chapter about Tyler and Mikey and Mikey having a possible crush on Tyler and i was like "what!? no way, weird! i didn't write that at all!" and then i reread and i was like "whoa...i DID write that..." for the record, NO, Mikey doesn't like Tyler, not in this fic. i wasn't trying to hint at them at ALL but i can totally see how that'd be really easy to read ((oops!)) i HAVE been lowkey dropping hints about a past relationship between two other people, but almost no one has commented on that at all, so idk if that's being picked up on or not? oh, well :) it's all fun, we'll see how things go)

anyways. sorry for the all the rambly pre-chapter notes. i MISSED you guys, that's all!!! so HERE you go, the next chapter. you're all so awesome, thank u for reading my fic <3333

chapter title from Collar Full by patd <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tyler was pretty sure he had a concussion, at least a small one. That gym floor was hard. Tyler was also pretty sure that at that exact moment, he did not fucking care.

Less than two minutes ago, Tyler had been shooting baskets half-assedly with a hell of a lot of weight on his shoulders and worries in his head, feeling more alone than he ever had before in his entire life, but now? Tyler honestly couldn’t recall half of what he had been so worried about. What on earth had been wrong again?

All Tyler was capable of being aware of right then was that Josh was on top of him with his arms on either side of Tyler’s body, completely blocking out everything else in Tyler’s mind except for him, and Josh’s mouth was finally on his. Fucking finally. How and why, Tyler didn’t care about right now either- well, he kind of did, like Josh went from avoiding him like the plague and being one hundred percent uninterested to tackling him in a heated makeout sesh? At school no less, where any one of their friends or classmates or, God forbid, teachers could walk in on them. What the hell had changed? What had Tyler missed? Yeah, okay, so he was curious as hell to figure out all those
things, and he had a hell of a lot of questions to put to Josh about everything that had happened in the past couple of months, but. But for now, Tyler wouldn’t worry about any of those. For now, all he wanted to worry about was keeping Josh’s mouth on his.

Speaking of the devil, Josh was kind of crushing Tyler a little bit; it was growing harder for Tyler to get any air into his chest what with Josh basically lying on top of him- Josh was heavy, goddammit- but Tyler also thought it might have been from the fact that their mouths hadn’t separated for at least a solid three minutes. Whatever. Tyler was way too busy with super important things like kissing Josh to worry about simple stuff like breathing.

Josh’s tongue was in Tyler’s mouth, and Tyler sucked around it, letting his hands run up and down Josh’s back and into his hair. Josh still had one hand beneath Tyler’s head, and sure, Tyler was a bit embarrassed about it, but it made him literally swoon. Well, as close to swooning as you can get while lying on your back on the gymnasium floor. Tyler didn’t care though. Everything about this, everything was absolutely perfect.

Oh, my God, he smells so good, how does he smell so good? God, I wanna stay like this forever, how did I fucking live not talking to him? I can’t not do this, always, always. Ugh, okay, he’s getting kind of heavy, maybe- no, dammit, I don’t wanna end this, I can deal with not breathing for a bit longer. I just fucking love- okay, Jesus Christ, if he moans like that one more fucking time, I swear I’m gonna-

Josh bit Tyler’s bottom lip and tugged on it, their mouths parting for a second, drawing out a long whine from Tyler. Tyler could tell- feel, actually- Josh about to smirk, so Tyler jumped at the opportunity to take back control while they were parted, resecuring his hand behind Josh’s head and forcing his face back against his own before he could make any smart comments and shoving his tongue between Josh’s lips. It was Josh’s turn to make a high pitched sound of surprise, muffled slightly in Tyler’s mouth, and Tyler would have laughed at him to give him a taste of his own medicine, the big meanie; but Josh let out another small sound just then, lower than before, and the thought of giving him a hard time about it quickly vanished from Tyler’s mind as Tyler was reminded once again that he couldn’t handle it for much longer if Josh kept it up…. But goddammit, Tyler wanted to make him make those sounds again. Those sounds, those little breathy and low moans and groans, he wanted to make Josh feel like that. Tyler felt Josh’s tongue probing gently at the inside of his cheek, and Tyler guided Josh’s tongue into his own mouth to suck on it. He pressed his hand down a little harder as he smoothed it up the hot skin of Josh’s back- Huh, when did I get my hands under his shirt? Oops, sorry not sorry!- and then Tyler sucked a little harder on Josh’s tongue, and suddenly Tyler’s heart was soaring as Josh made another breathy noise. Score!

Tyler couldn’t help the grin that spread across his face, which made it difficult to keep Josh’s tongue in his mouth, and Josh pulled back a little. Tyler immediately tightened his grip on the back of Josh’s neck to keep him close, and then suddenly Josh’s lips weren’t on Tyler’s mouth but on his neck, and Tyler moaned so loudly it echoed throughout the entire gymnasium. He would have been embarrassed about it except that it felt so fucking good. Tyler moved both his hands up to the back of Josh’s head and ran his fingers through the fading blue. Not that he could see, his eyes were squeezed shut, but Tyler felt right then that he knew everything about Josh by heart.

Josh suddenly grazed his teeth sharply against Tyler’s Adam’s apple and Tyler gasped loudly. Except that, I didn’t know that about him, shit. This is a side of Josh I want to get to know very, very well. God, is that slutty of me? I literally do not even care right n-

Every coherent thought in Tyler’s mind went flying out the window as a wave of pleasure washed over his entire body, his mouth falling open at the sensation though he found himself unable to make any sound. Josh had- whether intentionally or inadvertently, Tyler honestly couldn’t care- ground his
hips down against Tyler’s, and to put it frankly, Tyler had lowkey known he was getting horny, but he hadn’t realized until this moment that he had a full hard on through his jeans. Another wave of pleasure hit him as he realized, with only a hint of smugness, so did Josh.

Tyler didn’t exactly mean to, but he pushed his hips up to meet Josh’s again; he couldn’t not when he had become aware of just how much tension had built up between them and how fucking good it felt to tease it a little.

“Ty...Tyler, oh, God, you...y-you...”

Josh’s voice was right in Tyler’s ear, his breath hot against his now damp skin. It tickled a little but sent delicious chills racing down Tyler’s spine, causing Tyler to whine a little in response and jerk his hips up again. Josh groaned long and low against Tyler’s neck, right beneath his ear, and as the chills hit him again, Tyler honestly was prepared to just melt and die right then and there on the gym floor with Josh Dun on top of him, when there was the loud bang of the gym doors being shoved open from across the room.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Tyler exclaimed quietly, shoving Josh off of him in a panic and scrambling into a sitting position. Josh was stumbling to his feet, tripping over Tyler’s legs and almost falling again, but he managed to stay upright. Tyler scrambled to his knees before Josh grabbed the shoulder of Tyler’s hoodie and hauled him to his feet beside him, the two bumping into each other.

“Get down!” Josh hissed in Tyler’s ear, pulling him around the corner of the bleachers.

“We just got up!”

Josh ignored Tyler and shoved him to the ground again, crouching down beside him.

“Bossy,” Tyler chided in a low voice, unable to help himself. Now that they were out of the open and relatively hidden from whoever it was that had entered the gym, Tyler’s initial nerves had settled a bit, that wave of euphoria they had both earlier been riding returning. He was just so happy, he couldn’t contain it; he was much too happy right now to be bothered with anyone else other than Josh. They had almost been caught by God knows who, and sure, he had freaked out a little at first, but it was kind of exciting, he had to admit. Plus watching Josh get all serious and worked up about it was pretty hot. Tyler had never thought he’d enjoy being manhandled before, but he was quickly changing his mind.

“Shut up,” Josh hissed back in a whisper, pushing at Tyler’s side. “Get under the bleachers, they can still see us out here.”

“What’s the matter, Joshie, you scared-”

Josh shoved Tyler a bit harder, and Tyler collapsed from his crouched position backwards beneath the bleachers and onto his ass.

“Ouch!” he whispered dramatically. “That hurt, you dick.”

Josh inched beneath the bleachers after him and pressed in close to Tyler, ducking so he wouldn’t bump his head on the bottom of the seats. “Tyler, please, be quiet, I swear-”

“You left your backpack out there anyways, if they come this way at all, we’re screwed.”

Josh squinted his eyes at Tyler. “You sound annoyingly happy right now.”

“Yeah, well, you just sound annoying,” Tyler grinned.
“Ty, this is serious.”

Tyler was about to make a smart reply, but the sound of footsteps kept him quiet. It only sounded like one person, but that’s all it could take to cause a lot of trouble, for both of them. And the footsteps weren’t staying on the far side of the gym like they should have been; they were getting closer.

Tyler felt his breath hitch in his throat as he tried to quiet his breathing. Every little sound seemed to echo achingly loud in the large room. Even though Tyler knew it was probably just his imagination, he still felt a bit paranoid about it. He glanced slowly over at Josh without moving his head too far. Josh was kneeling next to him as still as a statue, one of his knees digging into the side of Tyler’s thigh and resting his head against the edge of one of the rows of bleachers. He was so tense Tyler could practically see the sweat forming on his forehead. The footsteps were still getting closer; Tyler could see the feet of whoever it was between the bleachers now, halfway across the gym. He breathed in deeply and glanced back over at Josh. It was relatively dark beneath the bleachers, with only a few streaks of light finding their way through between the seats and one of them casting shadows across Josh’s face. Tyler could see the shadow of his eyelashes on his cheeks. He wanted so badly to cup his face, to feel his skin again, but- not now. Dammit.

Then Tyler noticed how Josh’s brows were furrowed, and how he actually wasn’t crouched as still as Tyler had thought at first but was shaking ever so slightly. A warm feeling washed over Tyler’s heart- yeah, it’s cheesy, I’m cheesy, okay? Fuck off - and with the footsteps still getting closer, Tyler understood how big a deal this was to Josh. Seriously, he didn’t want to get caught either, after all. ... do I? No, Ty, not now, think about that later. Of course I don’t want us to get caught, not like this, don’t be an idiot.

Tyler glanced briefly back out between the bleachers at the approaching person before inching his hand slowly towards Josh’s hand and gently brushing the back of it with his thumb. Josh didn’t move from where he was leaning his head against the metal seating, so Tyler slowly leaned forward a couple inches to rest his head against the seat, too. He had a slightly better view of who it was out in the gym, and at least it didn’t look like any kid they knew. It looked more like an adult. Which could be a lot better or a lot worse.

Tyler shifted uncomfortably; kneeling so long on this floor was getting really tough, it was killing his knees. He was too young to have anything kill his knees. He sounded like his dad. Then Josh's elbow was suddenly digging into Tyler’s side, and Tyler had to stifle a surprised gasp.

“Be still,” Josh more mouthed the word than he spoke it, and Tyler didn’t know if Josh could really see his face too well beneath the bleachers, but he rolled his eyes dramatically just in case he could see.

Just then though, the mystery person who had interrupted them earlier- damn them - stopped walking almost directly in front of where Tyler and Josh were hiding, and Tyler’s stomach jumped a little. Maybe they had heard him squirming around, dammit, he should have listened to Josh, I am such a dunce-
There was the sound of shuffling and a set of keys jingling, and Tyler peered between the bleachers curiously, letting out a small breath as the person simply picked up Josh’s bag from the ground and collected the basketball Tyler had been playing with earlier before turning around and heading back across the gym.

“Janitor,” Josh whispered in Tyler’s ear, and Tyler jumped as his breath tickled against his skin. It legit made him shiver. Tyler just wished the janitor would hurry the fuck out of there.

They remained still in their crouched positions as they heard the distant sound of his keys again and then the gym doors clanging shut. Josh let out a huge sigh, and Tyler rearranged his aching legs to sit more comfortably on his ass, stretching his legs out in front of him. He pushed at Josh’s ankle next to him, knocking Josh backwards onto his ass, too.

“Dude, you were so fucking stressed,” Tyler huffed out a laugh, feeling himself relax, the tension in his shoulders dissipating.

Josh chuckled tightly once and kicked at Tyler’s thigh with his foot. “Shut up, dude. You were stressed, too, don’t pretend you weren’t.”

“Hm, maybe so, but at least I wasn’t pissing my pants over it.”

Tyler shrieked then as Josh lunged at him, tickling his stomach and sides and knocking him backwards, only to hit the back of his head on the edge of the bleachers.

“Owww…” Tyler let his voice sound as whiney as physically possible, making a show of rubbing his head as he fake glared at Josh in the dimness.

The immediate hurt puppy look that crossed Josh’s face made Tyler’s heart melt. So maybe it was a little mean of him, but that face was the cutest fucking thing ever, and Tyler would do almost anything to see it more often.

“Shit, bro, I’m sorry, are you okay?” Josh crawled over closer to Tyler and kneeled beside him, watching with worried eyes as Tyler continued to rub at the back of his head. “I’m sorry, Tyler, I didn’t mean to...shit....”

Josh reached out a hand between them as if to place his hand on the back of Tyler’s head, and then they both froze, Josh’s hand in midair. Tyler felt his breath getting caught somewhere in his throat as his stomach dropped, and ordinarily Tyler thought that that was probably a not-so-great feeling, but right now, when it was because of Josh, Tyler was hoping the feeling would never go away.

Tyler realized then that he had been staring blankly at the strings of Josh’s jacket for the past few seconds, and he forced his eyes to flick up to Josh’s face. Josh was already looking at him, and Tyler knew that he had thought it before, but he had never seen Josh’s eyes look so fucking brown and deep and beautiful before. And his eyelashes were so damn long and soft. Tyler vaguely recalled feeling them flutter against his cheek as Josh had kissed him, and Tyler had the strongest urge to just leap at Josh, forget everything and just kiss him again like they had been doing before.

Suddenly Tyler focused on Josh’s hand still in the air between them and the fact that his hand was shaking. Why doesn’t the idiot move or something? Tyler’s brows furrowed down. Why doesn’t he just kiss me again? Doesn’t he know that I want him to? Fuckin’ dummy.

Tyler huffed, half in a sigh and half in a chuckle as he leaned forward and pressed his forehead to Josh’s, placing his hand on one of Josh’s knees. He could feel Josh tense against him, but it was only a few seconds before he let his own hand settle gently on the back of Tyler’s neck.
Tyler peered at Josh and smirked when he saw that it was now Josh who was avoiding his gaze, staring down at Tyler’s hand on his knee. Tyler tilted his head and brushed his nose against Josh’s.

“Dude, are you blushing?” Tyler couldn’t help himself. Apparently giving Josh a hard time was a new favorite pastime of his.

“Shut up….” Josh said softly between them, the bright shade of red splattered across his face becoming even more visible in the dim light.

“Dude, you are blushing!”

“Tyler, shut up!” Josh huffed, sitting back on his heels and pulling away from Tyler.

Tyler burst into giggles, only giggling harder when Josh crossed his arms and glared at him.

“Tyler, I’m serious, dude, shut the fuck up-”

“Dude!” Tyler wheezed, clutching his side. “You’re still blushing.”

Josh resettled himself on the floor so he could shove his foot at Tyler’s leg. “I’m not talking to you anymore, you’re such a dick, honestly.”

Tyler shoved Josh’s leg back. “You’re into it though.”

“Are not.”

“Are, too.”

“Are not.”

“You totally are.”

“I am not! God, you’re so annoying, I can’t believe that I-”

Josh stopped talking and started blushing again as Tyler made a smug face at him.

“And don’t look so fucking satisfied with yourself. What about my backpack? I need to get it back, my phone’s in there.”

Tyler shrugged. He didn’t care about Josh’s backpack, he just wanted to keep teasing Josh and making him squirm, then maybe kiss his adorable face and make him blush again. “I dunno, bro, the janitor probably put it in lost and found, we can just stop by the office on the way out. No biggie.”

“We?”

Tyler fought his own blush threatening to appear on his face as he shrugged again, trying to appear as cool and casual as possible. “Yeah, I thought maybe we could stop by Burger King on the way to your house.”

“My house?”

“Yeah, I’m inviting myself over, is that okay? This is an overnight trip for the team, remember? And as you well know, my parents don’t know about...well, y’know. Going home tonight would blow my cover.”

“Wait, you mean you wanna...like, you wanna spend the night? At my house?”
Tyler couldn’t read Josh’s expression too well in the dim light, and he suddenly felt unsure. “Yeah...I mean if that’s chill with you and everything...?”

“Dude, for real? Of course it’s chill with me, I mean...yeah, of course,” Josh stumbled over his sentence, the blush on his cheeks spreading across his whole face. Tyler smirked, reassured.

“Well, c’mon then, let’s go get your bag. I’m hungry, I want some fries.”

Josh huffed out a small laugh, and Tyler saw him watching him as he crawled past Josh and out from underneath the bleachers, walking off across the middle of the gym. Well, half walking, half skipping. Tyler was kind of skipping, and he knew it. And he didn’t even care.

Tyler didn’t even check to see if Josh was following him, and the fact that he didn't have to made his heart beat race.

Tyler peered out the window of Burger King, squinting suspiciously as a car drove slowly past. It was probably no one, but the restaurant was only around the corner from the high school; it would be so easy for someone to see him here, with Josh. The tiny shred of anxiety that Tyler had been feeling vanished though as his mind turned to Josh, once again. He glanced across the room to the counter where Josh was waiting in a short line, head turned down as he tapped on his phone. Tyler felt a huge grin spread across his face as he studied Josh, looking absolutely adorable in his old hoodie and beanie with a few stray tufts of brown- Brown! The blue is almost completely faded now, wow. Hey, maybe he’ll let me help him dye it again...that could get...interesting, considering where we stand now...couldn’t it?- hair wisping out from beneath it. Josh’s cheeks were flushed a bright red from the cold air that tsunamied the room every time a customer opened the doors. Tyler noticed, even from across the room, that Josh’s lips were a lovely dark shade of pink, and that Josh was currently biting his bottom lip. Tyler felt a wave of something suspiciously similar to pure lust come over him at the sight, and then as if Josh had heard his thoughts, he looked up and their eyes met and locked on each other, and Tyler swore it was like meeting for the first time. This was new and exhilarating and a bit scary and it- whatever it was- kept Tyler feeling like he was on an extremely fast and daring roller coaster, the kind with the caution signs in the line about not riding if you’re pregnant or over a certain age and about being in perfect physical condition before getting on. The feeling made Tyler’s stomach forget that stomachs belong in your tummy and not your throat, and it kept coming back, every time Tyler even thought about Josh, much less making long and intense eye contact with him. It was okay though, Tyler decided as the line moved forward and Josh suddenly had to look away to place their order. Tyler fucking loved roller coasters.

Another blast of cold air hit Tyler as the restaurant doors swung open once again, a few flakes of snow actually finding their way inside. Tyler watched them from across the room as they disappeared upon hitting the floor, and he shivered even harder than he had been a moment before. It was fucking cold. He had left his coat at school in his haste to not leave Josh’s side as they retrieved his bag from the office, probably hanging somewhere in the gym or still in his locker, and Tyler cursed himself now for forgetting it. He pulled the drawstrings of his hoodie tightly around his face and drew his legs up onto the booth bench and against his chest, turning his back to the cold window beside him. It helped, but only a tiny bit.

“Hey, Ty, you wanted pickles on your cheeseburger, right-” Josh stopped beside the booth, tray in hand, and eyed Tyler for a moment before starting to chuckle under his breath. “Cold?”

Tyler shifted his hood enough to make sure that Josh could see his eyeroll. “Yeah, and it’s your fault I left my jacket at school, mister.”
Josh didn’t look very sorry in Tyler’s opinion. “Whatever, dude. You shouldn’t be complaining anyways, I just bought you a cheeseburger.”

Tyler made a pouty face. “How can I enjoy it if I freeze to death before I eat it?”

Josh set the tray in the center of the table and slid into the bench across from Tyler. Tyler was only a little disappointed that he didn’t sit down on the same side as him.

“Drama queen. Relax, dude, it’s not that bad. We can share the fries, okay?” Josh handed Tyler his burger and dumped the box of fries onto the tray.

Tyler shrugged off his slight disappointment and turned in his seat to sit cross legged instead, facing Josh. He was fucking starving. He hadn’t brought a lunch to school that day.

“Ew, pickles,” Tyler wrinkled his nose and glanced up when he heard Josh snicker.

“Give ‘em to me, I’ll eat them,” Josh said.

Tyler picked the pickles off his burger—four of them, ew, that’s four pickles too many—and tossed them on the tray in Josh’s direction.

“Gee, thanks,” Josh commented. Tyler didn’t respond, just hummed happily as he took a bite of his sandwich. *Finally. Why the fuck didn’t I eat lunch?*

Josh’s phone dinged with an incoming text, and Tyler glanced up at Josh in between bites of his food. He paused. Josh had been staring at him, but had quickly looked away when Tyler had noticed, completely oblivious to his phone. He picked at the fries on the tray and steadily avoided Tyler’s gaze.

“What?” Tyler finally asked, mouth half full, as dread washed over him. Was Josh starting to back out of this...whatever this was? Tyler’s heart rate sped up, but not for good reasons this time.

“Hm?” Josh briefly met Tyler’s gaze before blushing and looking back down, fiddling with his napkin on the table. “Nothing, sorry.”

Tyler frowned. *I knew it, I knew this was too good to be true.*

“Seriously, what...what is it? Why were you looking at me like that?”

Josh fidgeted, but he met Tyler’s eyes. “It’s...you’re just...you’re really cute, that’s all. Like really...really cute...”

Tyler’s mouth had dropped ever so slightly, but he didn’t care. As soon as the words left Josh’s lips, Josh’s blush got even more noticeable, and he looked away again. *Dammit, he blushes a lot, he is so, so pretty...wait...did...did I make him blush? Do I make him blush? And he thinks I’m cute? Whaaaaaat-*

“Is that...sorry, I’m being a bit creepy, if you don’t-”

“Wait, no, it’s fine,” Tyler reassured Josh, studying him closely from across the table. “You can call me cute any day, I don’t mind.”

Josh only blushed harder, and Tyler beamed. So he *did* make Josh blush!

“You’re blushing again,” Tyler stole a handful of fries, watching in glee as mortification crossed Josh’s face.
“Tyler! God....”

“What!? It’s cute. I think you’re cute, too.”

“Yeah, well,” Josh huffed, shifting again in his seat. “Who wouldn’t?”

Tyler barked out a laugh in surprise. “Wow, look at you, aren’t you saucy?”

Josh was grinning and blushing at the same time, and when he stuck his tongue out slightly between his teeth, Tyler almost died right then and there in the booth at Burger King.

\textit{God, I love him...whoa, hold up, I guess I shouldn’t really think shit like that randomly. I should slow down or something. But...I don’t wanna slow down.....}

Neither Tyler nor Josh said anything after they stopped giggling, just continued eating in silence. It didn’t feel too awkward though, Tyler thought. Well...it was kind of awkward, probably just because they had a big conversation coming up, sooner or later, and they both knew it. But for now, while Tyler finished his burger, he was content with just shivering in his hoodie and looking out the window at Burger King’s neon sign reflecting off the snow, with Josh sitting across from him, still playing with the napkin on the table. It was the closest that they had been in months, and Tyler was gonna fucking enjoy it.

“So....”

Josh’s voice made Tyler jump. He knew what was coming now. \textit{Ugh, so soon?}

“So I guess we should...y’know...talk about this...and all...you know?”

Tyler crumpled up his burger wrapper and nodded. Better sooner than later, right? “No, yeah, totally. Talk. We should. Talk about it, I mean. We...we totally should. Yes.”

Josh nodded, and they made fleeting eye contact, a permanent blush on Josh’s cheeks now. Tyler smiled to himself. \textit{God, he’s so pretty....} Whatever they had to talk about and despite the small level of anxiety Tyler was feeling, Tyler was fairly confident that they would be okay. Josh had kissed him, Josh had called him \textit{cute}, Josh was currently still blushing. They’d be fine. They were just going to talk.

“So, um, you...you, uh...you like me, then, huh?” "Great going, Ty. Sick job. You have such a way with words. Great.

Josh nodded, and they made fleeting eye contact, a permanent blush on Josh’s cheeks now. Tyler smiled to himself. \textit{God, he’s so pretty....} Whatever they had to talk about and despite the small level of anxiety Tyler was feeling, Tyler was fairly confident that they would be okay. Josh had kissed him, Josh had called him \textit{cute}, Josh was currently still blushing. They’d be fine. They were just going to talk.

“So, um, you...you, uh...you like me, then, huh?” \textit{Great going, Ty. Sick job. You have such a way with words. Great.}

Josh’s blush deepened even more (\textit{how is that even possible!? God, what a cutie... .}) as he started to fidget. He rubbed at the back of his neck, and Tyler's eyes followed his movements inadvertently. Tyler wanted to hold his hands, wanted to reach across the table and touch him, he wanted to be \textit{closer} to him, dammit. Less than an hour ago they had been making out and grinding on the gym floor, and thinking about it now only made Tyler all hot and bothered. Well, as hot as he could be while currently \textit{freezing}. Tyler wished Josh would get over there on his side of the table and warm him up.

“I mean...yeah, like...yeah. I like you....” Josh stuttered out, shifting around nervously. He kept sneaking glances at Tyler; every time they made eye contact, his blush would somehow deepen even more, and he’d quickly glance away again. Tyler was about to demand to know more, but Josh finally continued.

“Like...I \textit{really} like you, I do. I mean...don’t you...don’t you like me back, just...just a bit? ‘Cuz Mikey \textit{swore} that you—"
“Wait, wait, Mikey? How is Mikey involved in this?”

“Oh, well...didn’t you know? I bumped into him after school, he was about to head out with the rest of the team, and then he just...he just knew, about us hanging out and being friends and...well, everything else, too. You didn’t know? You didn’t tell him? I thought since he’s like, your best friend or whatever that he woulda-”

“You’re my best friend,” Tyler interrupted, feeling his face grow hot.

Josh’s rambling stuttered to an end as his eyes flicked up to meet Tyler’s. Tyler swallowed hard but didn’t look away. He didn’t know why, after everything that had happened between them, he felt so shy about admitting to Josh that he was his best friend. Tyler had never had a best friend before.

Well, that’s it, isn’t it? That’s why it’s hard to say it out loud, ‘cuz Josh might be your best friend, but Josh has already got a best friend, buddy, like it or not, and it’s not you. Now you’ve gone and put him in a fucking spot, what can he say now? Great going, Ty-

“Really?”

Tyler couldn’t stop staring across the table and into Josh’s eyes as he nodded hesitantly. God, I love his eyes. Why can’t it just be us two? Just us and no one else-

“You’re my best friend, too.”

Tyler’s heart leaped, but he shoved it back down. “You don’t have to say that, dude, sorry, I shouldn’t have-”

“But I mean it.”

Tyler paused, uncertain. Josh looked genuine, but then again, who couldn’t completely trust those big, chestnut eyes? “But...but what about Brendon? And, and Spencer, and Dallon, and I mean Brendon-”

“You’re different.”

Tyler tried not to smile, because he was certain it would come out looking a little smug if he did. “In...in a good way?”

Josh’s face cracked into a smile then, and Tyler’s heart rate doubled at the sight. Tyler didn’t think he would ever grow tired of seeing Josh smile. “Of course in a good way, dummy.”

“Just checking.” Tyler didn’t even try not to grin back at Josh.

They didn’t say anything for a moment. Tyler finished his soda and crunched on the ice. It only made him colder, but he didn’t want to stop. The silence between them might grow awkward again if he stopped making crunching noises. Josh’s phone dinged again, but they both ignored it.

“So...,” Josh was playing studiously with his fingers on the tabletop, and Tyler glanced up at him over the rim of his cup. “So like...you like...how long have you...I mean-”

Tyler understood what Josh was trying to ask and decided to let him off the hook without making him finish his sentence. Cute as Josh’s bumbling was. Hey, I can be a nice guy sometimes. “Since like, I don’t know, man, like...remember when you first got your crutches? I guess around then. Probably. Most likely. I mean, it’s not like I wrote it down or anything.”
“Same for me, I guess,” Josh said, before sticking out his bottom lip. Tyler choked on his own tongue. Goddammit, Josh had to give him a fucking warning before being all cute and shit like that. Dammit. “What, you mean you don’t write about me in your diary?”

“Ha, ha,” Tyler replied, rolling his eyes. “Eff you, bro. But...if I did keep a diary, you’d be in it. Probably.”

“You totally keep a diary.”

“I don’t.”

“Whatsoever you say, cutie pie.”

Tyler burst out giggling at the look of shock and mild horror on Josh’s face at his own choice of words.

“Wait, I d-didn’t mean, like...shit,” Josh stammered out, his blush back and stronger than ever.

Tyler’s heart was glowing, and he was sure his face was, too. “’Cutie pie’?”

Josh groaned and slumped down against the table to bury his face in his arms. “Tyler, shut up.”

Tyler burst into giggles again. He was so happy. For the first time in a long while.

“I missed you, Josh—” he confided, “-dude.” He didn’t want to make things too deep, too quick.

Josh peered up at Tyler from the table surface. “Same, bro. Like...I don’t even...I can’t even remember why we stopped hanging out in the first place, like....”

Tyler leaned down against the table to peer across at Josh at face level. He pushed his cup out of the way. “I know, right? It was like, obviously before the prom, before...Thanksgiving break, too, I think? I think we just...I think we both just kinda freaked each other out a little, ’cause I didn’t know you liked me and you didn’t know I liked you and I didn’t know that you didn’t know that—”

“Okay, okay, dude, I get it,” Josh huffed against his sleeve, a small smile on his face. “So...wait, you’re serious you didn’t tell Mikey anything then? He just put it together on his own from watching us and from his own cru- I mean, like, he just put it together? O-on his own?”

Tyler gave Josh a questioning look, but didn’t press it, just shook his head against his arm resting on the table. “Well, I mean, I told him I had a crush, on a guy, on a friend, but...I think I let something slip about basketball once, but I don’t see how-”

“Well, that limited the options,” Josh quipped.

“-but I don’t know. I thought we were pretty slick, in my personal opinion.”

“We’re so slick,” Josh grinned.

“So slick.”

“Want the last fry?”

“Nah, you can have it.”

“Thanks, bro.”
Josh’s phone dinged once again, and Josh sat up, huffing as he powered it off without even checking the screen and shoving it into his hoodie pocket. Tyler tried not to grin too much.

“Wanna head out?” Josh asked as he tossed the last fry in his mouth. “I think Call of Duty is calling our names.”

Tyler sat up excitedly, a huge smile on his face. “Definitely, dude. I’m gonna kick your ass.”

“You wanna drive?” Tyler asked as they crossed the Burger King parking lot to his mom’s van.

Josh had been busy staring at Tyler’s ass while he was walking a few steps ahead of him, but he quickly and embarrassedly jerked his eyes up to meet Tyler’s face as he glanced over his shoulder at Josh. Josh began to sweat despite the cold wind and the few snowflakes falling from the sky. He really hoped Tyler hadn’t caught him; that would be awkward.

“Uh, n-no, you can drive.”

“Do you have your license?”

“Um...I have a learner’s permit.”

“I don’t mind if you do wanna drive. I don’t know if that’s legal, technically, since I’m not over twenty-one or whatever, but. Whatever, am I right?”

“Um...it’s fine, really. I’ll let you drive.” Josh didn’t really feel like getting into a whole big explanation about him being terrified of driving. That’d be a real mood killer.

Tyler shrugged as he unlocked the doors and didn’t push it farther, and Josh sighed in relief as he quickly hopped into the passenger side of the car.

“I’ll let you use the aux cord then, how ‘bout that?”

“Hey, thanks, man, really?”

Tyler started the ignition and immediately turned the heat dial on as far as it would go. “Yeah, go for it, bro. Play something catchy.”

“If there’s anything embarrassing, just ignore it,” Josh warned, hooking up his phone and placing it on shuffle.

“If there’s anything embarrassing, I’ll incorporate it into daily jokes and references and never let you live it down.”

“Dude, you are so mean,” Josh laughed, only a tiny bit relieved when Immigrant Song came on. He didn’t doubt that Tyler would actually do what he had threatened.

Tyler started humming quietly as they pulled out of the parking lot, and Josh smiled, glancing over at him. He studied his profile; his funky hairline as it tapered into sideburns and his eyelashes so soft and fluttery they reminded him of Jenna’s; tanned skin, even in the winter, little upturned nose and the faded splash of freckles across his cheekbones. Josh loved- liked, admired, he meant- every part of Tyler. And to think that only an hour or so earlier, Josh’s own face had been pressed against that face, that beautiful face, his own lips touching Tyler’s skin- God, Josh was getting himself all worked up just thinking back to it. He wanted to do it again. And then again, and again, and maybe
one more time. Just for good measures. Just to prove to himself that this was all actually real.

“You’re lookin’ pretty serious right now, bro,” Tyler’s voice startled Josh out of his reverie, and Josh cursed silently at himself as he felt the blush that he was getting so used to lately growing on his cheeks once again. “Whatcha thinkin’ about? Anything in particular?”

Tyler’s voice was playful, hinting, and Josh stifled an embarrassed groan as he realized Tyler most likely definitely knew what he had been thinking about.

“Just, um...I was just...I was thinking about the, uh, the game. Tonight. The basketball game. In Hamilton. Y—you know, the, uh...the game.....”

“Yeah,” Tyler said slowly, his tone making it obvious to Josh that he just loved to tease and embarrass him. “I know the game.”

“Y-yeah....”

“...what about it?”

“What?”

“Well, are you gonna finish that thought or not?” Tyler giggled at him, and Josh smiled, despite the fact his blush was once again turning into a bright red. Goddammit, he’d have to work on that. Google how to not blush around your crush so much or something. Jesus.

“Oh, um...I don’t know. I was just thinking how this would’ve been a fun one to go to, y’know? The first overnight trip for the team this year and everything, and in such a big city, too. It would’ve been pretty tight.”

“Yeah,” Tyler agreed, stopping at a red light. It was late enough in the afternoon now that a hazy blue light hung in the air, growing steadily deeper and darker with every passing minute. It made everything look soft and quiet, especially with the blanket of snow on the ground. It had started snowing a bit harder as well; Josh was glad Tyler was behind the wheel and not himself.

“I don’t know if it would’ve been that fun though, for us, I mean. If the team still has issues with stuff, y’know?”

Josh nodded. “Yeah...about that, Tyler. I’m...I’m sorry about it, man, I really am. Just...this year, sports-wise and shit, it’s...it’s not really going the way I think either of us wanted it to.”

“You couldn’t have stopped it from happening though, dude. I seriously hope you’re still not blaming yourself. I thought you’d grown a pair since then.”

“Ha, ha,” Josh replied, though he didn’t answer what Tyler had been asking. “So...your parents still don’t know, then?”

Tyler groaned out loud, and it was pretty cute, though Josh figured now wasn’t the best time to tell him so. “Yeah, I don’t know how to tell ’em. I was...I was kind of hoping to get back on the team before I’d have to, y’know? I mean, I almost hit the end of my rope with the game tonight. My dad was talking about going with me to Hamilton all week long, like he was getting really excited for it. But then at the last minute he had an emergency appointment this morning, and he decided he couldn’t get away. Thankfully. Saved by the bell.”

Josh huffed, shaking his head. “That was a fucking close one, dude.”
“Yep,” Tyler sounded infinitely cheerier now. “And now you’re saving my ass again by letting me crash at your place tonight. Don’t worry, I bring the party so it’ll be worth it.”

Josh laughed once, quickly skipping a song on his phone as he detected the beginning notes to probably an embarrassing selection. Nickelback or something. Quick one.

“So what about you then, hm? Your ankle’s all better now, has Coach talked to you about being back on the team yet?”

“Oh….” Josh didn’t know why exactly- probably because he had been too busy being an emotional wreck over a lack of Tyler in his life for the past couple of months- but he hadn’t even thought about when he’d be able to rejoin the team. Coach had said he could when his leg was healed. “He hasn’t said anything to me yet, but I guess I haven’t really given him a chance to, y’know? I’ve kinda been, uh...skipping my last period and stuff. I haven’t really been hanging around after school a lot lately. You know how it is.”

“Tsk, tsk, Josh,” Tyler said in a sing-song voice. “Well, you should. You should go ask him next week, like on Monday, dude, right away, just do it, go ask him about being back on the team. This is the time of year you start getting a lot of scouts during the games, you don’t wanna miss out on that.”

“Yeah, but….” Josh was having bad vibes about getting back on the team, and he was pretty certain he knew why. “…what about you?”

Tyler glanced over at Josh as he grinned. “Don’t worry about me, bro, just get back on the team. Seriously, ask Coach. Do it.”

“But-”

“Just do it!” Tyler mimicked Shia LaBeouf, and Josh couldn’t help but to start snickering at him.

“Dude,” Tyler interrupted himself suddenly as a new song started to play. “What the fuck... is this...? ” Tyler threw Josh a wide grin- and, frankly, a menacing one, in Josh’s opinion- as to Josh’s horror, he recognized the new song as a Jonas Brothers song.

“Ugh, oh, my God, I didn’t even know that was on there,” Josh groaned out loud, wildly grabbing for his phone. Tyler was laughing as he snatched it away before Josh could reach it.

“Dude, seriously, give me that!” Josh whined, punching at Tyler’s arm, though the effect was weakened by the fact he too was laughing. “Pay attention to the road, Jesus, give me my damn phone!”

“When you look me in the eyes!” Tyler sang in an annoying voice (in Josh’s opinion), holding the phone out of Josh’s reach. “And tell me that you looove me!” Josh would have protested more about Tyler and unsafe driving, but they had just made the turn into their neighborhood and were driving so slowly now anyways that he didn’t suppose it mattered that much.

“I catch a glimpse of heaaaven—”

“You are the absolute fucking worst, and I hate you,” Josh emphasized, giving up trying to steal back his phone and collapsing back in his seat, pouting over at Tyler as Tyler continued to sing along to the song, turning up the volume. Josh mimed covering his ears and made a sick face, though he had to admit- Tyler was being pretty fucking cute.

“I don’t know why I’m the embarrassed one here,” Josh spoke loudly to be heard over the second chorus playing nearly at the highest volume and Tyler’s jokingly off-tone harmonies. “It may be on
They rolled to a stop in Josh’s driveway, and Tyler just continued singing, turning to waggle his eyebrows at Josh.

Josh barked out a laugh, tugging the aux cord out of his phone and hopping out of the van, slamming the door shut on Tyler’s protests.

“Dude, don’t pretend that you don’t know all the words either, bro,” Tyler said once he had exited the van and slipped around the front and over to Josh.

Josh pursed his lips at Tyler. “Well, I don’t go around yelling them at the top of my lungs like an idiot.”

Tyler was practically beaming at Josh, and Josh’s heart rate doubled when he noticed Tyler’s gaze flick down to his lips. He did, right? Oh, my God, he totally did. Standing there staring at Tyler staring at him— it made Josh’s knees weak. Which was not currently a good thing, since the driveway was incredibly slippery with the newly fallen snow, and it was dark enough now to make it nearly impossible to spot the icy patches. Josh really didn’t want to fall and hurt his leg again. That would suck some major ass.

“C-come on,” Josh waved a hand towards the house, breaking their eye contact. The cold was getting seriously uncomfortable now; the snow was starting to seep through his sneakers. “Let’s get inside, it’s kinda cold out here.”

Tyler’s eye lit up visibly despite the dark. “Call of Duty?”

“You bet,” Josh replied, nodding, even as Tyler took off for the front door. Josh huffed out a laugh to himself as he followed.

The electric fireplace was on and blazing in the living room, and Josh started to sweat in his hoodie the second he closed the front door, though it was a welcome change from the frosty weather outside. Tyler was tugging off his shoes, leaving them on the tile by the front door, and Josh tried not to smile too big at the sight of Tyler feeling comfortable in his house. It made Josh really happy; why, he wasn’t so sure, but it was nice. Josh tugged off his own wet shoes and shrugged out of his hoodie, dropping it on a nearby armchair.

“Oh, hey, who’s watching Gossip Girl?” Tyler piped, ducking around the sofa and eyeing the TV, on and muted in the corner by the fire. “Is your fam home?”

“You watch Gossip Girl?” Josh teased.

“Hey, don’t knock it, it’s a good show. Lots o’ drama.”

“So, you know all the lyrics to Jonas Bro songs, and you not only like the show, but you recognize a random episode of Gossip Girl—”

“Joshua, don’t judge me.”

Josh dissolved into snickers as Tyler sunk onto the arm of the sofa to watch the silent screen. He heard the sound of the pantry door closing in the kitchen and made his way across the room to Tyler. “My sisters are home, but my parents went to Hamilton to watch Jordan play— I mean, he’s on the bench, it’s not like he’s gonna actually play, but they’re pretty pumped about him making the team, I guess. Plus this is his first trip away overnight, like in a different city, so they—”
Shush, this part is so good, oh, my God….”

Josh huffed in disbelief, Tyler’s eyes glued to the screen. “Ty, the volume’s not even on, how are you enjoying this?”

“Oh, hey, Josh,” one of Josh’s sisters padded in from the kitchen, mug of coffee in hand. “I was wondering when you’d get home. Mom told us to call her if you were out past ten.”

Josh rolled his eyes. “Shut up, Abs, I’m not that late. It’s literally five o’clock.”

“Ashley was about to call her anyways,” Abbie shrugged her shoulders, slipping past Josh towards the sofa. “Oh- hey, Tyler. What are you doing here?”

“Oh, um, sorry, I was just- hi, nice to see you, um, again,” Tyler stammered awkwardly, jumping up from the arm of the sofa and subtly edging away from Josh’s youngest sibling towards the staircase.

“I’m Abigail, don’t you remember? The last time you were over here was like, last fall.”

“Oh, r-really?”

Josh tried not to smirk as Abbie nearly cornered Tyler, Tyler looking rather awkward and panicked. And flustered and cute, if Josh was being completely honest, albeit a little mean. Tyler glanced to Josh over Abbie’s head, looking frantic, and Josh tried not to giggle out loud as he shouldered his backpack and headed for the stairs to rescue Tyler from his baby sister.

Ashley appeared in the kitchen doorway then, leaning against the frame as Josh passed by. “‘Sup, J, you’re home? Mom said we can order a pizza tonight,” she said dryly, crunching on an apple.

“Oh, awesome,” Josh paused, momentarily distracted. They had just eaten, but he could always go for a pizza. “I brought a friend over, just FYI.”

“I know already. To play video games up in your bedroom, right?”

“Yeah, how’d you know-”

Tyler’s loud voice interrupted Josh and Ashley. “Yeah, well, Josh and I are going to go now-upstairs, okay? See you later.” Tyler took a step backwards onto the staircase, jerking his head at Josh while trying to smile politely at Abbie as she continued to crowd him at the foot of the steps.

Josh huffed out another laugh. “Get pineapple and pepperoni when you order, okay, Ash?” Josh said, leaving his one sister in the doorway to help Tyler escape from the other.

“Back off, Abs,” Josh muttered, only half joking as he brushed past his other sibling to follow Tyler, who was already halfway up the stairs and around the corner out of sight.

“Wait, J, whos’ that? Your friend is already-” Ashley’s voice followed Josh as he jogged up the steps, but he ignored whatever it was she was saying.

Tyler was standing on the landing, still looking quite flustered with a small splash of red across his cheeks, and Josh started to laugh at his expression.

“Dude, I think your little sis likes me,” Tyler murmured, as if the idea was the most horrific thing to him.

Josh wheezed. “Dude, you are so funny, you should’ve seen your face back there, bro, oh, my God.”
“Hey…” Tyler elbowed at Josh’s side before crossing his arms. “It’s not funny, okay? I didn’t know what to do, it was so awkward…”

“Nice to see you, um, again!” Josh mimicked in a high voice, laughing harder as the red on Tyler’s cheeks spread to his whole face.

“Bro, you are such an asshole, I don’t even sound like that.” Tyler pouted, swinging Josh’s bedroom door open and stepping in backwards, glaring at Josh.

Josh was about to crack another joke in a Tyler-like, high-pitched voice as he took a step closer to Tyler, crowding him against the open door, his hand reaching out for Tyler’s without his even realizing it and their faces suddenly quite close, when out of nowhere-

“Josh, hey, buddy, I texted you, but-”

Josh spun around at the exact same time as Tyler, the two of them hurriedly stepping apart, Tyler banging into the open door and the door respectively banging loudly into the wall, and Josh stumbling in a pile of dirty clothes and collapsing against his dresser next to the door, nearly falling to the floor.

Spencer was sitting on the edge of Josh’s bed, controller in hand, the Skyrim save screen glowing on the TV behind him. His mouth was hanging open.

Josh’s nerves suddenly went ballistic as his mind began to run and trip over itself, feeling his body literally grow sick with the sudden weight of anxiety and worry that hit him full force as he could only stand there, frozen in place, watching as one of his best friends slowly stood up, face visibly hurt and confused as his eyes darted back and forth between Josh and… and Tyler. Josh’s school enemy. Josh’s basketball rival. The new kid. The outcast. The guy that Josh’s friends believed had purposefully interfered to get Josh kicked off the team, the guy who had walked onto their turf and stolen Josh’s placing on the team, dashing his dreams of winning a scholarship and becoming a professional athlete. The guy who had torn the team in half, who was responsible for Josh’s hurt leg and his ruined last year of high school. Josh’s supposed nemesis.

Josh could only watch as all the emotions played across Spencer’s face, the silence in the small bedroom growing louder and louder with every passing second that none of them said anything.

Finally, finally, Spencer moved, raising a hand slightly before dropping it back next to his side.

“Dude, what...what the fuck?”

Josh tried not to wince. At least it was Spencer and not Brendon. Thank God it wasn’t Brendon. Brendon would have lost his shit.

“S-Spence...what are you doing here?” Josh managed to choke out, literally feeling a drop of sweat form on his forehead.

Spencer let out a single laugh, though he wasn’t smiling. “Me? Me? What am I doing here? What about him?”

Josh had his eyes locked on Spencer, but in his peripheral vision he saw Tyler flinch.

“Look, listen, listen to me, Spence, okay? Listen.” Josh took a small step towards the bed, towards his friend. “Look, I...I...I’m sorry t-that...that I didn’t tell you, alright, I...I should have, I know, I know it, b-but...but me and Tyler, we-”
“I just, I thought- *we* thought that you *hated* this guy, and now you’re...you’re what, *hanging out* with him behind our backs?” Spencer waved an angry hand around in the air. “Dude, I just...what is going *on*? What, did you just start off the year thinking, oh, what a funny joke it’d be to lie to all my friends about hating this guy and get them to all hate the new kid, too? Is *that* what you thought, *Josh*?”

“Of *course* not,” Josh snapped, trying not to get too angry. “Look, I did, *we* did at first- hate each other, I mean.” Josh glanced sheepishly in Tyler’s direction, but Tyler only nodded lightly, eyes meeting Josh’s briefly but giving nothing away.

Josh continued, feeling as if he were balancing on a tightrope, trying not to hurt either friend. “At first I kind of *did* hate him, I was...I was stupid and angry and I just...it was mean of me, I know, but...I couldn’t help but be super jealous of him, y’know, I thought he was a dick- and then I...I don’t know how it happened exactly, but...he turned out to not be as much of a dick as I thought he was, he-”

“Gee, thanks,” Tyler piped from the corner. Both Josh and Spencer sent him dirty looks as Josh continued.

“-and he was actually pretty chill, which was pretty sick of him since *I* had been the one being such a dick to *him* in the first place, not the other way around, a-and he...he helped me the first time I hurt my leg, and I realized I had been *super* mean and-”

“Wait, the *first* time you hurt your leg?” Spencer interrupted. “You mean *before* you fractured it in the game and got a cast and shit? Dude, you mean you’ve been *lying* to us for what, four, five months? *Months* ?”

Josh shrugged one shoulder slowly, mind reeling. “I guess...I guess so? Kind of? It’s not like I didn’t want to tell you guys, I *did*, we did, but like...there’s just *so* many fucking strings attached, we didn’t know *how* .”

Spencer crossed his arms. “What do you mean?”

Josh sighed in frustration. “Like, the whole fucking team is a *mess*, because of us- well, because of *me*, mostly me-”

“No, it’s because of *us*, not just you,” Tyler corrected.

“Ty, this isn’t your fault, let me-”

“Stop being a martyr, Josh.”

“Yeah, stop being a martyr, Josh,” Spencer echoed, and for a second Josh thought maybe they could make this work, the three of them. He glanced over at Spencer, but Spencer still wasn’t smiling.

“*And?* ” Spencer demanded. “Why didn’t you just tell us the *truth*?”

“*Because* ,” Josh started again. “Our friendship was like, still rocky, like we had just become kinda friends, y’know, when I fractured my ankle, and suddenly Coach and the *whole team* were all up in our shit. And now- well, now we’re *both* off the team, so we both have friends mad at the other about that, and half the team hates *me* and the other half hates *Tyler*, and then there were all those stupid bets that Brendon had going on, and since we didn’t technically finish the game that night on ‘fair terms’ or whatever, a lot of *other* kids were pissed about *that*, and then-”

“Okay, okay, y’know what, stop. You’re making my head hurt,” Spencer grumbled.
Josh took a couple deep, slow breaths in the following silence, eyes darting back over to Tyler. He seemed to be doing okay, his head hung low as he quietly watched the scene unfold through his eyelashes. *Those damn eyelashes*...

“So….” Spencer said, voice trailing off, unsure. “Are you guys...so you’re *friends*, then?”

Josh’s eyes shot over to Tyler. Yeah, they had been friends, then not so much, then they had- they had fucking kissed, so yeah, obviously they were friends again, and now...now they were something more, surely...not that they had really discussed that part of things yet, but. Josh was pretty sure he didn’t need to try explaining all that to Spencer though, when he himself didn’t fully understand it yet. Probably Tyler didn’t either. So for now- friends.

“Yeah,” Josh nodded, glancing back to Spencer. “We’re...we’re friends….”

Spencer nodded, eyes scanning the floor as if still trying to process everything. “So...so is this like, why you’ve been acting so weird lately?”

Josh blushed, shuffling awkwardly. “What do you mean, *weird-*”

“Don’t play, Josh, you’ve been out of it for months, and you’ve been keeping this secret for months, so. Put two and two together.”

“I am *not* his secret,” Tyler protested, waving dramatic air quotes in the air as he snapped out his defense, and Josh had to stifle a small laugh, despite the amount of tension he still felt.

Spencer merely glanced at Tyler before directing his attention back to Josh. “Look, J, I don’t...I don’t, like, get this, I don’t really understand how this happened, like, at all, but...you’re my friend, and if...if this guy-”

“It’s Tyler,” Tyler said.

“-is your friend now- however that happened- I mean...I’m not gonna...like, what can I do about it? I mean, ultimately, I guess, it’s not *that* big of a deal or anything...really...I mean, you’re not hurting anyone- the opposite, actually-”

“Yeah,” Tyler added.

“Would you let me finish?” Spencer snapped at Tyler, and when Tyler stuck his tongue out in response, Josh almost grinned at how normal this could all get to feel. Eventually.

“What was I saying?” Spencer looked only slightly frazzled. Josh felt sorry for the guy.

“...that you approve of my friends? Thanks, mom,” Josh jested lightly, offering a small smirk when Spencer looked up at him.

Spencer huffed, almost a laugh. “Yeah. Whatever, dude.”

“I *love you, you love me, we’re a happy family*-

“Tyler, shut up!” Josh exclaimed.

“Dude, ew!” Spencer said at the same time. “Josh, dude, where did you *find* this guy?”

“My name’s Tyler,” Tyler huffed, crossing his arms. Josh had never seen someone jokingly sing such a lame cartoon’s theme song one minute only to look so adorably put out the next. It was kind of impressive.
“Sometimes I wonder the same thing,” Josh said, and the betrayed look Tyler gave him made Josh snort out a giggle.

“You’re both assholes,” Tyler huffed. He didn’t look too mad.

No one said anything for a few moments, and Josh was just about to awkwardly stammer into the silence, but Spencer beat him to it. “So...it’s Tyler, right?”

“Yeah, I’ve only said it like three times already-”

“Yeah, it’s Tyler,” Josh intervened, giving Tyler what he hoped was a stern look. “And he’s actually not a prick, even though right now that’s kind of iffy. He’s just hungry.”

“I am not,” Tyler glared at Josh.

“Oh. Well, I was kinda hoping you were, ‘cuz I am, and we’re ordering pizza, so.”

“ I’m hungry,” Spencer offered.

Josh held a thumbs up in Spencer’s direction. “Cool! So I’ll tell Ash to go ahead and call Pizza Hut and we can- wait, Spence?”

“What?”

“What are you doing here?”

Spencer looked at Josh like he was crazy, which Josh only kind of resented. “I live here,” he replied dryly.

Josh gave him a look. “No, you don’t, bro, seriously, what about the game? Why the fuck aren’t you in Hamilton right now?”

“Don’t tell me you got kicked off the team, too!” Tyler chirped, way too brightly for the still slightly tense situation.

Spencer gave Tyler a decidedly distasteful frown, shockingly similar to an expression Brendon frequently made when looking down at someone, which he did often. Josh almost laughed.

“No, I did not get kicked off the team, thank you very much. Unlike some dipshits I happen to know-”

“Okay, okay, seriously, Spence,” Josh interrupted before Spencer and Tyler could go at it anymore. “What happened?”

Spencer rolled his eyes, and Josh decided then that Spencer had been spending way too much time with Brendon lately. He was rubbing off on Spencer in a not-good way. “I’ve been bitching about it all week, dude, but apparently you’ve been all caught up with your little secret friendship over here that you weren’t even listening during lunch or reading any of my texts. I’m flunking a class, I can’t go on school trips until I bring my grade up. It’s that simple. And I did text you this afternoon, several times, about coming over to play Call of Duty and hang out and shit. But you didn’t reply.”

Josh rubbed the back of his neck, feeling guilty for being so blind to his other friends lately. He smiled sheepishly at Spencer. “Yeah, sorry about that, bro. I’ve been kinda distracted-”

“Yeah, no shit, Sherlock.”
Josh bit back his sarcastic response, waving a hand at the TV on the bookshelf instead, the Skyrim save screen still glowing in the background. “Okay, well, you’re here now. Let’s play Call of Duty, okay?”

Josh looked over at Tyler, who was glancing between Josh and Spencer. Tyler shrugged. “Sure. I mean, if he’s okay with that.”

Spencer grimaced, eyeing Tyler suspiciously. “Yeah, I’m okay with that, as long as this joker doesn’t cheat or some shit.”

“Good!” Josh exclaimed loudly before either of his friends could continue. “It’s settled then, we’ll do multi-player. And don’t worry about Ty, Spencer, he’s an amateur gamer, even you can probably beat him.”

“Hey!” Both Tyler and Spencer protested at the same time.

Josh was just about to escape from his friends to go tell Ashley to order the pizza when he remembered one last thing. “Oh, hey, and Spence? About me and Tyler, we...well, we’re not really...we’re not really like, telling people yet...okay? That we’re friends. I just...I don’t think Brendon’s gonna take it very well, you know how he can be, and I mean, I wouldn’t blame him—”

“Well, thanks,” Tyler commented.

“No, I don’t mean it like that, Ty, c’mon, it’s just. We’re just gonna tell all our friends in our own time...okay? Spencer?”

Josh glanced over at Tyler, still standing in the corner by the open door, concern filling his chest as he searched Tyler’s face for any negative emotions. Josh knew it wasn’t fair to act like Tyler was a dirty, little secret or something, but they had both agreed that this was for the best for now. Tyler wasn’t looking at Josh though, he was watching Spencer, assumedly waiting for his response. Josh turned to Spencer as well.

Spencer was turning the controller around in circles in his hands as he shrugged one shoulder casually. “It’s up to you guys, it doesn’t involve me.”

Josh tried not to sigh in relief too loudly. “Thanks, bud. You won’t tell Brendon?”

“You kidding? He’ll flip. You can break his heart again.”

Josh widened his eyes warningly at Spencer before glancing worriedly over at Tyler, hoping Spencer’s choice of wording had gone over Tyler’s head and he hadn’t noticed. Tyler was already squinting at Josh, and Josh could feel his face heating up. There were some things in Josh’s past that he just wasn’t ready to share with Tyler yet. Probably not for a long time, if he could help it.

Josh let out a shaky laugh, trying his best to shrug the comment off. “Yeah, well, you know B. He always flips about all kinds of shit. Real drama queen.”

Spencer huffed in agreement before turning towards the pile of video games on Josh’s floor, rooting through them for Call of Duty, and Josh took his chance to escape. He slipped past Tyler, pointedly ignoring his questioning raised eyebrows, and out into the hallway, calling over his shoulder.

“I’m gonna go order that pizza now while you two set up the game, okay? And just, try not to kill each other, please, while I’m gone. I’ll be right back!”

So, maybe that had all been a little unexpected. Or a lot unexpected. Same difference, in the end.
And so it had been a little rocky. But, despite it all, Josh couldn’t help but have a pretty good feeling about it. He had told a friend about Tyler and the earth was still spinning. They were okay. They were all okay. Josh smiled to himself as he hopped down the stairs. They could make things work.

Two pizzas (with pineapple), six games, four fistfights (between Tyler and Spencer, all of which Josh had split up), and five or so hours later, Josh was lying on his stomach in the middle of his bed, thumbs sore from the controller and stomach uncomfortably full, his eyes drooping tiredly as he only half-assedly tried to dodge an enemy grenade. Ultimately, Josh was pretty pleased with how the evening had progressed. Tyler and Spencer had argued over the last slice of pizza, argued over who got to sit on the bed, argued over gaming tactics, and argued over which Call of Duty game required the most skill, but at least they hadn’t killed each other, despite the fistfights. Josh was sure that, given a bit more time and maybe a couple more pizzas, they would become best friends. Sooner or later.

It was late. Spencer was on the bed next to Josh, slouched back against the headrest, his own controller resting in his lap as he snored lightly. Tyler was sitting cross legged on the floor in front of Josh, and he seemed to be the only one still awake enough to be at all invested in the current game. Either Tyler had magically and miraculously improved at Call of Duty since the last time he and Josh had played, or else he had been lying all along about not knowing how to play. Josh didn’t know, and he was too sleepy right then to really care. He dropped his controller to the floor next to Tyler and let his head fall to the mattress, mind fading in and out as he listened to Tyler curse quietly about the enemy’s underhanded tactics.

The next thing Josh was aware of was someone shaking his shoulder gently, and he blinked his heavy eyes open, squinting. “Hm? What?”

“Hey, J, Spencer went home, it got kinda late on us.”

“Mhm….”

“Can I wear one of your t-shirts? I don’t have my pajamas.”

Josh was so sleepy, he didn’t remember responding, just let his eyes slip back closed and buried his face in his arms. Maybe he nodded, he didn’t know. He couldn’t really remember the question.

Someone was shoving at his arm again, and Josh grumbled something, trying to swat the hand away, but ultimately letting himself be guided into a more comfortable position on the bed, the comforting weight of his sheets and blankets being pulled up and over him. Josh snuggled down into the warmth.

The bed springs squeaked and the mattress moved slightly, and then there was a soft voice in his ear. “Is this okay?”

Josh hummed.

“I can sleep on the couch instead if you want.”

Josh made another humming sound.

“This is okay?”

A moment later the covers were being rustled around Josh’s shoulders, and just before Josh could sleepily complain, there were thin, cold fingers slipping beneath his arm.
“Sorry. My hands are cold.”

Even in his exhausted state, Josh didn’t mind. Not one little bit.
Despite it being late January, Josh woke up sweating, his legs tangled in his sheet. He rolled over onto his back and squinted up at the ceiling; the fan wasn’t on. Josh always slept with the ceiling fan on.

Sunlight was streaming in through the window beside the bed, slowly washing the room with it. It was at an awkward angle just then, the light shining over most of the bed except for where Josh’s head was, but every few seconds it would creep up a little higher. It was up to Josh’s nose now, and if he moved too much the light would flash into his eyes, forcing him to squint them shut again. And it was so damn hot. Why the hell isn’t my fan on? Josh wouldn’t have been surprised if all the snow outside had melted by now.

Part of the comforter was resting heavily on one of Josh’s legs, and he kicked lazily at it- only it wasn’t the comforter and it slipped off the bed onto the floor. That’s weird, I don’t think I left my jacket there…. Josh glanced over the edge of the mattress and saw a hoodie lying on the floor.

That’s not mine…wait…that’s Ty-

Josh jerked his head to the left and leaned up on both elbows at the same time, slipping back a few inches and almost rolling backwards off the bed. The comforter was bundled up on the opposite side, and there beneath it, with his back to Josh, was Tyler. Tyler. In my bed. Holy shit….

The last time that anyone had slept in the same bed as Josh had been…well, strictly speaking, it had probably been Brendon some night last August before school had started- or actually, once Josh thought about it, it had been Jordan when they had repainted his little brother’s room sometime in October. Josh hadn’t liked bunking with Jordan one little bit, but their mom had insisted he sleep with Josh instead of on the couch. But those times didn’t count; Josh meant, like, the last time he romantically shared his bed with someone- though did this even count as romantic? Tyler had spent the night as a friend, as a sleepover type of thing. But Tyler was more than a friend- right? So the last time that Josh had slept in the same bed as someone that he was romantically interested in had been….

Wait, that all was besides the point. Tyler was in Josh’s bed, right now. Tyler was in Josh’s fucking bed. Tyler had slept with Josh all night in his bed. And, Josh noticed, Tyler was wearing one of his
shirts. Even with his back to Josh and the comforter pulled halfway up his waist, Josh could tell his wrinkled band tee was baggy on Tyler’s slim shoulders. It did funny things to Josh’s heart just then, to see Tyler so quiet and peaceful, just sleeping. The sunlight pouring in and heating up his room didn’t really bother Josh anymore; it painted Tyler’s tanned skin and hair a shining, golden tone, and Josh just wanted to look at him forever.

Josh tried to slow his breathing and get over the initial shock of it all as he slowly lowered himself back against the mattress, resting on his side with one elbow propping his face up, a definite space still between him and Tyler. He didn’t want to wake him up. How early was it anyways? Or how late? Josh watched the comforter lift and fall gently with each breath that Tyler took, and he wondered how the hell Tyler wasn’t uncomfortably hot under that heavy blanket.

Josh thought back to the night before, to the afternoon before, and everything that had happened between them. It felt like a lot more time had passed since he had talked with Mikey and discovered—wow, Tyler actually likes me back! Not even a whole day, less than twenty-four hours even! And they were friends again. Josh almost cried with relief, right there in bed next to… oh, God, he’s my best friend, isn’t he? God. I lov- I really like this guy. He’s cute. He’s fun. I like him.

Josh didn’t know what they were considered now, technically; their talk the other day at Burger King hadn’t really been that enlightening in that regard. But Josh figured that Tyler was probably still as surprised and unsure as Josh was about all of… this. After all, it had all happened kind of suddenly. And anyways, Josh didn’t care about labels right now. Simply being with Tyler was way more important than whether or not they were technically considered boyfriends or dating or—just thinking about that aspect of things made Josh start to blush. Again. Dammit.

Tyler shuffled softly beneath the comforter just then, and Josh started, surprised. He held his breath, waiting to see if he had woken him, but Tyler just let out a soft little sound before flopping over onto his back, eyes still closed and breath steady.

Josh felt himself smiling like an idiot, just lying there next to Tyler and studying his face. He loved everything about his face, it was literally perfect. His little upturned nose and goddamn those long eyelashes and the light scattering of freckles across his cheeks and his light pink lips—oh, God, his lips… I just wanna….

An idea occurred to Josh, and he quietly grabbed his phone off the bedside table, trying not to feel like too much of a creep as he snapped a quick picture. Seriously, how could he not? He couldn’t waste this opportunity. Tyler looked absolutely precious. Angelic. And they were like almost-boyfriends anyways, he could take a picture of his almost-boyfriend if he damn well wanted to. And he did. He really, really did. Josh admired the picture briefly in his camera roll before frowning slightly upon the realization that that was his only picture of Tyler. After months of knowing each other and that was all? Nearly three thousand and five hundred pictures on his phone, and only one was of his best-friend-almost-boyfriend? He had pictures of all his other friends- lots and lots of them; at least a third of all the pictures on his phone were of Brendon, ridiculous selfies he had taken, forty or fifty at a time whenever he stole Josh’s phone. Which he did a lot. Another third of the pictures was probably all the screenshots Josh had taken of all the stupid shit Brendon and Spencer posted or sent Josh; he even had a picture of Pete on his phone, for God’s sake. He even had pictures of Jenna. Ones Dallon or Brendon had taken of her and Josh sitting together at the lunch table when Josh didn’t realize they had taken his phone and were taking pictures of him, or selfies Jenna had sneaked onto Josh’s phone herself, Brendon-style. All those pictures— but only one of Tyler.

Well, Josh would just have to fix that. ASAP.

He held the phone out to capture both him and Tyler on the screen, held up a peace sign, winked,
and snapped another picture.

What? So I took a pic, okay? He’s too cute, I had to...ugh, leave me alone.

Josh shoved his phone under his pillow and sighed happily, eyes falling back down to Tyler’s face. Josh still couldn’t believe it, really. Not just the fact that Tyler was in his bed, had spent the night, but that they had...they had fucking kissed, just the day before. And it had been so fucking good, Josh had almost died. Legit died. And not only that, but Tyler liked him. He actually liked him. Josh honestly had no fucking idea why, but thank God he did. Mikey could apparently tell that Tyler liked him and then Tyler himself had said he liked him, too. So Josh hadn’t just imagined it all. Tyler was asleep beside him wearing one of Josh’s own shirts to prove it.

Josh suddenly had another realization that he wasn’t too happy about- he had only ever kissed Tyler once. Sure, they had been busy yesterday, after the janitor had interrupted them. There was their Burger King stop and then Spencer had showed up and they spent hours playing video games. So they hadn’t really had a chance to...continue anything.

Josh felt himself blushing as he lay there admiring Tyler and his lips as he debated about what to do about that. In his past relationships- there hadn’t been many, but he wasn’t a complete virgin, thank you very much- Josh had never really...taken the initiative too often. He was more shy, more reserved, especially when it was with a person he really, really liked. And he really, really liked Tyler. But at that moment, with the sunlight reflecting a halo around Tyler’s face and the soft sound of him breathing, Josh decided that a few seconds of insane bravery on his part would be well worth it, in the end. Or at least he hoped so.

Josh wiggled closer to Tyler, still a little hesitant to press too closely against him, but Tyler was bundled under the comforter anyways, so Josh didn’t feel too uncomfortable with it. He tucked one arm under his head and tentatively reached out the other, fingers playing lightly with the collar of his shirt that Tyler was wearing. It looked like a Metallica one, but Josh couldn’t really see it beneath the covers too well.

His fingers brushed against Tyler’s collarbone, and his skin was so warm on Josh’s fingertips that he just wanted to...to hug Tyler or something. Goddammit.

I want him to wake up, I want to talk, I want to cuddle, I want to- oh, shit, that’s kind of embarrassing, cuddling. No, it’s not, why is that embarrassing? Ugh, I don’t know. Either way, he’s a sleepy head. Time to wake uuup. He honestly can’t still be tired, can he?

Josh hesitated for only a second before leaning in closer, bed creaking slightly as he shifted, and lowering his head a few inches so his lips hovered above Tyler’s chest. He breathed out softly, heart full of butterflies, before brushing his lips along Tyler’s collarbone. His hand had stopped playing with the collar of Tyler’s shirt, palm resting gently against Tyler’s chest instead. Josh could feel Tyler’s chest moving as he breathed beneath his hand. Josh peppered light kisses all across Tyler’s collarbone, confidence building as he pressed another kiss to the base of Tyler’s neck, almost on his shoulder.

Tyler stirred and made a small noise, and Josh pulled back only a little to see Tyler’s eyebrows furrow before his eyes blinked open.

Tyler mumbled something Josh wasn’t sure were even words, and he huffed out a small laugh.

“It’s about time you woke up, holy shit, man,” he gently kissed Tyler’s shoulder again, before he could lose his nerve.
Tyler didn’t reply; he seemed confused as to his surroundings for a second before he appeared to register that Josh was kissing up his neck now.

“Mm, J-Josh,” Tyler grumbled sleepily. “Stop, that tickles.”

Josh smiled against Tyler’s neck and pressed another kiss to his skin, right beneath his ear.

“I know.”

Tyler fidgeted a little; he had freed his hands from beneath the covers, Josh found out, because he tangled them in Josh’s hair just then and tugged gently.

“You’re a jerk. You know I’m ticklish.”

“I know,” Josh reiterated, nipping Tyler’s ear.

“Jerk.”

Josh smiled again, he couldn’t help it, and Tyler wiggled onto his side facing Josh before he could kiss his neck another time. Josh pouted at him and was about to complain, but Tyler bumped his forehead against Josh’s and pressed their lips together, his tongue immediately finding its way into Josh’s mouth.

Josh let out a quiet groan, surprised. Pleasantly surprised. It wasn’t as...intense or anything as yesterday, but Josh didn’t care about that. Tyler was kissing him. Josh felt one of Tyler’s hands slip from its place in his hair down to rest on his hip, and Josh almost pulled back from the kiss, embarrassed, because his shirt had ridden up and he only now realized that he wasn’t wearing his jeans, only his boxer briefs. He didn’t remember taking his pants off the night before, but then again he shouldn’t be too surprised- he never slept with pants on, ever. He must have taken them off sometime during Call of Duty. Tyler’s hand was resting half on the bare skin of his hip and half on the elastic strap of his boxers, and his hand felt incredibly warm against Josh’s already heated skin. Josh tried not to let on how much it was affecting him.

Tyler, however, must have been a professional mind reader or some shit, because Josh felt him smile against his lips before murmuring, “Prude.”

Josh opened his eyes to glare at Tyler, who was already grinning up at him, their foreheads still pressed together. “I am not a fucking prude. You’re the prude. Asshole.”

“Aw, poor Joshie, he’s blushing!”

Josh shoved at Tyler’s shoulder and rolled onto his back, covering his face with one arm. “I’m not. Shut up.”

Josh heard Tyler giggle before feeling the bed dip slightly as Tyler scooted closer to Josh’s side, squirming under Josh’s other arm and resting his head on his bicep.

“Josh,” he said in a whiney voice. Josh turned his head and peeked out from under his arm at him. “Don’t be moody, bro.”

Josh huffed out a quiet laugh but didn’t move his arm from over his face, and after another second, Tyler reached up to tug at his arm. Josh let him pull it away, his cheeks still warm.

Tyler smirked at him but thankfully didn’t mention it. “I think your friend Spencer likes me, what do you think?” he said instead.
Josh huffed again. “Oh, yeah, totally. You guys were arguing last night like me and Brendon argue all the time, so I think you’re good.”

Tyler made a face. “What about you and Bren-”

“I don’t wanna talk about them right now,” Josh interrupted, brushing his nose against Tyler’s. “Kiss me?”

This time Tyler huffed. “Hey, I call the shots, mister.”

“Well, fine, bro, if you don’t wanna, then you can just-”

“I didn’t say I didn’t wanna, chill, dude,” Tyler giggled and grabbed at Josh’s face with his hand, guiding his face back against his. A warm feeling, even warmer than the sunlight filled bedroom, flooded Josh’s chest.

Josh let his eyes flutter shut as he kissed Tyler, feeling more content than he had in a long, long time. He sucked on Tyler’s bottom lip, tugging at it gently with his teeth, and Tyler let out a high-pitched whine. He felt Tyler’s hand slip from his cheek to the back of his neck, keeping their faces as close to each other’s as possible.

Tyler started to grin again and freed his lips from Josh’s, though their mouths were still so close their lips brushed as Tyler spoke. “Your breath smells bad.”

Josh was still lying on his back as he turned his face away from Tyler’s to look up at the ceiling fan instead, trying not to laugh because he wanted to be mad. “Dammit, Tyler, why do you say shit like that?”

Tyler started giggling; Josh couldn’t believe his impertinence.

“For real, bro! Your breath smells fucking bad, too, but I wasn’t gonna fucking say so,” Josh huffed, making to sit up.

Tyler grabbed at his arm before he could and said in between giggles, “Aw, c’mon, man, I didn’t mean it, I was just joking, c’mon, bro, get under here with me.”

He held the comforter up and tugged harder on Josh’s arm, though to be honest, Josh didn’t need much convincing to slip beneath the covers next to Tyler. Whether he was kind-of-mad or not.

“Sure you don’t want me to go brush my teeth first?” Josh snipped half heartedly as he laid down on his back again, close enough for Tyler to throw the covers back over them both.

“Shut up, you’re perfect,” Tyler replied, still too busy with rearranging the comforter to notice the way Josh froze at his words or the blush that had almost faded from his cheeks starting to grow again.

With the covers finally arranged the way he wanted, Tyler let out a little sigh and threw a leg over Josh’s beneath the comforter, while at the same time pulling out one of Josh’s arms so he could wiggle back beneath it, using it as a pillow. He nuzzled his face against Josh’s neck and sighed again, hand resting in the center of Josh’s chest.

Josh lay rigidly, blinking up at the still ceiling fan as sweat formed on his forehead, and it wasn’t just because he was hot beneath the heavy comforter, either. Tyler was curled up on his side against him, head on his arm, hand on his chest, and sweat-clad leg over his own bare ones, and it was without a doubt the most sweetly intimate Josh had ever been with another human being, like ever. And with
Tyler. If someone had told Josh a week ago that he’d be here now, like this- he would have never believed them, ever, not in like, a gazillion years.

Life was funny sometimes, Josh supposed.

Josh felt Tyler press a gentle kiss to his neck, right below his ear, and he tilted his head slightly towards Tyler, peering at him out of the corner of his eye. Tyler peeked up at him through his eyelashes, and Josh was thoroughly surprised when he saw Tyler blush and glance quickly back down. Why would he be blushing? That’s my department. What on earth does he have to be embarrassed about?

Josh thought about saying something but couldn’t decide on what, so he just hummed quietly and softly ran his fingers through Tyler’s hair. It was short in the back and longer up front, the strands tangled and sticking every which way. Josh quickly realized that he loved playing with Tyler’s hair.

Tyler hummed in a low voice, and Josh giggled. “You sound like a cat purring, dude.”

“I could make a couple inappropriate jokes about that,” Tyler replied in a gravelly voice, his eyes closed.

“Yeah, I bet you could.”

“Want me to-”

“Nah, bro, I think we’re good.”

“Whatev-”

Suddenly, Josh’s phone started to ring loudly from beneath Josh’s pillow, and Josh jumped, startled, sitting up and dislodging Tyler from his arm. Tyler’s head flopped back against the pillow as Josh rummaged wildly for his phone, cursing and muttering at the blaring ringtone. Brendon had changed it to “Friday” by Rebecca Black a few weeks ago, and Josh had completely forgotten about it; he rarely received phone calls. Tyler was chortling hysterically.

“Bro, are you fucking kidding? What is this, are you serious?”

“Tyler, shut up, I swear-”

“It’s like I don’t even know you, Josh, first the Jonas Bros, now this-”

“Tyler-”

Josh finally found his phone and immediately hit accept, just to make the ringtone stop. He hadn’t even seen who was calling. Probably his mom, to let him know that she and his dad and Jordan were almost home.

“Yeah?” Josh said into the phone, slightly winded from frantically trying to find it beneath his pillow, face flushed from the minor embarrassment of such a stupid ringtone. Fuck you, Brendon.

Tyler was still giggling quietly, and Josh glared down at him. Tyler only giggled harder and tugged on the edge of Josh’s shirt. “Lay back doown,” he whined in a semi-quiet voice.

“Shut up, I’m on the phone-”

“What the fuck is up, bro, this is your number, right?”
Brendon’s voice in Josh’s ear made Josh sit up even more rigidly than before, feeling as anxious as if
Brendon had just walked into the bedroom. Josh waved a hand at Tyler, trying to quiet his giggling.

“Oh, y-yeah, hey, B. No, yeah, this is my number. What...what’s up? Why are you call- oohf!”

Tyler had abandoned tugging on Josh’s shirt and had punched the inside of his elbow instead,
causing the one arm supporting Josh’s sitting position to give sudden way, and Josh collapsed back
against the bed. Tyler was beaming.

“Tyler, seriously, what the hell-”

“Josh? What’s going on, are you okay, cuz? I texted you like, five times, but you didn’t answer. I
thought I had the wrong number or some shit.”

“Jooosh,” Tyler whined, but Josh threw a hand over his mouth, sitting straight back up in bed.

“Oh, uh, s-sorry about that, yeah, I was just, uh, y’know, um...I didn’t get the notifications, y’know...sorry, man....”

“It’s whatever. I just wanted to tell you about the game. Worthington fucking lost, dude. To fucking
Hamilton, their fucking team sucks ass, and we fucking lost.”

Tyler was still playing with the hem of Josh’s shirt, but at least he was being quiet now. He looked
questioningly up at Josh. Josh let his hand slip from over Tyler’s mouth back to his side.

“Pete got a foul for kneeling some jerk in the balls, and the score wasn’t even fucking close, man,
seventy-four to forty-two! Fucking forty-two, can you fucking believe it, bro?”

Josh started to sweat; having Brendon on the phone while lying half naked in bed with Tyler was
way too stressful for him. “Wow, man, that’s tough-”

“I know! And the fucking worst part of it all is there was a fucking scout at the game, bro! Pete
doesn’t think it was a scout and Coach won’t tell us if it was or not, but I totally know, I saw him! I
made one shot- and it was pretty impressive, too- and the fucking guy didn’t even see it, he just saw
our fucking low as shit score.”

“THERE was a scout?” Josh questioned lamely, wishing he could just hang up and talk to Brendon
later, maybe when Tyler wasn’t running a hand over his bare thigh. He glanced back down at Tyler
and shook his head, feeling goosebumps forming on his skin.

“Hel-looo? Josh? Did you hear what I just said?”

“Hm, what? Sorry, what did you say?”

Brendon sighed loudly over the phone. “You. The team. When are you going to rejoin, bro? Your
leg is more than back to normal now, and we fucking need you. If there was a scout at this game,
there’ll be one at like every game from here on out, and we need to seriously step up our game. Cue
you, my dude. There’s another game next Friday, a home game. You gonna be playing or what?”

“Oh...yeah, I guess I should-”

“Ask Coach this Monday, okay, J, or like even call him or something today, we need you, manda-
don’t you want to play?”

"No, yeah, I want to, sure, I just...." Josh trailed off, distracted, and glared down at Tyler, who was
now tugging at the elastic band of his boxers.

Stop it, Josh mouthed. Tyler only smirked, pretending not to notice.

"You just what, bro? You fucking love basketball! Look, if you wanna get a scholarship or some shit to get into a nice college, you better get back on the team pronto. Coach would totally let you play this next game, even though it's literally back to back with yesterday's flop, he trusts you that much, for real, bro. You're the best player, hands down."

"Okay, Bren, I'll ask, but just let me- ow! What the hell!!?"

The waistband of Josh's boxers snapped sharply against his hip. Tyler grinned sheepishly up at Josh. "Oops...." He didn't look sorry, and Josh glared down at him even harder.

"Dude, that fucking hurt, why did you-"

"Josh? What are you doing, who are you talking to?"

Josh started to sweat again, and he lowered himself a bit closer to the mattress so he was resting his weight on his elbow. "Uh, no one, no one, um...yeah, about the team, I'll just...I'll ask Coach, okay? So...how was the trip...?"

If Brendon suspected anything, he didn't let on, just began rambling on about the roadtrip and how cramped the bus was and Pete's derogatory and sexual remarks about Brendon and Ryan, but Brendon didn't really care, because most of them were true, and he told Pete as much, and then Pete-

Josh's mind was wandering all over the place, trying to find a way to get Brendon to hang up. His arm began to ache from holding himself up in the awkward position he was in, and he shifted slightly, pulling his leg out of Tyler's reach. The sheets shuffled below him, and Josh side eyed Tyler, who froze when he noticed Josh looking at him. He smiled innocently, only his head visible above the covers, and Josh rolled his eyes.

"Uh-huh...yeah...wow...really? What a dick...mhm...."

Josh felt like he was talking to his grandma- minus the cursing- simply murmuring the occasional word or two so Brendon would know he was still there, though Josh seriously doubted Brendon was even listening to the lack of what Josh was saying. He was on about how he and Ryan got to share a motel bed last night, and how they still got it on even with half the team in the same room.

"Wait- that's kinda gross, dude-"

"Shut up, Josh. And then Patrick was banging on the door, 'cause the idiot went down the hallway to get a bucket of ice and forgot the key, so that weird kid who's friends with that Joseph dick got up to let him back in, and-"

Josh's breath hitched, and he tensed at the mention of Tyler, but he tried staying calm. Brendon had only mentioned him, no big deal. Josh realized he was probably being incredibly paranoid, but he couldn't help it right now. And hearing Brendon call Tyler a dick didn't really set well with Josh. He glanced back down again at Tyler; he was curled up on his side and humming a song under his breath, the sunlight making his face glow and his eyelashes shine, appearing even longer and softer than usual. He was playing gently with the fingers on Josh's hand, his eyebrows drawn together in an adorable face. A warm feeling flooded Josh's chest, and then a heavier one a moment later- why did people have to be so mean to Tyler? Why did Josh's friends have to hate him? As soon as the thought came to him, Josh realized it was equally his fault that his friends thought Tyler was a dick. Josh felt suddenly that he didn't deserve to have Tyler snuggled up beside him, looking so peaceful
and at ease.

Brendon's voice in his ear shook Josh out of his thoughts. "-and he said okay, obviously. And I have no fucking clue about Spencer, ha, poor guy. We'll have to work on him, y'know how it is with him and girls, he's so fucking shy. What about you, you're taking Jenna, right?"

"Hm- what?" Hearing Jenna's name only made Josh feel more awkward. As if he didn't feel on edge enough right now. "What about J- what about...her?"

Josh glanced nervously at Tyler, who was in the middle of edging closer to Josh. He nuzzled his nose against Josh's side, causing butterflies to erupt in Josh's stomach. Josh could barely concentrate on Brendon's words as he tried not to swallow out loud as Tyler slid an arm over Josh's stomach, draping it across him. Josh's shirt had ridden up even more, somehow, which Josh thought was a little unfair and definitely gravity defying, as he was still half sitting; Tyler's arm was warm and heavy against Josh's abdomen, and Josh tensed his muscles, trying not to let Tyler feel how much he was shaking. God, what is he doing to me right now, I can't deal with him and Brendon at the same time, Jesus, I'm gonna slip up, I don't know how, but Brendon's gonna know, he's gonna figure out, how can't he when-

" Seriously, did you forget, J? In like, I don't know, two, three weeks. V-day prom, my dude! V-day, more like D-day for me, ha, ha, get it, bro? Get it? Me and Ryan, dude, 'cause Ryan has a di-"

"Brendon, what are you even saying right now? Jesus Christ, you're an idiot, your jokes aren't even funny...." Josh couldn't afford to think about dicks right now. No. Absolutely not. Tyler drummed his fingers gently against Josh's bare side, and Josh only barely managed to stop himself from squeaking out loud. He tilted his head, pinning his phone between his ear and his shoulder; with his one hand free, he tugged softly on Tyler's arm, taking it away from his stomach and then pulling his shirt back down over his belly button. He mouthed for Tyler to stop again, and Tyler spit his tongue out. Josh scoffed quietly and raised his eyebrows, giving him a Really? look.

"-a new phone soon, I'm going down to the Apple store today and looking at the different options, then I might check out GameStop, just browsing, y'know. I'm fucking broke. Ryan was gonna come, but he can't now 'cause he's got family over, but I'm gonna go over there after I'm done looking around and surprise him, because let me tell you, man, we've got some unfinished business after last night. It's hard to- oh, ha, get it, hard- it's hard to really do anything good in a motel room with like five other people around, so we're gonna-"

Josh was about to interrupt again and tell Brendon to stop giving him details about shit like that, but a loud shuffling noise distracted him. He looked over at Tyler, who had shoved the covers halfway off of himself and rolled over onto his stomach, propping himself up on his elbows. Josh tried not to glance down at his ass, which was now visible with the covers bunched on his legs. His sweatpants looked a little big for him and were riding quite low on his back, the dip in the small of his back sloping down beneath the gray material. His skin was so, so golden, and Josh suddenly wanted nothing more than to throw his phone across the room and kiss a trail down Tyler's back.

Tyler's mouth on Josh's neck effectively jogged Josh from his daydream, causing him to jump slightly in surprise. Tyler's head was turned to face Josh, since he was still on his stomach, propping himself up on his elbows. Josh tried not to glance down at his ass, which was now visible with the covers bunched on his legs. His sweatpants looked a little big for him and were riding quite low on his back, the dip in the small of his back sloping down beneath the gray material. His skin was so, so golden, and Josh suddenly wanted nothing more than to throw his phone across the room and kiss a trail down Tyler's back.

"You are seriously a douche," Josh murmured quietly as he sank into his pillow, Tyler's hand
slipping beneath Josh's shirt as he nipped at Josh's ear, tongue circling the gauge. Josh felt Tyler smile against his skin as he edged even closer to Josh and nuzzled his face into Josh’s neck.

Josh fumbled to hold onto his phone, his brain unable to process whatever it was Brendon was saying, if he was even still there, because the only thing he could register right then was Tyler. Everything else was so, so unimportant. Tyler’s hand beneath Josh’s shirt inched higher, up to his chest, and Josh’s muscles in his stomach were quivering so hard he imagined the whole bed was probably vibrating a little. He gasped and then moaned quietly as Tyler suddenly licked his tongue solidly across his collarbone and up the side of his neck.

“Nnnhhh, T-Ty, s-stop, I’m tryna...the phone....”

“-the hell are you doing, bro?” Brendon’s laugh echoed in Josh’s ear. “Wait, are you fucking around with Jenna right now, bro? Oh, my God, you are something else-”

“Shit-” Josh’s brain switched to panic mode, and he bodily shoved Tyler away from him, dropping his phone in the process, the covers rustling loudly and Tyler making an oohf sound as he flopped over onto his back. Josh scrambled to his knees and dug around in the tangle of sheets for his phone, shushing Tyler loudly when he began to giggle again, both of Tyler’s hands covering his face as he continued to laugh.

Josh’s face was impossibly red by the time he recovered his phone and lifted it unwillingly to his ear. “B? Y-you still there?”

“Joshua, you slut! And you tell me not to be the gross one. Wow, dude. I legit just got home from the school, how is Jenna over there already, bro? What, couldn’t you guys wait?”

“Shut up, for real, man....” Josh mumbled, talking half to Brendon and half to Tyler, who was shaking behind his hands. Josh smacked at his leg, annoyed and embarrassed. I seriously hate this kid right now....

“Whatever, bro, I get you. I’ll hang up now then, since you’re busy. Just remember to use a condom, okay, J-”

Josh tapped the End button and dropped his phone onto the messy bedside table, thoroughly relieved to have finished that conversation, more or less. Now he could deal with Tyler. Josh crossed his arms over his chest and glared down at him, waiting for him to notice his annoyance.

Tyler took a shaky, deep breath and peered up at Josh, waving a hand in his face as he exclaimed, “Oh, my, God, dude, your face!” and dissolved into giggles again.

Josh swatted at Tyler’s hand. “Not funny, bro. I was on the phone. With Brendon. He could have totally heard you, doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“Oh, well, I’m so sorry to bother you when you’re talking to your precious little Beebo-” Tyler began in a sarcastic voice.

“Tyler, come on-”

Before Josh could begin worrying too much about Tyler being seriously annoyed, he started to giggle again and reached out a hand to poke at Josh’s knee, walking his fingers up to Josh’s thigh and trying to tickle him.

“Stop, I’m trying to be mad at you,” Josh whined, grabbing Tyler’s fingers and hoping he couldn’t tell how much Josh was beginning to blush from Tyler’s hand on his thigh.
“Ooh, you thick,” Tyler said in a sing-song voice, tugging at the edge of Josh’s boxer briefs, and Josh knew if he hadn’t before, he definitely looked like a tomato now.

“What-”

“Girl, you thicker than a bowl of oatmeal,” Tyler said in between even more giggles.

“Ty -ler, what the hell, you can’t just say that. I’m not that thick, come on, Jesus-”

“Haven’t you seen that video, it’s so funny-”

“Yes, I’ve seen it, that doesn’t mean you need to repeat it-”

“Thicker than a bowl o-”

Josh fell forward from his kneeling position to hover over Tyler, his hands supporting himself on either side of Tyler’s head. He leaned down and brushed his nose against Tyler’s. He tried not to smirk too obviously at Tyler’s mildly stunned expression and heaving chest.

“What were you saying?” Josh murmured against his cheek.

Tyler made a squeaking noise before Josh felt his hands come up to rest on his hips, his fingers splayed on the bare skin of his hips above his boxers.

Tyler’s breath tickled Josh’s ear as he said in a high voice, “You are pretty thick, to be honest.”

Josh smiled against Tyler’s cheek, too happy to stay embarrassed. Thick or not, Tyler seemed to like him. And that’s all that really mattered to Josh at that moment.

Tyler ran one of his hands from Josh’s hip up under his shirt and onto his back, pushing at him, until Josh realized what Tyler meant, and with only minor hesitation, he swung his leg over Tyler’s to straddle him.

Josh pulled his head back to study Tyler, lying there beneath him, his hands still now, and to his surprise, Tyler was looking down, his eyes shielded by his eyelashes and a red tint on his cheeks. Josh leaned back down to nose at Tyler’s cheek, but he still didn’t look up.

“Hey,” Josh said quietly, afraid his voice would sound too loud amidst the morning light streaming in the window. “Ty?”

Tyler hummed in response and brought his hands up to Josh’s chest, playing with the collar of his t-shirt.

“Ty?” Josh pressed quietly, turning his head quickly to nip at Tyler’s fingers. Tyler started, surprised, but let Josh kiss the tip of his knuckles, then ran his fingertips over Josh’s bottom lip.

“Yeah?” Tyler finally replied in a soft voice, almost a whisper.

When Josh didn’t reply right away, Tyler lifted his eyes to meet Josh’s, and the red on Tyler’s cheeks darkened.

“Thank you…” Josh mumbled, suddenly embarrassed with Tyler finally looking at him.

Tyler drew his eyebrows together, his lips looking incredibly pouty, and Josh feeling the incredible urge to lean forward and kiss them.
“For what?” he asked, his eyes darting back and forth to each of Josh’s. The sunlight was shining in a direct beam on Tyler’s face, making his skin and lashes and eyes all appear even more golden and soft than Josh normally saw them as. Josh felt that warm feeling inside him again, rising up and flooding his chest and threatening to spill out of his lips. Josh didn’t think he was ready for that. He closed the door on those specific thoughts for now. Not now.

Josh shook his head once, then indulged himself, because why the fuck not? I can do what I want, and leaned forward to suck at Tyler’s bottom lip. Tyler moaned into Josh’s mouth, tilting his head up so Josh could reach him better and letting his hands drop from Josh’s face to rest on either side of his head, fingers wrapping around Josh’s wrists. Josh lowered himself onto one elbow, pulling his one wrist free from Tyler’s grasp to slip his hand beneath Tyler’s neck instead, rubbing soft circles in the dip of his neck directly below his hairline. Tyler was making quiet, openmouthed sounds into Josh’s mouth, and Josh traced his tongue along his bottom lip, wanting nothing more than to drown in the sounds Tyler was making, to record them and listen to them forever.

“Josh,” Tyler said, ending it with a high moan as Josh took his lip between his teeth and tugged gently. “F-for what?”

Josh furrowed his brows, letting Tyler’s lip free from his teeth, his mind blank. It took him a moment to remember what it was Tyler was asking about.

“Oh,” he murmured, embarrassment rising all over again, his face feeling flushed. He felt Tyler’s thumb rubbing soothing circles on his wrist, and he smiled against Tyler’s lips, knocking their noses together gently. “Just for...y’know...this. Being like...I don’t know...for wanting this...too...”

Tyler was silent, and it took Josh a stressful moment before he realized it was because he was grinning and not because he was weirded out.

“You’re welcome, Jish.”

Josh made a quiet scoffing sound, pulling back an inch more to look down at Tyler. “Jish?”

Tyler shrugged and made, quite frankly, in Josh’s opinion, an adorable face, his nose scrunched and mouth in a lopsided grin. “Yep. Jish. Joshie.”

Josh rolled his eyes, smirking. “Just wait till I make up some nicknames for you, you twat. Then you’ll regret calling me Jish and Joshie and oatmeal-”

“Hey, for real, you are thicker than a bowl of oatmeal. At least the kind of oatmeal my mom makes-”

Suddenly Josh’s stomach dropped, and not for good reasons, because the sound of someone thundering up the stairs all but shook the walls of Josh’s bedroom, and then all too quickly there was someone fumbling with the doorknob to Josh’s bedroom. Josh and Tyler both moved at the same time, Josh pushing himself up from his position of straddling Tyler and falling over on his ass on his side of the bed; Tyler sat up and bumped into Josh as Josh was getting off of him and slipped off the other edge of the bed and onto the floor, taking half the sheets with him and jostling the nightstand on his way down. Josh clambered off the bed and to his feet on the opposite side of the bed, his heart racing. He stepped backwards onto something sharp and stumbled back against the nightstand, his phone and a cup of water clattering and sloshing to the floor. Tyler popped up on the other side of the bed, Josh’s too-big band tee hanging off one of his shoulders, steadying the lamp on the other nightstand before it could topple over as well.

“Ow, shit!” Josh exclaimed angrily, glaring down at whatever it was he had stepped on, just as the door flew open, and Jordan bounded into the room and punched Josh on the shoulder. Josh shoved
him backwards a step, but his younger brother seemed unfazed.

“Ow, Jordan, what the hell? Whatever happened to fucking knocking before just running in here, I fucking told you not to do shit like th-”

Jordan interrupted, oblivious to Josh’s complaining. “Yo, bro, Mom and Dad and me just got home, they picked me up at the school ‘cause I rode home from Hamilton with the team- oh, guess what, Worthington lost! It was a good game, though, you shoulda been there! I got to play! For like a whole minute, for real, bro! Dallon hurt his knee and Mikey had a penalty and Patrick was already playing so Coach had to use me-”

Jordan stopped abruptly, suddenly noticing Tyler standing on the other side of the room. “Oh, hey, I didn’t see you. I didn’t know you had a friend over, Josh. Hey, did you spend the night? Josh, does Mom know you had a friend overnight?”

Josh just glared at Jordan, hoping desperately that he wouldn’t study the scene before him too closely and put two and two together.

Jordan did notice something just then, though. He eyed Tyler up and down and then looked back to Josh, asking quietly as if Tyler couldn’t hear them in the small room, “Tyler Joseph? Did he hang out here all night? I thought you didn’t like that guy. That’s what the guys on the team are saying. I thought you guys were just hanging out before for a school project or something, like you had to.”

Josh rolled his eyes and sighed, trying to act as casual as possible, despite the fact that his heart was still racing faster than an Olympic runner. “It’s none of your business, I can have a friend over if I want. I’m not all up in your shit all the time, why do you think you can be all over mine? Just get outta here, and fucking knock next time, I swear, or I’ll-”

“You guys lost ‘cause the team sucks, yeah, I know,” Josh said quickly, hoping Jordan would get the idea and leave. “Now can you fucking go please?”

“Moom! Josh is cursing again!” Jordan yelled, throwing a smirk over his shoulder at Josh as he barrelled out of the room, not even tossing Tyler a second glance.

Josh huffed loudly and limped over to the open door, yelling after his brother, “Am not! Jordan’s being an asshole!” He slammed the door shut and leaned against it, just in case Jordan got the idea that it would be funny for him to come barging in again.

Josh was still pissed, but Tyler burst out into a fit of laughter, doubling over and holding his stomach like the whole situation was the funniest thing he had ever witnessed.

Josh scowled at him. “What is your problem, is everything a joke to you? He almost saw us, in bed together, and half naked-”

Tyler wheezed, “You are such a prude, oh, my God. I didn’t even mean it when I said it earlier, but now….”

Josh glared at him, limping over to the bed. “I hate you.”

“Like, have you even ever had sex before, bro?”

“I have to, shut the fuck up, Tyler.” Josh sat down heavily at the foot of the bed and rubbed at his foot, turning his glare from Tyler briefly to the pair of cracked sunglasses on the floor that he had
stepped on a moment before.

“Really?” Tyler quipped sarcastically, edging around the bed and crossing his arms. “Cause you act like a virgin to me.”

Josh fixedly ignored Tyler’s annoying smirk, cursing at himself in his mind to not fucking blush, not right now, please, and muttered instead, “That is seriously not up for discussion right now.”

Tyler moved a step closer to Josh and knocked his knee against Josh’s. “Right now?”

Josh chanced a glance up at Tyler’s face and immediately regretted it, because seeing Tyler standing so close to him with his head bed and swollen, red lips and baggy t-shirt, combined with the gleam in his brown eyes as he stared down at Josh, rendered Josh completely helpless. His hands moved on their own, reaching out to take hold of one of Tyler’s, pulling him closer to stand in between Josh’s knees. He tried to think of something to say, but no words could form to describe what he was feeling, so he let his head fall forward and bump against Tyler’s stomach instead. A moment later, Tyler freed his hand from Josh’s and was gently running his fingers through Josh’s hair, cradling his face closely against him. Josh reached out hesitantly before resting his hands on Tyler’s hips. He could smell the cozy, somehow familiar scent that he now associated with Tyler, though it was currently mingled with the smell of Josh’s own shirt and laundry detergent. He decided it was a very good mix.

It felt very quiet for a very long time, though Josh supposed it was really closer to fifteen seconds, before muffled voices sounded in the kitchen and the garage door rumbled closed. Josh leaned back to look up at Tyler. Tyler’s eyes were closed, and Josh couldn’t tell if he was humming again or not. This kid is so weird….

Tyler opened his eyes suddenly and noticed Josh looking up at him. “Hey, Josh?”

“Hm?”

“I’m kinda hungry.”

Josh huffed out a laugh. “Me, too. I can hear your stomach rumbling.”

Tyler tugged at Josh’s hair before stepping back and glancing around the floor. “Wanna change and go get some breakfast then? Your mom won’t mind, right? Hey, have you seen my shirt anywhere?”

“Maybe….” Josh stood up, eyeing Tyler’s shirt lying behind the door, and said, “But…does this mean you’re gonna leave now?”

Tyler muttered something unintelligible as he kneeled and dug around under the bed, and Josh continued. “Cause…I mean, you can hang out here…if you want. I don’t think Brendon’s gonna come by or anything, so we should be good…Ty?”

“Hm? What, J, I didn’t hear you.” Tyler popped back up from the other side of the bed, tossing the sheets back onto the mattress. His eyes scanned the floor as he grabbed the collar of his tee and pulled it quickly over his head, dropping it on top of the tangled covers.

Josh almost choked. “I was just, um, saying, um…could you…if you want to….”

“Yeah?”

“Please…um….” Josh’s eyes looked everywhere but at Tyler’s bare chest, the new expanse of tanned skin he had never seen before screaming at Josh to do nothing but look at it. “Please, um…stay?
Here? Maybe?"

A slow smile grew on Tyler’s face, and Josh felt himself blushing all over again. “You want me to?”

“Yes,” Josh replied way too quickly. “Is that even a question? For real? Of course I want you. To stay, I mean. Yes, definitely. I mean, as long as it like, y’know...fits in your schedule and...stuff...”

Tyler tilted his head and repeated slowly, “Fits in my schedule...? Oh, my God, dude. You are seriously too cute. You sound like my grandma. Of course I’ll stay. I still have to beat your ass at Mario Kart.”

Josh’s face exploded into a bright shade of red as he spluttered indignantly. For one, he did not sound like anyone’s fucking grandma, and secondly, no one was gonna beat him at fucking Mario Kart. Tyler ignored Josh’s spluttering, humming happily as he finally spotted his shirt and passed by Josh way too closely for being half naked, oblivious to Josh’s unease. He grabbed it from the floor and pulled it on over his messy hair, much to Josh’s relief. Maybe now he could breathe again.

“You coming?” Tyler jogged Josh from his reverie, and Josh noticed Tyler was waiting by the open door.

Josh nodded, and Tyler grinned at him in a way that made Josh wonder what was so funny, but before he could question it, Tyler headed out into the hallway, and Josh had to jog to catch up.

Josh bounded down the steps two at a time to catch up with Tyler, jumping the last four to the living room floor before Tyler hopped down beside him. Josh eyed the room warily; Ashley was sitting in the corner with her headphones in, writing in a notebook, but she glanced up when Josh followed Tyler closely, guardedly through the room. Josh glared at her warningly, and she raised her eyebrows, looking Tyler up and down before looking at Josh pointedly.

“Oh, hi, Tyler,” she smiled brightly and nearly bounced in her seat. “Did you sleep well? Josh didn’t make you sleep on the floor, did he?”

Josh turned bright red and glared at his youngest sister, and Tyler laughed once, a little awkwardly. “I was fine, no worries. So, um...how are you...today?”

Abby exploded into a bubbly chatter, about what, Josh didn’t even know, and he smirked only a little at Tyler’s awkward stance as he nodded deviously, looking confused. He looked over at Josh with wide eyes, but Josh only raised his eyebrows at him. He would learn soon enough not to get Abby started, even if he had to learn the hard way. Even so, Josh glared at Abby once more, just for good measure- Tyler was taken, thank you very much.

“Oh, well, what a surprise, it’s nice to see you, Tyler! Abby, for goodness’ sake, don’t talk his ear off, dear. Did you spend the night with Josh?” Josh’s mom interrupted Abby, closing the closet door and crossing the kitchen to give Tyler a side hug and patting him on the shoulder. Josh stifled a snort at how stiff Tyler was standing throughout the ordeal.

“Oh, y-yes, we were just hanging out,” Tyler stammered in a polite tone, crossing his arms shyly
across his chest once Mrs. Dun had pulled away.

“Oh, well, isn’t that nice?” Mrs. Dun said as she moved over to the dishwasher, beginning to unload its cleaned contents onto the counter. “You working on a school project or just, what’s the word Josh uses, chilling?”

Josh snorted and raised his eyebrows teasingly at Tyler, who only glared at him before responding. “We were just, um, chilling.”

“Not playing those violent video games, I hope.”

Josh sighed loudly and slipped past Tyler, subtly running a hand across his hip as he past and smiling secretly to himself as he felt Tyler stiffen beneath his fingers. “Yes, Mom, we were playing the most violent games imaginable.”

“Don’t get snippy with me, Joshua-”

Abby interrupted from the table. “There was a lot of yelling and cursing going on.”

Mrs. Dun turned to Josh, hands on her hips, and looked ready to give him an earful, when she once again noticed Tyler standing sheepishly in the corner, and she smiled tensely instead.

“Never mind for now, never mind...well, are you boys hungry? I can’t imagine you could have dragged Josh out of before eleven, hm, Tyler?”

Josh smirked at Tyler across the room, Tyler’s face a rosey red. “Oh, um, we were out of bed- I mean, we got up like...a bit...ago...thirty minutes maybe?”

“It’s almost one, y’know,” Abby chirped.

“Goodness, you must be hungry then! How late did you boys stay up anyways? No matter, you’re up now! Well, you wanna- oh, Josh, would you mind helping your dad in the garage, he’s getting our bags out of the back seat.”

Josh huffed but slipped past the open dishwasher and to the garage door, glancing back over his shoulder as he went out. Abby was standing now and closing in on Tyler, but Josh’s mom was already ordering her to leave him alone; Josh couldn’t help but smile as he jumped down the step to the garage floor.

“Yikes! What the hell, it’s fucking co-”

“Hey, Josh, that you?” Josh’s dad came around the back of the car, several bags in his arms. “Mind taking one of these for your old man? Your mother insisted on packing nearly half the house. I tried telling her it was only one night, but- well, you know your mom.”

“Yeah, I know Mom.” Josh danced back and forth on his bare feet, trying not to touch the freezing cement any longer than was necessary as he took the bags from his dad. In hindsight, Josh figured it would have been smart to put on socks, and maybe a pair of pants. “S-so how was the game?” he chattered.

“Wasn’t the same without you, sport. But your brother did manage to play for about thirty seconds, don’t know how he swung that,” Josh’s dad chuckled, grabbing the rest of the bags from the back seat and slamming the door. “You don’t have to tell him I said that, though.”

Josh followed closely on his dad’s heels as they made their way back inside, Josh sighing audibly in
relief at the wave of warmth that hit him once back in the kitchen. He dropped the ridiculously heavy bags he was carrying to reposition them (what the fucking hell did you even pack in these, Mom, holy shit-) when he paused, eyes landing on Tyler across the room.

He was leaning against the counter, fingers fiddling idly with a pack of poptarts as he stared out the window over the sink, the sunlight streaming across half of his face. He looked so casual and at home, standing there in the kitchen of the house that Josh had grown up in; it was a sight that Josh realized looked absolutely beautiful, and the second the thought hit Josh, that annoying warm feeling flooded his chest again.

Just then Tyler noticed Josh standing there by the door, and his face split into a smile. Josh felt like he was in a daze, unable to move as he simply stared back. He realized Tyler was saying something to his dad, but he hadn’t been paying any attention to his words, too busy watching his lips move from across the room. And then suddenly Josh was being pulled back to the present by the sound of his dad’s voice.

“Tyler Joseph? That name’s familiar...hey, you’re on the team, is that it? I didn’t see you at the game though.”

“Hey, that’s right, I forgot you were on the team, too,” Josh’s mom added. “Tyler, why weren’t you at the game, hon?”

Josh froze again, only this time for less than nice reasons. Tyler’s eyes jerked to his before he stammered out, “Oh, um, I was on the team- I mean, I am on the team, I just...I wasn’t able to, um....”

“He had a dentist appointment,” Josh offered, grabbing up the bags from the floor and walking between his parents to be nearer Tyler, dropping the bags onto the kitchen table and elbowing Tyler in the side. “Right, Ty?”

Josh’s dad chuckled. “Well, Worthington sure could’ve used your help last night, that’s for sure.”

“Now, Bill-”

Josh tugged on Tyler’s sleeve while his parents were distracted discussing the game and nodded his head towards the living room. Tyler grabbed another bag of poptarts from the counter and followed Josh out of the kitchen, holding onto his hand lightly.

“Thanks,” Tyler said once they had rounded the corner. “But, bro, what if your parents tell my parents about the game, or that I wasn’t there? What if they like, accidentally mention that-”

“Shh, Ty, don’t worry about it, we’re good for now,” Josh reassured, turning around to face Tyler.

“Hey, guys, what’s up?” Ashley spoke from her chair in the corner, and both Josh and Tyler jumped. Tyler dropped Josh’s hand and took a step back, his cheeks heating up again.

Josh glared at his sister across the room. Really? Again? How many fucking times are we gonna be interrupted, I swear.... Josh had completely forgotten about her. “None of your business, Ash.”

Ashley raised her eyebrows in disbelief. “You sure there’s nothing...going on?”

Josh sighed dramatically, and Tyler mumbled, “I’ll wait for you upstairs,” before dashing down the hall.

“Now look what you did, you scared him away,” Josh said, only half joking.
Ashley shrugged. “Pretty sure he won’t give up that easily.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Have you told mom and dad yet?”

“Don’t answer my question with another question.”

Ashley just stared judgingly at Josh. “Okay, fine, then don’t tell me. I already know anyways.”

Josh was pretty certain she wasn’t bluffing, but he held out hope anyways. “I don’t know what you mean, stop being annoying. I’m going upstairs.”

“Have fun,” Ashley called after him, and Josh really didn’t appreciate her tone just then.

Josh bumped into Tyler at the top of the stairs. “Dude, you have way too many family members,” Tyler told him.

“You’re telling me,” Josh mumbled. “Sorry about...all that...downstairs. Pretty crazy family.”

Tyler arched an eyebrow. “Well, now I know where you get it from.”

Josh scoffed as Tyler marched past him and into his bedroom, Josh following a second later like a puppy. Tyler was already on his knees, shifting through the stack of games piled in the corner.

“What do you wanna play? I’m tired of Call of Duty. How about The Last of Us? Or- ooh, Portal! Dude, we’re playing Portal.” Tyler waved a case around in the air.

Josh groaned, latching the bedroom door behind him. “No way, man, not that one, I hate that game.”

“You own that game.”

“Yeah, but I hate it.”

Tyler inserted the game anyways and turned the TV on. “Well, I’ll just have to find some creative ways of distracting you, then, won’t I?”

Josh tried not to let his mouth gape too obviously, nearly dropping the pack of poptarts Tyler threw at him.

“Come on, dude, they probably broke now,” Josh complained, doing his best to recover as he flopped down on the bed next to a cross legged Tyler and sprawled out on his stomach.

Tyler hummed absentmindedly as he loaded the game menu, and Josh felt one hundred and ten percent content to just lay there and look up at him all day. He shifted and placed a quick kiss on Tyler’s knee through his sweatpants instead.

Tyler, his eyebrows drawn as he studied the screen, finally glanced down at Josh. His lips turned up in a faint smile. “What was that for?”

Josh knew it was fucking cliche, but he felt like he was melting under Tyler’s gaze. He was becoming really used to that warm feeling in his chest now. Because I lo-....

Josh shrugged, fiddling with one of the controllers. “Because you’re cute.”

He sneaked another glance up at Tyler, who was beaming down at him. Tyler reached out then and
patted Josh’s head. “Well, then, you’re cute, too, *Joshie*.”

Josh groaned.
Chapter Notes

i love u guys thx for reading mmmmmmmm <33333333 this chapter might be a tad dull but the next one!! is good!! i pwomise!!

chapter title from Raised By Wolves by Falling In Reverse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tyler couldn't stop smiling. He was sitting in the back of his homeroom, five minutes away from starting a boring English class that he wasn't going to pay any attention to, and he was smiling. And it was a Monday. If Tyler was being honest, his face kind of ached; he had been smiling all weekend. And it was all because of one person.

The one person who had been more or less the only thing on Tyler's mind for weeks, months probably, the one person whom Tyler had hated, then liked, then admired, and now, for some time-yeah, Tyler was man enough to admit when he was a goner- loved; the one person who, in the past couple of months alone, had made Tyler hate him all over again, cry over him, and then fall head over heels for him, again. Dammit. And only last week, Tyler had thought his haywire emotions were all for nothing, that that one person, who made Tyler's young heart feel everything, didn't care for him anymore, not even a little bit, not even as a friend. And that had been almost too much of a burden to bear. Tyler couldn't begin to express the immense relief he felt wash over him when he finally realized oh, my gosh, he likes me, too!

Tyler was bent down over his desk, protecting his phone screen from prying eyes and scrolling through his text conversation with Josh. Once Tyler had finally gone home Saturday evening, he and Josh had taken to texting instead. They had grinned at each other in church, but had been unable to approach each other; Brendon had sat with Josh during the service. But it made Tyler's heart soar when Josh had winked at him as Tyler and his family had slipped past their pew after the sermon.

Tyler wasn't sure how he and Josh were going to make school days work for them. It had been hard enough keeping their friendship secret several months ago, but now this? Would it be harder or easier? Harder for sure, Tyler worried. But the worry couldn't stay too long or prominent on his mind, because his phone buzzed with another new text.

Joshie: where r u?

T: Home room u idiot where r u?

Joshie: with b in mcdonald's drive thru, want something??

T: JOSH! Tyler pasted several shocked emoji faces to the message. He couldn't believe that boy sometimes. T: class starts in like 3 min!!!

Joshie: i wanted hashbrowns

T: and demerits?

Joshie: lol Moore luv's me she wouldn't do that
T: lol no yeah she would

Joshie: whatever at least i got my hashbrowns

Tyler tried not to chuckle out loud. T: fine its ur life. bring me some too then

Joshie: gotchu bby

Josh posted several of the kiss blowing emojis, and Tyler almost blushed. Over a text. Almost.

Suddenly someone was bumping against Tyler's shoulder, and he almost dropped his phone. Mikey shoved Tyler over several inches to squeeze onto the same chair with him.

"Bro, there's a chair right there, " Tyler sighed, turning off his phone to another message alert.

"I know," Mikey said, shifting awkwardly. "But I wanted to ask you something. About you-know-what. "

For one hot second, Tyler started to panic, then remembered that it was Mikey who had known about them in the first place. Not only that, but he had been the one to actually push them together.

"Wait, shouldn't I be asking you about you-know-what? " Tyler countered, raising his eyebrows. "Like, how the fuck did you even know about us in the first place?"

Mikey had the decency to look a little sheepish. "Yeah, about that...sorry and all, but like...I mean, I had to, you were miserable, it was a little pathetic, to be honest. I had to do something. And the two of you were so busy ignoring each other that you didn't even realize you coulda been spending all that time making out. Or something, I don't know."

Tyler looked skeptical. "Were we that obvious?"

"Just a little, yeah."

Tyler shrugged and bumped Mikey's shoulder with his own. "Thanks, then. A lot. I seriously don't know when we would've...y'know...on our own. If like, ever, who knows."

"Ha, yeah," Mikey huffed. "I totally understand that."

"Yeah- wait, really?"

"Oh, just, y'know, um...I feel you...y'know...."

Tyler nodded, side eyeing his friend. "Okay."

Mikey nodded, too, eyes avoiding Tyler's, before he quipped, " So how'd it go? I tried giving you some space over the weekend, y'know, let you two sort things out. Probably had a lot of arguing to get through."

"Not really," Tyler said, a smile growing on his face as he thought back to the past couple of days. "It actually went really well. We hung out at his place on Friday afternoon 'cause his parents and brother were away for the game, and I still haven't told my parents about, well...y'know. The whole being-off-the-team thing. So staying over at his place was a great cover for-"

"Whoa, whoa, wait, hold up, you spent the night? At Josh's house?"

"Shhh!" Tyler waved a hand in Mikey's face, glancing nervously around the crowded classroom. All
the other kids were making so much noise that Tyler doubted they could hear anything, but all the same. It didn't hurt to take precautions.

"Yes, I spent the night at his house, okay?" Tyler repeated himself. "But we didn't like, do anything, Jesus."

"Uh-huh, sure. You spent the night at his house, but you didn't do anything...okay. Sure."

Tyler rolled his eyes. "Well, like, we slept in the same bed."

Mikey widened his eyes, smirking. "And? Come on, give me the scoop, I wanna know!"

Tyler sighed, trying to act casual and not start blushing or gushing or something equally embarrassing. "And we like, y'know, made out a lot...he wasn't wearing pants-"

"He wasn't wearing-"

"No, yeah, he was, but like, just underwear, y'know. The really tight kind, y'know? Like mid-thigh type of thing. It was really hot."

"I bet."

"He's got a really, really nice ass."

"You sound totally in love."

"Oh, yeah, totally," Tyler joked, glancing away, face heating.

Mikey didn't push it, and Tyler was relieved. Instead, he noticed Tyler's phone and tapped at it. "Take any selfies or sneaky pics or anything?"

Tyler's felt his face light up as he turned his phone back on- to several messages from Josh, which he smiled at and temporarily ignored- and opened his camera roll, scrolling through several pictures he had taken yesterday afternoon of the melting snowman Madison had made in the backyard to the pictures from Saturday. A lot of them had turned out blurry, but there were still a few good ones.

Tyler tilted his phone to show Mikey one of Josh kneeling on the floor, searching behind the dresser for a video game he had sworn he owned but couldn't find anywhere. Mikey scoffed when he saw it.

"You're right, he isn't wearing any pants!"

"He's thick, right?"

"Really thick. He's a keeper."

Tyler laughed and opened another picture; Josh had just stood up from his kneeling position and was giving Tyler and the camera a "Really?" look.

Mikey laughed. "Oh, my God, he's cute."

"I know, right?" Tyler whined. "Here, look at this one. I just beat his ass at Mario Kart, see?"

In the picture, Josh was sitting on the floor and leaning against the bed; Tyler had been laying on his stomach on top of the bed and had leaned down to take a selfie of the two of them, a victorious shit-eating grin on Tyler's face and an adorable pout on Josh's.
"Oh, my, God," Mikey said again, laughing as he took the phone from Tyler to study the picture. "I bet he hates you."

"Bet he doesn't," Tyler piped, grinning as he took his phone back and scrolled through several more pictures.

The bell rang loudly from the hallway, making both Tyler and Mikey jump. Gerard bustled in from the hallway right before Ms. Moore did, hurrying to the back of the class to grab his seat. He paused when he saw Mikey still sitting with Tyler in the same chair and furrowed his eyebrows at them.

"Close one," Mikey told his brother as he stood up from the cramped space he and Tyler had been sharing, patting Tyler once on the back before taking the empty seat next to him instead. Tyler smiled up at Gerard, who made a sour face and avoided the empty chair on Tyler's other side, crossing the room to sit next to Mikey instead.

Tyler eyed Mikey, eyebrows raised in question, but Mikey only shrugged. Sometimes Gerard got in moods, no big deal. They should just get used to it.

Ms. Moore closed the door loudly behind her and ordered the class to quiet down. Tyler quickly stuffed his phone in his pocket, not wanting to get it confiscated. English was not the class to try messing around in.

The teacher had just finished collecting homework and was writing some notes on the whiteboard when the door slammed open, Brendon waltzing in, laughing loudly as he was saying something over his shoulder to Josh.

Tyler stiffened in his seat when he saw Josh, feeling like everyone in the room would suddenly be able to tell everything simply by the way Tyler was looking at him, despite being at the back of the class and no one even looking in his direction; they were all too distracted with watching Brendon and Josh as Ms. Moore slammed her marker down on her desk and began lecturing them.

Brendon must have said something sarcastic in reply to Ms. Moore, because the class erupted into quiet giggles around Tyler, but Tyler only had eyes for Josh, who was smiling ear to ear, face flushed, eyes landing on Tyler before he would smile a little bigger and his eyes would dart away again. Tyler's cheeks were starting to hurt again. He wanted nothing more than to wave his hand at Josh and call him over the empty desk beside him, but he couldn't. The pang of bitterness that hit Tyler just then surprised himself, and he tried his best to squash the feeling back down. Slipping out his phone while Ms. Moore was distracted, Tyler sent Josh a short text.

T: Told u so

Tyler peeked up to the front of the room; Brendon was still going at it with the teacher, and Josh was taking the chance to idle away from the scene towards an empty seat on the far side of the room. Tyler watched from the corner of his eye as Josh slipped into his chair and pulled out his phone. He glanced up and over his shoulder at Tyler and stuck his tongue out, and Tyler covered his grin with his hands.

"You're blushing," Mikey leaned over and whispered.

Tyler didn't doubt it, and he didn't really mind.

The remainder of the school day proved challenging for Tyler. For real, how come he had every class with Josh? Like every class. That was just unfair. And besides English, lunch, and music,
Mikey had his own junior classes to go to, so Tyler had no one to pretend to talk to when in actuality he was trying not to stare at Josh. It didn't help Tyler's cover at all either that Josh was constantly sending him texts during each class, just little, pointless blurbs or emojis. But Tyler wasn't about to pretend that he didn't thoroughly enjoy each and every text Josh sent him, even though it was seriously keeping him from taking any kind of helpful notes during their lectures. At least none of the other teachers seemed to be as concerned with distracted students as Ms. Moore always was.

Tyler joined up with Mikey again at lunch, sitting together at their usual spot along the back wall. Gerard, and Frank as well, for that matter, were nowhere to be seen; Gerard was still acting rather coldly, but when Tyler voiced his concern, Mikey reassured him not to worry about it, then tore his tuna fish sandwich in half and offered some to Tyler. Tyler ripped open his bag of chips and set it between them on the table.

It already felt to Tyler like the school day had been eight hours long instead of only four. *How can today not be over yet? Get me out of here....* Keeping up the whole I-still-don't-like-Josh-Dun-so-we-ignore-each-other-out-of-spite thing was getting pretty tiring, to say the least, especially when in reality you not only *not* dislike him, but really, really, really, *really* like him, like I-wanna-put-my-tongue-in-his-mouth like him... Tyler was just getting really tired, okay?

"You chill?" Mikey asked, and the elbow of the arm Tyler was resting his chin on slipped off the edge of the table. Tyler jerked back upright, feeling his cheeks heat up as he realized he had been staring across the room in the direction of the Cool Kids' Table. Brendon and Spencer were laughing loudly, and Jenna was sitting next to Josh- Tyler tried not to feel too jealous about that. They were just friends. Even though literally the entire rest of the school, including Jenna, thought they were dating. Tyler didn't know how he felt about that. He didn’t want to think about it.

"Yeah, I'm chill. Aren't you?" Tyler forced his eyes away and tossed a handful of Fritos in his mouth.

Mikey gave him a knowing look. "O-kay."

Tyler sighed. "Are you going to act like this all the time now? I won't show you any more cute pics of us if you do."

Mikey raised his hands. "I didn't say anything."

Tyler just ignored him and checked his phone for another text message from Josh.

When the last bell finally rang, Tyler collected his things with superhuman speed and followed the majority of the student body to the front doors, propped open and letting in a frigid wind and several small flurries of week old snow. Tyler shuffled from foot to foot to stay warm, eyeing the crowded hallway. Basketball practice was starting in five minutes, and Mikey had already waved goodbye to Tyler and darted off towards the gym; most of the kids Tyler knew weren't around.

Just like at Burger King last week, Tyler felt like he and Josh hadn't really discussed the finer points of this new... *thing* that they were doing. Relationship, Tyler guessed. Maybe. *Hopefully*. Eventually. Whatever it was though, they hadn't really discussed how it would work now, what with most of their time being spent in school, around people who weren't allowed to know about them.

Tyler pulled out his phone and contemplated sending Josh a text. It was pretty slipperly out, and obviously cold; Josh wouldn't want to walk home on a day like this, not when Tyler had driven his mom's van to school and could conveniently give Josh a lift. It would be *rude* even not to wait and
offer Josh a ride.

_T: i'm by the front door i'll give u a lift_

Tyler hit send and peered down the hall once more, smiling a minute later when he saw Josh come around the corner. He was grappling his backpack onto his shoulders while trying to untangle himself from his headphones at the same time, nearly dropping his phone when he finally glanced up and noticed Tyler waiting by the front doors. A smile lit up Josh's face, and Tyler felt giddy at the sight of it. He nodded towards the parking lot and edged towards the door. Josh had just nodded back when Coach Anderson dashed out in front of Josh, the two actually colliding and Josh's bag flopping to the floor. Coach grabbed one of Josh's shoulders and led him a short way back down the hallway, out of the way of any passing students who may suddenly appear, and began talking animatedly to him. Tyler stopped in the doorway and watched for a moment.

_Coach Anderson? He should be in practice right now, what does he want...oh, my, God, maybe it's about the team...!

Tyler didn't want to get his hopes up, in the small chance that that _wasn't_ what the coach was talking to Josh about, but Tyler couldn't help it. This was _awesome!_ Josh's leg was all healed now, practically back to being completely normal, he could _totally_ be back on the team, no problem. Tyler remembered how important the team was to Josh, though he had a feeling as of lately Josh had been hiding just how much he really missed playing. Why, exactly, Tyler wasn't totally sure, but you could never know with Josh. He was a little weird in some ways, Tyler was continuously finding out.

There were loud voices from the hall leading to the gym, and Tyler decided it was best to wait outside, just in case someone who knew him and Josh wandered by. He glanced once more over his shoulder at Josh and the coach before jumping down the steps to the sidewalk and darting off across the parking lot.

The parking lot was clearing pretty quickly, which was a good thing, because Tyler couldn't really remember where he had parked his mom's van that morning. He spotted it in the far corner of the lot, the windows frosted over and a tiny icicle hanging off the muffler. Tyler threw his bag in the back seat and leaned against the car, shuffling his sneakers in a clump of dirty snow. He felt nervous and excited, wondering what was going on back inside the school. Maybe if Coach _was_ offering Josh a place back on the team, Josh would go to today's practice and not even come outside right now. Tyler pulled his phone out of his back pocket and checked his texts. Should he wait a few more minutes? Would Josh text him if that was the case? He didn't want to leave Josh here without a ride if he _wasn't_ going to practice- he didn't even have his sports clothes, of course he wouldn't stay for practice. But there were extras in the locker room.

_Wait, wait, wait, Ty, stop jumping to conclusions, you're gonna get yourself all excited and you don't even know what Coach is saying to him-

Josh was standing at the foot of the steps, glancing around the parking lot, and Tyler jerked himself out of his thoughts to wave a hand at him, stuffing his phone back in his pocket with the other.

Josh noticed him waving and started off in his direction of the parking lot. His head was down, and his brow was furrowed. _Oh, no. He's not back on the team. Oh...shit...."

"Hey," Josh said when he reached the van.

"Hey," Tyler replied, then dived right in. "Dude, what was that with the coach? Was it about the team?"
"Oh...yeah."

Tyler waved his hands around, his excitement levels rising. "Well? Are you back on?"

"...yeah."

Tyler felt his face burst into a huge grin, and he fist pumped the air. "Fuck, yeah, bro, that's sick! That's sick! You're back on the team, it's about goddamn time! They were fucking losing without you, oh, my God, it served them right! Now you can show those losers how it's really done, fuck, yeah!" Tyler grabbed Josh's arm and thrust it in the air with his own. "C'mon, dude, aren't you at least a little excited about this!?"

Josh wasn't really making eye contact, and when Tyler let go of his arm it dropped back to his side. "Well?" Tyler persisted. He poked at Josh's stomach through his hoodie. "Dude? Joshie?"

Josh sighed. "Well, yeah, I mean, I guess I'm a little excited...like, it'll be nice to play again and all..."

Tyler squinted his eyes at Josh. "I guess I'm a little excited ? What the hell, bro? What's with you, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, it's just...I don't know...."

Tyler struggled to find the words he needed to question Josh's sanity right now. He spluttered a little, raising his voice. "You don't know? Don't know what, what's that supposed to mean? Josh, when I first fucking met you, basketball was like your fucking life, and now you 'guess you're a little excited'? Seriously, what gives? Are you okay? Pete's not being a dick or anything, is he-"

"No, it's not that," Josh interrupted. "I'm fine, I promise, I just...honestly, I just feel...a little guilty...about this...."

Josh peeked up with puppy eyes through faded blue bangs at Tyler, and Tyler's heart started to melt. "Guilty? Why the hell would you feel guilty about this, Josh? What's there to feel guilty about?"

Josh shuffled around and kicked at a clump of snow, dropping eye contact again to look around the parking lot instead. "Can we get in the car? It's kind of open here...."

"Yeah," Tyler murmured and nodded, and Josh slipped around the front of the car to the passenger side. Tyler climbed into the driver's seat just as Josh was climbing in on the opposite side; he tossed his bag into the back seat next to Tyler's and slammed his door shut, the sound of the nearby traffic muting instantly.

"What's up?" Tyler pressed, when Josh didn't say anything, only reached out a hand to fiddle with the air conditioning slats. "You know you can...you can talk to me, about things, y'know...right?"

"No, yeah, I know I can, it's not that, it's just..." Josh leaned back in his seat and ran his hands through his hair. "It's just not fair, Ty, it's not...it's not fair-

"What's not fair? How is this not fair?"

Josh gave Tyler a look through squinted eyes. "It's my fault you're off the team, and now I'm getting a second chance, but not you . That's...that's the most unfair thing ever, like...I don't even wanna do it if you don't get to, too, and-"

"Josh," Tyler interrupted, putting on his sternest oldest brother voice. He didn't even know when
Josh's birthday was, maybe he was older; but that didn't matter right now anyways. Tyler had a point he wanted to get across. "Josh, listen, okay, first off, that wasn't your fault-

"It was-

"It wasn't...okay, it wasn't. It was...it was a lot of people's fault, I guess, or I don't know, it wasn't anybody's fault, but most of all it wasn't just you, okay? So stop that, you got it?"

Josh was peering at Tyler through several loose, tangled strands of hair; he wasn't smiling, but Tyler thought he could detect a hint of a smile in his eyes. Maybe. Or maybe he was just about to laugh at him for being sentimental.

Tyler continued anyways. "Like, I mean, it was my fault, too, right, like it was about me, so it's my fault. Stop saying it was because of you, 'cause you're wrong, you stupid idiot. And the team legit sucks ass right now, they need players like you back on the team."

"And like you, " Josh added.

Tyler nodded slowly, fighting the urge to jokingly, unironically claim to be the best player. Now was not the time. "Maybe. Sooner or later. But that's my problem, okay? I'll work it out with the coach-and...my parents-when the time comes. But in the meantime, you need to get your head out of your ass and get back out there on that team and save them from looking like total idiots at the next game. Okay?"

Tyler reached out and shook gently at Josh's shoulder, then flicked at his chin. "Okey-dokey, Joshie?"

Josh stubbornly didn't reply, just tilted his head down and made a pouty face, and Tyler tickled at his neck. "Smile already, honestly, you're such a baby-"

Josh squirmed away from Tyler's hand, small grin on his face, and Tyler beamed. "That's that prize winning smile, Joshie-woshie, I knew you could do it, ittle, wittle baby-"

"Oh, my God, stop talking," Josh groaned, smacking Tyler's hands away. "Fine, okay, you win. I'll go to practice tomorrow."

Tyler gave Josh his best all-knowing-mom face and started the car. "Awesome! So we're good then!"

"It's still not fair, though."

"I know it, but we'll work with it, okay? You're back on the team. That's a great start, bro. Wanna watch a movie?"

Josh huffed out a laugh. "What?"

"A movie? Wanna go to the theater? I do. They're playing a new DC movie, I really wanna see it." Tyler pulled the van out of the parking lot and into the afternoon traffic.

Josh laughed again. "Okay. Sure. Why not?"

"That's what I always say."

They hadn't kissed since that past Saturday- or even spent any time at all together, really- and this
was a fact Tyler was painfully aware of while standing in line at the theater. There weren't a lot of people there on a late Monday afternoon, except for a few moms with little kids and some older couples, but the line was moving pretty slowly despite of it. Tyler was even starting to worry that they'd miss the opening scene if things kept up at this pace. He glanced over at Josh, standing beside him in line. He had pulled up his hood, blueish fringe falling in his eyes, his cheeks rosy from the cold, and had stuffed his hands in his pockets, rocking back and forth on his heels as he studied the movie posters along the outside of the building. Tyler found himself once again admiring Josh’s profile. He really, really wanted to just lean in and kiss the tip of his nose.

The line moved forward a step, and Tyler sighed dramatically. If he missed the beginning of his movie, he would not be a happy camper. Josh was still looking at the posters and didn't seem to hear; Tyler sighed a little louder, but Josh still didn't look over at him. Tyler peered over his shoulder once, just to be on the super safe side, before inching a step closer to Josh and slipping his hand into Josh's hoodie pocket. Josh jumped a little and tilted his head to look at Tyler.

"What...are you doing?" he asked in a suspicious voice.

Tyler smiled and blinked his eyes. "I'm cold, that's all. You're always like, really warm."

"I'm warm?"

"Ya gotta lotta body heat."

"O-kay...so you're using my pocket instead of your own?"

"Mhm," Tyler nodded and leaned down quickly to bump his head against Josh's shoulder. "Until you get the hint and hold my hand, dummy."

Tyler peaked up at Josh just as a grin grew on Josh's face, and he took hold of Tyler's hand and pulled their hands out of his pocket, swinging them between the two of them.

Tyler rearranged their fingers, gleeful at the simple feeling of Josh's skin against his own. He tried not to giggle too loudly. That would be embarrassing. "Bro, this is like a date, isn't it?"

"I don't know, bro, is it?"

"It is if you want it to be."

"Okay, then."

Tyler's eyes went to Josh's face, but Josh was already looking at him, and Tyler felt suddenly shy, turning away to check the line again and pulling Josh with him a few spaces forward. When Tyler glanced back over his shoulder at Josh, hand in hand, the smile glowing on Josh's face made Tyler's heart stumble. Tyler thought, for a split second, that there was something shining warmly in Josh's eyes, something he recognized very well, but he maybe only imagined it; it made Tyler want to tell Josh, but he bit his lip and squeezed his hand a little harder instead.

They sat in the back of the theater, in the middle of the last row. The movie they were seeing had been playing for almost a month now and was about to stop showing soon, so besides a couple other people scattered in the rows ahead of them, the theater was practically deserted. Tyler didn't mind though; this was exactly how he liked it. He was reclining cross legged in his chair, lazily watching the scenes on the screen in front of him, not really paying attention. When a particularly bright scene lit up the room, he tilted his head to look at Josh, who looked seriously engrossed with the story. He
was leaning forward in his chair, his eyebrows furrowed as he followed closely every movement of the actors. Tyler smiled, his heart light. Damn it all to hell, he loved this guy. He really did. That scared Tyler a little bit, but he buried those feelings and thoughts for now and just admired the adorable, child-like look on Josh's face.

Suddenly Josh was glancing over at Tyler, and he noticed him staring at him. "You're gonna miss the movie if you're not watching it, bro," he leaned in and whispered, motioning at the screen.

Tyler shrugged. "S'okay, I've seen it before."

Josh looked surprised. "You have? Then why did you-"

"I just like being at the theater," Tyler interrupted in a low voice, jumping at the chance to lean over into Josh's chair and speak near his ear. He could smell his shampoo, and Tyler had the urge to kiss his neck. "It's like, I don't know, comfy, cozy, y'know? I like movies that have been playing for a coupla weeks so there's not so many people, and then I sit in the back by myself and it feels all dark and quiet and safe-"

A loud crash and voices screaming sounded around the room, the screen flashing different colors.

"It's quiet? " Josh asked in a loud whisper. Tyler gave him a look.

"Y'know what I mean, it's like all...like it's just you, y'know? It's a good place to go to get some space."

"Your safe place?" Josh queried, eyes meeting both of Tyler's, first one, then flicking over to the other in equal intensity. Tyler loved how Josh did that.

"Kinda."

Josh smiled and leaned back in his seat, turning his face back to the screen. Tyler's lips lifted slightly, and he followed Josh's lead, leaning back in his own chair to watch the movie. He might have seen it already- twice, to be exact- but he'd watch it again a million times if it meant watching it with Josh. Warm fingers found Tyler's hand in his lap just then, and Tyler, surprised, looked back over to Josh as he reached over the armrest to hold Tyler's hand, his eyes not leaving the screen. Tyler smiled in full and slipped his fingers into Josh's, and Josh rubbed his thumb across Tyler's knuckles. Fondness and contentment flooding his heart, Tyler turned his attention back to the movie.

Practice had technically started five minutes ago, and Josh was stalling in the empty hallway by his locker. He had already changed into his shorts and jersey in the bathroom, not wanting to face the other players in the changing rooms yet. He hadn't told anyone about being back on the team- well, except for the obvious, there was Tyler, and his parents, and by extension, Jordan knew- but he hadn't told any of his friends, not Spencer, not even Brendon. Josh didn't fully know why he was so anxious about going back to practice, but for some reason, the thought of having to deal with what his friends would say and how the rest of the team would react was something Josh wasn't so sure he could face. Who knew, Coach might have already told them all. No, no he didn't, because if he did, then Brendon would've texted him for sure.... And the whole thing going on with Tyler was still bothering Josh, too. Tyler had been a really good guy about it yesterday, but Josh couldn't shake the feeling of guilt he had. Tyler should be getting back on the team with him, he should be getting ready for practice right now, too. Josh was feeling pretty low and pretty anxious, and that was never a good mix. And he had to face the team sooner or later- time was running out.
Josh glanced nervously at the clock on the wall. Coach would be looking for him soon if he didn't get in there. He pulled open his locker and rummaged with his bag, checking his phone for a text from Tyler. That was possibly one of the only things that could help calm his nerves right now.

No new messages. Josh tried not to let it get to him and turned off his phone, stuffing it into his bag, his anxiety building even more. He had no choice now but to join the team in the gym. Or run away. Josh seriously contemplated how far he'd be able to make it by hitchhiking as he slammed his locker door shut.

"Hey, cutie," Tyler piped suddenly from the other side of Josh's locker door.

"Jesus Christ, Tyler, you scared me," Josh gasped, jumping back a step and bumping into the row of lockers while a smile inadvertently appeared on his face.

"M'sorry," Tyler beamed, looking very unapologetically angelic. Josh wanted to reach out and pinch his cheek. He almost did it, too. Tyler reached out a hand instead and tugged at the hem of Josh's jersey. "Well, don't you look handsome?"

Josh huffed, blushing, grabbing at Tyler's pinkie as he glanced over Tyler's shoulder to make sure the hallway was actually empty. "You sound like my mom."

"Well, it's true," Tyler said.

"That you sound like my mom?"

"Fine, don't accept my compliments then," Tyler snipped, crossing his arms, struggling to keep a grin from breaking across his face.

Josh didn't know how to reply, so he just smiled his sweetest smile at Tyler, waiting for Tyler to crack. Josh wasn't sure what he and Tyler were- he was a little afraid to ask, to be honest; it had only been several days, but Josh was always paranoid that the next time he saw Tyler, Tyler would suddenly have changed his mind about...whatever it was that they were doing. But having Tyler be the one to initiate interactions- not just interactions but flirty interactions- it was a real boost to Josh's ego.

Josh just didn't get why a guy like Tyler would like a guy like him. It just seemed too good to be true, and Josh was paranoid that, sooner or later, he would wake up.

Tyler took Josh's hand, and Josh jumped, surprised, zoning back to the school hallway and to Tyler, standing only a step away from him.

"You okay, J?" Tyler asked, his voice scratchy.

Josh dropped his eyes to their hands, loving how different their skin tones appeared, how tanned Tyler's fingers and hands were compared to his own rather pale skin. He licked his lips and murmured, "I'm just, um...I'm a little nervous...you know?"

Josh peeked up at Tyler and could literally see the thoughts working behind Tyler's eyes. Tyler nodded slightly, and Josh stammered, "Like, y'know...it's...a lot of people in there, and I'm...just a little...."

"Hey, hey," Tyler said, still holding Josh's hand. "It's okay to be shy."

"I'm not shy," Josh protested weakly.
Tyler squinted his eyes and smiled at Josh, and Josh could have sworn Tyler was glowing like the fucking sun or some shit. He also realized Tyler was an inch or so taller than him. Josh hoped Tyler wouldn’t notice that.

"You better get on in there or else you might as well skip it, bro," Tyler said softly. "Just do you, boo, you'll be fine."

Josh chuckled once. "You give the best advice."

Tyler beamed, and Josh didn't have the heart to say he was joking.

Josh leaned in suddenly and pressed a quick kiss to Tyler's lips. They hadn't kissed since Saturday; they had only held hands at the movie theater last night, and Josh was probably feeling a little more nervous about it than he should. Ordinarily Josh would not have done something like that, in the school hallway where anyone could have happened by and seen them- but Tyler was standing there so sweetly and was such a good listener and so fucking cute...Josh kind of lost his head.

When Josh pulled back, cheeks blushing, he was surprised and pleased to see that Tyler looked surprised as well, a red tint appearing on his cheeks. Before he could say anything, Josh dropped Tyler's hand and dashed off down the hall towards the gym.

Best to just go ahead and get it over with. Josh felt now like maybe he could.

Practice was better than Josh had expected. Brendon, for one, was ecstatic that Josh was back, if not a little pissed he hadn't mentioned it to him; Spencer and Dallon and the rest of the guys were equally pleased to see Josh. Mikey smiled broadly at Josh, and even Pete wasn't too horrible. A few offhanded comments, but what was new. Seeing Mikey and Pete together in the same space made Josh remember what Mikey had told him last Friday, and he tried not to act too obvious about knowing it; but they both acted so casual, Josh started to doubt whether or not Mikey had even been telling the truth about them in the first place. If they were together, Josh would seriously have to get some tips from Mikey on how to hide a relationship so expertly. They were doing a really good job. It made Josh worry all over again that he and Tyler were being constantly, painfully obvious.

But once they started playing, Josh was almost able to forget about all of that. He had forgotten just how much he fucking loved playing basketball. Sure, he was a little rusty, he hadn't played in months, come on, give him a break. But being out there on the court, running and jumping - and being fucking able to, fuck fractured bones- had Josh’s spirits soaring. This was good. This was what he was meant to be doing. He made several baskets with ease and completed the basic warm ups and drills effortlessly. This was his zone.

At the end of the practice, Coach yelled at the team a bit about last week’s awful game, recounting to Josh the stupid maneuvers and stunts that were pulled and expressing his newfound hope in the team now that they had a trusted player back on the team. There was a home game against Hilliard at the end of the week (a small, nearby school, easy competition, no scouts) and Coach was ready for the team to make a comeback, play a good game. He stressed the importance of keeping their skills sharp over the next two weeks, because then there was a big game- against Akron. The team all exclaimed
quietly at that. That was a big city, that was a big deal. Coach affirmed everyone’s suspicions that there would definitely be scouts at that game. Hence the need to really, really crack down in practice.

“So this week, home game, easy,” Coach reminded the team at the end of practice as they collected their things from the changing rooms, Josh hovering by the door. “With Dun back on the team—no, not you, kid, your brother—we should be looking at a clear shot for a win this Friday. But still, don’t let your guards down, Hilliard’s a pretty basic team, but they’ve pulled a few tricks out of their sleeves before, so just watch it, okay? And I don’t want anyone missing practices this week, no one for any reason. Got it, gang?”

The team murmured their agreement, and the coach left. Josh was still waiting by the door for his friends, unsure if they were all going to hang out or what. He didn’t want to run away directly after practice; that could be suspicious. Though Josh did notice that both Mikey and Pete had disappeared before Coach’s speech. He wondered what they were doing for a second, then decided he probably didn’t want to know.

“Hey, man, I love that you’re back,” Brendon appeared at Josh’s side, his jersey half on and half off, and clapped him on the back.

“Thanks,” Josh said, clapping Brendon back. “I love that you love that I’m back. Heard you guys sucked ass without me.”

“Whoa, look who’s getting a little cocky over here,” Brendon laughed loudly, pulling his jersey off and smacking at Josh with it.

Josh brushed him off, and Brendon sauntered over to Ryan, planting a kiss on his bare shoulder before grabbing his shirt and dashing off around a row of lockers with it, to Ryan’s protests.

Josh smiled at Brendon’s antics; he had missed them. It felt like a long time since they had hung out. With any of the guys, really. Josh hoped he wasn’t ignoring his friends, hoped they didn’t feel that way. It was just... difficult when your best friends kind of hated each other.

Everyone seemed to be chill, though. Spencer, Dallon, and Patrick were talking animatedly in the corner, Brendon and Ryan were doing who knows what around the corner, and Jordan had run off a minute ago. Josh thought about joining Spencer, or maybe seeing if Brendon wanted to hang out, but something stopped him. He wasn’t sure what it was, but they all looked so... normal, just chatting and joking like normal people got to do. Josh was overwhelmed with the wish for Tyler to be there, too, for him to be able to be a part of all of this. He deserved to be a part of it.

Josh took a few steps backwards and slipped quietly out of the changing rooms, and went home, and did his homework, and went to bed early. Before finally falling asleep, sprawled on top of his covers with the ceiling fan spinning lazily, he checked his phone.

Chapter End Notes

heyo friends i literally wanna say how much i literally adore you all literally so much literally i’m <33333 things were a lil tough for me these past weeks and i was a lil insecure w this chapter and my writing in general and

UR SUPPORT IS LITERAL LIFE TO ME!!!! THIS IS ALL BC OF U BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE I<3 U ALL!!!! I'LL UPDATE SOON!!!!
THANK YOU FRENS
Because he now had hour long practices after school, Josh was unable to spend any time with Tyler that week, much to his disappointment. Not only that, but Coach was really pushing the team to practice harder and longer, to get back into the flow of things before the big game in Akron next month. Josh wasn’t sure why Coach was stressing so much about the home game that Friday, it would be an easy win, but he was stressing nonetheless, and the entire team felt the pressure he was putting on them.

With Josh back on the team, and with one key player still missing, Coach had reassigned new positions for everyone, which was another huge factor of anxiety for him, and honestly the rest of the team as well, Brendon had mused to Josh and the gang. Mikey and Ryan had moved from the bench to play the forwards on the team while both Josh and Tyler had been MIA, pushing Pete to first player as point guard instead of shooting guard, which had been filled by Brendon, and leaving Dallon in his usual place, due to his height, as center post. Now, with Josh back, Ryan was back on the bench, and Mikey was filling in as fifth player. Coach had been rearranging the five boys in different positions all week, seemingly unsure as to where to put them for the Hilliard game. It was Thursday afternoon before Coach had finally settled on who was to play where; practice was over and the team was in the changing rooms when Coach had dashed in to move them all one last time for the next evening. Josh, and the rest of the team for that matter, had no idea what the fuck he was doing.

Dallon was center, as per usual, but instead of playing forward like Josh had at the beginning of the year, Coach had wanted him to play shooting guard, with Brendon and Mikey as forwards, and Pete, as Josh had guessed but had hoped to be wrong, as point guard. Asshole.

Pete was in no way the best player, and Josh and Brendon had a mutual freak out over the fact he was going to play point even with Josh back on the team. The only saving factor of the whole situation was that it was only for one game, and it was against fucking Hilliard. As annoying as the positions and practices were, they were only a temporary annoyance, and Worthington would win anyways, so who really cared? Josh thought he’d probably be a little more agitated about the whole thing if his mind had been completely focused on the upcoming game- which it wasn’t- and not on...well, someone else.

Josh didn’t mind the basketball part, really- he hadn’t played in so long, practice was really starting to feel good to him again. Put the ball in his hands and he could go on for hours, no matter the position he was forced to play. But the isolation from- yeah, okay, from Tyler- was really starting to get to him. When that thought crossed Josh’s mind, he laughed out loud at himself. It hadn’t even been a week. Fucking chill, bro.

Josh wasn’t sure if it was because Tyler was his first...kind-of-boyfriend in a couple of years or if it was because of something else, but he was really fucking obsessed. Is that weird? Is that creepy of
me? Nah...I don’t think so...Brendon and Ryan are like fucking shadows, surely it’s not weird to always wanna be around your crush...right? Weird or not, Josh had spent the week in between classes and practices texting Tyler nonstop, and Tyler had done the same, much to Josh’s immense glee. It was literally like downing ten cups of black coffee in a row, or several large cokes. The rush of adrenaline he felt every time a new text loaded on his phone- or a new snapchat, or an IG or twitter message- and the unavoidable crash every evening when Josh went to bed and realized he had to not only go through another whole day of not being around Tyler in person, but spending said day pretending to intensely dislike him- it left Josh feeling more than a little crazy. But the knowledge that Tyler maybe felt a tiny bit the same way helped make up for it. Only a little, though. The situation still sucked.

Josh just hoped that after everyone got used to him being back on the team and they all got back into the swing of things, everything would calm down enough that he and Tyler could start finding more regular times to hang out. Not only was the team and the coach amped about Josh being back on the team, but the entire high school was making a big deal about it. It made Josh feel embarrassed, honestly. Like, he got it that he had been on the team for years now and was a relatively popular player- seriously, the school wasn’t that huge or anything, everyone knew the guys on the basketball team. But Josh still felt things were being blown a bit out of proportion. The home game that Friday was becoming as big a thing as the upcoming game with Akron; it was the first game that Josh would be playing in since the incident.

At least Brendon was enjoying the heightened attention that week, making a spectacle of himself at the lunch table every day, especially when Friday afternoon rolled around. Their usual table was surrounded by several girls from the cheerleading team, thanks to Brendon, who was telling them God knows what. Josh thought he heard him trying to hook one of them up with Dallon; judging by the insanely red blush and hassled look on Dallon’s face right then, Josh figured he was right. Josh, meanwhile, was hunched down in his seat, doing his best to stay out of the way of all the commotion. There was a girl sitting on the edge of the table right in front of him, and Josh pulled his pepsi can closer to him before she knocked it over with her hip. He didn’t even know her name.

Another girl Josh didn’t know was basically sitting in Brendon’s lap across from Josh, and Josh could only shake his head, eyes sliding over to Ryan next to Brendon, who seemed completely casual and oblivious to the fact that his boyfriend was acting like this. Josh wasn’t sure how he’d react if it were Tyler, but it probably wouldn’t be like that. As soon as the thought hit Josh though, he snorted to himself out loud. He couldn’t see Tyler surrounded by cheerleader girls, not in a million years. Just...no.

Josh’s phone buzzed in his pocket twice in a row, and Josh tensed as soon as he felt it, looking up and across the lunchroom to Tyler’s table. Sure enough, to Josh’s delight, Tyler was already looking over at him. He jerked his head upwards once and smiled before going back to his phone, and a second later Josh felt another buzz. Dallon was beside Josh, but he seemed pretty preoccupied with snapchatting whatever was going on across the table with Brendon and a certain red haired cheerleader to notice Josh secretly texting a secret boyfriend. Josh sneakily pulled his phone out to another buzz and hunched over his phone as he opened Tyler’s messages.

Ty: did u see what i sent u on ig?

Ty: its like a super duper easy recipe on how to make oreo mug cakes bro are you down or are you down

Ty: maybe tomorrow we can chill ?? and do the oreo thang ??

Josh tried to hide his smile as he glanced back briefly at Tyler before tapping a response. Why were there no oreo emojis?
J: oreos 4 life bro! It’s a date

J: i’d say tonite except 4 the game. Ugh

J: r u seeing B rn?

The table jostled into Josh’s ribs after he sent the text, and he glared up at another cheerleader who had decided to sit on the table. Josh pulled his soda even closer to himself and away from the spill zone.

Ty: haha yeah lol i thought he was gay

J: me too but

J: cheerleaders, man

Ty: u don’t look like ur having too much fun

J: if anyone tries to sit on my lap im committing murder

Josh peeked another look at Tyler, who was grinning down at his phone, thumbs already working on a response.

Ty: not in school, u’ll b expelled

J: good

Ty: :OOO

Josh snickered out loud, then glanced nervously around the table; it was still so loud no one had heard him, and everyone seemed much too interested in yelling back and forth about the game to notice Josh quietly texting on his phone.

J: so what r u gonna do tonite?

Ty: eat a pint of Ben n Jerrys and play nintendogs

Ty: sexy right

Josh smiled and as much as he wanted to reply lightly and jokingly, he still had a lot of repressed emotions about tonight. Mainly all about Tyler. He had been trying all week, but he just couldn’t shake the heavy weight of guilt he felt about Tyler having to miss another game. And seriously, what about the guy’s parents? He couldn’t keep it up forever, hiding something that big from them. Josh seriously marveled at how he had made it this far. Josh’s siblings would have ratted him out a long time ago. Looking at you, Jordan. Bitch.

J: u kno wut i mean bby

J: aren’t ur parents gonna come tonite? what did u tell them

Ty: i acted sick this morning. i got it under control

J: u sure

Ty: dont worry abt me so much jj
Ty: wish i could be at the game and see my BOO kickin ass but

Ty: i could disguise myself as a cheerleader

Josh choked on his sip of pepsi as Tyler’s texts loaded on his phone, and he glanced across the room again, his cheeks reddening when he met Tyler’s eyes. Tyler raised his eyebrows and smirked.

J: u’d rock the mini skirt and pom poms not gonna lie

J: kinda wanna see that

Tyler replied with several suggestive emojis and added: if u guys win tonite we should celebrate. Winking emoji face.

Josh spluttered on his pepsi again, eyes darting to Tyler as he tried to formulate some kind of response to that. Holy hell.

He was typing out a fumbled response, cheeks blazing, when someone bumped into his arm, probably one of the cheerleaders, and Josh was about to elbow her- kinda rude, he knew, but c’mon- when the person pushed past his arm and perched on his lap. Actually on his lap. Josh was about to flip his shit when he suddenly looked up and- oh. Jenna grinned down at him and flung an arm around his shoulders.

“Hey, love, who ya textin’?”

Josh had almost forgotten his phone in his hands, text messages visible and his contact name for Tyler, Ty, surrounded on either side with every heart and love related emoji that existed. He turned it off and placed it face down on the table so quickly he worried for a second he had cracked the screen. But there were bigger problems to deal with right now.

“Whoa, Flash! That was a hell of a lot of hearts.”

“Ha, ha, yeah, um...it was nothing, just....” Josh felt himself starting to sweat. Jenna’s hand was way too close to his neck.

“Brendon’s having fun,” Jenna didn’t push it, nodding her head across the table. “You looked lonely. What, not a single cheerleader wanted to sit on your lap?”

She laughed, and Josh had no idea what to say. He tried to peek around her and see what Tyler was doing, but there were too many people crowded around. He was starting to get very concerned about how Tyler would feel if he saw this. Maybe he can’t see? There’s a hell of a lot of girls around here right now...shit, who am I kidding, oh, God, I hope he doesn’t get mad. I mean, why should he, he knows about Jenna, shit, it’s not fair, that’s so shitty of me, shit, shit, I need to just-

“Jooosh! Silly, you keep zoning out. What’s with you lately?” Red alerts shot off in Josh’s mind as Jenna’s hand was suddenly on his chin, tilting his head up towards her. Okay, her face was way too close now. Some loose strands of her hair were tickling against his face, and Josh didn’t know what exactly was going on, but he knew it was not good.

Jenna’s breath tickled his eyelashes and he blinked several times, and she smiled again, wiggling into a better position, which was, unfortunately, still on Josh’s lap. Josh’s heart was beating so fast and so hard it actually hurt his chest, and he wondered briefly if it was possible to get bruised ribs from something like that, when suddenly she was leaning down even closer. Her lips pressed sweetly against the corner of Josh’s mouth, and he completely froze, his mind simultaneously screaming as it shut itself down. This is not freaking happening right now-
She pressed another kiss to Josh’s mouth, and he could feel her lipgloss gliding wetly against his dry and cracked lips. The urge to just shove her off of him swept through Josh, but his arms felt stiff and heavy.

“Yo, Joseph, you gonna be at the game tonight? Team needs you, y’know. A cheerleader called in sick today, and you’re just her size!” Brendon’s taunting voice echoed in the lunchroom and even louder in Josh’s ears, and Josh wanted to die, paranoia, hurt, and a little bit of shock ripping through him. He jerked his face away from Jenna’s, her hair still clinging to his face, just in time to see Tyler darting past their table, his face turned away. Brendon and several of the cheerleaders were looking in his direction as he passed; several girls were laughing openly at Brendon’s comment and at Tyler as he edged by them, and Brendon flipped the bird at Tyler’s back. Brendon, and the rest of the team for that matter, rarely made jokes or comments about Tyler once the drama with Josh’s leg had died down, but Josh assumed with the anticipation of tonight’s game and with the entire cheerleading team boosting his ego, he couldn’t help but pick on someone for a laugh.

Josh did shove Jenna off his lap then, apologizing when she stumbled, surprised. His hand shot out automatically to steady her, and he smiled quickly, emptily, avoiding her eyes.

“Are you okay, Josh? What’s wrong?”

“I—I’ll be back, o-okay? Talk to Dallon or s-something, okay? I’m sorry, I’ll be, um...I’ll be right back,” Josh stammered, his throat and chest feeling tight. Maybe he was the one getting sick.

“Yo, J, where you going, man? It’s ten till next period,” Brendon called as Josh stumbled away from the table. Josh’s mind was fuzzy and everything was muted, but Brendon’s voice came through loud and clear.

“You shut the fuck up,” Josh snapped as he turned away, afraid to look at his friend because he was certain his emotions would be written clearly all over his face, and Brendon would know everything with just one look.

Josh could hear Jenna’s voice as he pushed past several cheerleaders, but he couldn’t understand what she was saying. He would have ignored her anyways, would’ve ignored anyone who tried to talk to him right then. He needed to talk to one person right now, and only one, and not any of them.

Josh stumbled into several random students on his way out of the cafeteria, bursting into the hallway and peering both ways down the hall, first left, then right, eyes searching frantically for Tyler. Several kids were hanging in the hallways, some gossiping by their lockers, others sitting on the floor eating their lunches; a couple of teachers bustled past, a janitor, too, but Josh couldn’t see Tyler anywhere. He hesitated a moment, then darted down the hallway, deciding to check by Tyler’s locker, worry flooding his chest. This is not fair, this is the fucking worst, oh, my God, poor Tyler, this fucking sucks. I should’ve broken up with Jenna, I should have a long fucking time ago, God, I am a fucking idiot, what the hell is my problem. Now Tyler hates me and Jenna probably does, too, and Brendon- yo, fuck Brendon, I can’t fucking believe he would say that shit, honestly, what the hell, what the hell, this is all my fault -

Josh slipped around the corner and collided with a girl he didn’t recognize. She dropped her bag and cursed angrily at him, and Josh stammered out a quick apology as he continued down the hallway. He just needed to get to Tyler right now, he needed to explain.

Another turn, and then Josh saw one of the back doors swinging shut at the end of the hallway, and through the glass a familiar hoodie disappearing into the parking lot. Josh took off in that direction when he felt a sharp tug on his own hoodie. He whipped around, stumbling a little, angry response already on his lips when he noticed it was Mikey standing behind him, arms crossed over his chest,
eyebrows furrowed deeply. Wow, he’s...taller than me...huh....

“Where are you going?” Mikey demanded, his voice clipped.

Josh huffed, still pissed. “Where do you fucking think? I got to find Tyler, did you see-”

“Yeah, of course I saw. What the fuck was that?”

Josh waved a hand indignantly. “I didn’t do it, it wasn’t my...she fucking kissed me, dude, I didn’t want her to-”

“That doesn’t fucking matter, Josh,” Mikey interrupted. “God, what is your problem? You haven’t fucking broken up with her yet? What the hell?”

Josh felt his heartbeat racing even faster than it had been a moment before. “It’s not like that, okay, it’s just, it’s hard to explain, okay? It’s complicated, it’s-”

“No, it’s not,” Mikey interrupted again. Josh couldn’t recall seeing him this mad before, even when Josh had insulted his brother way back at the beginning of the school year. “It’s not complicated, Josh, it’s really not. If you like Tyler, then you fucking like Tyler, okay, not Jenna. And if you like Jenna then you fucking like her, and you don’t fuck around with Tyler and his feelings, okay? If you don’t like him then I swear, stop fucking around with him, stop leading him on, don’t you-”

“I’m not,” Josh spluttered. “God, I’m not, I mean, I didn’t mean to, okay? It’s just a...a delicate situation, alright? Tyler knows that, he knew that before we got together, okay? And I am going to break up with Jenna, it’s just...I’m working on it, okay? I need to go talk to him-”

“No, that’s the last thing you need to do,” Mikey took a step forward, as if suspecting Josh to dart off at any second- which honestly, Josh felt more and more like doing with every second. He was not enjoying this conversation. “That’s the last thing Tyler needs right now, either. Just...just leave him alone, alright? You need to figure out your shit.”

Josh felt annoyance wash over him just then. “It’s none of your business, Mikey. This is between me and Tyler, okay-”

Mikey actually huffed out a small laugh. “I don’t care whose business it is. And let’s be real, I think the last person Tyler wants to see right now is you.”

A dull pain blossomed in Josh’s heart as he just stared at Mikey, brain searching for a response but coming up empty. After a silent moment, Mikey dropped his gaze and brushed past Josh, heading off down the hallway in the direction that Tyler had exited. Josh remained still, not bothering to move until he heard the swish and latch of the door shutting behind Mikey. The gust of cool air that was let idled around Josh, and he shivered, finally shuffling from his spot. He blinked his eyes. He was not crying right now. He glanced over his shoulder- just in case, in case...Josh didn’t really know. Tyler wasn’t there, nor was Mikey, and Josh didn’t expect either of them to be, he just...Josh needed to get out of there. Right now.

There was no practice that afternoon because of the game that evening, so Josh didn’t think twice about fumbling blindly down the hall, his vision blurred as he slipped past faceless students to his locker, throwing it open and yanking out his bag. He thought several pens and pencils scattered on the ground, but he wasn’t sure. He didn’t care either way. He didn’t bother closing his locker, just swung the door in the general direction, the sound of the metal clanging echoing in his ears. He stumbled down the hall and out the front door. The bell sounded behind him.

Why did this have to happen? How come Josh had just managed to get his stupid feelings all figured
out, only to have it all come crashing down like this? Why had he let things go so far with Jenna? Stupid, stupid, stupid. I’m an idiot. Josh slipped on a hidden patch of ice in the parking lot and almost toppled over, but righted himself and continued towards the sidewalk. He hated this goddamn school. He hated his goddamn classmates and his goddamn friends and his goddamn teammates and the goddamn team and the stupid cheerleaders and the stupid teachers and the stupid Coach and all the stupid rules and Mikey and Brendon and- Josh hated everything.

Except Tyler. Josh didn’t hate Tyler. He could never hate Tyler. As soon as the thought crossed Josh’s mind, he laughed aloud to himself; he had hated Tyler once, months ago. It felt like a hundred years. Wow, I was pretty stupid then. Looks like I still am. I just need to man the fuck up and break up with Jenna and stop hiding and lying and just be out with Tyler, to everyone. Fuck what they say. But it wasn’t that easy, Josh knew this. He kicked angrily at a clump of snow. And now Tyler kind of hated him. And why shouldn’t he? Josh was a dick, and Josh hated himself for being that way. This is all my fault, everything is. Why does literally everything suck?

Josh wondered where Tyler was right then. With Mikey. Probably ranting about how stupid Josh was or how unfair everything seemed. Or maybe he was...maybe he was even crying. The mere thought of Tyler crying, and because of him, tore at Josh’s heartstrings. Nothing in the world seemed more wrong or unfair. Josh never wanted to make Tyler cry. Not ever.

By the time Josh stumbled up his driveway to his front door, his sneakers were thoroughly soaked through, and he dropped another pen on the front stoop as he dug in his backpack for the key. As soon as he was inside, Josh quietly shut the door, hoping that if his mom was home, she wouldn’t hear him arriving before school let out, and jogged up the stairs to his room. He shrugged out of his backpack and wet shoes and collapsed onto his stomach on his unmade bed. Tyler had been in this same bed only a week ago. Josh longed for him to be there now. He wished more than anything that he could just ignore this problem, and maybe, maybe it would go away, but. Josh wiped at his face—his eyes were still a little moist—and rolled over onto his back, tugging his phone out from his pocket and turning it on, his messages to Tyler still open on the screen.

J: i kno u probably don’t wanna talk 2 me but i’m rlly sorry ty

J: pls don’t b too mad

J: i mean u can b mad if u want i just mean

J: i’m really sorry

J: i can fix this ok? pls don’t b sad

Josh turned his phone off and tossed it onto the bed beside him and closed his eyes and waited for Tyler to respond.

Five minutes till the start of the game. Josh was hiding in the changing rooms—yes, hiding, okay? He didn’t wanna be there. He had changed into his shorts and jersey half an hour ago and had sat on the floor around the corner and in the back of the changing rooms, the muffled sound of the crowd out in the gym still able to reach him. He could hear a recording of the school band’s slightly off tune playing and the cheerleaders doing a routine. The rest of the team had all changed and already headed out to the gym, to either socialize or warm up or show off or make small talk with the Hilliard team and students. Josh didn’t care about any of that. His anxiety was through the roof, and he was pretty sure if he tried to run or jog or jump that he would throw up all over the floor. That would be embarrassing. Possibly the only thing more embarrassing than tripping and breaking your leg during
Josh felt another wave of nausea hit him, and he glanced at his phone. Still nothing from Tyler. He hadn’t replied to a single text, not all day. Josh hadn’t really expected him to, but Tyler hadn’t even opened the messages. Josh’s thumbs hesitated over the screen. He was unsure if sending Tyler another text or giving him space, like Mikey had said, was a better idea. Josh tried not to be too angry at Mikey; after all, he was just trying to be a better friend than Josh had been able to be. But Mikey wasn’t really making it easy not to be mad at him, glaring at Josh when he had first entered the changing rooms and whenever Josh had even glanced in his direction.

There were sudden footsteps from around the corner and Josh quickly turned his phone off and wiped an arm across his face. His eyes were still a little damp, though Josh was still adamant about the fact he had not spent the better half of the afternoon crying. Brendon jogged around the row of lockers then and nearly stepped on Josh. “Whoa, hey, there you are, Coach was looking for you, bro!”

Josh hadn’t spoken to Brendon since he had snapped at him during lunch, but either Brendon had been too distracted with mentally preparing for the game, flirting with the cheerleaders, messing around with Ryan, or a mix of all three to remember that Josh was pissed at him, judging by the familiar way he spoke to Josh now, even reaching down to ruffle his hair. “C’mon, bro, you’re alright, aren’t you? Why are you sitting, is it your ankle again?”

“No, I’m fine, I’m...I’m coming, let me put my phone in my locker. I’ll be right out, okay?” Josh stood shakily, and Brendon clapped him roughly on the shoulder before darting out of the room again. Josh was thankful, really, that Brendon didn’t bring up their exchange from lunch. Josh hadn’t meant to yell at Brendon like that, but he had just cracked. No one could talk to Tyler like that, no one. Josh wouldn’t let them. The outburst, in retrospect, surprised Josh as much as it probably had shocked anyone who knew him who had also heard him.

Josh cast one last glance at his phone- no new messages- before throwing it a little too roughly into his locker and slamming the door shut. He took a deep breath, and with his stomach still in his throat, made the short trek into the gym and ocean of noise.

It was a tougher game than anyone had anticipated. Within fifteen seconds of the start, Hilliard had sneaked through Worthington’s defense and scored the first points. Brendon yelled something at Mikey, who only shrugged; Mikey wasn’t used to playing defense, and he and Brendon didn’t really seem to be making the best team. Josh felt his stomach churn; this was going to be a long game. And he was the shooting guard, along with Pete, which meant he had to step up and really play the game. No hanging out by the sidelines for this one.

With the ball back on the floor, Pete snatched it easily, only to be cornered by the opposing team. Fuck, they moved really fast. Worthington hadn’t prepared for this at all. Josh didn’t even see it coming when Pete jumped and threw the ball over the other players’ heads to Josh. Josh stumbled on his own shoelaces as he caught it and immediately had to swerve around another player, darting off towards the hoop. Dallon waved at him from across the room, and Josh calculated which would be the safer move; throwing the ball to Dallon, who was closer to the hoop but warily close to Hilliard’s power forward as well, or to spring high enough to make the shot over both forwards himself, though he was still several yards away. Hilliard’s center was closing in on Josh’s right, and he didn’t have time for any more calculating; he thought he heard Coach yelling at him, too, or maybe it was Brendon, or Pete. Or all of them. Josh bent his knees and sprung into the air with an energy he really wasn’t feeling. His stomach twisted.
It was a clean shot, or almost was, until one of Hilliard’s defense and the shortest player on their team jumped impressively high and knocked the ball off-course. Josh cursed, and he could hear Coach doing the same from the sidelines. Josh jerked to his right and nearly collided with Hilliard’s center, who was hanging around him so closely it was really starting to piss Josh off. He couldn’t fucking move without bumping into the guy. He didn’t even have the fucking ball.

The Hilliard team moved the ball across the floor shockingly fast, and was closing in on the hoop when Brendon managed to steal it away, tossing it over Mikey’s head to Josh. Josh jumped to grab it as the Hilliard center jumped to catch it, too, and they bumped shoulders roughly, the jolt knocking Josh to the ground. He was a big guy, okay? Even taller than Dallon. Josh had made eye contact with Mikey when he had stood back up, and Mikey glared at him. Josh wanted to address him about it, to tell Mikey to stop looking so smug because it wasn’t his fault, okay, but Coach was yelling at him to get after the ball, so Josh swallowed his emotions and darted nearer to Brendon, who was jumping up to knock the ball away from their hoop. Josh had a sinking feeling in his stomach, fully prepared to hear the buzzer alerting the audience to Hilliard scoring another set of points, but suddenly the ball was bouncing right in front of him, and Josh had no time to think, only barely enough time to grab the ball and start running in the opposite direction. Wow, Brendon had actually jumped high enough to do that? Despite the nausea and anxiety he was currently feeling, Josh couldn’t help but also feel a little proud at the thought.

Two opposing players jumped into Josh’s path, and he had to quickly backtrack, bumping into the chest of that insanely tall center player and almost tripping again. Can he get the fuck off my back, please? Fuckin’ hell. Josh glared up at him as he ducked down and out of reach of the other guy, passing the ball around him and back towards Pete.

The game went on, dragging on for the rest of the period without any more points being handed out, which Josh looked at as almost a good thing, albeit pretty disappointing as well. The buzzer sounded, and Josh slumped off the floor, sweaty and already exhausted, to the bench to find some water.

“Hey, man, what the hell’s going on with Hilliard?” Spencer jumped up from the bleacher to meet Josh, pounding him on the back. Josh wished he would stop but was too tired to even protest. He only shrugged, trying to catch his breath.

“Yeah, what the hell is up?” Jordan piped, bounding over to Josh from his end of the row. Josh scowled at him and turned away slightly.

Ryan reached around Jordan and Spencer then to hand Josh a water bottle, and Josh nodded thankfully at him, timely downing three quarters of the bottle. Pete jogged up beside Josh and threw an arm over his shoulder, grabbing the bottle from him to finish its contents himself. “Listen, Dun,” he said, glaring over his shoulder as if the Hilliard team could hear. “Coach just told me and Urie, we need you to play forward, okay? Hilliard’s a bitch, man.”

“What’s going on?” Josh looked over his shoulder, too; Coach was on the other side of the gym talking to Mikey and Brendon, pointing out at the floor. Ordinarily, he would’ve shoved Pete’s arm off of him, he was sweaty and gross, but Josh figured so was he, and the energy it would take to shove Pete away from him wouldn’t be worth it.

“I got no fuckin’ clue, man,” Pete tossed the empty water bottle at Jordan without even glancing in his direction and steered Josh away from the bleacher. “I’m gonna be following Dal with post, okay, but I still have to play point, obviously; we’re all doubling up. We have no choice. So you’re guard and small forward with Mike, okay?”

Josh tensed slightly. “I don’t think Mikey wants to work with me.”
“He’ll do it, don’t worry,” Pete said. “You just keep that ball away from them, okay? I’m gonna be on the left side for the next period, so you take the right. I know their power forward, I met him last year, so I’ll know what he’s planning. I don’t know about the other forward, but you guys seem the same size, you should be able to handle him. And watch out for that center, he’s a real fuckin’ bitch.”

“Yeah, I know,” Josh huffed, just as Coach waved the team over, the Hilliard coach doing the same. They lined up and the second period started.

The second and third periods continued in much the same way. Worthington played hard and Hilliard played harder, scoring several times with skill that they had never shown before, at least in all the years that Josh had played against them. Worthington was able to keep pace throughout the two periods, earning several free throws when Hilliard’s center post jackass got fouled; but both teams were putting up such a fight that the scores were depressingly low. Fourteen to sixteen, with Worthington in the lead, but barely. Coach’s face was red, and he was waving his hands angrily from the sidelines before pacing back and forth with his hands on his hips and shaking his head. Unfortunately, with the last foul for Hilliard, their center player kneed Dallon so roughly in the stomach that he had to drop out halfway during the third period, leaving the team to finish the segment with only four players; the center then turned around and elbowed Mikey in the face. On accident, he had said when both coaches called him out and began arguing over it. Pete somehow got involved, and both Hilliard’s center and Pete were told to sit out for the last quarter, which definitely did not help Coach’s stress levels, if one could judge by the darkening shade of red on his face.

During the thirty seconds allowed to the team to decide which players they wanted to fill in, Coach was nearly having a heart attack, racing along the bench before physically hauling Ryan to his feet and shoving him in the direction of the team, waiting nervously behind him. Everyone shuffled awkwardly as Coach spent several precious seconds arguing tensely with Mikey, blood pouring from Mikey’s nose and corner of his mouth. He wanted to keep playing; Mikey argued that since he had played the previous three quarters, he knew the other team better than letting a bench player take over. Coach didn’t seem convinced at all, and Josh was more than a hundred percent sure that if the buzzer hadn’t sounded, he would’ve kept arguing, but there was no more time. Coach herded the new team back onto the floor, and both teams lined up for the last period.

The gym felt strangely quiet to Josh, besides the steady hum in his ears and the occasional echoing screech of someone’s sneaker and the constant thudding of the ball, interrupted only by the metallic clang of the net and the deafening lack of a buzzer. Two minutes passed with no score, then four minutes, then six. Coach was pacing along the floor now faster than some of the players were moving.

A minute left in the last quarter, and Josh suddenly found himself with the ball. Everyone was slowing down now; both teams had spent the past forty minutes tiring each other out so thoroughly that Josh knew now was the time to try making an extra basket. The other team’s guard would be down and scoring another set of points could be as simple as tossing the ball to the right person. At that moment, that person happened to be Mikey. He had jogged from one end of the court to the other behind the other players, slowing to a walk near one of Hilliard’s forwards. His brows were furrowed and his head lowered as he watched Josh across the room with an intense stare, and blood was dried in a streak across his cheek. He looked pretty badass. Hilliard’s guards and the new center player were circling Josh, casually, tiring, and Josh dribbled the ball lazily, hunched and tensed to make a move in a split second if need be. He eyed Mikey’s position. Dallon was idling across the floor, a little closer to Josh than Mikey was, but one of the guards noticed him and backed into his path, the two struggling with each other, their eyes on the ball the whole time. Josh risked a glance up at the timer on the wall. 35...34...33...32...
Worthington was still in the lead by two points, and that was good, but it wasn’t enough, not for Josh, not for Coach, not for Worthington. The game wasn’t over yet. And as tired as Josh was, at least the sick feeling in his stomach had vanished sometime during the first half; the thrill of actually playing was starting to come back to him. If he could just make this shot.

Suddenly the Hilliard center lunged at Josh, and Josh sidestepped just in time, jumping and springing the ball from his fingertips to Mikey across the floor. Everyone sprang back into action. One Hilliard player jumped up against Mikey as he tried to shoot a basket and knocked the ball away from him, and another Hilliard person caught it, dribbling it in the other direction, weaving around Dallon and then Ryan. Josh darted around the center post still in his way and chased after the ball, mirroring Ryan on the opposite side of the gym as they neared the hoop. Josh managed to dash in front of the forward player with the ball, waving his arms and preventing him from making a basket, which he was incredibly close to doing. The forward made to jog around Josh’s right, near the edge of the court, and as Josh moved to block him, he darted to Josh’s left, leaping and throwing the ball across the court to another player close enough to the hoop to make an easy basket. Josh cursed as he righted himself and spun around, just in time to see Brendon jumping into the air and intercepting the ball. Josh could hear cheering from the crowd behind him as Brendon dribbled the ball expertly between two Hilliard players. One of them elbowed Brendon in the side and he stumbled, but threw the ball back over to Josh before his knees hit the ground.

Josh was currently in the clear and caught the ball easily, taking advantage of the open space of gym around him and sprinting off towards the other end of the court. Just as he neared the hoop, Josh heard Dallon call out to him, and he turned just in time to dart beneath someone’s arm, the ball still secure. Only now he was facing the wrong way, and there were two more Hilliard players closing in on him with one now behind him, and he was awfully, dangerously close to the line marking the edge of the court.

Coach was very close to Josh on the other side of the line, yelling something, and Josh glanced over his shoulder at the timer. Eleven...ten...nine....

Oh, shit.

One of the two Hilliard players in front of Josh lunged at him, backing him close enough to the player behind him that Josh could feel his body heat, and Josh lurched his body to the right, away from the edge of the court and twisting around to face the hoop, at the same time as the Hilliard player behind him jumped at him, their legs tangling and a sharp pain ringing up Josh’s leg to his knee. Not again, fucking-

Josh stumbled to one knee, the cement floor feeling like it cracked his kneecap, the ball falling a little too weakly from his fingers, but thankfully with still enough distance to bounce once and end up in Brendon’s hands. Last Josh had noticed him, he was on the other end of the court with the new Hilliard center player breathing down his neck. Brendon cast a worried glance in Josh’s direction, but Josh pointed violently at the net as he heard several loud voices from the crowd counting down the last five seconds. The player who had tripped Josh darted in front of him, blocking his vision, and Josh stumbled to his feet, limping over a step. Hilliard had the ball again, halfway back across the court. It was okay, Worthington was still in the lead, it’s okay, it’s okay, it’s ok- Josh tried to run but wincing as his ankle started throbbing sharply. Three...two....

The clang of the net echoed a half second before the buzzer went off, and Josh kneeled back on the floor, rubbing at his ankle as sweat trickled steadily into his eyes. Another buzzer sounded, and the crowd was sort of deafening as the scores loaded on the screen. Seventeen to sixteen. Josh glanced over his shoulder and blinked his eyes to see the red numbers glaring at him. Seventeen!? Hilliard’s last shot had earned the team three points compared to two. Josh cursed out loud and dropped his
head against his knee as he continued rubbing at his ankle.

The Hilliard team victoriously made their way over to the bleachers, where the visiting families and students streamed out onto the gym floor to meet them. Josh saw Coach having a breakdown several yards away, sitting in a fold up chair with his head in his hands. He would have laughed if he wasn’t so surprised and upset about the loss himself.

Josh glanced up to see Brendon walking across the floor to him, hands on his hips. His face was red and sweaty, his bangs clinging to his forehead. He was eyeing the Hilliard team warily.

The room was loud with hundreds of people talking and cheering excitedly, and once Brendon had reached the spot where Josh was kneeling, he had to raise his voice to be heard. “What the fucking hell, man. What the fucking hell.”

“I know,” Josh replied miserably.

“You okay?” Brendon asked, noticing Josh’s hands rubbing at his knee.

Josh just nodded. It wasn’t serious, thank God. “What about you, man?” he motioned towards Brendon’s stomach in case he couldn’t hear him. “Looked like that jerk could’ve broken a rib or something.”

Brendon was still panting and only raised his eyebrows in agreement, pulling up his shirt to show off a dark blue bruise already forming on his torso.

“Yikes,” Josh said. Brendon studied the bruise a moment before dropping his shirt back down. He mussed Josh’s hair quickly then nodded behind him. “I’m gonna talk to Coach.”

Josh didn’t reply, and Brendon walked off.

The rest of the Worthington team were milling about by the bleachers, the players looking utterly exhausted, both them and the bench players all with the same look of shock written on their faces. Josh could see Jordan yelling something at a Hilliard bench player, trying to pick a fight, but the player just ignored him. Josh almost laughed to himself. What an idiot.

Only a few minutes later and Brendon passed back by Josh along with several other players, heading towards the changing rooms. Josh was content to sit a few more moments in his corner until he noticed his parents and sisters making their way down the bleachers to Jordan, and he hauled himself to his feet and limped towards the changing rooms as well. The last thing he wanted right now was to deal with his family.

Josh had assumed the changing rooms would be a relatively quiet relief from the echoing gymnasium, but the second the door closed behind him, he could hear Brendon and Pete’s angry voices shooting back and forth. Josh warily edged behind Brendon to get to the back of the room and to his locker. He was not going to get in the middle of this right now.

“What the fuck, man, if you weren’t pussying around and fucking passed the ball they wouldn’t have scored those last points.”

“This isn’t my fucking fault, Wentz, at least I was fucking playing. You were the fucking pansy sitting out on the fucking bench, ’cause someone couldn’t keep their fucking pants on. What the hell was that, by the way?”

“Shut the-“
“Their center was fucking out, man, he was disqualified and we could’ve won then, we were fucking ahead, but oh fucking no, you had to go fucking argue with the jerk-”

“With or without Pete, I think we would’ve still lost,” Dallon intervened.

“Yeah, those weren’t the same guys from last year,” said Ryan. “Did you recognize anyone? I didn’t.”

“Fucking transfer students,” Brendon snapped. “They only kept their meanest players. And if Pete had just fucking-”

“Brendon.” Ryan and Spencer started at the same time.

“Don’t you fucking start on me, Urie, I’ll break your fucking-”

“Say it to my fucking face, you piece of-”

“Brendon, cut it out, take a walk,” Ryan pushed past Spencer to tug at Brendon’s arm, and Brendon shrugged him off, stomping past the two of them and making his way to the back of the room, past Josh and around the row of lockers. Pete slammed his locker shut and followed him, bumping his shoulder roughly against Josh. Josh staggered back into his locker and glanced worriedly at Ryan, who shook his head and followed the other two.

“Brendon, stop it. Guys, don’t start-”

“Should we…?” Spencer motioned towards the back of the room, where Brendon and Pete had started arguing again over Ryan’s protests.

“Leave them alone, they can sort it out themselves,” Dallon said, shoving his locker open. “If they’re gonna act like fucking kids then let them.”

Mikey sighed audibly, and Josh looked across the room to him. Their eyes met briefly before Mikey glared harshly. He slammed his locker shut so forcibly that Josh flinched, before marching out of the room without a second glance in Josh’s direction.

Josh sighed quietly and looked down at his shoes, scuffing one against the floor. This was insane. They weren’t acting like a fucking team anymore; no wonder they had fucking lost. Josh had never played a game and felt so out of place before, so out of beat with the other players.

This has to stop. Right now.

Josh made up his mind then and fumbled quickly with his lock. He pulled out his hoodie and tugged it sloppily over his head before quietly exiting the changing rooms, to the sound of his teammates still arguing. He hoped no one started throwing punches.

The gym had emptied quickly; most of the Worthington students had gone home, along with a lot of the Hilliard families, though there were still several celebrating team members and their friends left. Josh eyed his family still at the bench with Jordan; his dad was waving his car keys and heading for the back door to the parking lot. Josh hurried his steps; he only had a couple of minutes.

Coach was in the same spot of the gym where Josh had last seen him. His back was to Josh, and he was discussing something with the Hilliard coach. Josh shuffled from foot to foot a few yards away for a moment before edging closer and clearing his throat. Coach glanced briefly at him and continued talking. Josh looked behind his shoulder; his family was heading towards the back door. Ashley made eye contact and waved for Josh to come on, but he pointed at Coach Anderson and
held up three fingers. Ashley nodded from across the room and followed their mom and other siblings out the door to the parking lot.

Finally, Coach finished talking and turned around, gathering up his clipboard from the chair beside him. Josh took a hesitant step closer and dived right in.

“Coach Anderson, about tonight-”

“Dun, we’ll discuss it Monday, first thing in practice, alright?”

“No, yeah, I know, that’s not what I mean, I wanted to talk about something else.”

“If you’re not happy about something, we’ll discuss it on Monday,” Coach reiterated. He looked tired and seriously pissed, and for a moment Josh considered mentioning it another time. But then he remembered how thoroughly he had let Tyler down that afternoon and past week, in more than one way, and decided it should be now or never. Tyler deserved this. It was the least he could do, considering what a jerk he’d been.

“Coach, I need to talk to you about something now, it’ll only be a minute-”

“Monday, Josh.”

“You need to put Tyler Joseph back on the team.” There, Josh said it, he’d said it out loud. He fought the urge to glance nervously behind him and make sure none of the other players had heard.

Coach did a double take and froze, staring intently at Josh, clipboard grasped tightly in his hands. He opened his mouth, then closed it, then finally said, “You...what did you say?”

Josh took a steadying breath, but said firmly, “I said we need Tyler Joseph back on the team.” He held eye contact with Coach, lifting his head an inch higher. He had to say yes, he just had to.

Coach was silent again for what felt like a full minute before finally shaking his head and shuffling a few papers on his clipboard. “You know I can’t do that, Josh.”

“Why not!?!” Josh exclaimed, sputtering. “Y-you have no reason not to, and we really freaking needed him tonight . Hilliard kicked our ass, and they’ve always been- always been easy competition. Coach, we need to-”

“Josh, calm down,” Coach interrupted, holding a finger in Josh’s face. Josh wanted to smack his hand away and keep trying to talk sense into this man. He had to….

“You know I can’t put Joseph back on the team. Good player or not, he was ejected for behavioral issues, and that’s not the kind of image we want for this school. We can’t have that kind of image, it would ruin any chance for the rest of the team to play in national competitions- even state competitions would be very limited. He was a problem student before I even gave him a chance on this team, I should never have risked it in the first place. That was my mistake, but I won’t put him back on this team just to tear things apart again.”

Josh fought desperately for the right words to say, thoughts and reasons and arguments crashing through his mind in an angry tornado. “That’s fucking bullshit!”

“Joshua Dun, you’re in a school, you really need to watch your lang-”

“No, Coach, please listen, that’s not true, none of that is true,” Josh hurried to keep talking before Coach could issue him a demerit for cursing. There were way more important things to discuss than
his choice of exclamations. “It’s not true, I’m telling you, whatever you heard, they were just rumors!”

Coach just raised an eyebrow and gave Josh a look before turning back to the chair and picking up his bag. He slung it over his shoulder, and Josh continued, words stumbling over each其他, afraid Coach would just walk away without giving him a straight answer.

“Coach, listen, seriously, whatever you heard about Tyler isn’t true, I swear. The other guys...and...me, I was...I was jealous at first, too- but we all, we...people were talking, people were curious about him, and one or another, different rumors started to spread, but it was only because he was such a good player and we were all- at least I was so competitive that it just...things got out of control. People took things out of context. Sure, me and Tyler, w-we were rivals, but like...it was purely on an athletic level, like...it was never because he was a bad guy. He’s not a dick, he’s not like, violent during the game, he never was, you can’t claim that because he wasn’t, not during any practice here or any game. And he wasn’t back at his old school either, I swear he wasn’t, it was just stupid rumors spread by stupid people and believed by stupid people and- I mean, you’re not stupid, Coach, that’s not what I meant, it’s just.... None of it is true, you have to believe me-”

“Josh-”

“Call his old school, call them right now and fucking ask them about Tyler Joseph. Ask them!”

Coach sighed, tucking his clipboard under his arm. “Josh,” he said again in an annoyingly calm and low voice. “This school, Worthington...the team, myself, as the coach...we have to be very careful, very selective about the...the type of kids we allow on the team. When you’re on the team, when we get to travel to different schools across the state, that’s a privilege. If you’re grades are below average, if your sportsmanship is subpar, the list goes on...then you’re temporarily suspended from the team- not as a punishment, but to give you time to put your best effort into the other areas of your academic life. You know all that. When you’re on this team, you’re a representative of this school, of Worthington, of what we stand for. We simply cannot permit trouble students to be on the team. Worthington is a good school held in high esteem in this state, we have a reputation to maintain. You get me, right?”

Josh was silent, gritting his teeth. His eyes felt a little watery, but he wouldn’t cry, not in front of Coach Anderson, thank you very fucking much. He took a shaky breath before spitting out, “What about Tyler’s reputation?”

Coach furrowed his brows. “What do you mean?”

“Tyler has a reputation, too. And right now everyone is thinking the absolute worst of him, this whole stupid school believes every single stupid lie about him, but no one cares or even notices any of the good things he does. Tyler is a...an excellent student and person, and no one notices because they just assume that he’s not. He has a reputation, too, Coach. What about that?”

Coach studied Josh for a minute, and Josh finally felt a flicker of hope. He pressed, “Can’t you just...call his old school and ask? You’ve never...you’ve never had like, official reports or anything, have you? If he really was a bad student, if he really did cause trouble on the team then...then they’d tell you. It’d be on his record. I mean...I mean, this is America, the guy deserves a trial at least. What is this, is this the democracy we fought the Revolutionary War for, just so we can judge a guy without proof and then-”

“Okay, okay, Dun. At least you’re apparently paying attention in history,” Coach almost grinned but not quite, and Josh felt the flicker of hope in his chest sway. Whether positively or negatively, he didn’t know just yet.
“We need him back on the team,” Josh added quietly. “We needed him tonight.”

Coach shuffled his clipboard again and took a pen from his pocket, scribbling a quick note. “Okay….”

Josh’s eyes widened. “Okay…?”

Coach rolled his eyes at the expression on Josh’s face. “Okay. Give me a few days. I will call Joseph’s old school, alright? But that’s all I can promise you, if the kid’s got a record, if he’s got anything against him, anything regarding the team whatsoever, then…then that’s all I can do. You get me, Dun?”

Josh’s face split into a grin so big it hurt his cheeks. He gave a sloppy salute. “Aye aye, Captain! Thank you, thanks a lot, I’m, you’re…you’ll see, once you call them and ask about him, you’ll see, Coach!”

Coach Anderson made an unsure noise as he pulled his keys out of his pocket. “If the kid’s got a record, he’s still off….”

“Sure, sure,” Josh dismissed the concern, walking backwards across the gym floor as he waved goodbye. “Thanks, again, Coach, you won’t regret it, I swear you won’t. We’ll win every game from now on, just you fucking wait!”

“Dun, about your langu-”

“Gotta go, Coach, see ya on Monday! Good game, good game!” Josh almost tripped as he turned around and dashed out the back door and into the safety of the parking lot.

His family was waiting for him in the van, the heat blasting out of the vents and the classical channel playing quietly on the radio.

“That took forever,” Abby whined as Josh climbed over her and into the back seat. “Ow, you’re on my foot, Josh, get off-”

“That was longer than three minutes, J,” Ashley muttered once Josh plopped into his seat next to her and buckled his seat belt. Josh only shrugged.

“Too bad about the game,” Josh’s mom called from the front seat. “You played well though, Josh! Impressive performance considering this was the first time since you hurt your ankle.”

“Damn right it was impressive,” Josh’s dad added. Abby gasped as Mrs. Dun smacked at his arm. “Not in front of the kids,” Josh and his three siblings could all hear her hiss at him.

Mrs. Dun smiled at Josh in the rearview mirror. “How about a late night stop at Wendy’s for frosties to celebrate anyways, huh, kids? Josh, sound good?”

Josh was never one to turn down ice cream, no matter how chilly it still was outside. Once they were out of the parking lot, Jordan turned around in his seat and had to poke Josh’s knee to get his attention. Josh had been too busy smiling out of the window to pay any attention to his little brother.

“What are you smiling for, what’s so funny? The game sucked. We lost, dude.”

Josh didn’t reply, only shrugged. He pulled out his phone and checked his messages from Tyler, squinting at the screen in the dark car. Funnily enough, even though Tyler still hadn’t opened his texts, Josh’s spirits didn’t sink at all. Even though Tyler was still mad at him, even though Mikey
was mad at him, even though Josh had a lot of explaining to do with Jenna...he just had a good feeling about things. And the game? It didn’t feel like a total loss to Josh. Not in the slightest.

Chapter End Notes

good stuff is coming next guyssssss THANK YOU SO MUCH?????? for your love and support?? and for reading such a long WIP fic!!!!! thank you THANK YOU FRIENDS!!!!! ILY <33333
been kind of hoping you might

Chapter Notes

well shit fire and save matches LOOK WHO FINALLY UPDATED! msorry for being such a neglectful dad to this fic and yall kids i love you all thank you FOR READING!??!!!!

(title from the wombats' Give Me A Try)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tyler was laying on his stomach, sprawled across his bed and squinting at the small text in one of Maddie’s books, a brand new copy of some new thriller. He had woken up that morning much later than usual- well, technically, it was noon- to a light but steady rain outside his window. Tyler had been surprised Zack’s alarm hadn’t woken him up that morning at some ungodly hour, but the day was so gray and sleepy, plus the fact that Tyler had laid awake half the night scrolling angrily through all the pictures he had on his phone of Josh, from his camera roll and on Josh’s instagram and twitter accounts, before silently crying himself to sleep, it wasn’t that surprising at all that Tyler had overslept several hours. It was all for the best though, Tyler decided. He was supposed to be acting kind of sick anyways.

After he had first woken up, Tyler had lugged himself out of bed and had peeked out of his room and down the hallway. The upstairs was deserted, and he could hear his siblings downstairs in the living room watching a movie. Tyler hadn’t felt at the time- and still didn’t feel, actually- like socializing, even if that meant skipping breakfast. Instead, Tyler had sneaked across the hall into his younger sister’s room and borrowed a book to try forgetting his problems in. He had grabbed one blindly from her shelf; he didn’t care what it was, he’d have read one of his textbooks from school if he hadn’t left his bag down in the kitchen yesterday afternoon. Maddie would kill him if she knew Tyler was reading one of her books before she had had a chance to read it, but Tyler’s own small collection of books were still taped up in a moving box beneath his bed, and the last thing he felt like doing was searching the house for some scissors to open the box just to get one of his own books. At chapter seven, when Tyler still had no idea what was going on, he figured it didn’t really matter much about reading Maddie’s book before her. He wasn’t paying any attention anyways.

Tyler reread the same sentence for the sixth time before dog earring the page and resting his cheek on top of it, sighing and looking glumly out the window beside the bed. The rain wasn’t very heavy, but it was still washing away the last few drifts of snow scattered across the front yard and driveway. There was a small lump of a snow-Yoda Jay had made the other day by the mailbox, and Tyler watched as an ear slid off and splat in the muddy, dead grass beside it. Tyler was a little sad to see the snow gone, but the weather matched his mood, and right now, all Tyler felt like doing was moping. So who cared about the snow anyways?

Tyler’s phone buzzed from the floor beside his bed, and Tyler waited for a few minutes until it buzzed again, then reached down to fish it from the pile of clothes he had dropped there the day before. He took a shaky breath and eyed the black screen suspiciously. It could be... Josh . Tyler wasn’t really sure if he wanted to talk to Josh right now. Except that of course Tyler totally, one hundred percent did. He wanted to be mad, to stay mad, but it was Josh. He couldn’t stay mad at him, he really, really couldn’t. The day before, during lunch, when they had been texting innocently-
well...maybe it wasn’t completely innocently, but you get him- and everything had felt right with the world, and then she had come along and...it made Tyler a little sick to think about it. Sure, he had known that Josh and Jenna were kind of together, and that hadn’t really bothered him. He knew how Josh felt, about both him and Jenna, and he knew Josh wanted to break things off with her. They hadn’t officially discussed all that yet, but. Tyler knew. And even when he had run out of the cafeteria yesterday, he hadn’t really been mad. Just a little hurt. And not even that hurt by Josh either; he had seen what happened, he knew Josh hadn’t initiated it. Heck, he had been texting him. But try telling Tyler’s brain that. The paranoia was so quick to crawl in, so quick to wash away and replace everything they had done together, everything Josh had ever said to him...Tyler knew it was a little pathetic, but what could he do? He was positive he would have gotten his shit together eventually, after a few moments alone, but then that stupid asshole friend of Josh’s had made fun of him when he was trying to get out of there. Tyler hadn’t even done anything, he was just walking by and suddenly an entire table full of students were laughing at him. It had all felt too familiar and reminded him too much of things at his old school. Tyler had felt mad at all of them just then, even Josh. Maybe even especially Josh. He hadn’t even come after him or anything. Shouldn’t he have come after him?

At least Mikey had. They had sat outside the school on the curb in the back parking lot; even though the curb was wet and it was cold, Mikey had stayed with Tyler. Not for very long, but at least he had made the effort. Tyler hadn’t wanted company right then anyways. Who wanted company when you were using every single muscle in your face to try and hold back the petty tears you felt fighting their way out? Not Tyler. Mikey had helped though. He always seemed to be the voice of reason for Tyler when his mind was going haywire.

Tyler’s phone buzzed again; Tyler had gotten so lost in replaying the events of the previous afternoon that he had almost forgotten he had received a text. He forced himself to turn his phone on.

Mikey: really bad game last night lol. we lost obv

Mikey: how r u doing? want 2 come over?

Tyler sighed in relief at the messages. It was just Mikey. Tyler could deal with just Mikey right now. Well, kind of. Tyler opened the right conversation as quickly as possible, struggling to keep his eyes from landing on Josh’s unopened texts. He had read them the other day as Josh had sent them, but he hadn’t opened the messages yet, much less replied. He wanted to, which kind of surprised Tyler, but he really did- he just didn’t know what to say. What if Josh was mad at him for getting mad? What if Josh was mad that Tyler was mad and then ignored his texts? Why hadn’t Josh texted him again today? Had he given up? What if this was the beginning of another prolonged period where neither Tyler nor Josh talked to each other, just like back during the winter months? Tyler’s heartbeat quickened at that, and not in a good way. Oh, God, what if this is like last time? What if we have to not be friends again? Dammit, I can’t handle doing that again, I just can’t. I legit won’t. If he thinks he’s going to get rid of me that easy then he is goddamn wrong, I won’t-

Mikey: we can watch a movie. G’s not home, we can hang in the basement. he’s still acting weird idk wut’s up but he’ll b gone for like 3 hours so we hav time 2 watch Batman or something

Tyler tried to calm the new worry about Josh that had just been created in his mind and fumbled out a quick reply.

T: no thx i’m kinda busy

T: thx tho bro a lot

Mikey: Spider man?
Tyler paused and thought about it. Maybe he should get out of the house and hang out with his friend. Instead of laying around in his bedroom in his pajamas with the lights off not reading his sister’s book and scrolling through Josh’s social media accounts all day. That probably wasn’t the best thing for him to do.

T: idk…

Mikey: i’ll make u hot chocolate

Mikey: w rainbow marshmallows

Mikey: and whipped cream

T: ...the canned kind?

Mikey: xtra creamy!!

T: ...ok i guess

Mikey: :DDD

T: b there in 20

Tyler didn’t bother changing out of his pajamas, just stuffed a pair of sneakers on his feet and a random beanie on his head and asked to borrow his mom’s keys. His mom fussed over him for a minute, worrying whether or not he was well enough to drive since he felt so poorly last night he had to skip the game, but Tyler convinced her that he felt loads better now. He coughed a little, just so she wouldn’t get suspicious, and let her stuff a handful of throat lozenges in his hand, her voice carrying after him to take it easy as he dashed for the door.

Mikey lightly joked throughout the movie about Tyler’s pajama pants matching the movie they were watching- his fuzzy sweatpants with little spidermans all over them; they were one of Tyler’s favorite pairs, hand-me-downs or not. Besides those couple of remarks Mikey made, and his offer halfway through the move to get Tyler more hot chocolate, they were silent, sitting at opposite ends of the old couch in the Way’s basement, the volume low and subtitles on. Mikey got on his phone a few minutes after the movie started, and Tyler thought about doing the same, but instead let his mind wander, grateful to his friend for offering his company while at the same time not being overbearing. Truthfully, Tyler didn’t want to be alone, but he didn’t feel like socializing either. This was a good inbetween for the time being.

Tyler’s thoughts of course wandered back to the other day, the scene with Jenna sitting on Josh’s lap and touching him and then kissing him, kissing the same soft, chapped lips that Tyler had kissed, played over and over in his head. He thought briefly of all the other snapshots and short scenes his brain had remembered and stored up, of Josh at the Christmas prom, of the way Jenna had kissed him then, too; that afternoon after school when Tyler had first taken Josh to the movies with him, to that Star Wars movie; of when Josh had first hurt his ankle at their neighborhood court and Tyler had sucked up his pride and decided to help him home; those anxious, blurry, first days at Worthington when he was barely able to put a face to Josh’s name, but a quiet boy with flaming red hair and tattoos kept catching his eye...and then to more recent times, to the aching isolation Tyler felt when he and Josh weren’t speaking, to Christmas day and how his family had been singing Christmas songs while baking gingerbread cookies, and Tyler had barely felt well enough to slump downstairs and sit in the other room by the fireplace, pretending to be fine, just a little sick; and then that
afternoon when Tyler had decided to stay after school and mess around in the gym, a decision he had almost not made, had almost gone home instead; had decided to mess around and shoot some baskets to try and clear his head, only to find himself face to face with Josh as Josh— for some crazy, unknown reason to Tyler—kissed him, changing everything; the pink glow on Josh’s cheeks as they ate across from each other in Burger King; the surprise and fear Tyler had felt when they stumbled across Spencer in Josh’s room; spending the night in Josh’s bed, lying next to him, listening to his steady breathing before finally falling asleep, too, never having felt so safe and content in all his life. Tyler found himself smiling a little bit, even though the scene playing on the television was currently one of distress and disaster. He remembered how he had woken up the next day to Josh’s mouth on his neck. Quiet, timid, shy Joshua Dun, kissing him awake, turning Tyler on more quickly and heatedly than Tyler ever expected Josh to fully know. That was a feeling Tyler hadn’t forgotten, and didn’t plan on forgetting even if he lived to be over a hundred years old.

Not for the first time, Tyler thought forlornly that if everyone else could just leave them alone, if the whole world could just continue spinning and everyone else could just continue on with their lives, and leave Tyler and Josh alone, then they would be fine. But that would be too easy, wouldn’t it? Everyone else just kept interfering, they kept getting in the way. Jenna, with her perfect blue eyes and perfect makeup and perfect white-blond hair and short, revealing skirt, slipping her arms around Josh’s neck and sitting so delicately on his lap and pressing her bright pink lips so sensually to Josh’s skin, looking as though she fit perfectly up against him, was born to fit right there beside him—well, on him, in that particular memory. Jenna and Josh. They went together so well. Tyler almost let out a quiet, dry sob right there, but stopped himself in the nick of time, eyes darting over to Mikey. He hadn’t looked up from his phone. Tyler went to take a sip from his mug to help push the tears and emotions back into place but found his mug was empty, and set it quietly on the stack of books acting as a side table instead.

The closing scene of the movie was playing when muffled footsteps sounded on the stairs behind them, and Mikey waved as Gerard came around the corner into view. Tyler almost forgot to acknowledge him, but remembered at the last second that even though he was dying on the inside, he should still be polite. He forced a small smile onto his face and nodded. Gerard ignored them both and closed the bathroom door behind him.

Mikey shrugged at Tyler, but Tyler didn’t really care. He just wanted to go hide in the bathroom, too.

The credits finally started rolling, and Mikey muted the movie and let out a sigh. Tyler could feel Mikey looking at him, but he just stared intently at the screen, pretending to read the names of the stunt actors while struggling to keep his bottom lip from wavering.

“No one cares that much about the credits,” Mikey said after a while, his voice low and quiet.

Tyler huffed and looked down at his lap; not a laugh or a sob, just a tension riddled breath of air. There were too many thoughts and feelings stopped up inside him, like steam in a pressure cooker, and if Tyler wasn’t careful he’d explode soon. Probably.

“How he...y’know...texted you or anything? Called?” Mikey asked.

Tyler found himself shaking his head, and he stopped biting his lip long enough to explain, his voice strained and higher than he’d like to admit, “Y-yeah, um...yesterday, a couple of times. He sent a few texts....”

Tyler resumed chewing on his lips, eyes jumping from one new name to another on the silent screen in front of them, anything to keep his eyes from getting too watery. He could sense Mikey about to say something, several times, but each time he opened his mouth, he ended up closing it again. Tyler felt bad all of a sudden for making things so awkward with his friend.
“I mean, y’know, it’s whatever, it’s not...it’s not a big deal or anything, I’ll...I’ll be okay. I’m okay.”

Tyler side eyed Mikey to see if he had bought it.

Mikey was squinting his eyes at Tyler, and Tyler immediately dropped his gaze to his hands in his lap, busily messing with the drawstring on his sweatpants. He sighed. “It’s just...like, I knew he was with her, y’know? Well, like, at least everyone else thinks they’re a thing, so...I, like, I lowkey knew that, y’know? And I thought, I don’t know, that he would...eventually like...break things up with her...y’know? He just...hasn’t yet and- and that’s okay, like, I don’t know how things stand with them, like he needs to do it...like in his own time and stuff, I get that. It’s just. You know.”

Mikey huffed. “You’re more understanding than I would be if my boyfriend was doing that shit. It’s a jerk move on his part.”

Tyler blushed. “We’re not...I don’t think we’re boyfriends or anything...yet. I mean I want us to be, but...I don’t know if...if he’s that serious or...maybe not? I don’t know, I’m just overthinking everything, you know how it is.”

“I know how you are, yeah.”

Tyler fidgeted uncomfortably. “What’s that supposed to mean? Do you think I’m overreacting?”

Mikey shrugged. “No, not really. It’s like, normal to be all tense and upset about it. Maybe...I don’t know, maybe you should try texting him back?”

Tyler looked at Mikey, surprised. “You think so? I thought you thought he was being a jerk.”

Mikey only shrugged again. “Jerk or not, you love him, so. That’s that.”

Tyler’s face was completely burning now. “I do not... I don’t- I just like him, okay, Michael. We’re not even official boyfriends yet, Jesus.”

Mikey shrugged again, and Tyler felt the urge to smack him or something. He stood up instead and zipped up his hoodie. “I should probably go home, I...I have...laundry to do....”

Mikey didn’t say anything to stop him, and Tyler shuffled from foot to foot for a moment. “Thanks for, um...y’know, for getting me out of the house for a moment. It helped, really.”

“Yeah, bro,” Mikey offered a grin. “Anything for my best bro. I’ll text you, okay? Let me know how things go with you-know-who.”

Tyler managed a weak smile back and headed for the stairs.

“Take the bag of marshmallows with you!” Mikey called after him.

Tyler drugged back into his front hallway and kicked his shoes off. It had started raining heavier and harder on the way home, and the car had almost spun off the road at the turn into the neighborhood. Black ice or something. It wasn’t a big deal, but Tyler was glad to be back in the safety and comfort of his own home. He’d had enough for one day. His bed and nintendo were calling his name.

Tyler’s mom popped out of the living room into the hall at the sound of the front door closing.

“Hey, Tyler, honey, there you are. Didn’t you get my texts?”

“What? No, I was driving,” Tyler mumbled, already starting up the staircase, ziplock bag of
marshmallows under his arm.

“Your friend’s been waiting here for you for half an hour already. I didn’t know how long you would be gone, so I told him he could wait in your room until you-”

“Wait, who?” Tyler stopped so quickly on the staircase that he nearly slipped in his socked feet. He glanced back down at the hallway by the front door where he had toed off his shoes a moment before. A familiar pair of scuffed red Nikes were resting in the corner.

“-such a nice boy, so polite! I was just talking to his mother on the phone yesterday, she’s a nice friendly person to have met as soon as we moved here-”

Tyler didn’t stay to chat, just turned and galloped up the staircase, slipping to a stop in the hall outside his door. It was cracked open slightly, and he could hear Zack’s monotone voice droning on about who knows what. Tyler briefly contemplated hiding in the basement before shoving the thought aside, taking a deep breath, and, still unsure of his own feelings, pushed the door open.

Zack was sitting cross legged on Tyler’s bed, scrolling through his phone’s camera roll and giving steady commentary for each picture, leaning over and shoving his phone into- into Josh’s face. Josh was wearing the same hoodie he always liked to wear, perched awkwardly on the foot of the unmade bed- Tyler’s bed, Josh was on Tyler’s bed- nodding mutely along to whatever it was Zack had to say about each new picture he was showing him. Tyler’s heart stumbled to a halt at the sight of him, the door whining on its hinges as it swayed wider open, and both Zack and Josh looked up. Tyler watched slightly in awe as Josh’s cheeks, already tinted pink, probably from the cold- why is it so goddamn cold in here? Is the heat even on?- bloomed into a full and bright shade of red, and he quickly averted his gaze, tugging at the hem of hoodie as he looked down at his lap.

“Oh, hey, Ty,” Zack said, sounding distracted. He shoved his phone under Josh’s nose again, and Josh jumped back slightly. “This was the basketball team before I decided soccer was more my thing, both me and Ty were on it that year. See, I’m in the back there, you can’t see too good ‘cause this guy Brett was taller than me- oh, and that’s Tyler in the middle, see, and that guy right there used to be his best friend. I was the youngest guy on the team that year, pretty cool, right?”

“Uh...huh....” Josh mumbled, glancing from the picture back up to Tyler before quickly looking away again. Tyler found it more endearing than anything else. He was mildly surprised at how much he had missed Josh’s voice; it hadn’t even been twenty four hours. His voice sounded good in Tyler’s room.

“-and this was- oh, haha, look at this one, this is Tyler when we went to a thrift store one time, it was like so long ago, like, three years ago or something, look, he found this hat and put it on, it was so funny-”

Tyler stiffened when he noticed Josh suddenly trying to hide a smirk. He glared at his younger brother. “Yeah, um, I think you’re boring Josh now, Zack, how ‘bout you go downstairs and-”

“I’m not boring him! You’re not bored, are you, Josh?”

The small smile on Josh’s face faltered for a brief moment as he glanced up at Tyler, then over to Zack. “Um- no, I’m not bored, these are...these are some funny pictures-”

“Yeah, see, Tyler? He’s fine, leave us alone. Oh, and this one- oh, my God, this one, this is hilarious, this was during some play we did in the spring one year, it was Legally Blonde- I was part of the running crew, I wasn’t on the drama team- but Tyler was, and Tyler played- oh, my God, you’ll never guess, ha ha! Here, look at his outfit, he had to play-”
“Zack!” Tyler intervened, only slightly sweating. “I’m here now, you can go, okay? Go...do something, I don’t know, just get out—”

“No, wait, I wanna show Josh the other pics of you during the play, as Margot, ha ha, remember when you had to—”

“Zaaack!” Tyler almost stomped his foot but stopped himself in the nick of time. That would appear too childish. “Could you please just leave?”

Zack sighed loud and long and hauled himself up from Tyler’s bed. “Fine, whatever. I get it, you hate me. I’ll just go eat all of the pizza pockets so there won’t be any left for you. Suck on that. Margot.” He slouched out of the room, bumping past Tyler.

“Don’t eat them all, jerk ;” Tyler warned as he closed the door behind his brother. He shuffled his feet for a moment and fiddled with the doorknob for as long he could without making things too awkward, then took a quick breath and turned around to face Josh.

Josh was smirking. “You played Margot in Legally Blonde—”

“Oh, my God, can you please not?” Tyler whined, flinging his arms at his sides and dropping the bag of marshmallows he had still been carrying. “I was like in seventh grade, okay—”

“You sure? You looked older in the pic to me.”

Tyler grabbed the ziplock bag from the floor, a few marshmallows somehow flying out of it. “Okay, so maybe I was in eighth—”

“Eighth?”

“Or ninth...or...maybe tenth....”

Josh was absolutely beaming at Tyler now, and Tyler flung the bag of rainbow marshmallows at him, several more flying from the half zipped opening. Josh flinched away as the bag hit him in the shoulder and he looked up at Tyler, surprise and a shocked grin growing on his face. “Yeah, yeah, okay, okay, I was in tenth grade and I played Margot in Legally Blonde; yes, I wore a dress just like your stupid friend said and I sang all of her parts, since my stupid little brother decided it was just so important to show you all of my stupid, old, embarrassing pictures; I’m so glad you came all the way over here on your precious Saturday afternoon just to laugh at me. I’d hate to disappoint you. Are you happy now, mister?”

There wasn’t much bite in any of what Tyler was saying, just a growing irritation; the longer he spoke the higher his voice became, and he cut himself off, eyeing Josh suspiciously. He was certain Josh would have busted out laughing long before then had he not covered his face with both his hands halfway through Tyler’s little tirade, his shoulders shaking. He took a gasping breath and dropped one hand, studying Tyler across the room. Tyler crossed his arms over his chest and stuck his nose in the air, daring Josh to say anything. He had to get out of this conversation with some dignity at least.

After a tense moment of silence with only the sound of rain pelting the window, Josh let out a quiet chuckle as he stood up and took a step in Tyler’s direction. Tyler started to turn away but felt Josh’s tight grasp on his bicep through his hoodie, pulling him back around to face him.

Tyler almost decided to let himself simply be pulled into a hug, the relief of Josh actually caring and not just texting him but coming over- presumably to make up about what had happened yesterday—was so great and overwhelming. But then Tyler noticed the smirk still playing at the edges of Josh’s
mouth, and he recoiled again, Josh’s hand slipping from its grip on his arm.

“You’re still laughing!” Tyler accused.

“No, I’m not, I swear!” Josh giggled.

Tyler spluttered, crossing his arms tighter and taking another step away from Josh, backing into the edge of the dresser. “And I’m still mad at you, by the way. I’m not talking to you right now. What are you doing here anyways?”

Josh’s giggling immediately quieted and his eyebrows drew together, the emotions on his face sobering so quickly that Tyler wished more than anything to just see him smile again. What ever was he mad about again?

“Oh, yeah…” Josh murmured quietly, eyes dropping to the ground. “About that….”

Tyler rubbed awkwardly at his arms. He wasn’t sure whether he was relieved Josh wasn’t making eye contact or disappointed. Probably a bit of both. “Yeah...about that….”

Josh hesitated a moment, rubbing at the back of his neck. “Look, um...Ty...I don’t know...um, I’m not sure what to say, but um...I want you to know I’m sorry about...about everything. About, um...about what Brendon said and about Jenna and...and I’m just...I’m sorry…? It wasn’t...I mean, things weren’t supposed to happen like that. It’s...it’s not what I wanted. I’m...sorry, Ty. It...it wasn’t fair, I wasn’t being fair, I should never have expected you to- I mean, with Jenna and stuff, you...you shouldn’t have to deal with that. I’m sorry your Friday night sucked ‘cause of me.”

Tyler felt what little anger was left in him slowly but steadily fizzle out. How could he possibly stay mad at this boy? Josh was blushing still and his eyelashes looked so long and gentle against his cheeks as he continued to stare down at the floor, and he looked so cozy and warm in his hoodie, all Tyler really wanted to do right then was give him a big hug. And a big kiss.

Tyler didn’t know how to say any of that out loud though. Because he wasn’t happy about this thing with Jenna, and it wasn’t okay, and if after this they made up and things went back to- to that - Tyler thought he’d probably die if that happened.

“I just...I mean, like, I get it’s like hard or whatever...to, I don’t know, like...to have to break things off with her, but...you can’t, like...be with both... of us...not really....” Great going, Ty-guy, that was articulate.

“No, I know, I don’t wanna be, and I’m...I’m working on it,” Josh stumbled over his words, looking up at Tyler. Tyler felt kind of small under Josh’s gaze. “I am working on it. It’ll all work out really soon, things’ll be okay again. We need to break up.”

“What?”

“No, no, no, no, not us, I mean me and Jenna, me and...me and Jenna need to break up,” Josh took a step closer to Tyler, as if he was afraid he would bolt out of the room. “Me and Jenna. Not me and you. Definitely not...me and you...”

Tyler shifted, embarrassed, glancing all around the room except for the spot directly in front of him. “Oh...yeah, sure, um...I mean, like...if you... want to then...then... do... break up....”

Josh’s brows furrowed together and his lips were slightly parted. Tyler thought quickly about just pulling Josh closer and kissing him and discussing all of this later, but Josh was already saying something else, taking another step into Tyler’s personal space as he did.
“Tyler, don’t…don’t you know that?” he huffed, sounding almost like a laugh, but his face still looked worried. “You thought I…you thought I didn’t wanna…be with you?”

Tyler risked a glance at Josh before immediately looking down again, his eyes locking onto one of the drawstrings of Josh’s hoodie instead. He shrugged one shoulder with his arms still crossed. “I…I thought you...maybe wanted to, um….” Tyler let his sentence trail off, unable to think of something to end it with. He blinked a couple of times.

Josh made that huffing sound again, and Tyler peeked up through his eyelashes at Josh. Josh looked…genuinely upset. “Tyler, I…how could you think that? I thought you…I thought you knew how I...how I felt about you…don’t you know?”

Tyler almost wanted to cry, not because he was sad necessarily, but because there was so much tension cramped so tightly in his stomach and making him feel a little sick. He blinked a couple more times and breathed in sharply through his nose, jaw clenched tight. He was not going to start crying, no fucking thank you. “Well...well, I...well, what was I supposed to think, huh? You were...you were snogging her face off and, and...and everyone says that you guys are...are...I just thought you…."

Josh was shaking his head. “I don’t fucking care what anyone else says. I don’t like her like that, Tyler, I like you, okay? I know I...I know I kissed her, and I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have, but...could you just...just give me a few days, okay? And I’ll break things off with her, I promise. You’re the...you’re the only person I wanna be with...okay? Ty?”

Tyler, despite trying desperately not to, sniffed quietly and glanced up at Josh. The emotions written on Josh’s face visibly melted when Tyler’s eyes met his, and Tyler glanced immediately away, embarrassed. Why is he...why is he looking at me like that? Like I’m a...I don’t know, a girl or something. Well, you are being really weepy, Ty-guy. Shut up.

There was a finger on Tyler’s chin just then, and Tyler jumped, startled, as Josh tilted his head up to look at him. He had taken another small step closer to Tyler, too, and Tyler held his breath, feeling his cheeks flush as he blinked furiously, trying to rid the dampness in them before Josh noticed.

Josh murmured softly, “Is that okay? I will break up with her, alright, and then it’ll be just you and me...you okay, baby?”

Tyler made an embarrassing choking sound as he tried to swallow a mixture of a laugh and a sob. Josh’s hand was still on his chin, and his fingers were more distracting than Tyler would ever have anticipated.

“...promise?” Arms still crossed protectively, Tyler shrugged one shoulder again and made a humming sound, eyes jumping from one light freckle on Josh’s cheek to another, avoiding his eyes.

Suddenly Josh took yet another step into Tyler’s space, so close that it forced Tyler back a small step as he yelped, surprised, bumping into and leaning back against the dresser behind him. Something plastic clattering to the floor, maybe one of Zack’s soccer trophies. Both Tyler and Josh ignored it. Josh’s one hand was still holding Tyler’s chin, but the other had slipped around him and was resting in the small of his back. Tyler had nowhere to look now but into Josh’s eyes, and when he did meet them, he felt his face blushing even harder. There was such an intense emotion hidden somewhere in the brown sea of his eyes, and Tyler was both intrigued and a little intimidated, and definitely swooning. Not that he’d admit to that.

“I promise, Ty,” Josh mumbled, his breath tickling Tyler’s cheek. Tyler felt his own hands reach out towards Josh, one finding grip on Josh’s shoulder, the other clutching onto his hip. Something hard
was pressing into Tyler’s back, probably a knob from one of the drawers, and his neck was kind of aching from holding himself up in his slightly reclined position, leaning back over the cluttered dresser, but with Josh holding him and eying him like that and pressing into him between his legs like that- Tyler was totally chill with being a little uncomfortable.

“I promise,” Josh mumbled again, his eyes darting from Tyler’s eyes to his lips then back again. Tyler’s eyelashes fluttered just as he felt Josh’s breath blow hot against his mouth, and then Josh was kissing him, and every little paranoid worry and grievance Tyler had about and against Josh was dashed from his mind. Tyler had missed this.

Tyler heard Josh let out a little sigh, or maybe it was him, or both of them. Tyler didn’t know. All he could register was Josh, Josh, Josh, right there in front of him and behind him and against him and in him, Josh’s tongue was in Tyler’s mouth, tickling and strange sensations racing through Tyler’s skin, and Josh had never kissed Jenna in this way, Tyler was an idiot for ever thinking...he never wanted this to stop, never wanted Josh to stop touching him. Tyler’s hand slipped from Josh’s shoulder up to the back of his neck and then into his hair, faded blue, almost completely brown again. It was a really dark shade of brown, warm and safe and reminiscent of everything Josh made Tyler feel. Tyler intertwined his fingers with a few long strands and whimpered as Josh nipped at his bottom lip, panting. Tyler loved the feeling of Josh’s breath on his skin, never thought he would get over it.

Way too soon, in Tyler’s opinion, Josh was pulling back ever so slightly to press his forehead against Tyler’s, looking at Tyler with brown, puppy dog eyes. Tyler would have hated how Josh did that, except he was too busy loving every second of it.

“Ty, I...I really am sorry....” Josh murmured in a low voice against Tyler’s lips, sending little vibrations through Tyler’s body. Whatever little part of Tyler’s heart that wasn’t already melted did so now at Josh’s words.

“Sh,” Tyler replied, trying not to breathe too hard. “S’okay.”

“Really?” Josh looked confused.

Tyler nodded, their noses brushing together. “Yeah, I get it. Like...girlfriends are...man. Girlfriends.”

Josh huffed out a laugh, and his breath tickled Tyler’s cheek. “You’re the cutest. And the sweetest.”

Tyler could feel himself blushing again and was glad Josh was probably too close to him to notice it. “Yeah, well...don’t go spreading it around. That would really hurt my street cred.”

“I think Margot already ruined your street cred.”

“Jooosh!” Tyler whined, and Josh snickered and placed a quick kiss on the end of Tyler’s nose before pulling away, turning back to Tyler’s bed.

“I brought you oreos,” he said, picking up the carton and holding it out to Tyler.

Tyler glanced at it curiously before looking back to Josh, small smile on his face. “Why?”

“For the thing you sent me,” Josh stated. “Remember? The oreo mug cake thing? On Instagram?”

Tyler started to beam at Josh, he couldn’t help it. “You brought me oreos just for that?”

Josh shrugged, poking at Tyler’s stomach with the oreo carton. “I had to do something. Do you want ‘em or nah?”
Tyler tried not to giggle as he took the box from Josh. “Was this our first fight?” he asked with flourish, more than half joking, but Josh looked immediately guilty. Tyler kind of regretted saying it.

“I was kidding, JJ,” Tyler said, reaching out his empty hand to pinch at Josh’s cheek. “Stop making that face. I don’t wike it.”

Josh ducked his head, trying to hide a grin as he brushed Tyler’s hand away, and Tyler cackled in victory.

“You’re the worst,” Josh muttered as Tyler slipped past him to his bed, plopping down cross legged on the tangled sheets and ripping the oreo package open.

Tyler only smirked at Josh, his smile growing as a second later Josh joined him on the bed, their knees bumping together fondly.

Tyler was feeling infinitely better come Monday, even though he, as usual, couldn’t be seen talking to Josh, and they had to walk past each other in the hallways and look the other way, like they didn’t care- he was even okay when Brendon sauntered by with Josh after lunch, and he made another remark about missing Tyler’s cheer routine at last week’s game. The slight humiliation was totally worth the look on Josh’s face as he glared at his friend, his eyes flashing to Tyler’s as he raised an eyebrow from behind Brendon’s shoulder. Tyler tried not to smile. What would Brendon have thought if he smiled?

Tyler was even okay during physics, their last class of the day, when Jenna flounced into the room at least ten minutes late, and made a show- at least, in Tyler’s unbiased opinion- of dragging a spare chair from a table near the door to the other side of the room, joining Josh and that one guy who’s name Tyler totally remembered, Joe or something. She bumped her elbow against Josh’s as she hooked her purse onto her chair, then reached out and brushed some blue tinted hair out of Josh’s eyes. Now, Tyler was man enough to admit that he had started to get twisted a little out of shape at that, his pulse quickening and his back straightening, but then Mr. McAuley cleared his throat and continued his lecture, and Jenna turned in her chair to see the whiteboard, and suddenly Josh was looking over at Tyler, their eyes meeting and all the tension- or at least most of it- was quickly rushing out of Tyler’s system at the pure puppy dog eyes Josh was making at him. Even from across the room, they were the most gentle and warm shade of brown Tyler had ever seen and he was in love. Jenna nothing, Josh liked him, he had said so. It would be all okay. Just because Jenna was sitting with Josh instead of Tyler right then, that didn’t affect things in the long run. Tyler was totally chill.

There was still a good half hour left in physics when there was a knock on the door and the secretary was leaning in. “Excuse me, Mr. McAuley?”

The knocking woke Tyler back up from his semiconscious state with a start, and his head almost slipped out of his hand, his elbow slipping off the edge of the table. Frank chortled quietly from beside Tyler, and Tyler glared groggily at him. Physics was fucking boring as hell, okay? And for some godawful reason, Josh seemed to actually like physics and wasn’t answering the couple of texts Tyler had sent during the first few minutes of the lecture. After Tyler had hit send, a second later Josh had rummaged in his pocket, turned off his phone, then repocketed it, tossing a sly grin over his shoulder at Tyler and spitting his tongue out before turning back to the senseless diagrams in their book. Tyler glared lovingly at the back of Josh’s head and dark, mussed hair. Nerd.

And so, Tyler had fallen asleep instead- not technically asleep, just sort of dozing in and out. He had just been resting his eyes, okay? He guessed it was a kind of good thing Mrs. Hampton had
knocked. Who knows how long he’d be out otherwise? Mikey and Gerard weren’t in this class, and Tyler didn’t think it beneath Frank to just get up and leave when class was done, abandoning Tyler for Mr. McAuley to discover, snoring and maybe even drooling a little on his oh so precious stupid diagrams-

“Tyler? Are you asleep back there or didn’t you hear Mrs. Hampton?”

Tyler started again for the second time, reddening immediately as all his classmates’ eyes settled on him. “U-um, yeah, uh...sorry, what...w-what did she...I didn’t catch that, I couldn’t hear-”

Mr. McAuley sighed and interrupted. “You’re wanted in the principal’s office. Go on, don’t keep everyone waiting. Mr. Iero will collect your homework assignment for you.”

“Fuck that,” Frank groaned quietly.

Tyler gave him a nervous glance as he scrambled to his feet. Several students snickered. Tyler glared at a couple of them as he grabbed his bag and book and stumbled between the tight rows of desks towards the front of the room. Brendon stuck a leg out into the aisle as Tyler slipped by, but Tyler was not in the fucking mood right then to deal with Brendon’s shit, and took a wider step so as not to trip, kicking Brendon’s shin sharply with his other foot.

“Ow, what the hell’s your problem?” Brendon piped, pulling his leg back and glaring at Tyler.

“Dick,” Tyler mumbled and spit his tongue out at him.

Several more students began snickering at the argument, and Tyler caught Josh hiding a smile with his hand out of the corner of his eye. Tyler tried not to beam too proudly or obviously.

“Okay, okay, enough of that,” Mr. McAuley said from the front, glaring at the class in general and then at Tyler as he squeezed past him to get to the door, Mrs. Hampton still holding it open and waiting patiently.

The door swung shut as Mr. McAuley began his lecture again, and Tyler found himself wishing that Josh were coming with him, or that he were even back in the classroom suffering through class instead of submissively following the secretary into the unknown like this. The principal? What did she want? What could she possibly want? Tyler’s grades were okay, most of the drama between him and the rest of the school that had been circulating during the first semester had seemed to die down over the winter break, and things were running pretty smoothly, at least on an academic level. Why did the principal have to go and stir up trouble now?

Mrs. Hampton glanced over her shoulder at Tyler, as if his worrying was loud enough for her to overhear. She offered a warm smile and almost laughed. “Don’t look so worried, I don’t think you’re in trouble, hon.”

Tyler tried to smile back but didn’t quite manage. He appreciated her effort, though. Another several turns and a flight of stairs and they were stopping in front of the principal’s office, Mrs. Hampton knocking once as she offered Tyler another smile and even gave him a quick pat on the back. The door swung inwards, and Tyler only had a split second to be surprised to see Coach Anderson there before the secretary was all but pushing him inside and Coach was ushering him to a seat in front of a cluttered desk.

The door clicked shut behind him and Tyler tried not to panic as he perched stiffly on the edge of his seat, eyes jumping from Coach Anderson, who nodded at him as he took the chair next to him, to the principal behind the desk and piles of paper, a middle-aged woman who was currently scrolling on
her laptop on one side of the desk. Tyler tried to take a deep breath as quietly as he could; the room felt absolutely silent, despite the steady hum of a huge fish tank in the corner. The blueish hue cast from the tank on the wall above it actually calmed Tyler a little, the longer he looked at it.

Much too soon, however, Tyler jerked his head back forward as the principal- Mrs. López- clapped her hands together and her voice rang out in the still room.

“Alright, Tyler, it’s good to see you. How are you doing?”

Tyler glanced again at the coach before shrugging a shoulder and mumbling, “Uh, okay, I guess...um, for a Monday.”

Mrs. López chuckled good-naturedly, just as Tyler had started to panic that his reply would be taken the wrong way. Thankfully it hadn’t, it would seem.

“I was just taking a look at your grades here; you seem to be doing pretty well. Especially in English, you have almost an A plus. That’s pretty impressive, I must say- I know Ms. Moore, she doesn’t hand out A’s just like that. And music as well, you’re doing good there.”

“Uh...yeah, thanks. I...I really like music. And reading, reading’s um...it’s fun....”

Mrs. López nodded, scrolling on her laptop again. “And I see that you expressed interest in joining the drama team, during the first quarter, I think...no go there?”

Tyler didn’t know why he felt like blushing. “Oh, um...I don’t know, they were kinda, um...y’know, lots of other kids were already signed up, and I didn’t wanna like....”

Tyler didn’t know how to finish his thought, but thankfully the principal didn’t press him. She clicked something on the laptop screen and continued scrolling. Tyler glanced over at Coach Anderson again. What the hell is he here for? Is he like the assistant principal or something and I never fucking knew that, or...or what...? Am I...oh, God, am I in trouble with the team again? Is all this because I got kicked off the team? Oh, God, am I in trouble with the team again? Is all this because I got kicked off the team? Oh, my God, what if I’m being expelled? Ty-guy, whoa, wait, seriously- why would you be expelled? You didn’t do anything, technically; just getting dismissed from a sports team isn’t enough to merit expulsion, in your senior year. And that was way too long ago to bother with now, that was last year. If you were gonna get expelled ‘cuz of that, you wouldn’t have been allowed to start the third quarter. C’mon. Don’t get paranoid, it’s okay, I’m sure it’s nothing...but...what is it then...?

“You did theater at your old school? At Mansfield High, right?”

“Y-yeah, Mansfield, East Mansfield High School...um, I was in the drama club, since junior high...a- and I was in the band.

“Oh, band, how many years did you do that?”

“O-oh, um...since junior high, too, I think.”

“What did you play?”

“Clarinet. I, um, wasn’t that good.”

“Your scores all look fine to me, more than fine. Don’t put yourself down.”

Tyler didn’t know what to say, so he didn’t reply.
“You do any sports? At Mansfield?”

Tyler tensed and fought the urge to look at the coach again; things were starting to connect now. Not the reason for any of this, but the reason the coach was here at least. They were getting into controversial territory.

“Um...yeah...my dad was the, um, the coach. For the basketball team. I played- my brother, too-well, for a little bit, he, um, played for like two years and then, um, joined the soccer team. B-but I was on the basketball team. Since junior high. A-and the soccer team as well, actually...I wasn’t that great at soccer.”

Mrs. López had been nodding the entire time Tyler had been stammering out his reply, peering over her thin glasses at him; not unkindly, but it was still unsettling. “And how were you at basketball?”

Tyler felt his blush trying to appear again. “I...was okay at it...”

“And how were you at basketball?” Mrs. López continued. “Really? The records from MHS are really quite impressive. I’ve just been looking through them here.”

Tyler wanted to shift in his seat but felt like he was in a spotlight and any movement would be painfully awkward, so he chewed at his lip instead.

“Tyler, I don’t mind saying this, your reports from the past three consecutive years on the MHS team are...well, frankly, they’re far better than many of the kids who make it onto the team here at Worthington. Really impressive. And I’m not even much of a basketball fan.”

“U-um...” Tyler was starting to sweat through his hoodie. “...thank you...”

“It says you had near perfect attendance, since junior high,” Mrs. López continued. “And, more importantly, I feel, perfect conduct and sportsmanship reports. Not a single bad mark. In fact, it states that you received a sportsmanship award, twice, actually.”

Tyler couldn’t help but fidget in his seat as he tried not to blush. “Yeah...I mean, um, yes, yes, ma’am, I did... Um, what is...why am I here...right now, if, um...can I ask?”

Mrs. López shuffled through a few papers lying beside her laptop before turning back to face Tyler fully, folding her hands on top of the papers. “Tyler, on behalf of Worthington, I’d like to apologize to you. I know it hasn’t been easy for you, transferring schools like this for your senior year, and I’m afraid there have been some very unfair...well, actions taken against you. I’ve just been discussing things with Mr. Anderson here; it was recently brought to his attention that you may have been...prematurely judged. I have since looked into things myself and can verify that that has indeed been the case. Very unfortunately.”

Tyler did glance at Coach Anderson then, who grinned at him almost a little sheepishly. Almost.

Tyler’s brain was spinning. He was having trouble keeping up with all of this. He looked back over at Mrs. López, speechless.

“Again, both Coach Anderson and I would like to apologize to you for the inconveniences.”

“Is, um...is this about me...being kicked off the team?” Tyler asked, still a little unsure what was going on.

Coach Anderson jumped in. “Yes, Joseph, it is. Back in, what was it, November? That little scuffle that happened between you and another player, there were...well, steps were taken against you...
without sufficient reason, and that’s, that’s not okay. That’s not what Worthington wants for its students. I’m sorry for my part in that. I think a lot of people were under the impression you were well, a lot of people were definitely not aware that you had perfect conduct reports back at your old school, ha, that’s for sure!”

Tyler’s face was on fire now. God, adults apologizing were the worst, made even more so because they were teachers. God, how fucking embarrassing, ugh, what am I supposed to say to this, I don’t know what to-

“Coach Anderson and I both feel that since there is no evidence of any problems at Mansfield- I don’t know where or how that news spread, but trust me, I will be looking into it- we feel it’s only fair to offer you a place back on the Worthington basketball team, effective immediately. If you’d like, of course. Your parents have already been alerted to the situation, and...honestly, I can’t apologize enough for this mistake. It’s completely unacceptable.”

“What do you say, eh, Joseph? We got a big game coming up, we could use you back,” Coach slapped Tyler on the back and Tyler jostled forward, almost out of his chair.

“Um…” Tyler’s head was still spinning. Do I just say yes and then I’m...I’m back on the team, just like that, just like nothing happened? “Uh...um, yeah, y-yeah, um...I mean, yes, I’d...I wanna be on the team, but-”

“Great! Join us for practice tomorrow then, how about it?” Coach Anderson slapped Tyler’s back again and stood up. Tyler didn’t hesitate to follow suite- he wanted to get out of there.

Mrs. López stood behind her desk and held a hand out for Tyler to shake. “Thank you for being so understanding about all of this, Tyler, for being so humble. I am sorry for the unpleasantness of this situation. It must have been tough for you, being dismissed unfairly like that.”

Tyler shook the principal’s hand, praying to God his palm wasn’t obviously sweaty, and nodded awkwardly. He didn’t know what to say.

Coach Anderson ushered Tyler back out into the hall with another few good-natured thumps on his back, reminding him of the time practice started tomorrow and how he’d have his jersey and locker ready for him then. Tyler doubted he could have added in a word if he had wanted to. The dismissal bell rang above Tyler’s head as the principal’s door shut him out in the hallway, and he could hear Coach and Mrs. López start talking again, voices muffled. The distant sound and chatter of students began, and Tyler blinked a couple of times as he stared at the closed door before he forced himself to turn and start back down the hallway in the general direction of his locker.

What...had just happened? Was he really back on the team like he had never been dismissed? And what had brought this on all of a sudden like this? Didn’t López mention something about...it had been brought to Coach’s attention...what the hell did that mean? Had Mikey said something? Maybe his old school had contacted Worthington. That made a little sense. Or maybe his parents had-

Oh, God...my...parents....

Tyler didn’t even realize he was back in the downstairs hallway being jostled by other students till a voice called out his name. He looked up, too distracted by the horrific realization he had just had to register who it was coming towards him.

“Hey, Ty, how’d it go, man?” Josh was standing there beside him, looking unconcerned with being seen or overheard, a grin playing on his face. “What’d the principal say? Was Coach there?”
“What...what do you know about this?” Tyler didn’t know what to think, his thoughts and words coming a little too slow.

Josh did glance over his shoulder then briefly before dropping a hand on Tyler’s shoulder and leaning closer to speak, ignoring Tyler’s question. “What went down, what happened, babe? Did she- wait, why do you look so upset, Ty, are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m just....” Tyler shook his head, more to clear his brain than as a reply to anything. It helped a little to regain his focus; Josh’s brows were furrowed as he stared intently at Tyler, and the blur behind him suddenly turned back into students as they bustled by. A few distant alarm bells went off in Tyler’s mind, and he quickly turned to the row of lockers beside him, bumping into a locker door that was hanging open. He scanned the row for his number and shrugged out from under Josh’s hand to go a little further down the row to his own locker. Josh drifted after him.

“Someone might see you,” Tyler mumbled under his breath as he tried to hide his face from the passerby. A few familiar looking girls, maybe juniors, drifted around the corner, and he turned further away as he spun in his locker combination.

“I don’t care,” Josh hissed back, though he lowered his voice and turned his back to the group of girls as they passed. “I don’t care,” he repeated. “I wanna know what’s up with you. You look a little sick. Ty, what’s wrong?”

Tyler huffed as he yanked out his bag and slung it on his shoulders, checking to make sure his phone was still in his pocket. He almost closed his locker but decided to let it hang open a moment longer; it helped block him and Josh from everyone else.

“Are you okay?” Josh asked, his tone gentle, and Tyler cracked.

“Yeah, I’m...I mean yeah , I’m okay, it’s just...like, I’m back on the team...for some reason, I don’t know why Coach randomly looked into it all now , but. I’m back on the team...as of tomorrow.”

Josh nodded but his tone sounded hesitant. “That’s good...?”

“Yeah...no, yeah, it is, it really is, but....”

“But what? Are you worried about the other guys? Pete and Brendon and all them? ‘Cuz if you are, you shouldn’t, Ty, I’ll take care of them, I don’t want you to feel like-”

“No, it’s not that,” Tyler intervened, a little embarrassed. “I mean...not really , like I can handle that, but....”

“But what?”

Tyler shuffled a foot awkwardly. “I think Coach- and maybe the principal, too, I don’t know- talked to my parents...about...all this....”

An immediate look of understanding crossed Josh’s face. “Shit...Tyler, I’m...I’m sorry, that wasn’t...I forgot that-”

“It’s not your fault, J.”

“No, yeah, but it kind of is, I...I talked to the coach last Friday, after the game, y’know? I didn’t even think that he might go to your p-”

“ You talked to Coach?”
Josh looked sheepish. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

Tyler groaned, cutting Josh off. “No, don’t apologize, I’m...sorry for being like this. It’s not your fault.”

Josh’s shoulders slumped. “I feel like it is.”

“Well, it’s not. Shut up. It’s my parents. No, that’s not even true, it’s not them, it’s me. Ugh.”

Josh huffed. “It’s hardly your fault either, Ty, that’s not fair—”

“Well, then it doesn’t matter then!” Tyler tried not to snap but failed. He sneaked a look over at Josh, concerned he’d hurt his feelings, but Josh looked more than understanding about everything.

“Were they...were they really pissed at you?” he asked after a minute.

Tyler sighed and finally slammed his locker shut. The hallways were a little less crowded now than earlier. “No. I don’t know. I haven’t talked to them yet. I think they just found out this afternoon.”

“Fuck....” Josh glanced down the hall, but the coast still seemed clear. Tyler noticed he had his jersey slung over his shoulder.

“Aren’t you missing practice?” Tyler asked, tone a little strained, as he nodded at the jersey.

Josh seemed to have genuinely forgotten about the practice, wrinkling his nose for a couple of seconds before realizing what Tyler was motioning at. “Oh,” he pulled the jersey from his shoulder and looked at it a moment. Then he slung his backpack onto one shoulder so he could turn and reach the zipper, shoving the shirt inside. “I’m not going today.”

Tyler gave Josh a look bordering on impatience as he started down the hall towards the front door. He wasn’t mad at Josh, okay, he was just stressed, in general. He tried not to let it show too badly.

“And why not?” Tyler asked over his shoulder as, sure enough, he heard Josh’s footsteps jogging after him.

Josh fell into place beside Tyler with only one more fleeting look over his shoulder. “I’m going with you.”

“Why?”

“To...for moral support? To help explain. Y’know.”

Tyler tilted his head down to hide the small smile tugging at his mouth, despite the inevitable storm he was anticipating. “I don’t need help talking to my parents, Josh, I’m a big boy.”

“I...know that, but...don’t you want me to...to—”

“I’ll give you a ride home.”

They didn’t say too much the short distance from the high school to their neighborhood, the heater humming quietly the only sound in the van. But Tyler would be lying if he said he didn’t appreciate the company. He was still practicing in his head how to address the issue with his parents when Josh said, “You missed the turn.”

Tyler glanced at him apologetically. “I...actually wouldn’t mind if you, um...if you wanted to- not help explain, exactly, I can manage on my own, but if you wanted to...well...”
Tyler was looking at the road in front of them again but he could still sense when Josh started grinning. “Moral support?” he asked. Tyler kind of hated the tone he used.

“Yes, moral support. Okay?”

“Whatever you want, babe.”

Tyler tried not to let Josh notice the slight blush on his cheeks.

“Tyler Robert Joseph, you have an incredible amount of explaining to do, young man.”

Tyler ordinarily would have rolled his eyes at his mom standing in the hallway with her hands on her hips and her glasses slipping down her nose, but her tone was a lot icier and her gaze a lot more intense this time than it usually was whenever he came home a little too late or got a poor mark in math or accidentally dropped a curse word in front of her. Tyler crossed his arms over his chest and edged past her into the living room, thankful that at least his siblings were still at school. He was thankful for Josh’s comforting presence hovering in the doorway as well, as his mom advanced on him, completely oblivious to Josh.

“Tyler Robert, did you hear me? I got a call today, from your principal. To say I was surprised or shocked by what she told me would be a gross understatement!”

Tyler chewed at his lip and looked down at the floor, unwilling to meet either his mom or boyfriend’s eyes right at that moment.

“If your father hadn’t been at the office today, I swear to God, Tyler, he would have hit the roof—”

“You told Dad already?” Tyler pouted, peeking up at his mom.

“You can bet your sweet life I did! Tyler, what— I don’t even know what is going on with you, what on earth happened? You were kicked off the team, are you serious?”

“It wasn’t… it wasn’t exactly my fault—”

“Maybe not, but you lied to us, how many times? How many games did you miss because you weren’t even on the team?”

“I—”

“And why on earth wouldn’t you just tell me and your dad? Why would you lie about it all?”

“I’m sorry….” Tyler didn’t feel like explaining. He didn’t really have a good reason either, besides he didn’t want his parents to be disappointed in him, or freak out, like his mom was currently doing.

Josh cleared his throat. “Um, Ms. Joseph, it’s uh… it isn’t all Tyler’s fault, really.”

Tyler’s mom looked surprised to see Josh hanging by the door. She almost looked a little embarrassed at having gone off on Tyler in front of a guest.

“It was, um… there were people gossiping and stuff and basically just… some kids are di- I mean, some kids are, um, jerks, and, uh, it wasn’t… it wasn’t Tyler’s fault, he didn’t do anything, but then when I hurt my leg— it wasn’t Tyler’s fault then either, during the game, we sort of, we tripped on each other? And, and like, I got hurt and we both got suspended, but Tyler was like… more permanently suspended. Because the coach like, thought the worst, y’know? Because people were
Mrs. Joseph didn’t say anything for a minute, and Tyler watched her face nervously, eyes jumping occasionally over to Josh. The quiet was tense.

“It, um...it was only a couple of games Tyler missed anyways, and he...like, he didn’t tell you guys because he...he didn’t want you to be like, let down. It’s tough on us kids, we...we wanna make our parents proud, but...shit hap- I mean, life happens...like, stuff out of our control- like other kids saying bad things about the transfer kid in his senior year...y’know...that’s a pretty tough situation to be in, ya gotta admit.”

Tyler almost laughed at the expression on his mom’s face as she sized Josh up, still standing half in the living room, half in the hall. She was still angry, it was written all over her face, but there was a softer hint there now, too. Tyler tried not to sigh audibly.

“I...Tyler, your dad and I knew it would be tough to switch schools on you in your last year of high school. We didn’t want that for you, but...we had no choice. I can...I can understand your position, you’ve...we’ve dealt with bullies before, but...son, I wish you would have come to me, and your dad. We could have helped you.”

Tyler wanted to roll his eyes, but now probably still wasn’t a good time. He chewed on his lip some more before mumbling, “It was my problem, and I wanted to deal with it...without dragging you guys in on it...you’re both so busy, and I didn’t wanna...like, burden you or anything....”

“Tyler,” his mom huffed. Her hands were on her hips. “Your problems are never a burden to us, we’re your parents, for Christ’s sake.”

The conversation would have been getting too mushy in Tyler’s opinion, what with Josh being there to witness it all, if it weren’t for the fact that his mom’s eyebrows were still drawn together in agitation. He tried to look as apologetic as possible. Maybe his puppy eyes were in order. Nah, he was too old for that.

Mrs. Joseph threw her hands in the air like she was tired of going around in circles with the subject. “I can guarantee you there’ll be more to say about this when your father gets home, young man. And whether you’re now back on the team or not, you’ll still have to be grounded.”

“Aw, mom-”

“No sir, I don’t wanna hear it. There’ll be...no car privileges, for...for the next month. No movies either.”

“No car to get to school either?”

“Your dad can drop you off. The afternoons shouldn’t be as cold as the mornings, you can walk home.”

Tyler huffed quietly, but this wasn’t too bad, not as bad as it could be. He didn’t really care that much about the car; the movies, sure, but he could always sneak out to see one if he had to-

“And you come home immediately after practices, and no outings on the weekends.”

“Not even for church?”

“That hardly counts as an outing, Tyler.”
“Right...for a month?”

“A month.”

“...you sure?”

“Absolutely, Tyler. I can’t believe you lied to us for so long, about something as important as your sports. You know we’re counting on a scholarship with that. So yes, for a month.”

Tyler met Josh’s eyes over his mom’s shoulder. Josh pulled a face, and Tyler was surprised that it actually helped to lift his spirits.

“Oh, and that prom coming up, you can stay home from that.”

Tyler shrugged his shoulders. “Not like I’d go anyways.”

“Tyler...”

“Sorry, mom,” Tyler made a show of glancing at the clock in the corner. “Well, am I...am I grounded right this very minute, or can I hang out with Josh for a bit? Since he’s here.”

Mrs. Joseph looked back over at Josh and actually managed a tight smile. “Sorry, Joshua, just a family thing going on right now. Though you do seem to know a lot about it.”

Josh began to apologize, but Tyler’s mom beat him to it. “No, it’s okay, I don’t mean it in a bad way. It’s...it’s good Tyler has a friend like you, looking out for him. Just this one time, Tyler. Then you’re on your own for the next month, you hear me?”

Tyler gave his mom a quick hug on his way past before grabbing Josh’s arm and heading for the stairs. “Thanks, mom, okay, I got it! Love you!”

Once safely in the bedroom with the door closed, Tyler groaned as he flopped down on his stomach on his unmade bed. Josh sat down beside him a moment later and pinched at one of his cheeks.

“That wasn’t too bad...right?” Josh asked. “Coulda been a lot worse.”

Tyler buried his cheek in his arm to get away from Josh, though he smiled as he did so. He rolled over onto his side to look up at Josh. “Yeah. Coulda been. I mean, my dad still has to have a go at me, but...it wasn’t too bad.”

After a moment, he added, “Thanks for, y’know. Staying.”

Josh grinned sweetly before lying down on his side to face Tyler. “Anytime. Though I guess we can’t hang out much for...what, the next month? Since someone went and got themselves grounded.”

Tyler pouted. “You’re supposed to make me feel better about that.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I don’t know. Sneak me out or something, that’s not my job. You’re supposed to come up with that.”

Josh started giggling and Tyler started blushing and despite the fact he was now grounded and both his parents were mad at him and he was facing the unknowns of being back on a team that half hated him...all things considered, Tyler felt like they were going to be okay. Probably.
chapt 18 will be much sooner than 3 months lol i'd laugh but it's true and i'm kind of pathetic :""") I LOVE U FRIENDS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! <333333
baby, now you're one of us

Chapter Notes

i got SO MANY LOVELY MESSAGES from you guys abt the last chapter THANK YOU AND BLESS YOU FRIENDS peace and love <333 this update's a little shorter than i had originally planned, but it's fun i think! love you all <3

title from Ain't It Fun by Paramore

Tyler was wrong. Oh, shit, who was he kidding, things were not okay. He was grounded, and that meant he couldn’t hang out with Josh in the precious time they might be able to find after school. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, he was back on the team out of nowhere, no time to prepare, no time to let things settle in his mind, no time to even text Mikey and beg him for his support during practice that afternoon as Tyler had to face the other players all together for the first time in literal months.

Tyler worried about it all day long, from the moment his dad dropped him off that morning- no car privileges, effective immediately- to lunch period to the last lecture before Tyler had to face the firing squad. He kept his eyes peeled for a chance to talk to Josh and just vent all this shit and maybe get some answers or at least a bit of assurance, but an opportunity never popped up. Either Jenna or Brendon or a hoard of nameless students that Tyler didn’t want to risk anything in front of were always surrounding Josh. At least Tyler was able to tell Mikey, who seemed a little under the weather himself, a bit about the situation during lunch, though not to the full extent; just the fact that oh, hey, I’m back on the team, did I mention? Mikey had been surprised to learn it was due to Josh, and his spirits seemed to lift considerably. Tyler wondered briefly what was going on, but the thought wasn’t enough to distract him from his distress. The internal fretting continued throughout the afternoon.

Do they even know I’m back on the team? Did Coach tell them? Did the principal tell them? Does Spencer at least know, since he’s like, okay and stuff? Oh, God, there’s another problem...what if he accidentally lets slip to that dick Brendon, what if he- I hope Josh thought of that, I hope he reminded him not to say anything. Shit, shit, between Brendon and Pete and faking to not like Josh- and to not like him, God, I’m confused- and Spencer not slipping up and ratting on us, and then- what if Coach says something about Josh being the one to like, get me back on the team in the first place? What if he already did say something, ooooh shiiii-

“Ty! I’ve been looking for you, c’mon, man, what’re you doing?” Mikey grabbed Tyler’s arm and stuffed a familiar blue and yellow jersey into his hands. “Here, from Coach! It’s even your old one, man, number one!”

Tyler felt a little like puking. He swallowed down the feeling and tossed his book into his locker before letting Mikey drag him down the hall. He considered making a run for it, but Mikey’s grasp was surprisingly secure.

“Wait, wait, wait, Mike, wait a minute,” Tyler dragged his heels as they rounded the corner and the gymnasium doors came into sight. “Wait, are the, um...are the other guys all in their already?”

Mikey dropped Tyler’s arm but was still edging towards the doors. “Yeah, most of them, I think. It’s
“Yeah, um…” Tyler rubbed at his elbow. He really did not want to go in there. “Did Coach, um...has Coach said anything yet...about me...y’know...?”

Mikey got what Tyler meant, Tyler could tell. “I don’t know what he’s told them, he...might’ve made an announcement after I left, I don’t know, but...I mean, c’mon, Ty, he wants you back on the team, you are on the team, fair and square. Don’t worry about those other guys. Josh is here, too, remember? It’ll all be chill, dude.”

Tyler huffed. “Maybe.”

“It will, now come on! You still gotta change! Take five in the changing rooms, get a grip, ‘n then come on out, man, okay?”

Tyler only nodded and thankfully Mikey let it go. He slipped into the gym behind Mikey and hightailed it to the changing rooms.

Empty. Thank God. Not that Tyler really deserved any favors, he was kind of flunking his science class and he had just been grounded, but still, Tyler appreciated it. He peeled off his hoodie and shirt and fumbled around for an empty locker.

The door to the changing room squeaked open, and Tyler froze, his heart flying into overtime as he tried to casually inch around a row of lockers to relative safety. Not like he wasn’t about to go out there and dive in head first or anything.

“Tyler?”

He sighed audibly. “Josh, over here.”

Josh appeared from around the corner and a genuine smile split across Tyler’s face. “Josh, I’m so glad you’re here, man, I swear, I’m dying, I can’t do this, I can’t go out there, and, and...I mean, if you think I’m just gonna skip on out there into the...the lions’ den then you’re...you’re just wrong, okay, I can’t do that, I can’t-”

“Lions’ den? That’s a little overkill, don’t you think, Ty?”

“Shut up!” Tyler kicked at a locker, but it was only half heartedly and didn’t hurt, or unfortunately make as punctuating a sound as he had intended.

Josh raised his eyebrows like he was babysitting his youngest sister. Tyler pouted. “Don’t look at me...” he grumbled.

Josh let out a small sigh and then placed his hand on the back of Tyler’s neck. It almost could have been only friendly if he wasn’t rubbing circles with his thumb in the soft hair on the base of his neck. But it was soothing, even that small of a gesture, and Tyler tried to lessen his pout, just a tiny bit, for Josh’s sake if not anyone else’s. His hand was incredibly warm on Tyler’s skin, and he was instantly reminded that he wasn’t wearing a shirt. A blush grew on his cheeks.

“Look, Ty...the guys aren’t that bad. Not even Pete, and he kind of hates me right now, since the Hilliard game, he’s just. Y’know, Pete. And Brendon, he...he’s always been a dick, always will, but I mean...just ignore him, okay? You don’t have to talk to him, this is just practice, y’know, we might not even get to actually playing today and you can prolong interacting with him for another day or so. You like basketball, you miss it, too, right? I really did. And that...it kinda made it worth the tension or whatever with the other players, y’know?”
Tyler hadn’t been listening at first, still wrestling with the contradicting thoughts bouncing around in his brain; but Josh sounded sincere, so towards the end of what he was saying, Tyler tried to tune in a little bit. “That’s...right, you had to do this, too, didn’t you. After your leg got better.”

“Yeah, I mean...maybe it wasn’t as hard for me, ’cuz I know these guys, but. You weren’t there to make it a little less...daunting...y’know? And I’ll be out there, too, Ty. Brendon and all them’ll be there, but...so will I...y’know?”

Tyler was about to just plant one right on Josh’s lips to shut him up before he said anything else way too incredibly close to a stupid, embarrassing chick flick line, but the door squeaked open again, and Tyler jumped and Josh quickly pulled his hand away. Tyler immediately missed it.

“Hey, guys, what’s the hold up, Coach is waiting!” Spencer. Tyler tried to slow his breathing. “Oh, hey, Ty! Coach said you were back! Good to see ya, man. Ha, coulda used you last week, that’s for fuckin’ sure. It was a mess, you guys were all over the place, weren’t you, Josh?”

Josh scowled at Spencer and Tyler hid a smile as he tugged his jersey over his head. He felt a hand brush lightly along his hip, and Josh flashed him a quick smile once the shirt cleared Tyler’s face. Tyler looked pointedly at Spencer until Josh got the message.

“By the way, Spence, remember, don’t let on to the other guys about us, okay?”

“He means us, like, friends, like, don’t let the other guys know we’re like...friends. Okay?”

“I know what he means, dipshit,” Spencer scoffed at Tyler. “Fine, fine, yeah, I remember. Y’know, Josh, you aren’t gonna be able to fool Brendon for much longer—”

“Yeah, yeah, save it, tell me later,” Josh patted Tyler on the shoulder and ushered him and Spencer out in front of him. No time for any last words.

The other guys were already running laps around the room, and- that was good, that eliminated that awkward first hello. Maybe the coach understood the situation more than Tyler had given him credit for. Spencer and Josh started their laps, and Tyler walked along the edge of the room for a moment, waiting for Mikey to round the corner before falling into place beside him.

Ordinarily, Tyler would huff and puff and finish his laps mentally kicking and screaming, but when Coach blew his whistle, Tyler wanted nothing more than to run another five. Just one more, anything to buy a bit more time...but the team all finished their last lap and stood around the coach, and Tyler had to stop running and join them. At least Mikey was there.

Coach didn’t say anything, he didn’t even look at Tyler, just launched into a spiel about how godawful the last game was and how they needed to step up their own game big time for Akron in two weeks. Less than. Tyler stood at the edge of the group, hands fumbling awkwardly at his pockets, sneaking glances at the other guys to maybe determine how they were reacting. Most of the guys weren’t even looking at him currently, listening to Coach rant and plan the new gameplay. Tyler tried to loosen up a little.

With his speech done, Coach started barking out the new lineup for a short game; he said he wanted to put it to the test and see how they all meshed with the foundation a little shaken up. Tyler listened for his name to be called as Coach divided the room; Dallon gave Tyler’s shoulder a pat as he passed, and Patrick smiled at him from across the room. So far...surprisingly good.

Coach went back to his clipboard and seemed to be debating over something. One of the guys sighed loudly, and Coach told them all to go practice their drills, half the team on one side practicing
defensive, the other half on the other side practicing offensive. Tyler was relieved when Mikey dragged him along to the side where Patrick, Dallon, and Spencer were practicing. That was a pretty safe combination of players, in theory. Safer than being on the same side as Brendon and Pete. And Josh. A small part of Tyler piped up in protest that he had grouped Josh with the likes of his stupid friend. But it was what it was; besides, it didn’t mean anything. Tyler shook the feeling away and practiced his defense, grateful so far for the relatively uneventful practice.

After half an hour Coach had them switch drills, all the while still pouring over his clipboard. Tyler wondered why the hell it was so difficult for him to just throw them all on their old positions and leave it at that. The fact he didn’t know what the coach was planning was driving him up the wall.

After another half hour, Coach blew on his whistle and motioned the boys over. Tyler was panting and still half hiding behind Mikey. As the two halves of the team merged around Coach, Tyler dropped his gaze to the floor in case Brendon or someone was ready to fire off at him. He didn’t want a scene, not now that practice was almost finished, and in front of everyone. Hell, no.

Coach was saying something to Pete, Tyler couldn’t hear what, but he couldn’t help himself from letting his eyes wander over to Josh, standing opposite him, peeking at him through his eyelashes. Josh’s skin was sweaty and the bright lighting in the gym shone on his skin; his hair was damp and-oh, wow, it was curly! Actual curls! Tyler felt a smile pulling at his mouth, and Josh must have sensed it, because he looked over at Tyler then and mirrored Tyler’s grin. He looked adorable. Tyler wanted to tackle him in a big ol’ squeeze and then maybe play with those blueish and dark brown curls.

But then Tyler realized that Coach Anderson was talking louder, directed at all of them, and Tyler dropped his eyes again quickly, just in case Coach said something. The nerves swept over him again for about the hundredth time.

“-a very dismal game, like, embarrassingly bad, guys,” Coach was saying, one hand on his hip and the other waving his clipboard. “I was talking to Craig- to Coach Fenlon- after the game. Several new students, several new players, that’s all it took for them to go from some pretty subpar competition to actual competition. Ordinarily we’d just take the loss for what it is, move on, practice harder, whatever, do better at the next game- but this time of year right now isn’t ordinary. Our next game is in Akron, guys, and it’s in less than fourteen days. And we cannot, we can not play a game against Akron like we played against Hilliard. You get me?”

There was some grumbling from the players and a few nods. Tyler glanced at Mikey. Mikey winked.

“Granted, we had some unforeseen issues to wrestle with the past few months, some of which, well...like I mentioned earlier, some mistakes were made, some rash decisions. This was brought to my attention, I- and the principal as well, for that matter- we looked into it, and we’ve remedied it as best we can. Now hopefully, we can get this team back up and running better than ever. We’ve got a stellar player back in our midst, Tyler over here-” Coach was suddenly grabbing at Tyler and pulling him forward, iron grasp on his shoulder. Tyler stumbled a few steps and bumped into another player- Ryan, thankfully, and not one of several Tyler could name. “-and with a lot of hard work from you guys over the next several practices, along with a few tweaks to the lineup, we should, should, be more than able to give that Akron team a run for their money. Alright, who’s game, eh? We got that Worthington fighting spirit still?”

The response was half hearted, and a little pathetic. Coach didn’t seem to notice. He pounded Tyler on the back instead, jostling him into Ryan again. Tyler was beet red, and not just from the hour of drills, looking everywhere but at the other players around him. God, get me outta here, mcfucking alarm bells going off right here, man, I can’t be center stage right here right now like this, ugh, this
“You said there were a few tweaks?” Pete wasn’t glaring at Tyler, but Tyler felt the underlying hostility all the same. Coach finally let him go and Tyler slipped back several steps closer to Mikey.

“Yeah, that’s right, I got the list here,” Coach turned his attention back to the rest of the group. “So for the next couple weeks we’ll practice with this new lineup, it’s what I wanna try for Akron. With Joseph back, things should run a little smoother.”

Yeah, I fucking bet….

“So what’s the new lineup?” Tyler glanced up at Pete, who was pointedly ignoring him. Tyler didn’t half mind.

“Hold your horses, here it is now…okay, so same bench players, that much is understood. Ryan, Mikey, you’ll be the first guys we go to if someone has to sit out or gets hurt, yada yada, y’know the drill. Spencer, you’d be next, alright, so I wanna see you working on that offense, okay, just in case. Akron can be a pretty rough bunch of guys, and we need everyone- everyone, even our bench players, to be on their toes, got it?”

Mikey and Ryan nodded, and Tyler stifled a smile at the look on Spencer’s face. Spencer noticed him across the room and glared at him.

“Alright, now for the active players. Weekes, obviously you’re gonna stay center, you’re about twice as tall as every other kid here, ha. Lucky for us, that’s a good advantage. Urie, small forward; Wentz, power forward. I want Dun as shooting guard, and Tyler, you’re gonna play point guard. Almost the original lineup, but a few tweaks, like I said. We’ll play in practices from here on out with this lineup in mind, ‘kay fellas?”

“Why am I a forward?” Pete did turn his glare on Tyler then, and Tyler tried not to shrink back too visibly. That would really hurt his street cred, almost even more than Margot. Tyler purposefully refused to meet his eyes, looking instead at the exit along the back wall. Almost there now, almost there, practice is almost over, and I can get the hell outta here….

“Wentz, I don’t wanna hear it, I’m not going to argue with any of you over this. Alright, kids, you’re free to go, don’t forget to do your homework. Just because there’s a prom and the Akron game next week doesn’t mean you get to slack off.”

“But Coach, he hasn’t played with us since last year, you can’t just throw him back on the team like nothing, and as point, too, and expect us to actually be able to win anything-”

“Wentz, I am not going to discuss this with you right now, if you have a complaint, talk to me tomorrow during school hours, and you can.”

“Ugh, c’mon, let’s blow this place,” Mikey tugged on the back of Tyler’s jersey, and Tyler squinted his eyes at the disgust in his tone. Sure, he kinda hated Pete, too, especially right now, but it was still a little strange.

“You okay?”

“It’s whatever, just c’mon,” Mikey dropped Tyler’s jersey as they followed behind a few other players to the changing rooms. Tyler could hear Brendon going off about something behind him, but couldn’t make out any words. He was probably talking to Josh. Tyler peeked over his shoulder as the changing room door swung shut behind him, but quickly jerked his head back around when Brendon made eye contact and caught him looking. He hightailed it to his locker and yanked the
“-is real bull, man, I don’t know what the hell Coach is thinking.” *Brendon. Great.*

“What’s wrong with it? We stand an okay chance of winning now, don’t you th-”

“Oh, Ryan, you’re so naive,” Brendon interrupted. “No, whatever, you’re not even playing.”

“Hey, he is, too, that’s not fair. Bench players are still on the team, man.”

“Shut up, Dal, you don’t get it. I wasn’t even talking to you-”

Mikey bumped his shoulder against Tyler’s, and Tyler stopped eavesdropping over his shoulder—though it could hardly be considered eavesdropping, what with Brendon talking so loudly. “Wanna come over to my house? We can play D and D. Or study or whatever you want.”

“Um, I...thanks, but I’m...I can’t actually, I’m kind of grounded a bit,” Tyler replied quietly as he pulled his jacket on over his jersey and shoved his shirt in his bag. “For, y’know...sorry, I would, but-”

“Nah, it’s okay....” Mikey seemed distracted, his eyebrows drawn together as he fidgeted beside Tyler. “I just...never mind, I’ll...see you tomorrow, ‘kay?”

Tyler forgot about his own problems briefly as he tried to read Mikey’s face. “Are you sure you’re okay? What’s up, did something happen? You can...you can tell me, y’know, if something’s up.”

Mikey was silent as he pulled on his own jacket, seemingly debating in his head. He chewed on his lip like he was about to say something; Tyler didn’t know whether to press it or let it go.

“Nah, I’ll...I’ll see ya. Bye, Ty.” He grabbed his bag and slipped out of the changing room so quickly Tyler didn’t have time to reply. *Should I go after him? Maybe I should text Gerard and see if he’s okay...maybe I should-

The door flung open so hard that it crashed into the lockers behind it. Pete barreled in. “Man, I am so fucking done with this shit, I’m gonna fucking quit.”

“Please do,” Brendon retorted, and for once Tyler agreed with him. But that didn’t stop him from quietly grabbing his stuff as quickly as he could. Things were heating up and he had a gut feeling that he needed to escape ASAP.

“Shut the hell up, Urie, I’ve about had it with you!”

“Right back at you, asshole!”

“Pete, c’mon-” Patrick started.

“Guys, cut it out, for real. I am so tired of you guys fucking fighting all the time.” *Ryan.*

“Yeah, well, it’s all his fucking fault, okay.”

*Oh, shit.* Tyler froze, halfway to the exit, halfway to freedom. Brendon was pointing at him. Pete was inconveniently standing in the way of the nearest route to said exit. Tyler felt his defenses coming up.

“What are you talking about, B?” *Dallon* said, exasperated.
“He’s gonna fucking ruin everything, I call it right now.”

“Urie’s actually right, which is a fucking first,” Pete added and crossed his arms. He glared down his nose at Tyler, and Tyler almost edged a step back but stopped himself before he did. He glanced over at Brendon, who was arguing a little more quietly with Ryan right then. Spencer was on the other side of the room, looking uneasy; he made eye contact with Tyler, but there was little either of them could do at the moment. Dallon had given up and stomped out only a moment before, Patrick following a moment later. Who knew where Jordan had run off to. And Josh- Tyler didn’t want to admit that he was looking for Josh, but well...he wasn’t in the changing room anymore, by the looks of it, and Tyler's heart sunk a little further regardless. The numbers were dwindling, and Tyler was getting nervous about soon being outnumbered. On cue, Ryan threw his hands up then and shoved past Brendon, butting past Pete to get to the door. The sound of it clanging shut again was a reminder too late to Tyler that he should have jumped at the opportunity to get out of there while Ryan was. Now he was trapped.

“We were fucking fine before some asshole went and guilt tripped the coach into letting you back on the team, we don’t fucking need you here,” Brendon snapped, burning holes into Tyler’s chest. Tyler felt anger rising inside him and had to bite his tongue to keep from retaliating. If he did that it would only aggravate things, even more so than they already were.

“Probably cried to your mommy to come fix it, didn’t you?” Pete snorted. “Pulled some strings and now you think you got the Coach in your pocket? Well, you don’t, okay, Joseph?”

“I don’t think that,” Tyler said, glaring at Pete. He didn’t know who he hated more right now, Pete or Brendon. Or the entire team for leaving him alone with these jerks. Tyler made for the door, but-as he had expected- Pete took a step towards him to completely block his way.

“We’re not finished here,” he spat. “This is a problem, okay? This new lineup thing the coach’s got going on? It’s not gonna work. The Akron game’s big because of the scouts, and forward position isn’t gonna get me noticed, not like point. I didn’t work my ass off these past eight years to get upgraded senior year last semester by some fuckin’ pussy like you.”

“Shut the hell up,” Tyler snapped back, unable to silently grind his teeth together any longer. “If either of you dicks had any real talent you wouldn’t be intimidated by me anyways.”

Shit, probably shouldn’t have said that- Pete and Brendon visibly bristled at Tyler’s words. Pete advanced on him as Tyler took a step back, only to find that Brendon was directly beside him now as well.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” Brendon snapped.

Pete: “Shut your goddamn mouth—”

Tyler hadn’t been in a fistfight before but he was fairly certain it started and ended something like this, with a fist in his face in right about two seconds, unless he did something right now-

“Hey, back off, guys, you need to back off, alright?”

Tyler’s eyes flew behind Pete’s shoulder to Josh, standing by the door, his hands curled in fists at his sides, Tyler noted.

Pete turned around and snapped, “Shut the fuck up, Dun, what’s it to you?”

“I’ll get the fuckin’ coach in here if I have to,” Josh snapped back. “I swear to God, Pete, you gotta chill. You, too, Brendon, what the hell? C’mon, you know this isn’t what the team needs, it’s not
what you need either. You’ll get kicked off. You fuckin’ want that, B?”

Tyler sidestepped to get out of the immediate range of anyone’s fist. Brendon was still glaring, but at Josh right now instead of him.

“Coach isn’t messing around anymore,” Josh prompted. Tyler glanced at him again, but he was ignoring Tyler, meeting Brendon’s glare head on and occasionally glancing at Pete.

Pete threw his hands up in the air and made a noise of disgust. He bumped forcefully into Tyler’s shoulder as he passed, knocking Tyler against the lockers, the clanging sound echoing briefly in the small room. Josh didn’t move from the doorway, and Pete bumped into him on his way out as well, but Josh stood his ground, and Tyler- wow, okay, kind of hot.

Brendon muttered something and shoved the finger in Tyler’s face before stomping towards Josh. Tyler felt a small wave of disappointment as Brendon tugged on Josh’s arm, and Josh turned to follow him out of the changing room. Though really, what did he expect him to do? He’d already risked enough coming back like he had and saying what he did. If he had stayed, he might as well have just told the entire school they were dating.

Josh glanced over his shoulder though, just as the door was swinging shut behind him. He met Tyler’s eyes, and Tyler offered a small smile to let Josh know he would be okay. Josh didn’t have time to return it before the door shut.

Except for the scuffle in the changing rooms after that first practice, the rest of the week passed in a similar way, which was both okay in some respects and definitely quite bad in others. Classes were the same old, though since Tuesday practice, Mikey had been avoiding Tyler, at least in Tyler’s opinion. But then again, he seemed to be avoiding everybody, even skipping multiple classes; Gerard, as well, was quite distant. Tyler sent Mikey a few texts, got fewer replies, and basically decided that if Mikey wanted space, that was fine with him and the least he could do was to give it to him. So Tyler sat with Frank during the classes they shared instead; Frank didn’t know what was up with the brothers either, and he didn’t care. His so-what attitude mostly just amused Tyler, but it also helped inspire the emotional wall he needed to face the basketball team for an hour and a half every day after an incredibly boring and kind of lonely day of lectures.

Josh, on the other hand, though he and Tyler weren’t able to hang out- due both to practices and the fact Tyler was obviously still grounded, goddammit- texted Tyler almost nonstop, which definitely boosted Tyler’s spirits. After Josh had intervened on Tuesday afternoon, Pete completely ignored Tyler during practices, which was one hundred percent fine with Tyler. Brendon, not so much, but it was mostly just mean jokes and nasty remarks in contrast to actual physical or even serious threats. Tyler could handle that. Tyler told that to Josh when Josh had texted him Tuesday evening to ask if he was okay. I’m not a girl, I can take care of myself, you don’t need to play the knight in shining armor, I had it under control, etc. etc. Josh humored him at least, and frankly, though Tyler wasn’t sure he was completely comfortable with proclaiming as much to Josh just yet, he was secretly cool with it. Not that he was any helpless maiden, mind you. I definitely wear the pants in this relationship. Definitely.

The practices in general were okay. Just okay. Tyler loved playing again, he had missed it so incredibly much, but between having to ignore Josh, give Mikey space, stay out of Pete’s way, and dodge Brendon’s verbal jabs...it was a lot to chew. At least Dallon and Ryan and Patrick were civil enough, friendly even at times. Tyler still worried over Spencer spilling the beans, or God forbid Jordan open his mouth and say something stupid, but so far so good.
If Tyler was being honest, this entire routine, day in and day out, was starting to feel like running a marathon, and Tyler hated running. Texting with Josh in the evenings could only do so much to fuel their relationship and friendship, and Tyler was starting to get a little stir crazy. No Mikey to hang out with either, though he wouldn’t be allowed to anyways, not while he was still grounded. And one could only stand so much homework and studying at one time before one’s head would fucking explode. Tyler desperately wanted this thing to just chill. Whatever this thing referred to.

Any other Saturday afternoon and Tyler would have been absolutely thrilled, but here he was, stuck at home with every bit of his homework completed and double checked, tucked away in his folder and ready for next week. No car, no going out of the house, no new alerts on his phone. Honestly, Tyler was about to die.

His dad was working over the weekend again, Zack had called dibs on the playstation in the basement and had some friends over, Maddy was at her part time job, and Tyler wasn’t yet desperate enough to hang out with his baby brother, which left only his mom. Thankfully though, when she had grounded him and said no movies, she didn’t seem to mind him hanging sideways off the armchair and staring at the television screen. His mom was perched on the couch, going through some bills and receipts scattered across the coffee table and not even watching the show she had put on. Tyler, on the other hand, was bored stiff; there were only so many episodes you could watch back to back of Bewitched before going out of your mind.

Tyler must have groaned out loud or made a particularly obvious face of distress just then, because his mom glanced up and chuckled quietly. “You want a snack, Ty? I got some of those Valentine’s cakes in the pantry, you know, the Little Debbie kind?”

“Uuum….”

“You want one with some milk?”

“…eh….”

“What, you want chocolate milk? I’ll get you some chocolate milk.”

She tossed the remote control at Tyler’s face as she passed by the armchair. “There ya go, change the channel if you want, hon.”

Tyler muted the TV first thing, then swung his legs for a minute, listening to the muffled sounds of a competitive round of Mario Kart going on downstairs. He briefly pondered joining Zack and his friends before almost immediately deciding against it. No way. Last time he and Zack played Mario Kart together there was actual blood spilt. Zack had whammed his controller against Tyler’s and grazed his fingers. Yeah, it was tough.

An old black and white movie, HGTV, a news channel, another news channel, the Pioneer Woman, American Idol, a Nicolas Cage movie. A spoon clinked in the kitchen and the fridge door shut, and Tyler’s mom appeared in the living room again. Tyler flipped the TV back to the Pioneer Woman. His mom loved that show.

She placed a mug and a packaged Little Debbie’s cake on the edge of the coffee table closest to Tyler before sitting back down on the couch. Tyler said thanks and tossed the remote control back onto the couch next to his mom before leaning over and scooping up the mug. There was writing on it that read “Please do not confuse your google search with my medical degree.” One of his dad’s. Tyler took a chug of chocolate milk.

His mom unmuted the TV as the Pioneer Woman began a recipe for cherry pie and went back to her
receipts, and Tyler idly began swinging his legs again, resting the mug on his stomach and glumly watching as the milk sloshed threateningly close to the rim.

“Tyler, babe, don’t spill that or your father will kill you.”

Tyler sighed and took another sip of milk. He nudged the packaged treat with his foot before leaning forward again to grab it off the table, placing the mug on the floor by his chair, and flopping back into the cushions and toying with the edges of the package, the crinkling sound louder than the quiet volume of the TV.

“Are you gonna eat that or just make a lot of noise?”

Tyler glanced at his mom, but she didn’t look angry; she gave him a small smile before digging through her paperwork again.

A commercial for home insurance interrupted the show, and Tyler took the opportunity to rip the package open. One of the little heart cakes was smushed, and crumbs spilled across his hoodie. He flicked them onto the floor before waving the package in his mother’s general direction. A few more crumbs went soaring.

“Want one?”

His mom smiled but didn’t look up. “No, honey, go ahead and have them, I’m fine.”

Several more commercials played on the screen, and Tyler nibbled at one of the little cakes. They were a little stale, but he wasn’t one to turn down treats when they were sitting right in front of him. They were pretty cute, too, smushed or not.

“Are your kids gonna have a party or something? For V day?” Tyler asked, not really all that interested in whatever the answer would be. Your kids referring to the kindergarten class his mom assisted in. She always went way overboard with the crafts and parties and presents and treats for the kids. Maybe these Little Debbie’s cakes were for them.

“Oh, yeah, of course,” his mom answered, her voice light. She loved her job; Tyler was glad. She smiled as she continued. “It’s next Friday. They only have a half day, so the entire time’s gonna be spent on the party. This week we’re gonna be making lots of little cards and presents for them to take home to their parents. Isn’t that cute?”

“So cute.”

“They’re going to make cupcakes on Friday, too. Well, not make. I’m going to make them at home, I think, and bring them in the day of. They’re going to decorate their cupcakes. I can see it already. I’m going to be finding red and white and pink sprinkles and glitter and all kinds of fun stuff in my clothes for weeks.”

Tyler laughed halfheartedly. He was so bored now he had been reduced to initiating small talk with his mother. Oh, well. He supposed he wasn’t too old to have a girlish chat with her. Why not?

“I’m sorry about having to ground you, you know, sweetie,” she said suddenly. Wow, okay, so much for small talk. Well, maybe it could still be classified as small talk, but it wasn’t as comfortable as just listening to her talk about her toddlers.

“Oh, uh…” Tyler shrugged one shoulder and glanced back at the TV as the Pioneer Woman flashed back across the screen. “S’okay….” he stuffed another bite of cake in his mouth.
“It’s just...you know how it is, we can’t very well ground you for only a few days. It just happens to be at the time of month you have your prom going on- and I remember you telling me about your little crush- and I didn’t realize until later that maybe that would cause difficulties for you, and-”

“Wait, wait, what? What are you saying?” Tyler felt his cheeks heating up as he glanced awkwardly back at his mom, sinking deeper into his hoodie at the same time.

“The prom, for Valentine’s Day. You weren’t going to take your little friend, were you?”

“Um...no....”

“Aw, Ty, don’t tell me you haven’t told them yet.”

Tyler wanted more than anything to get out of there. He did not want to have this conversation. “Um...no, uh, I...I did...but....”

“Oh,” his mom looked up from her papers to study him, and Tyler quickly looked to the smushed cake in his lap instead. “Aw, honey...you told them and they didn’t feel the same? I’m sorry. When was that? Are you okay?”

The last thing Tyler wanted right then was to explain it all to his mom, but he suddenly felt the need to defend himself. Even worse than explaining everything to her would be letting her think he had been rejected and feeling sorry for him.

“No, he- I did tell them and they did feel the same. So....”

“Oh,” his mom sounded surprised.

Tyler huffed. “Why do you sound so surprised!?”

“Honey, I’m not, it’s just...oh, but, so you would have gone to the prom together then, wouldn’t you have? Aw, I’m sorry about that, honey...there’s still more proms, though, you can go together then, hm?”

“I- no, we’re not...we weren’t gonna go to the prom together, we...we don’t do that sort of thing. That’s sissy.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. Did you even ask her?”

“No....” Tyler muttered.

“Well, maybe you should have, she might’ve said yes.”

Tyler huffed. “I doubt it.”

“Why not?”

“I...I don’t think it’s what...it’s not like...the kind of thing we’d...do....”

“Oh. You and that nice girl, remember, what’s her name, uh, the principal’s daughter, you know? You two went to prom back in ninth grade.”

Tyler shook his head. “Well, this...this time’s different.”

“Why is it different?”
“I...I dunno, it’s just...this gu- this...this friend just wouldn’t...I don’t know. Probably wouldn’t be into it. Probably.”

“Hm...” Tyler sneaked a cautious glance at his mom. He didn’t like her tone. It was too thoughtful. Maybe he had said too much- “Well. I still think you could have asked.”

“I’m not even going anyways, you’re not letting me,” Tyler pointed out around the last bit of cake, hoping the subject would soon be dropped.

“I thought you didn’t want to.”

“I don’t.”

“Well, then, it all works out, doesn’t it?”

Tyler huffed again and leaned over for his chocolate milk. Why did he even bother....

“So...you know, you could bring...them over some time. For pizza rolls. I’d make you guys some pizza rolls and you could have the basement to yourselves, show ‘em the games you got down there.”

Tyler almost choked on his sip of milk. “I....” He bit down his initial response and took a second to actually think about it. “...maybe...maybe sometime...thanks....”

“But not while you’re grounded.”

Tyler looked at his mom, but she was pointedly looking away and at the television screen with keen interest, though she hadn’t shown any up to this point. Tyler eyed her suspiciously, but she continued staring at the freshly baked cherry pie the Pioneer Woman was holding up for the camera.

More commercials began to play, and just as Tyler started to grow concerned that things would become awkward, a cell phone rang from in the kitchen, and Tyler’s mom muted the TV as she muttered something about Jay’s teacher before dashing off towards the other room. Tyler felt some of the tension in his shoulders ease up a little, and he took a last sip of his milk before setting the mug back on the floor. He stared up at a watermark on the ceiling. Less than a year of living here and already they had begun to mess up the house.

Tyler studied the stain and considered what his mom had said. The initial anxiety that she somehow knew a little too much about his crush- heck, it just wasn’t a crush anymore, was it? Josh wasn’t just a crush anymore, he was a boyfriend. Either way, and whether or not his mom might suspect things, Tyler wasn’t worried about her freaking out. She was chill. His dad...maybe. A little at first, perhaps, but he’d come around eventually. Not that Tyler had huge, detailed plans of coming out anytime soon.

Then Tyler’s train of thought altered slightly, and he wondered, would Josh? Would Josh be into that sort of thing? Obviously if their circumstances were different, and they didn’t have to hide, and Josh wasn’t kind of with another girl at the same time as being with Tyler, and they didn’t have to pretend to hate each other, and the whole team and school weren’t involved, and. That was a lot of ifs, Tyler knew, but still. If things were different...after all, Josh had taken Jenna to the Christmas prom, why wouldn’t he be cool with taking Tyler to the Valentine’s one? The memory of the Christmas prom darkened Tyler’s thoughts a shade as he thought about Jenna. She had been glowing. And Tyler didn’t even like girls, not like that. But she had looked beautiful, and she and Josh had looked so lovely together. Everything she did and said had seemed so effortless. Tyler could never be effortless, no matter how hard he tried. He could never be anything even close to what Jenna was, calm and
cool and like, like majestic and shit, and….

His phone beeped from inside his hoodie pocket, and Tyler actually jumped. Good thing he had put his mug of chocolate milk down. The alert had jogged him out of his gloomy thoughts, clearing the clouds from above his head. No matter what had happened at the Christmas prom, Josh was with him now, he had chosen Tyler. He liked him. Obviously he didn’t care about Tyler being different from Jenna in almost every way- hey, maybe the guy liked that about him. Tyler started humming a pop song that was stuck in his head from being way overplayed on the radio lately, kicking his legs against the armchair in beat with the song, decidedly making an effort to not get sucked into less than positive thoughts on the whole Josh front. Why create new or dig up old problems when things were going smoothly?

His phone beeped again, reminding Tyler of his new text, and he quickly realized that it could be Josh! He dug around in his pocket and pulled out his phone, smiling at the screen as soon as it loaded.

J: heeey baby u busy today?? ;)
T: ha ha v funny
T: u think????
J: i did something cool b proud of me
T: :O wut!??
T: is it illegal
J: xDDD
J: only a little
T: WAT!!!
J: relax! i drove my mom’s van
T: u hav a license? since when
J: i dont, just a permit
T: o was that the illegal part
J: yeah i drove to ur house on my own lol
T: :O ur here!??
J: im waitin outside bby cmon
T: but im grounded
J: cmon anyways lets be naughty

Tyler’s cheeks split in a grin as he didn’t reply, just shoved his phone back in his pocket and rolled upside down off the chair, jostling into the coffee table on the way and barely missing the mug on the floor. He padded quietly through the living room and past the kitchen door. His mom had her back to him, unloading the dishwasher as she talked to the phone on speaker, and Tyler didn’t waste any
time darting down the hall and slipping on his sneakers. It was still pretty cold outside, but Tyler’s hoodie was thick enough that he opted to forgo the coat, pulling a beanie onto his head and cracking the front door open as quietly as he could.

The familiar gray minivan was parked along the curb, and Tyler jogged across the front lawn and yanked open the passenger door, hopping in as quickly as he could, both because he was freezing in just his damn hoodie and the concern that his mom would notice him missing and spot them before they could escape.

Josh was behind the wheel, a wide grin on his face as he looked Tyler up and down. “Hey, girlfriend. What’s up?”

Tyler laughed and punched Josh’s arm. “Josh, oh, my God, how did you know that I was dying in there? You saved me. I was going absolutely crazy.”

“I can imagine. I know how you are.”

“Ha ha,” Tyler glanced at the front door over his shoulder. “Let’s hurry and get out of here, huh? I wouldn’t put it past my mom to come crashing out here any minute, and you do not wanna be around for that.”

“Mm, I don’t know, I feel I could take on your mom.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t wanna find out. C’mon, let’s go.”

“Where to?”

“I literally don’t even care, just drive.”

“Um, yeah...about that....” Josh glanced away and tapped at the steering wheel. “Look, I, um, I almost had a heart attack getting this far, how about...how about you take it from here, okay?”

Tyler guffawed. “Are you serious? You’re that afraid to drive?”

Josh fidgeted and shrugged. “Maybe...stop making that face, just drive, okay? Dipshit.”

Tyler giggled the entire time he and Josh switched seats without getting out of the car, climbing over each other and the console, knees bumping into the console and heads into the ceiling, followed by strings of half hearted curses. Josh swatted Tyler’s ass before he plopped down in the driver’s seat, and Tyler only stopped giggling long enough to give Josh a smirk before gunning the engine and getting them out of there.
I've got a problem with your shoes and your tunes

Chapter Notes

HEY FRIENDS, long time no see! omg i saw Love, Simon this week HOW FUCKIN CUTE AMIRIGHT?????

So this chapter takes place directly after the last one so sorry if u have to reread a bit to remember eEEEK

chapt title from The Sound by the 1975

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a gray day and was drizzling lightly, too warm for it to be snow or ice, but cold enough to preserve the thin crustling of snow already on the ground. As for the roads, they were completely clear now save for a few dirty clumps near street signs where the snow plows had initially piled it all a few weeks back. The road was even still dry in places. Perfectly fine and safe driving conditions.

Not that any of that made the least little difference to Josh. Driving was still driving, regardless of the weather, and that terrified Josh to no ends. Blame it on a childhood spent chain playing Mario Kart with reckless abandon. He didn’t really understand his fear of it, but he didn’t feel any pressing need to overcome it any time soon either.

That was, until his adorable but unfortunately stupid boyfriend went and got himself grounded and needed to be rescued, though Josh still felt slightly responsible himself for that. And since Josh didn’t have access to a horse- he’d probably be just as terrified of riding a horse as he was of driving a minivan anyways- and since the aforementioned adorable yet stupid boyfriend had only recently made clear to Josh that he was in fact not a helpless maiden who needed a knight in shining armor-assuming, which Josh did, that knights who saved maidens often rode horses- Josh decided to just suck it up and be a man and drive his mom’s fucking minivan a half mile through the fucking neighborhood to his boyfriend’s house.

He could feel Tyler glancing at him now, every few minutes, from the driver’s seat. Every time Josh turned to make eye contact, Tyler would quickly jerk his gaze back to the road in front of them, though he never successfully managed to hide the smirk on his lips. Josh doubted if he was even trying to hide it. The bastard.

Once Josh had picked up Tyler and had turned the wheel over to him, he had searched for the AUX cord while Tyler made light hearted jabs at his music taste. Josh retorted that it wasn’t his fault, that the music selection on his ipod had never been cleared out, only added onto since junior high, but it made no difference to Tyler, the excuse only fueling his sideways smirks. Lucky, Tyler had quipped after Josh announced he couldn’t find the adapter. Josh had merely scowled at him before sliding in the first CD he found stuffed under the passenger seat. An NSYNC record of Abby’s. It would do.

They had only just pulled out of their neighborhood into the light traffic on the main roads, slowing for a yellow light when Tyler slapped at Josh’s bicep.

“So J, now that you’ve rescued me, what’s the plan? Though who seems to be rescuing who, hm? I’m the one driving, I might add.”
“Who’s rescuing whom, I might add,” Josh said, slapping Tyler back. Only because they were currently stopped though. Not if they had been driving. Josh shuddered.

“Uh, no, pretty sure it’s who not whom,” Tyler’s voice was lilting in that annoying way that Josh could only now find one hundred percent endearing. Maybe nine percent annoying, ninety-one percent endearing, Josh couldn’t be exact. He absolutely beamed at Tyler. He had missed him this past week, dammit. It was exhausting pretending to not care all day long during school.

“Uh, no,” Josh mimicked in a high, small voice. “Pretty sure it’s whom.”

Tyler threw his head back and laughed. He slapped Josh’s arm again. “I do not sound like that. Shut up.”

“Uh, pretty sure you do- ow, okay, okay, so you don’t, don’t pinch me, Tyler, what the hell-”

Tyler laughed again and Josh could only glare at him for about a second and a half while making a show of rubbing his arm before his heart began to melt, and he forced himself to look away and out the window instead of at Tyler’s face, just in case Tyler should notice the emotion on his face. Josh was sure it would give away everything he wasn’t ready to say yet.

Thankfully, the light turned green, and Tyler focused again on driving, though not too intensely not to sing along playfully to “Bringin’ da Noise.” Josh was in hysteric. Jenna had never made him laugh like Tyler did, not even close. Even his old friends didn’t seem to click with him half as much as they used to anymore. Josh felt a wave of melancholy wash over him, an attempt to pierce through his joy, and he quieted for a moment, a small smile still on his face as he eyed Tyler as he continued to sing along, oblivious to Josh’s guilt. He felt like he was betraying his friends, abandoning them. They didn’t hang out much anymore. Though honestly, Josh tried reasoning with himself, it wasn’t all his fault. Brendon had been busier than ever ever since he and Ryan had got their shit together- if you could ever consider Brendon having any of his shit together- as close as was possible for Brendon, at least. And Josh just hadn’t felt up to socializing too much for a couple of months back during the winter, he had been- yeah, so he had been too caught up with worrying about Tyler and their relationship, or lack of. He’d brushed Spencer and Dallon off so many times then that their texts and calls had dwindled.

But with Tyler...once they had figured things out, he had always felt up to hanging out with him, couldn’t recall ever really brushing Tyler off, not like with his other friends. What made him so different?

He knew. Josh fucking knew, and it terrified him. So he did what he had found semi successful up to that point whenever he started thinking about it - he clamped shut on those deeper thoughts, stuffed away the guilt about his old friends, and tuned back in to Tyler’s smile and giggles as he sang along to the CD. Josh snickered.

“Surprised you even know the words, douchebag. Thought my music taste was inferior to yours.”

“It is, but your sister’s is great,” Tyler side eyed Josh, and Josh scoffed.

“Well, fine then.” He switched the music to the radio. “She honestly has the biggest crush on you, it’s hilarious.”

Tyler shrugged. “Can’t really blame her, can you, it just runs in your family.”

Josh gaped at Tyler as he beamed proudly. “You are way too smug right now, dude,” Josh laughed, though that didn’t wipe the smirk off Tyler’s face.
They drove in silence for a few minutes, listening to a few fast talking advertisements and corny jingles before “The One That Got Away” started playing. They both groaned simultaneously.

“Major throwback,” Josh grimaced. “Why don’t they play something good?”

“Oh, like the Jonas bros or Avril Lavigne?” Tyler snickered.

“Hey, Avril’s actually good, okay,” Josh had to intervene. “I'll fight you on that one, Ty.”

“Ha ha.”

They pulled through the Arby’s drive through for onion rings and drinks (Sierra Mist what the hell, gross, for Tyler; just coke, thanks for Josh) before Tyler steered the van a street over into the empty back parking lot of Kroger Food and Pharmacy and parked. Josh looked at him quizzically through a particularly long strand of blueish fringe as he chomped on an onion ring. “Really, Ty, you’re this hungry? We just got food.”

“We’re not going shopping, dummy.”

“What then, buying lottery tickets?”

Tyler faked a gasp. “Do they sell those?”

Josh flicked a piece of crust from an onion ring into Tyler’s hair, and Tyler flapped his arms dramatically to get rid of it. Josh snickered, and Tyler glowed.

“Here, give me those.” Tyler snatched the Arby’s bag off of Josh’s lap and unbuckled his seat belt.

“What are you doing?” Josh said, stealing another onion ring from the bag before Tyler held it away out of reach.

“I’m gonna give you driving lessons, come on, get out,” Tyler responded as he unlocked the doors and hopped out of the car, looking way too satisfied in Josh’s humble opinion.

“Wait, what, you’re- you’re gonna w-what?” Tyler slammed the door on Josh’s stammering and marched pointedly around the nose of the van. He opened Josh’s door and waved the hand holding the fast food bag. “Come on, J, get out.”

“But it’s cold out,” Josh said in his whiniest voice.

“Your hoodie’s thicker than mine,” Tyler pointed out.

“Yeah, y’know what else is? My-”

“Shut the eff up, you’re starting to sound more and more like that Brendon every day,” Tyler interrupted in a mom voice, though he was trying not to laugh. Josh snickered, a small wave of pride hitting him when he noticed the blush deepen on Tyler’s cheeks, and, he reasoned, it wasn’t just from the lack of a coat.

“But Tyyyyyyyyylerrrrrrrrrr,” Josh resorted to whining again, crossing his arms over his chest so Tyler couldn’t tug his arm as well anymore. “I don’t...I don’t think we have enough gas for me to
practice driving. Actually y’know I think I have homework I didn’t finish, we should- we should probably study, y’know, we can-”

Tyler flung himself at Josh and Josh floundered for a minute, confused, until he heard his seat belt click and zip back up into place, the metal bit almost smacking him in the eye. He pouted at Tyler.

“C’mon,” Tyler insisted, almost stomping a foot. “I’m a good teacher. Great, actually, you’ll see. C’mon, Josh, please, for me? It’ll be fun, really, bro.”

Josh let out a long sigh and peeked up at the sky above. It was barely even drizzling anymore, he guessed it would be alright, not the end of the whole world at least. It was just a grocery store parking lot, and it was empty. And it was Tyler….

“You are not a good influence on me,” Josh made a last feeble attempt, even as he was slowly climbing out of the car, while Tyler did some sort of funny, stupid looking happy dance.

Josh shoved halfheartedly at his shoulder as Tyler bounded past him into the passenger seat. Josh slipped forlornly into the driver’s side and closed the door with a resolute thud. He was never going to open that door again. This was the end.

Tyler pounded Josh’s shoulder. “Lighten up, bro, it’s so fun, you’ll see, it really is. I love to drive. Hey, have you seen Fast and Furious? I love those movies!”

Josh grimaced. “Yeah, and I hate driving. That’s probably why, even.”

“But Josh! Vin Diesel! And Ludacris! Luda, dude. How can you not just wanna race across the country and-”

“Uh, I don’t want to die, thanks,” Josh interrupted. Tyler only laughed.

“Lemme find a good tune first, then you can burn rubber,” Tyler spouted off as he flipped through several radio channels. Josh fidgeted nervously, kept looking at the sky, hoping it would just let loose and start pouring or thundering or hurricaning or tornadoing or-

“Who sings this, isn’t it that, um…what’s his name, Travis…?”

“Travie McCoy, Gym Class Heroes.”

“Yeah, I like them okay, but I don’t know this song, though…whoa, it’s featuring someone? Who’s singing with him?”

Josh shrugged, tapping his hands nervously on his thighs. This was all just stalling the inevitable. He was going to drive, and they were both going to die, who cared about a Travie McCoy song on the radio featuring some random ass, no-name, mediocre singer screeching out the chorus-

“Oh, yeaaaah, baby,” Tyler all but shouted, changing the channels and turning the volume up on “Shake It Off.” Josh groaned and laughed at the same time, thumping his head against the headrest.

“Come on, Tyler, I wouldn’t have saved your grounded ass today if I had known you’d do this to me, on top of making me drive, too.”

Tyler only laughed in response and poked at Josh’s cheek. “I know you think this minivan is just the best car model ever but surprisingly it won’t drive itself, you know. It’s already on, just put it in drive and let’s go. Put your foot on the break and-”
“I know, I know, I know, I know,” Josh waved Tyler’s hand away and squinted at him indignantly. “I do know how to drive, mister. I just don’t like it. I drove to your house earlier, remember?”

“So then drive.”

There was no mistaking the tone of Tyler’s voice, the challenge in it, and Josh was suddenly filled with the desire to rise to it. Couldn’t let his boyfriend one up him after all, could he?

“Fine,” he said in a matching tone. Tyler raised his eyebrows at him as Josh changed gear and pressed on the gas.

Three hours, two oh-shit-Ty-we-backed-into-a-shopping-cart-the-car-is-ruined-my-mom’s-gonna-kill-me incidents, an endless slew of “god awful” (in Tyler’s opinion) and/or “they’re just overplayed” (in Josh’s) radio selections, an Arby’s large order of onion rings, and half a tank of gas later, Josh finally called it quits, putting the van in park and throwing his hands up, though both he and Tyler were too busy laughing their asses off to be genuinely upset or annoyed.

“That’s it, I’m done. I’m never driving with you again,” Josh declared, putting on as big a voice as he could muster over his giggles.

Tyler ignored him and clutched at his stomach as he laughed.

“You are so not a good teacher, either. What the hell does ‘turn the wheel left clockwise while half breaking’ mean anyways? What the fuck, Ty? How in God’s name did you ever get a license-”

“Eeeh, it took a couple tries,” Tyler admitted, his face red from laughing. Josh nodded smugly.

“A ha, see, I was right, as usual.”

“Hey, what do you mean? I’m always right-”

“Except for about driving apparently, I nearly crashed into that streetlamp and then it would’ve-”

“Well, because you were going like thirty in a parking lot, Josh, so who’s fault was that then, Mr. Schumacher?”

“Shoe mocker? What the hell does that mean?”

The van jostled and both Josh and Tyler shrieked before it stilled again.

“What was th-”

“Put the break on, you dummy, what, do you want us to start rolling or-”

“It is on-”

“The emergency break, Josh-ew-uh-.”

“Okay, Jesus, such a fuckin’ control freak....”

Josh activated the break before they made eye contact and dissolved into fits of laughter again, the van safely stationary on the damp pavement.

Just as their noise began to quiet down, both of them gasping for breath, “Call Me Maybe” blasted
from the radio and made the two of them groan.

“Still just overplayed?” Tyler waved air quotes in Josh’s face, and Josh pretended to bite at his finger, earning a girlish shriek from Tyler as he darted away, squinting his eyes at Josh.

Josh tried to look innocent. “What, I don’t bite.”

“Like shit you don’t, son.”

Josh huffed out a laugh and brushed at some annoying hair in his face. It was probably time for a haircut, but he hadn’t found the time lately to bother.

“Hey, you gonna dye it again?” Tyler unbuckled his seat belt and swiveled in the passenger seat to face Josh, pulling his legs up under him. He reached out and busied himself with fluffing at Josh’s hair, and Josh immediately felt himself starting to blush.

“Uh, maybe. Y’know.” He peeked up at Tyler, who seemed completely unaware of the effect he was having right then on Josh. The tip of his tongue was sticking out of his mouth as he focused on making an especially curly strand of hair stay down on Josh’s head. He tilted his head— he’s so fucking adorable, I don’t think he has any idea, he actually doesn’t, the little brat—before sucking his bottom lip in between his teeth. Josh quickly looked away.

“Hey, you ruined it, it was all standing up like a tower or something.”

“A tower?”

“Yeah, y’know, a tall building.”

“Yeah, thanks for that, Ty.”

“A blueish tower. Gonna do blue again, hm? Or maybe red? Y’know, I kinda like it this dark color, this brownish color, what brand of dye did you use for that?”

“Ha ha.”

“No, seriously,” Tyler leaned forward a little more as he tugged on Josh’s hair. “I like it, it’s pretty.”

“Pretty-“

“Shut the hell up, Joshua, you know what I mean. Here, turn and face me so I can fix this better.”

Josh didn’t argue, just unbuckled his seat belt and shifted to face Tyler. Tyler leaned further over the console and patted at Josh’s head.

“I like the curls. So cuuuuuuuurly.”

“Thanks, it’s a perm.”

“Wait, really-”

“No!”

Tyler started giggling— giggle! — and both Josh’s grin and blush deepened.

Josh was suddenly, intensely aware of the fact that he hadn’t kissed Tyler for...days. Weeks? Since...since Tyler had first been grounded. Okay, so not weeks, but. It felt like it. Josh was also
suddenly, intensely aware of the fact that that was all they had done, hadn’t really ever...gone further. Hell, Josh had practically even gone further with Jenna, in vague theory. And Josh suddenly, intensely, really, really wanted to go further with Tyler.

“Hey...c’mere....” Josh murmured, reaching out a hand and gently clutching Tyler’s wrist. Tyler froze, must have detected something in Josh’s voice; his eyes flicked down to meet Josh’s even as a small smile began pulling at the corner of his mouth. Not that Josh was staring at his mouth or anything. Boyfriends or not, that would’ve been weird.

Josh was also suddenly aware of the fact that they hadn’t officially decided on the term boyfriends, the realization hitting him even as Tyler was pulling away to climb awkwardly over the console and-oh, God, is he....- into Josh’s lap, knees on either side of Josh’s legs.

Tyler smirked down at the frozen look on Josh’s face as his hands seemed to find a hold on Tyler’s hips of their own accord. “You’re right, I can mess up your hair much better from up here.”

Josh huffed a little. “Oh, so you are messing it up. Should’ve known. Can’t trust you with anything, you weasle.”

Tyler started laughing, threading his fingers back into Josh’s curls and tugging a little, not enough to really hurt, or even enough to prompt Josh to pretend that it did, just to try and make Tyler laugh again. He was too busy studying the color of Tyler’s eyes to really make jokes anyways.

“Are we...did...did I ask you to b-be my boyfriend...?” Josh mentally cursed for stumbling over his sentence but forced himself not to look away from Tyler’s face when Tyler’s hands stilled again and he peaked down at Josh.

“Hm...” Tyler began, blinking a few times. Dammit, his eyelashes are fucking long. They’re- oh, hey, those ones are actually even tangled a bit, they’re that long....

“You didn’t, um...I don’t think we like, said anything, like, y’know, officially or...anything...we just....” Tyler trailed off and looked back to Josh’s hair. “...y’know.”

Josh nodded once. “‘S’what I thought...hey, Ty, wanna be boyfriends?”

Tyler blushed a little, and Josh started smiling. He loved making Tyler blush, and if that was a little mean of him, well then tough.

“Well, I mean, y’know, we are ...already, y’know.”

“Yeah, but officially,” Josh prompted.

Tyler squirmed in Josh’s lap, and Josh felt himself blush- fuckin’ karma, dammit- as he desperately attempted to keep himself under control. His legs were hurting from holding himself so stiffly.

“Well, I mean...I guess officially officially would include like, y’know. Coming out and all that to everyone, and...well, um....”

Josh looked away, shame creeping up in him like an unwanted relative dropping by. “Yeah....” And of course, what Tyler wouldn’t say but surely felt, wouldn’t include having a sort of girlfriend, too.

“I’m sorry-” Josh started.

“What, why? No, you’re, you’re not- you don’t need to be,” Tyler cut in. When Josh opened his mouth again, Tyler shoved a finger against his lips and gave him a stern look.
“Shush,” he huffed, and Josh almost smiled. “Whatever you’re thinking right now, Josh, it’s probably stupid, like usual. You’ve got a stupid look on your face. And you’re apologizing again, like...bruh.”

Josh laughed once and Tyler moved his hand away, tugging on the strings of Josh’s hoodie instead. “When...when I said, like, being official boyfriends or whatever probably meant we’d...y’know, do a lot of other stuff, too, and all that, I didn’t mean...I didn’t mean I didn’t want to be like...official...or that I don’t already consider us to be, and all that. Those gross, sappy couples posts—cough, cough, at your friend, Urie—can come later on. Instagram’s not going anywhere, last I checked.”

Josh laughed again. “He is pretty sappy, isn’t he?”

“He’s pretty gross,” Tyler specified. “At least it’s only online.”

“Ha, I wish.”

“Ewwww,” Tyler crinkled his nose, and Josh beamed up at him.

“I’ll let him know you stalk his social media, though, I’m sure he’ll be thrilled.”

“You wouldn’t.”

Josh pretended to think about. “I might.”

Tyler crossed his arms. “Fine, then. I’ll never play Call of Duty with you ever again.”

Josh grinned. “Promise?”

Tyler punched his arm in response, and they both dissolved into giggles.

Katy Perry interrupted them with “I Kissed A Girl,” and Tyler groaned, dropping his head to Josh’s shoulder.

“Oh, noooo.”

“Great channel,” Josh half joked, way too aware of every minute movement of Tyler’s body.

Josh was just about to explode, or at least tug on Tyler’s hair so he could kiss him, when Tyler tilted his head towards him.

“Hey, Josh,” he sang lightly, the radio almost seeming to drown out his voice. “Do you...like, do you like proms, and all that? Like the Valentine’s one this week, and, and that...are you into those?”

Josh hoped Tyler couldn’t read on his face the guilt that shot through his chest again at the mention of the prom. As of then, Jenna hadn’t yet outright asked Josh about it, but for the past couple of weeks Josh had been avoiding any scenes where it would be just him left alone with Jenna, for the sole reason he was terrified she was going to bring it up. And if she did, he didn’t know how he was going to say no, not without setting off alarm bells. That was the last thing he and Tyler needed.

He swallowed down his guilt as best he could before managing a small shrug, even with Tyler’s face still buried against his neck.

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He swallowed down his guilt as best he could before managing a small shrug, even with Tyler’s face still buried against his neck. “I mean...not...not really, nah, they’re just...just stupid high school things, y’know...stupid, really. Annoying, too, y’know...and pretty sappy.”

Tyler didn’t say anything. Josh could feel him still tugging at one of his hoodie strings. When Katy had finished whining into their ears and Tyler still hadn’t said anything, Josh was about to prompt him for a response when someone’s phone rang loudly between them.
Tyler jumped and slipped halfway off of Josh, bumping into the console.

“Shit, that hurt,” he muttered, patting his pockets. “Is that you or-”

“No, Rebecca Black, remember?” Josh said, trying to lighten what felt inexplicably like a slightly heavier mood than earlier.

Tyler only nodded as he clambered back over to his seat, digging through his pockets for his phone. Josh looked out the window, wrestling his disappointment back down.

“Hey, who- oh...yeah, um, hey, Mom….” Tyler peaked over at Josh, and Josh raised his eyebrows.

“I was, um, I was just...kind of...well, I needed to, um...I didn’t have m-my...my homework assignment? A-and, um...Mikey, he...he said he could give it to me and I…”

Tyler fell silent, and Josh could hear the muted voice of Mrs. Joseph on the other end of the line. After a moment, Tyler waved for Josh to start driving before looking away and countering whatever it was his mom had said. Josh only hesitated for a second before sucking it up and starting the car again, buckling his seat belt and slowly- really, really, fucking slowly- pulling out of the Kroger’s parking lot and onto the main road. For whatever reason, Josh doubted that now would be a good time to press Tyler about driving back instead of him, and he wasn’t completely sure that it was just because of his mom calling.

Chapter End Notes

the next chapt should be soooooon peace and love guyssssss
it ain't me, babe

Chapter Notes

omg i'm alive, it's a miracle!!!! once again a very late update, but you my friends are all ANGELS thank you so much for reading my story, i love you i love you i love you <333333

title's a song by the Turtles!

Besides what Tyler had said that Saturday afternoon when Josh had rescued him from a boring day of being grounded, he hadn’t mentioned the Valentine’s dance again to Josh. Josh was both concerned and minorly relieved. Surely, he thought, they had to discuss...well, Josh’s girlfriend issue before then, but mum was the word from Tyler; and unfinished, overdue homework and un researched, six page essays have a way of cramping one’s schedule so as to forget these things that need discussing.

And so Thursday came before Josh even realized, before he had even asked Jenna to go with him to the dance that night. By this point, they were enough of an item, as Brendon had so earnestly put it, that going together to any school function was just understood. A dream situation, Josh mused, for any other ordinary guy, to not have to remember and make a deal of inviting their own girlfriend to everything, but a rather sticky one for a guy who was trying to, as kindly as absolutely possible, dump his girlfriend.

And on Valentine’s day. Shit, bro. I’m fucked.

Also since that last Saturday, Josh hadn’t even been able to stop by Tyler’s after school and hang out. Granted, practices after school had been waxing longer and longer; by the time Josh (and Jordan, annoyingly) got home in the evenings, sweaty and so exhausted he could literally drop, dinner had been served, demolished by two trollish siblings, dishes cleaned and tucked away, and the whole family lounging and enjoying a sitcom on TV. Josh would have minded about all of this, except that Coach Anderson was a pretty decent guy and had been ordering pizzas for the team every night. Nothing like cold stuffed crust Pizza Hut to get the guys giving their all during the last quarter of a four hour practice. On top of a full school day.

So yeah. Forgive Josh if Thursday came a lot sooner than he had expected.

On the evening in question, Jenna picked Josh up from his house- it was still humiliating as anything for him, but he had barely been able to drive with Tyler by his side, no way would he be able to drive in any other situation. Especially with it being Jenna in the car with him.

Before they left, his mom had made only a minor fuss over them, snapping a couple pictures when Jenna had first come in the house, the two of them waiting in the hallway, Josh ready to dart at the drop of a pin. Ashley gave him a pointed look from behind her reading glasses as she slinked by from the kitchen, coffee mug in hand and pajama clad. She had never gone out for proms and dances and that sort of thing; she claimed it was all too childish and mushy. Josh was inclined to agree with her, but whenever she had her reading glasses on and was handing out her looks she reminded him way too much of a college professor for him to try and defend himself for actually going to these
things. The way she smiled at Jenna when she passed before actually glaring at Josh made him certain his sister must know more about him and Tyler than she was letting on. Though he’d never had a heart to heart with her about...that kind of thing. Josh was pretty sure they would have some sort of discussion sooner or later, if that glare of hers was anything to go by.

And yeah, Josh knew it. Ashley was right. He was a rat. A totally awful, miserable, cheating dick. It was kind of cheating, wasn’t it, to lead Jenna on like this while seeing Tyler and...Josh didn’t like where that line of thought led him. It made him sound more and more in his own head like that second cousin of there’s who was twice their age and lived in California and they weren’t supposed to talk about. A cheating scumbag.

The past few days Josh had tried remedying the situation by being as nice as possible to Tyler after school when he was stuck at home still; and as nice as possible to Jenna during school as she showed him pictures of different dresses she might wear to the dance; and as nice as possible to Brendon, who Josh knew he had been giving the cold shoulder to lately, intentionally or not; and as nice as possible to Spencer, who seemed to be having some family issues of his own; and if Josh hadn’t been such a dick friend for the past year then he would have noticed all of this, and....

Josh knew it was probably another dick move, they just seemed to come so easily to him without him even knowing it, but he couldn’t help feeling overwhelmed and even imposed on- God, that’s a hard word, I don’t...maybe that’s not the right word, I just...feel like I have to make everybody happy, y’know? Only I’m so dumb I’ve gone and messed everything up and now there is literally no way for me to get out of all this without messing up somebody, and that’s so unfair and I’m such a dick, why did I let this all happen- ow, shit, shit, maybe don’t talk to yourself while you’re shaving, smart ass, fuck, I’m gonna get blood on my tie-

Josh hadn’t been himself lately. And he was starting to realize he had no one to blame but himself.

And then, just to smear some icing on his own cake, the doorbell rang and Jenna was there and Josh had to stare down that judging look Ash had given him, and he found himself sitting in the passenger side of Jenna’s car before he had even the time to make sure the blood on his tie wasn’t too obvious. He felt himself tensing up as Jenna backed out of the driveway, and it wasn’t because of her driving ability.

She was humming good-naturedly to some song playing on the radio, turned down quiet enough that Josh couldn’t make it out. She had chosen a red dress she had shown Josh a picture of earlier that week. She looked nice in it. God, Josh didn’t want to do this, but he felt it coming up, the words rising in his throat and pressing to come out-

“You okay? You seem a little, I don’t know, out of it,” Jenna ventured. They passed the turn to Tyler’s house and Josh felt a tug on his heart.

“Am I that obvious?” Josh tried to laugh, but it sounded weak. He peeked worriedly over at Jenna, but her eyes were directed ahead. She was sitting kind of rigidly.

“How in the world was he going to say this to this girl? She had been nothing but kind and fun and wonderful to him, even when he had brushed her off so many times, she had never once complained, had never once really bothered him, he had just been too much of a dick to notice, and now he was gonna go and break her heart and she really deserved so much better and-
“There’s someone else, isn’t there?”

Josh’s thoughts veered and crashed into a wall. “I- what? You...how do you know?”

The corner of Jenna’s mouth turned up, though she wasn’t smiling. “I’m not dumb, Josh, you haven’t been very, I don’t know, interested lately.”

Josh studied the side of Jenna’s face before looking back out the window at the road in front of them. “I….”

“Brendon always said you had some crush on someone, he figured it was me for a while, but. I heard him talking to Ryan and the other guys a couple times. They think you’ve been acting weird, and he thinks you’re- well, ‘trying to get under some other chick’s skirt’, is how he put it.”

Josh cringed. “Brendon talks too much.”

“Maybe.” Jenna was silent for a moment. The light ahead of them turned red and with the motor quiet, even with the radio buzzing still, it was way too deathly still in that car for Josh. Ashamedly, as an afterthought, he figured it was probably too deathly still for Jenna, too.

“So...like, how long have you…?”

Jenna’s jaw was working, her teeth grinding, and Josh panicked suddenly that she would start crying. God, what would he do then? Shove open the door and jump out as soon as they hit thirty-five.

“...you know...been into someone else?”

“I, um.....” Josh’s hands were sweating. God, he had known he would have to do this sooner or later, and honestly he’d been lucky, getting away with it for this long, but it was still the most unpleasant thing Josh had had to do in his recent memory of uncomfortable situations. “It’s been a...a while, I guess.”

“Since the new year?”

“Yeah...uh, actually, a little...a little before that, I guess....”

Jenna glanced over at him but before Josh could meet her eyes, the light turned green and she was looking back at the road. “Since before Christmas?”

“Well...yeah....”

Jenna was only silent a moment. “Are you serious? We didn’t...we didn’t even like, get together till around then. Did you...did you ever even like me or- no, don’t answer that, I just....”

*Please don’t cry, please don’t cryyyyy, oh my God.* “Jenna, I’m...I *did* like you, I do , you’re- you’re awesome, I’m not kidding, you’re the coolest girl in the entire damn high school.”

“Don’t give me that-”

“No, it’s true, and you’re *pretty*, like, I mean, you’re *beautiful*, really, and you’re the...just about the nicest person I know, really. And smartest.”

Jenna’s brow was furrowed and Josh was relieved she wasn’t directing that glare at him, though he pitied the road before them. “If you’re just trying to make me feel good and get yourself off easy, you can quit it right now. Don’t lie to me, Josh.”
“I’m not lying.”

“But you like someone else?”

Josh had been worried about this, for a while now, in the back of his mind somewhere; he had worried he wouldn’t be able to break up with Jenna without, well. Getting Tyler involved. God. If I have any friends left at all when this is done I’ll be lucky.

“Yeah...Jenna, I’m sorry, but I...do.”

“You like someone else.”

“Yeah.”

“Who is it?”

Josh didn’t answer. Should he lie, should he just make up someone? Should he claim Jenna wouldn’t know her, she doesn’t go to their school, maybe she lives in a different city? An old girlfriend and they got back together? Maybe he could toss Debbie’s name out there...but if Brendon got wind of that, he’d surely know that was a lie, and-

“Do I know her? Is she a senior?”

The calm way Jenna was speaking made her questions not even sound like an interrogation, just a normal conversation. Josh almost wished she would be all demanding and pushy and mean, and then maybe he’d feel a little bit okay about lying or just flat out refusing to answer. But as it was, he’d already told her he wasn’t lying, and he’d hate- she’d hate- for him to start now.

But...what about Tyler? He’ll...he’ll kill me if I tell her...wouldn’t he? I mean...he wants me to break up with Jenna, surely he knows that means I have to tell her something, shit, shit, we should have talked about this before, then I would know what to do-

“Josh? Is she a junior? Doesn’t she go to Worthington?”

“Jenna, I don’t...I don’t know how to...”

“Josh, you have to tell me. If you want to break up with me and didn’t even have the balls to tell me before this stupid dance, you at least owe me this much. Don’t you think?”

Josh took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “Yeah...you’re right, I just....”

“Just what? I won’t get mad, I just wanna know.”

Josh sincerely hoped Jenna would hold herself to that statement.

“So do I know her?”

Deep breath. “Yeah, I think...not very well, just...” Open eyes. “...you’ve seen them around, I guess.”

“In our grade?”

“Yeah.”

“But I don’t know her that well?”
“No...no, you...no.”

“Josh, don’t make me play guessing games, okay? If you’re gonna tell me then please just tell me, alright? Who is she?”

I wonder if it makes it better or worse that it’s a guy...if was another girl she might go crazy, girls can get pretty crazy, but...if it’s a guy she might think I’ve just like...been using her this whole time, as like a cover up or some shit. Wait- have I? I didn’t...shit, I didn’t mean to, not at first, but I...what if she’s like, homophobic or something? That’s a little old fashioned, I guess, but...no, she’s fine with Brendon and Ryan, why should she care then if...but she and I... she and I... would that gross her out, since...and I’m not even gay, what do I- do I have to explain all that? God, am I gay? I’m not, what am I- does it matter? It doesn’t matter. I just like Tyler. Can I...can I tell her that? God, she’s gonna hate me.

“...Josh? You’re kind of freaking out. God, if it’s such a big deal, then-”

“No, Jenna, wait, don’t get mad, I’m sorry, it’s just...it’s...it’s kind of...hard to...I’ve never told anyone before, and...we’re kind of...keeping us, I don’t know...a secret.”

“Because you were seeing me at the same time?”

Josh winced. “No, not because of that, Jesus, that’s...I’m sorry, this is all my fault, it’s...no, it’s a secret for a different reason, so...so that’s why it’s a little hard for me to, like, y’know. Tell you and all.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t be mad, okay?”

“Josh, how can I get mad if you won’t even tell me? I already said I won’t, so just say it.”

Her tone was a little cold, but it had been since they had started this conversation, and rightly so, so Josh decided to go ahead and just say it. But with some tact, though, maybe ease into the subject, let her know how miserable he’s been for the past several months, trying to sort out his feelings and how he was as surprised as she’ll probably be to realize he likes another boy, and how it was hard for him to act on those feelings and even know if they were real in the first place because he was together with a really, really, really (a few extra really’s wouldn’t hurt) amazing girl, and he was worried there for a bit that he was going crazy and there was something wrong with him, because he had never really liked guys before, had him, and then when Tyler moved to their town and came to their school and took Josh’s place on the basketball team, well, there was so much intense emotion there from the start it just morphed into...well...liking him, and honestly, the rest of the guys all treat him like trash and it isn’t fair because he really is a great guy- and you’d probably like him, too, Jenna, you think Brendon is funny, but just wait till you meet Tyler...yeah, Josh would ease into the conversation, maybe test the waters, make sure, just to be safe, that she was open to different lifestyles and- God, lifestyles, what the hell-

“Josh.”

“It’s Tyler Joseph.”

GREAT. FUCKING. GOING. JOSHUA. WHAT THE HELL, BUDDY. ARE YOU LITERALLY HAVING A SEIZURE RIGHT NOW? WHAT THE FUCK IS IN YOUR BRAIN, YOU ARE SO. SO. STUPID. I CAN’T BELIEVE I JUST-

“Wha-...I...what?”
Josh took such a deep breath that it almost sounded like he was gasping. Maybe he was, Josh couldn’t tell, he was shaking so hard. “I...yeah, um...it’s...me and, uh...yeah....”

“Who did you say?”

Josh closed his eyes again but felt car sick, so he opened them. “I said...uh...Tyler...Joseph....”

His voice got so quiet there at the end that Josh was fully expecting Jenna to ask him to repeat the name for a third time. But she didn’t say anything, she just sat there, weaving her way through the evening traffic.

Finally, finally, after Josh had played through the top ten worst possible outcomes of this car ride in his head three times, Jenna said, “...Tyler Joseph?”

“Yeah.”

“Tyler Joseph?”

“...yeah.”

“Josh...quit fucking with me, alright, it’s not funny. I don’t know if you think this whole thing is just some big joke to you, but it’s not to me, okay. I’ve been honest with you, I always have, I think the absolute least you can do is to take this thing fucking seriously, okay?”

Josh felt some of the tension of “the big reveal” dissipate, but a new kind of tension was building inside him. “Jenna...I am, I am taking this seriously, for real. I wouldn’t lie about this.”

“But you’ve lied all year about actually liking me.”

“I...” Josh didn’t know what to say to that. Why would she believe him, really? She had absolutely no reason to. “I’m sorry.”

“Why can’t you tell me? Why can’t you tell me who it is? Is there even anyone, or is it just me that you dislike so much you wanna break up, and there is no other girl?”

Josh still didn’t know what to say. “There is no other girl....”

“I knew it.”

“There... is a boy. Tyler.”

Josh was a little scared, if he was being honest, to watch Jenna’s profile as he said this, but he forced himself to not look away. By the way her teeth were grinding, it looked as if she were trying very hard not to just lose it with him. Josh crossed his fingers.

It took a long minute before Jenna spoke, “Are you serious?”

Josh nodded, but Jenna wasn’t looking, so he said, “Yeah, Jen...I...look, I know it’s hard to believe, but it just sort of...happened.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“But I thought...I thought you guys hated each other.”
Josh tried not to huff. “That’s what everybody thinks.”

“Well, isn’t it true?”

“No. Well, I mean, it used to be true, I didn’t like him at first, but...I don’t know...I got to know him.”

They were both silent. The school came into view and Jenna turned on the blinker. “So...are you, y’know. Are you gay then?”

Josh knew that question would come up, and he understood that he really wasn’t in any position right now to be demanding any favors, but he was still a little sore that it had to be a part of the discussion anyhow. “No, I’m not.”

“But....”

Josh sighed. “I can like a guy without being gay, okay?”

“Okay, don’t get all bent out of shape,” Jenna retorted, pulling into the parking lot and parking as far away from the rest of the cars and the front door as possible. She turned off the car, and the silence crept in around Josh. He wished the radio was back on.

Jenna shifted in her seat to face him and Josh felt himself starting to get warm. Why did they have to do this now, couldn’t it have waited? Then Josh figured it should have been done in the very least a week ago, definitely not any later than right now. Oh fucking well.

Jenna didn’t say anything and Josh started to fidget. He took a peek at her before asking, “So...what now then?”

Jenna was playing with a sash on the edge of her skirt. She shrugged. “I don’t know. What are people supposed to do in this kind of thing?”

“I don’t know...I think you’re supposed to yell at me.” The very stupid and unfairly larger half of Josh’s brain meant it as a joke to break the ice a little, but he regretted it the second he said it. He braced himself for Jenna’s response.

To his complete surprise, she actually huffed out a small laugh, albeit a humorless one. “Yeah, maybe later. I don’t feel like yelling right now. I’m too...I don’t know. Washed out.”

“Because of....” Josh waved a hand a little, hating himself.

Jenna shrugged again. “Yeah, a little bit.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know.”

They were both silent for what felt like solid minutes. Josh glanced at the clock on the dashboard.

“So, um...I guess the dance is starting.”

“Yeah.”

Josh wracked his brain for the right words, any words. “You wanna...?”

“No. Do you?”
“Not really.”
“Okay.”

Silence again. Josh’s collar felt thoroughly soaked by now.

“Jenna, I really am sorry...I’m really really sorry. It’s not fair I let you get all, y’know, caught up in the middle of this...I mean, I can only imagine like, how tough it must be to be in your situation, y’know, and for me to break up with you like this and everything, tonight of all nights, too, and I just hope that you’re not-”

Jenna scoffed a little, effectively interrupting Josh’s rushed speech. “Don’t think so highly of yourself, it’s not like my heart is broken or anything. You guys are always so full of yourselves, it makes me laugh.”

Josh opened his mouth to reply then closed it. What could he say?

Jenna shifted in her seat. “I...sorry, I didn’t mean that. Not really. A little bit maybe, but....”

“No, it’s okay,” Josh said.

“I don’t hate you, you know,” Jenna was looking at him so Josh forced himself to meet her eyes. “You’re a fun guy. When you’re not being distracted by- well, I guess by your other g- your boyfriend, I mean.”

The seat belt was jamming into Josh’s hip but he felt too embarrassed to make a scene of adjusting it. “It’s only cuz we have to keep it a secret for now, y’know? That’s why I’m so distracted. I’d...I know I’ve been out of it lately, but that’s why. But it’s not...it’s not Tyler’s fault, that’s not what I mean, he’s fine, it’s just....”

“Keeping it a secret.”

“Yeah.”

“So...you don’t wanna tell anybody because...?” Jenna ventured.

“Because....” For one brief, insane moment inside Josh’s head, for the very life of him, he couldn’t think of a single reason keeping him and Tyler from the entire world. Then his senses came back to him. “...well, because the rest of the team’s kinda off with him, y’know, and uh, you know Brendon, how he is and all that, and what happened with my leg back in the fall during that one game, and. And I mean- I don’t know how his parents feel, I don’t know how mine would feel either, I don’t think they’d hate me or anything, but I mean. You know how it is- or maybe you don’t, I don’t know, just...being with someone who’s...y’know...it changes things for you...and the way everybody else...y’know....”

Jenna was giving him a look now, and Josh was put off by how familiar to some of Ashley’s looks it was. A look that said he was being incredibly dense and everyone else understood the situation perfectly while he was running around in circles, making a bigger idiot of himself every time he completed another lap. She was still serious beneath the look, but the look was there all the same.

“Don’t you think....” she started, but the sentence trailed off. Josh shook his head at her, waiting.

“Don’t you think maybe...you just shouldn’t care so much about what other people say?” the look was gone now, thankfully, but Jenna was being pretty intense about keeping eye contact that Josh would rather not. But he did have balls so he held it despite his ill feelings.
“I mean...I used to never think you cared, you just...always did what you wanted, dressed and acted the way you wanted, and you know, it was pretty cool. You weren’t a dick or anything, you just wanted to be a cool, chill guy, and it was cool. You weren’t hurting anybody, you just did your thing.”

Jenna stopped and Josh waited a moment before asking, “But...?”

Jenna looked at him and then dropped her gaze back to her lap, tugging once again at the sash. She shrugged one shoulder. “I mean...don’t get me wrong, you’re still a cool guy—when you’re not cheating on me, I mean— but we got to know each other a little bit, over the past few months. Well. I got to know you a bit, I don’t know about you. I don’t think you were paying all that much attention to me most of the time. But...well, you’re...you’re kind of insecure—”

“Insecure? I am not—”

“Yes, you are. Look, you care so much about what your friends will think and what your parents and family will think and what I think and...the whole school, too. The team. The coach. You worry too much about all of them. You should...you need to focus a little more on what you think. Don’t get me wrong, that doesn’t mean you only care about number one or anything, but...if you...trust yourself a little more, then your...oh, I don’t know, your actions, I guess, are a little more in line with who you are and...and then other people don’t get hurt, too. ’Cause you’re hurting yourself right now, too, y’know.”

Josh looked away. Man, he didn’t think breaking up would involve this kind of emotional and philosophical drilling.

“And...and Tyler, too.”

Josh’s body froze, his eyes jerking back to Jenna’s face uncertainty. She raised her eyebrows at him.

“Well? Am I right?”

Josh looked down and thought about Tyler. Sitting at home right now, thinking Josh was out at the dance with Jenna, and that stirred something in Josh’s memory, Tyler asking him about the dance a while back, when was that? Did...hey, did Tyler... want to go to the dance...with Josh? Josh hadn’t figured Tyler to be the type to like that sort of thing, it was kind of public and all. And of course Tyler knew, what with Jenna and then Brendon and the team and all ( oh, shit, Jenna’s right... ) that they couldn’t, well...go to the dance together . That was totally out of the question. Had Josh been oblivious to Tyler’s feelings about all that, though? He wracked his brain now for anything Tyler might have said along those lines. God, Jenna was right about everything , he had been so distracted about him and Tyler he was even pushing Tyler over. Figure that one.

“I mean...how’s he feel about tonight?”

Josh squirmed. He didn’t really feel ready yet to discuss him and Tyler with anyone else. But Jenna was only trying to help which, given the circumstances, Josh felt was extremely gracious and generous of her.

“Well, he’s...y’know. He’s not excited about it, I guess.”

Jenna nodded, and thankfully didn’t press the issue. A few more silent minutes passed and the sky grew slowly darker. Josh was trying to decide how to breach his request of Jenna to please not let on to anyone anything just yet, when she spoke up, apparently a mind reader.

“I won’t tell anyone, by the way. About you guys.”
“I was just gonna ask,” Josh said, relieved. “We’ll tell people eventually, just...not now.”

Jenna nodded again.

Josh had another thought. “Hey, about you and me though...I...well, I mean....”

“We’re not together anymore.”

“Yeah...but should we...do we tell... like, the guys and all? They’ll notice if we act different.”

“I’m not going to pretend to be your girlfriend,” Jenna said, not coldly, but with a definitive air. Josh had to respect that, even though he probably wouldn’t have said no if Jenna had offered to go on pretending.

“I won’t pretend, but I won’t tell anyone about you guys either. If anyone asks, we just...broke it off. That’s all.”

“They’ll definitely ask.” Josh could see Brendon at the lunch table giving them both the third degree already. Wonderful.

Jenna didn’t reply. The conversation felt like it had finally wound down, and Josh just wanted to go home, but he felt a little too guilty to just leave. “Hey, do you, um...I don’t know, wanna do something?”

Jenna gave him an are-you-serious look so potent Josh actually cringed. “I don’t mean the dance, I just mean...you got all dressed up and everything, and then I went and ruined the whole evening and all, I just thought....”

It took a minute, but Jenna finally flashed him a small, sad smile. “No, thanks. I’m not...not tonight. Maybe sometime, but...I want to be alone for a bit.”

Josh felt a new wave of guilt but he tried his best to swallow it down, nodding understandingly. “Do you want a ride home?”

“Oh, uh, thanks a lot, Jen, that’s great of you, but, um...I think I’d rather walk, y’know...thanks. Thank you.”

It looked for a suspicious moment like Jenna was smirking at him, but whatever look crossed her face happened so quickly Josh couldn’t be sure. He took it as his cue to go ahead and get out of the car. Thank God that was over.

“You do look nice- really great, you know that? It’s a good color on you,” Josh said, leaning into the car after climbing out. “And, um...I’m sorry, again, Jenna, I...just...please know that I am, really.”

Jenna raised her chin and almost smiled again. “See you tomorrow, Josh.”

“Uh- yeah. Yeah, okay. Um...bye. See you.” He closed the door and walked off as fast as he could. God, what an idiot he was. Stupid, stupid. He was so relieved to be done with all that. He felt the strangest feeling as he continued walking, round the corner and the school disappeared from view. He felt almost giddy. This meant so many new things for him and Tyler, he was sure of it. And this...this had been the first step towards them both being able to just be. The next step, logically, was letting the rest of his friends and the team in on it, and they’d get over their thing against Tyler, and they’d all be able to hang out and be chill and- Josh had big plans. Not just yet- no way, slow
down, they’d take it slow, one step at a time, but. It was still the first step, and that was pretty exciting.

Still, even with yard after yard of sidewalk disappearing under Josh’s feet, even with the giddy feeling in his stomach, he couldn’t outwalk the guilt he felt about Jenna. And what else was there to do? He couldn’t make it any easier for her- shit, she had even told him not to think so highly of himself- but he still felt shitty. I guess you just have to give these things time. Jesus, I sound like my mom...I guess this is life though, huh? Damn. It kind of sucks. And I’m only in high school.

It was fully dark out by the time Josh got to his neighborhood, walking slowly and aimlessly, not wanting to go home yet. He didn’t want to face all the inevitable questions from his mom and sisters if he came in this early. The lights were on around the empty basketball court, and Josh felt himself naturally drawn to it, even though he didn’t have a ball, even though he was in a suit.

Even though it was still cold as ass out there.

He leaned against one of the hoops and looked up at the sky. Too many clouds to see any stars, or even the moon; it would probably rain later on. Whenever he came to this court, Josh couldn’t help but think back about meeting Tyler here. And unfortunately, the ensuing embarrassment and pain with his leg. Ha. Good times.

Hm. Tyler. Josh thought maybe he should go over and see him, it was only a five minute walk after all. He had been pretty out of it all week, maybe even in part to the dance tonight, which Josh had stupidly not realized. I am officially the worst boyfriend in this whole stinking country, Josh decided, resigned. But he could still try and not be completely tactless. If he tried thinking from Tyler’s point of view right now- but not thinking too highly of himself as a boyfriend, as per Jenna’s advice- he figured Tyler just might be feeling a little low...and if Josh were Tyler, and Tyler had been the one running around with a pretend girlfriend for a Valentine’s day dance instead of him, Josh decided he might feel pretty bummed. And he decided he would be markedly less bummed if his supposed boyfriend would stop by to see him. Especially given if said boyfriend had been a man and broken off previously mentioned fake relationship and skipped aforementioned dance.

Josh still felt bad, he figured he should for at least a week or two, sort of as penance, but there was that rising feeling of giddiness again. And the more Josh focused on that feeling, the more he recognized it as the way Tyler made him feel. So he set off in his direction.

Chapter End Notes

believe it or not (Lord knows i’ve said this countless times only to prove myself wrong....) but the next chapter will be up this month!!! <33333 SO MUCH LOVE U GUYS ARE GROOVY!!!!
just to maybe hear you say....

Chapter Notes

U GUYS ARE SO SWEET ur comments on this story literally make my entire life <3333 i hope yall like this chapter, it's pretty darn cuuute i think

title from Falling Too by our BOYS ofc <333333 (literally one of my top faves i CRY OKOK)

P.S. LOOK AT THIS! it's a real Josh smile and i cry <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Tyler was depressed, nothing could keep his mind from wallowing in whatever it was that had caused his distress, mulling the same painful thoughts over and over and over again, analyzing the entire situation to death and working himself into a right state. Nothing could distract him...except movies could do a pretty decent job of it.

So there he was that evening, on Valentine’s day- the first, incidentally, that Tyler had ever experienced while not being single- and he was spending it at home watching a movie; in old leggings covered with the Minecraft heart symbol and a baggy, hand-me-down-from-my-little-brother Transformers pajama top, sweating in an oversized hoodie, sandwiched between the armrest and his sister, crowded on the couch with their parents, and Jay lounging on the floor in front of them. They were an hour and a half through the old Bonnie and Clyde film; their mom had protested at first (“Are you guys sure? It’s so... gorey, I don’t know...what about a romcom instead? Huh? How about Enchanted? Or Groundhog Day? No? Ooookay…”) but had finally relented after Tyler and his siblings preyed on her good-natured pity of the fact none of them had any dates for that evening’s dance. All except Zack, but Zack could always get dates, so no one pitied him. In Tyler’s opinion. Their dad, on the other hand, had been all for the movie choice, and his support no doubt helped to persuade their mom.

Tyler was sitting with his legs against his chest (the only way to sit on an overstuffed couch) and hugging a pillow (the only way to get through a high intensity film while also dealing with boyfriend issues without crying. Visible or audible crying, at least.) Tyler wiped at his eyes with a sleeve as lowkey as possible, hoping to not attract Maddie’s attention. The film was getting to yet another intense scene though, so he didn’t even need to really bother. That was partly why Tyler had helped Jay insist so strongly on this movie instead of just a plain sappy romance one. One, if it was too downright mushy, he’d probably start crying, and two, the action was so intense in Bonnie and Clyde it would do wonders at distracting him. So far he had been pretty right.

His phone was on the coffee table. He had argued with himself all that evening, through dinner and while he showered and even while he helped to pick a movie, about keeping it with him or just powering the damn thing off and leaving it under his pillow in an effort to forget anything that wasn’t the current movie, his mug of hot chocolate Maddie had made (she was an excellent hot chocolate maker), and the Reese’s heart candies his mom had brought home for him and his siblings, leftover from her kindergarten kids’ party.

But despite his better judgement, Tyler couldn’t find it in him to leave his phone somewhere he couldn’t grab it in a heartbeat- should he by chance happen to maybe just maybe receive a text from,
well, Josh. His boyfriend. On Valentine’s day. It wasn’t unheard of.

But so far...nothing. Tyler tried not let that tiny, nagging feeling of anger take over his hurt. Better to mope and feel petty and sorry for yourself for a short while than to get angry and let it potentially build itself up into a huge thing that might be hard to let go of later on. And the anger that tiny, shameful part of Tyler was wanting to feel was just amplified jealousy, and jealousy was even more petty than simply feeling sorry for yourself. Especially when it was over something as stupid and girly as a dance.

So Tyler settled on having a good old fashioned pity fest, though he guessed watching a true crime movie with his family didn’t exactly count in the traditional sense. Though he was cramming enough Reese’s hearts into his mouth to make himself feel a little sick, and his eyes were a little puffy with unshed tears and his nose a little snotty. So there was that.

Tyler realized as he was unwrapping another Reeses that he was thinking about the whole Josh/Jenna thing again and he had missed the last five minutes of movie. So he mentally shook himself by the shoulders and forced his attention back to the screen. It was getting to the good part anyways.

His phone buzzed. Jay, Madison, and their dad shushed Tyler so loudly his mom started to laugh. Jay and Maddie shushed her too. Jay turned the volume up.

“Tyler, turn your damn phone off—”

“Maddie, language, or else we’re getting rid of this movie—”

“I’m rewinding this thing, you guys suck!”

Tyler almost flopped off the couch as he snatched up his phone and silenced it, as another text alert sounded. “Geez, I’m sorry,” Tyler whispered as Maddie elbowed his stomach. “Mom, tell her to stop, that hurts—”

“Maddie, leave your brother alone—”

“Haha, baby,” Maddie laughed, followed by Jay’s outburst at having to rewind the same scene again.

Tyler slid off the couch and tossed his pillow on his seat, maybe aiming a little close to Maddie’s head to really save his spot effectively. His mom started to say something, but he was already out of the room.

He didn’t know why his heart was beating so fast, it wasn’t like back in the day when he and Josh weren’t on the same terms and hadn’t acknowledged their feelings towards each other yet. They were boyfriends, for God’s sake, why should Tyler’s heart be pumping like this? Maybe it’s a heart attack, too many candies, Tyler worried, even as he shakily perched on the bottom step and turned on his phone.

Mikey: ugh dances are dumb

Mikey: u were smart not to bother

Tyler’s heart sank a little, even as he felt a twinge of guilt for not being excited about his friend texting him. Though based on Mikey’s texts there wasn’t too much to be excited about anyways, so there was that.
Another couple texts came in, giving Tyler time to steady himself before having to formulate a reply.

Mikey: guys can be real dicks

M: as i’m sure u kno lol

Tyler was aware Mikey had been acting relatively weird- for Mikey- lately, a little distant, and Tyler had wondered more than once if Mikey was maybe hiding something from him; but given that Tyler himself had kept things- big, Josh related things- from Mikey back in the day, and also given that he had been a little distant himself lately, what with schoolwork and practices, he didn’t entirely blame his friend if he had been keeping something back. Who knows, maybe he hadn’t even meant to, he’d just been too busy to mention it.

But he was mentioning it- something, Tyler wasn’t sure-right now, so Tyler swallowed the tiny bit of disappointment at the texts not being from Josh and tapped out a reply.

T: ha yeah ik. What r u talking abt? U told me u weren’t going tonite

M: stag

T: oh. And?

M: nbd just this guy i like is messing around

M: sorry i shouldn’t hav bothered u im a little drunk

T: its OK. it IS kind of a big deal if ur pissed abt it tho bro

M: maybe lol i hate him tho so

T: well u kno i can relate to that haha

T: so are we both gay

M: ha yeah

M: it’s contagious and ur the carrier

Tyler considered a moment before breaching the subject. Mikey seemed to have enough on his mind without Tyler’s troubles, too, but he couldn’t help himself. He was probably too out of it right now anyways to really notice if Tyler changed the direction of subject slightly. Hell, he might even appreciate it, the poor guy.

T: so how’s the dance besides that? that’s code btw for what is my bf up to

T: not flirting too hard is he?

M: J? he’s not here

Tyler furrowed his brow and peered at his text messages as if the letters would rearrange themselves into a sentence that made more sense than what they currently did. Josh wasn’t at the dance? But he and Tyler had talked about- well, not in great detail or anything, but it had been understood that Josh would, unfortunately, in Tyler’s apparently mushy opinion, take Jenna. His supposed girlfriend. And Tyler had no texts from Josh...and if he wasn’t at the dance then...well, where was he?

M: ur not freaking r u?
M: did u think he’d b here?
T: he was gonna take Jenna
T: is she there
M: haven’t seen her
M: guess ur bf needs a leash
T: maybe
M: sorry i shouldn’t hav said that im drunk
M: don’t worry bro it’s prob nothing

But it was too late, Tyler already was worrying, very much so. Josh and Jenna weren’t at the dance. What was that supposed to mean? What if...some crazy thoughts started to form in Tyler’s head before he could stop them. Well, he hoped they were crazy, but maybe they weren’t so far fetched anymore. What if Josh had been so hesitant to break up with Jenna for the past weeks because he...he maybe...actually really liked her. Tyler didn’t doubt he did, a little, but he thought...he had always assumed...that Josh had liked her as a friend. Month old memories jarred themselves in his brain, not for the first time, of Josh and Jenna back at that last dance, in December. Granted, they hadn’t...they weren’t together then, but...Josh had seemed, well...into her. At the time. For the few pathetic seconds that Tyler had stood there watching. Or maybe he was just remembering it wrong. Josh would have told him if he had been getting wet feet about...about them. Him and Josh. If he had started to doubt whether or not they should be together. Josh would tell him. Right?

God. Tyler had gone from feeling a tiny bit jealous and a lot self pitying, which was all fine and good on their own, because they would end in do time, especially after he and Josh could hang out together for a bit, maybe after the game; especially after the next time he could feel Josh’s lips on his, especially then. Maybe a little drama like that even helps to make teen romances so damn exciting.

But to feel this. Jealousy had overtaken any pity Tyler had previously felt towards himself. Or maybe, the more he thought about it, they were one in the same. Yin yang type of thing? He didn’t know. All he knew then was- maybe, probably, realistically- he wasn’t good enough and Jenna was, and Josh was so beautiful and wonderful and Tyler had never felt better about being himself than in the past weeks that they had been together, and now all of that was gone, and Tyler would never be good enough for anyone, and he had just lost the best thing in his life without even realizing it, and no one would ever, ever love him, and he would never, ever, ever, ever love anyone else besides Josh, ever again-

Oh, shit. Tyler stopped his line of runaway thinking and looked up at the ceiling. A single hot tear rolled across his cheek and trailed down his neck into his shirt collar. He took a steadying breath. Did I say that I...do I...do I... love ...Josh...? Do I... love him?

Tyler had apparently stunned his brain into quiet for several seconds as he sat there and just breathed, in and out. His dad called from in the family room.

“Hey, Ty, the shoot out’s about to happen, want us to pause it for ya?”

“Chris, really-”

“N-no, I’m..I’m good, you guys go ahead...I’ll be right back,” Tyler called softly, once he wiped the single tear’s track off his face. He sniffed and looked down at his phone again, though it had turned
itself off. His brain slowly started to let thoughts filter back in.

So...I might love him. Maybe. I thought it in my head casually enough, but...but I was upset— I am, and...well, maybe that played a part in me...maybe blowing the situation out of proportion...I mean, after all, I still don’t know where he is. I mean, he might be at the dance, Mikey just didn’t see him...and...oh, God, does that make it better or worse about him maybe not liking me at all and actually liking Jenna? But wait, I didn’t even think that until I found out he wasn’t— might not be—at the dance, so...so what? Ugh, I’m confused, I don’t know what to think and now...now I think I might...God, I hope I don’t. That would make everything, regardless, be so, so much harder. I like him. I like him a lot, he’s my first real boyfriend, my first real...well, obviously, that past girlfriend thing was bad, he’s the first person I can be with that I’m actually like, y’know, into. Of course I’d have strong feelings about that, especially in my head when I’m upset and emotional and blowing things up way bigger than they probably are. I probably just blew up the fact I really, really, really, really like Josh and thought that I...felt more than that for him.

The other side of Tyler’s brain kicked into gear, much to Tyler’s distress. Why do you think it’d be such a big bad thing to love him, huh, mister? Why are you so set not to feel that emotion? Ugh, no, just let me rest! I don’t wanna think about it right now! It’s because you’re in high school, right, I’m only a teenager and teenagers aren’t, aren’t...aren’t able to understand that particular emotion yet. Right. Right, that makes sense, yes...best not to let these emotions run away from us. Got to keep things under control. Yeah, especially given my boyfriend might be off right now with his girlfriend, willingly, because he...because he doesn’t love me back. Stop! Thinking! That! You like Josh, he likes you, he liked Jenna, but he likes you more, okay, now stop worrying and stop thinking silly things you can’t possibly be able to feel. Cut it out. Just don’t-

His phone buzzed on his lap and jogged him from his obsessive thoughts so harshly he almost slipped off the step he was sitting on, his heart racing. He glared at his phone, snatching it up and turning it on, not sure why he felt such a sudden burst of anger, but it was pretty obvious he wasn’t in any damn mood to be texting when his heart was breaking open, he’d just kindly and tactfully suggest to Mike that both of them let it rest tonight, and then tomorrow on the bus to Akron they could discuss their boy problems, and if Josh didn’t explain to him first thing tomorrow morning, then Tyler would damn well be giving that lousy boyfriend of his the coldest shoulder south of the North Pole, and it would damn well serve that rat fink right-

There were several more texts from Mikey, but the most recent one that had buzzed and scared Tyler half to death stared up at him, harmlessly, innocently, from the glowing screen of his phone.

Joshie: hey bb u still up
Joshie: i mean its only 9 but ur a bit of a grandma sometimes so i thought i’d check <333

Tyler’s heart was pounding, and his brain was once again completely empty. He stared at his phone for a minute, blinking at it. He registered the sounds of a hail of bullets and his mom’s distant muttering, muted from the room over, suddenly drowned out by the sound of his own breathing.

His fingers trembled, itching to respond but unsure of what to say; his mind was still too tangled up in depressing thoughts to understand.

Joshie: bbbbbbb u awake

It didn’t seem, judging from the texts, as if Josh had sneaked off from the dance with his beautiful girlfriend whom he was actually deeply in love with— in like...with?? Ugh - instead of his crumby, gangly old boyfriend in a ridiculous outfit, whom he was preparing to drop via text on Valentine’s day evening. Josh, judging from his texts, seemed fine. Normal. Tyler tried desperately to calm his
breathing. His fingers shook but he managed a reply.

*T: i’m up. Why

*Joshie: ur still grounded

*T: ya

*Joshie: but can i come over anyways?

Tyler’s head felt dizzy with how quickly his heart switched directions. It was only nine, the dance had only started an hour ago, and here Josh was texting him, wanting to come over...whether he had been at the dance or not, that either didn’t sound like breaking up at all... or else it really, really did. No it didn’t, it was just...Tyler was confused and still a little peeved and he wanted some more Reeses’ hearts. And he really, really wanted Josh.

*T: yeah sure i’ll let u in

*T: text me when ur here

*Joshie: ok

*Joshie: i’m here

Tyler half huffed, half laughed, shaking his head at his phone in disbelief. Josh sent a kiss blowing emoji. Definitely a good sign. Tyler felt himself starting to relax a little bit.

*Joshie: let me in? I feel dumb standing here

Tyler dropped his phone so fast it clattered off the step and onto the floor. He could hear the music of the credit scene playing from the other room, and he quietly undid the lock on the front door and pulled it open.

Josh looked up from his phone and a smile split across his face. Tyler mirrored it, his cheeks hurting already with how intensely he was grinning. He jumped at Josh, wrapping his arms around him in a bear hug.

He knocked the air out of Josh, he could tell; Josh stumbled back a step, laughing, a beautiful sound in Tyler’s ear, his face buried in Josh’s chest. Tyler had seen him just that day at school, and during practice, but they had only sent a couple quick texts, and Josh had waved once to Tyler when they passed in the hall and no one was looking. And all the while Tyler knew that that evening, he’d be stuck at home while his boyfriend took someone else to the Valentine’s dance. Tyler had just really, really missed Josh, okay.

“Aw, Tyler, hey, babe,” Josh all but cooed against Tyler’s neck, the light brush of his lips and the tone of his voice enough to calm all the wild thoughts that had been rioting around Tyler’s head. “Hey, now, baby, are you okay? You’re- look, you’re getting your socks all wet.”

Josh had pulled away enough now for both of them to catch their breaths, but Tyler still had his arms around Josh’s neck, unwilling to let go. He huffed. “I don’t care about my socks, Josh.”

“Oh- okay,” a look of amusement and mild concern crossed Josh’s face as he studied Tyler in the porch light’s yellow glare. His hands were on Tyler’s hips. “Are you alright? You seem a little...I don’t know, a little tense?”
Tyler shook his head, unable to look away from Josh’s face. God, why did it suddenly feel like it had been so long? “I’m alright now.”

“You sure?”

Tyler nodded and admitted, a little shyly, “Now that you’re here.”

Josh’s face softened immediately, something warm flooding his features, and Tyler could feel his thumb stroking circles on his side over his hoodie. He gently ran one of his hands he had around Josh’s neck up into his hair.

“Ty, baby, I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Tyler murmured, memorizing Josh’s face, every inch and movement of it.

“For tonight. For being awful to you. For leaving you here and...and being off with someone else. I’d rather have been with you.”

There was so much honesty in Josh’s voice, it physically hurt Tyler to think that just moments before he had been doubting him so drastically. He shook his head, hating the sad look that had come across Josh’s face just then, the resigned look.

“No, Josh, it’s- it’s okay, I know. I know, alright? You don’t have to say sorry.”

“But I am. Sorry, I mean.”

Tyler had to force himself to let go of Josh, dropping his hands to his shoulders instead. He peered at him. “Are you alright? You’re the one who seems tense, to be honest. I- hey, look at you, all dressed up and everything.” Tyler fully let go of Josh then, stepping back to get a better look at him. He looked him up and down and whistled, giggling as a visible blush appeared on Josh’s cheeks. Tyler reached out and pinched at one.

“Aww, look at you, yer so sweet,” he giggled. “Is wittle Joshie Woshie embawwassed-”

“Shut up, Tyler!”

Tyler dissolved into snorts of laughter as Josh glared at him, not even halfheartedly, and crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m not making any smart ass comments about you in your- your fancy pajamas. Nice pants.”

“Hey, it’s Transformers,” Tyler protested, looking down at his own outfit. “And a hoodie. I’m comfortable. You, not so much.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t wear pajamas to a dance, now can I?”

Tyler stopped giggling at that, remembering that Josh had indeed been planning to go to that evening’s dance, and, for whatever reason, was now standing on his doorstep instead.

“Yeah, speaking of, why aren’t you, um….” Tyler began.

Josh reddened even more, dropping his gaze and waving a hand. “I, um...well, y’know....”

“No...? I thought you were going with...um, well...you got dressed for it and everything, did you leave early or something?”

“I...I broke up. With Jenna.”
Tyler tried not to gape at him. He felt several different emotions tugging at him all at once. He tried not to sound too ecstatic. “You what?”

“We broke up….”

“Really?”

Josh nodded. He looked upset, and Tyler couldn’t understand why.

“But that’s…that’s good! Right?” He watched carefully as Josh searched for an answer. A little bit of that old fear of his started to creep back up his spine.

“Yeah, I…yeah, it is,” Josh started, shifting from foot to foot. “It is good. I just….”

“Josh, you look upset, tell me what happened,” Tyler demanded, reaching out to brush a hand gently down Josh’s arm over his suit jacket. “Didn’t she…did she get mad? Did you-” Oh. Shit… . “-did you have to tell her about…y’know…about us?”

Josh peeked up at Tyler through a longish strand of hair and chewed on his lip before speaking. “She…yeah, Ty, I…I’m sorry, but I…I didn’t know how to, to do it if I didn’t tell her, and…I didn’t want to, ’cause I didn’t know how you would feel about, y’know, someone else knowing about us, we didn’t talk about that at all, and I wouldn’t have…I wouldn’t have broken up without talking to you first so we could get it all straight, but it just…it just happened, and honestly I’m glad it’s over, I should have done it a long, long time ago. I’m sorry to have put you through that, that was wrong of me, but I didn’t…but I broke up with her, and…I’m really sorry I had to. Y’know.”

“Is…that why you seem upset right now? ‘Cuz you had to tell her about us? Or ‘cuz you…had to break up?”

Josh shrugged. “A little bit of both, I guess.”

“Oh….” Tyler didn’t know what to think. Was Josh…sad about breaking up or sad about breaking up?

“Ty? What’s wrong? Shit, I’m sorry I had to tell her about you, I wouldn’t have if I didn’t have to, but-”

“No, no, it’s okay, I get it, but…I mean, if you didn’t want to…didn’t wanna, y’know, break up with her, well, you didn’t…you didn’t have to…just ‘cause of me, and-”

Josh interrupted. “What do you mean? What are you talking about?”

“Well, I mean…y’know, if you liked her, you didn’t have to-”

“Liked her? Tyler, I…I like you , don’t you know that? Jesus, don’t you know that?”

Tyler felt his own cheeks heating up now, and he crossed his arms. “Well, I….” he couldn’t think of what to say, and Josh seemed to wilt a little.

“I guess I should have expected this. I know, I was leading you on, too, in a way. Tyler, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, can you…please don’t be mad at me, okay? I can’t- I couldn’t stand it if you were mad.”

Tyler didn’t fully understand everything that was going on right then, but he was dead certain that Josh apologizing right now didn’t feel right, technicalities be damned. And also, as adorable as those brown puppy eyes and pout were on Josh’s face, it wasn’t right that he was sad about all of this and
what he had done tonight. It wasn’t *right*.

“I’m not mad, Josh,” Tyler said, reaching out for him again, unable to stop himself. His fingers fiddled with the bottom button of Josh’s jacket. “It’s okay, everything...don’t worry about it, babe.”

Josh moved his hand as if to touch Tyler’s but he didn’t. “Josh, I’m not mad,” Tyler repeated, in case Josh was stupid and didn’t get it the first time.

Josh sighed quietly. “Okay...” he said finally.

Tyler rolled his eyes, a smile tugging on his lips. “Just okay? C’mon, J. Don’t be so serious. You’re always taking things so hard.”

Josh looked up at him helplessly and Tyler started to laugh again, for want of any better reaction. Josh seemed a little put out.

“C’oooooon, Josh,” Tyler sang, voice a tad bit whiny, but he didn’t care. He grabbed both of Josh’s hands in his own. “Kiss me, quick! It’s been too long.”

A small smile crept onto Josh’s face as he peered at Tyler, ducking his head slightly. His cheeks were still pink, Tyler noticed with glee that he didn’t bother to conceal.

“Hey,” Josh said after a second, his turn to sound whiny. “Are you making fun of me again? Why are you always making fun?”

“I guess because you just make it too damn easy,” Tyler said brightly. He batted his eyelashes a couple of times and leaned towards Josh. “Kiss me, Joshua.”

Tyler was opening his mouth to make another smart remark about Josh being a prude when Josh’s mouth was suddenly in the way, his arms around Tyler’s back and pulling him flush against Josh, their legs tangling. Tyler stumbled but Josh was holding him so he couldn’t fall over or something similarly embarrassing, and after a moment he stopped flailing his arms and let them rest around Josh’s neck again, his fingers slipping up into Josh’s hair of their own accord. Tyler loved the soft, wavy feel of it, the heat of Josh’s skin beneath his fingertips. Yeah, it had been way, way too long.

Josh’s tongue found its way into Tyler’s mouth like it belonged there- in Tyler’s opinion, it did- and Tyler made a soft sound of surprise, the feeling never becoming familiar, the sensation always a little strange, but feeling so incredibly *right* all the same. He opened his mouth quickly for Josh, would never dream of keeping him out, holding his head in place directly against his by his curls. Boy, did he need a haircut. Not if Tyler had any say in the matter though. It was shockingly curly the longer it got, and Tyler loved it as much as he loved every other part of Josh. Which was so much he felt like his chest was about to explode. One of Josh’s hands slipped from Tyler’s waist and up his back, it was over his hoodie and over his tee but the feel of Josh against him made Tyler gasp out loud into Josh’s mouth all the same. God, it hadn’t been just long since they’d done this, it had been *forever*, and *nobody* was gonna catch Tyler stopping any goddamn time soon-

“Tyler? What are you doing with the front door open, hon? You’re letting all the warm air out.”

Except maybe his mom.

They jumped apart, Tyler tripping against the step by the doorway and just barely managing to catch himself. Josh was snickering at him, and Tyler glared at him as he wiped at his mouth, as if there were some visible trace there of what they had been doing, besides slightly swollen lips. Josh’s looked swollen at least. He turned towards the door just as his mom appeared.
“Ty, what are you- oh, well, hello there, Josh, isn’t this a nice surprise,” Mrs. Joseph smiled at Josh and he immediately stopped snickering.

“Well, don’t you look nice in that suit! So handsome. Your mom must be so proud.”

“Um, Josh looked horrified. Tyler had to subtly cover his mouth with his hand to keep from laughing out loud at him.

“You were at the dance tonight, right?” Tyler’s mom continued, oblivious to Josh’s discomfort- or, in Tyler’s opinion, sneakily aware of way more than she ever let on to, and opting to ignore it anyways- “How was it? All decked out in hearts and such, I imagine. Is it over so soon? It’s only- it’s barely nine. I thought all you teenagers stayed up half the night. I know mine do.”

“Mooooom,” Tyler started.

“What? We’re just chatting, Tyler, that’s what people do,” Mrs. Joseph said, and Tyler groaned. “We were just watching a movie- Tyler’s still grounded, unfortunately, I’m sure you know, though I am sorry he had to miss the dance tonight. He’d never admit it, but he’s a real sucker for stuff like that, I know.”

“Mom!”

“Oh, c’mom, Ty, it’s okay to admit things, you know.” Mrs. Joseph gave him a look and Tyler threw his hands up. Why did moms always have to embarrass you in front of your crush….

“Mom, we’re going to put in a Cary Grant movie now, which one do you- ooooh, what’s going on?” Maddie appeared behind their mom in the doorway and Tyler groaned out loud.

“Really, guys? C’mon-”

“Oh, hey,” Maddie said, only a little shyly. “You’re Tyler’s friend, right? Aren’t you Josh? Tyler talks about you all the time-”

“I do not, shut up!” Tyler felt himself quickly losing control of this entire situation.

“Tyler, don’t tell your sister to shut up-”

“Weren’t you at the dance? Why are you here?” Maddie asked, and Tyler sent her a death glare.

“I, um,” Josh glanced from Maddie to Mrs. Joseph and then to Tyler, looking lost and at a complete loss for an excuse. His hands were fidgeting, Tyler noticed, and as funny as the situation might be, he was feeling a little put out at his family for causing it, especially when all he wanted to do was to take Josh’s hands back into his and stop him from all that fidgeting. Josh didn’t need to be dealing with all this right now either. “Um...it, uh, ended early. I’m sorry, Mrs. Joseph, I know Tyler’s um, grounded, but I thought it would be okay if I, um...just stop by for a minute, or...?”

Mrs. Joseph waved a hand. “Of course, Joshua, anytime, you’re welcome anytime in this house, you know that, of course.” Hey, maybe his mom hadn’t ruined the situation as much as Tyler had thought!

Tyler’s dad’s voice sounded in the hallway. “Hey, gang, why’s the door open? You’re letting all the warm air out-”
Great. Tyler groaned again, much to Josh’s amusement, he noticed, judging by the smirk he shot at him just then.

“Great, hey, dad, why don’t we just grab Jay and we can all stand outside,” Tyler said, his mom glaring at him.

“Tyler, I don’t think that tone is necessary-”

“No, he’s right, isn’t he, Kells- oh, do we have a guest? Josh! It’s nice to see you, bud! How’s the leg?”

Josh looked majorly uncomfortable at all the sudden attention, and Tyler couldn’t blame him. Parents, man, are they all like this?

“Hi, Mr. Joseph, I’m, uh- I’m better. A couple months ago…."

“Of course, of course, you just wanna be careful with it still, you got that game tomorrow and everything. Once you put that kind of tension on your bone and the muscle it doesn’t heal quick, it can hurt you later on, years from now-”

“Dad, he knows, okay, it’s all fine now,” Tyler interrupted. “Mom, why are you standing with the door open, you always complain it lets the warm air out and wastes electricity when we do it. And Maddie- I think I hear Jay putting in The Ring, so you better go stop him, quick….”

“ Why do we own that movie-” Tyler’s mom started, even as Maddie dashed off down the hallway, and Mr. Joseph started to laugh, clapping a hand on Tyler’s shoulder.

“Forgive us, Josh, please come in, look at us, Tyler’s right, making you stand out there in the dark, c’mon on in- that’s alright, isn’t it, Kelly-”

“Yes, yes, I told him he could stay, that’s alright. I’ll get you all some more hot chocolate. You like movies, Josh? We're not watching The Ring, but we have some old films if you like those, we’ll find some fun ones for Valentine’s day-”

They moved inside- finally- Tyler’s parents disappearing back into the family room, their voices muffled. Tyler turned to Josh, the relief obvious in both of their faces. The whole thing was just so ridiculous. And all this commotion, directly on top of the newfounded assurance that Josh actually and really, genuinely liked him. Ridiculous as well, Tyler knew, since they were boyfriends. But he couldn’t help it, any of it. It was all too much for Tyler to handle, so he started giggling.

“Someone’s gotta be,” he managed in between gasps for breath, and after a second Josh started to smile.

“I think both of us have too many family members for own good,” Josh said, which wasn’t even that funny, but Tyler was in a laughing fit and Josh’s comment only added fuel to the fire, and he leaned his head on Josh’s shoulder, unable to quit snickering.

“Do we really have to sit down here and watch a movie with the whole fam?” Josh asked once Tyler had pulled away to gasp for breath.

Tyler’s voice was still shaky as he responded, “Why, did you have other plans?” He wiggled his eyebrows at Josh, and when Josh blushed again Tyler started to laugh at him.
“Tyler, Jesus, are you okay, man? Nothing right now is that funny….”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Tyler said, trying to regain at least a little bit of his composure. Deep breaths. He grabbed his phone from the steps and pocketed it, turning back to face Josh, a huge smile still splayed across his face. “It’s not that it’s all funny exactly, it’s just...I’m really glad you’re here.”

Tyler hoped Josh wouldn’t think he was weird- weird er- and poke fun about him verbalizing his emotions, though Tyler wouldn’t have held it against him if he did, to be honest; Tyler knew he was an absolute bucketcase and he was weird and he was just so fucking glad Josh was here with him, because if he thought about it all too hard, it didn’t make sense, no one would willingly choose him over anybody, and the fact that Josh did made Tyler feel things in ways he didn’t know were possible. Underneath it all right now, Tyler felt fragile, like he’d been worn pretty thin lately, and the slightest thing could knock him up. Like Josh not understanding what he meant when he said he was glad he was here.

Josh stared at Tyler for a moment, possibly waiting to see if he would dissolve into giggles again; but when Tyler didn’t, just waited quietly for Josh to respond, a smile grew across Josh’s entire face, those little lines appearing beneath his eyes and his dimples popping out. A real Josh smile. The kind that not only reached his eyes but shone most brightly through them, his gaze honey brown and warm and safe and loving- and the full strength of it was directed at Tyler.

Earlier on, before Josh had texted Tyler as he was sat there on the staircase, worrying himself sick with his distress and loneliness, Tyler had been unsure. He had argued with himself, he’d been surprised, worried, even a little frightened, maybe disappointed. But there was not a single, solitary doubt in his entire being now, not when he looked at Josh and his smile, smiled at him, smiled for him. Tyler knew.

And he was immensely pleased, whilst under the literal sunrays of Josh’s happiness, to realize that he wasn’t the least little bit scared anymore to feel what he knew he did, and had felt for a long time now.

Tyler loved Josh. And he felt fine.

He wanted to say something but didn’t know what- what do you say after realizing something like that?- but just then his mom popped her head out from the other room.

“Hey, Ty, we got another movie in, maybe Josh would like to change into something a little more comfy, okay? Go see if you can find some shirt or pants for him, alright, hon?”

Oh, well. His deeper, stronger realizations and emotions could wait for a while- right now there were some serious opportunities for teasing that Tyler would rather die than pass up.

“Sure thing!” he replied with gusto, waving at his mom before grabbing Josh’s hand and all but dragging him up the stairs behind him.

Josh laughed at Tyler’s enthusiasm as he shoved Josh towards his room and started sifting through drawers. Josh hovered awkwardly in the doorway.

“I can just stay in this, it doesn’t matter,” he suggested, tugging at his tie.

“Nah, dude, you gotta get out of that, you can’t hang out in a suit when I’m wearing pajamas,” Tyler said.

Josh mumbled under his breath. “I thought you liked the suit.”
Tyler pulled out a couple of shirts and turned around. “I do, Joshie, but I’d rather see you taking it off right now.” Josh raised his eyebrows and Tyler added mischievously, “And putting some of my clothes on instead, you perv.”

Josh snickered a little as he wandered into the room, loosening his tie. “Oh?”

Tyler raised his eyebrows right back at Josh’s smug face. “Are you offering to put on a show?”

Josh blushed- Tyler knew he would, which maybe made his comment a little unfair, but Tyler didn’t mind playing dirty right now. When Josh didn’t respond other than finishing up with his tie and tossing it onto Tyler’s bed, Tyler held up the shirts he had found.

“They’re probably gonna be a little tight, but comfier than what you’ve got now. I’m guessing you’d rather wear my clothes than Zack’s. Groooooooss.”

Josh scowled at Tyler. “‘A little tight’? Are you calling me fat?”

“No, of course not, Joshie. Just a little thick,” Tyler said, unable to keep from giggling.

Josh glared again. “I am not. You’re just skinny.”

“Oh, c’mon, J, it’s a good thing, you look sick, man! I love your thick thighs.”

“Ty ler, stop it or I can’t change in front of you,” Josh tried to sound stern, but that’s an arguably difficult thing to do while also trying to hide a smile.

Tyler noticed and only hummed happily to himself in reply, throwing himself across Zack’s bed, stretching out on his stomach and propping his chin up with his hands to watch Josh.

Josh squirmed under his boyfriend’s sudden intense scrutiny. “And stop staring. You’re making me nervous.”

Josh was acting incredibly shy and Tyler couldn’t remember him ever being more adorable. Maybe he was being a little unfair but he couldn’t help himself dammit, Josh’s eyes and little pink blush were making him fifty times cuter than any pupper ever could be right then, and Tyler was loving it. He just tilted his head, hiding his smile halfway with a hand.

Josh stammered for a only second before setting his jaw, a slight hint of defiance in his eyes that made Tyler’s heart beat trip a step. Josh shrugged out of his jacket. He tossed it on top of Tyler’s head.

“Joooooosh,” Tyler whined, voice muffled beneath the fabric. He could hear Josh snickering as he struggled with it for a minute. He sat up cross legged on the bed and knocked the jacket to the floor.

“I don’t know why you insist on acting like this now, you better get over me looking at you or else we won’t have much fun in the future.”

Josh had been fumbling with the buttons on his cuffs when he stopped at Tyler’s words and looked up at him. He raised an eyebrow. “In the future?”

Tyler gave Josh a look and grinned. “Yes, in the future. You know what I mean. Anyways, J, you really gotta find some clothes to wear right now, though-”

“Why are you changing the subject-”

“I’m not, it’s just my whole family’s downstairs waiting on us, you dummy. So what’ll it be, my old
Josh stared at him a second before laughing, half in amusement and half in disbelief. “You are the most ridiculous person I’ve ever met, I swear.”

Tyler smiled smugly, elated. “Anything to make you smile, Joshie.”

Josh must have heard some of that newly discovered love seeping from Tyler’s words, or seen a wave of it in his eyes as he stared longingly at Josh, Josh’s laughter still in his ears, because Josh stilled suddenly and a funny look appeared on his face. Time seemed a little sluggish, and all Tyler wanted then, more than anything was to just stay there on his brother’s bed and stare at his...at Josh, in love and unafraid, simply looking at him; but that look had come across Josh’s face and Tyler wasn’t quite sure what it was and he didn’t wanna freak him out or anything, and his family was waiting on them, after all.

Before Josh could form a reply, Tyler climbed off the bed and patted the shirts he had tossed there. “It’s, um, it’s your choice,” his voice was a little shaky with unspoken emotion, and he turned to dig through his dresser again, hoping Josh wouldn’t notice. He pulled out some leggings and sweatpants and tossed them next to the shirts.

“Just pick whatever you want, whatever fits, y’know.”

“Those are- those leggings have flowers-”

“Yes, Josh, very good, that’s right,” Tyler cut in, glad for an excuse to be sarcastic. Always a sure way to cover up an almost-slip of emotion. “They’re my favorites actually, but I’d let you wear them if you want. Though I doubt they’ll fit over your thick-”

“Tyler-”

Tyler leaned forward to place a quick, sloppy kiss on Josh’s flushed cheek. “Meet you downstairs, baby! Five minutes, okay?” and he dashed out the door before Josh could protest further, or before he could drop the ball of his own game and give his heart away.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter will be up NEXT WEEK GUYS omg!!!!!
(it'sfinallygonnabegettingsmuttyupinhere whaaaaaat u didn't hear it from me...........)
>>>>>>EDIT: YO FRIENDS so an unplanned vaca happened and i really wanted to post on the 18th bc WHAT UP fic anniversary! i was gonna post a chapter before then too, but i'm thinking i'll just make the next chapt extra long and good and post it then, cuz if i post now or try to split the chapter i currently have written or anything i won't have time to get a really good update ready for the anniversary day!!!! it just means a lot to me IDK I AM DUMB!!!! i hope u guys don't mind waiting a few extra days <3333333 this update will be WORTH it tho i PROMISE :''''
Baby, I adore you but I'm afraid to say

Chapter Notes

On this day exactly 3 years ago...I STARTED THIS FIC, FRIENDS!!!!!!! the first chapter wow :") i cannæ believe it is 3 YEARS OLD!!!!!!! MY BABY!!!!!!! H U G E shout out to all of you reading this, whether u just found it or have been here since chapter 1 (oh mY god?!) I love ALL of you so much and guess what omg so do Tyler and Josh!!!!!!!!! <333333 in all honesty this is actually really emotional for me, writing this story has helped me in some dark times yall get me JoshnTyler have that effect on us |-/

SO abt this chapter yall: it is mucho long ok it's literally 20k so that's why it took a lil longer, also i HAD to post on the anniversary day lol, so i hope u rlly enjoy it!!!!! it's uuuuh a good one i think ;)

title from Cowards by Raleigh Ritchie!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They didn’t end up watching a Cary Grant movie, which was just as fine with Josh, since he barely knew who Cary Grant was, other than recognizing the name. When Josh had come downstairs, hesitant, shy, tugging at the bottom of Tyler’s t-shirt that he had selected (which Tyler was right about being a little snug, though Josh would literally rather die than admit that to him) Tyler loudly declared with a groan from his end of the couch that Maddie was making them watch 13 Going on 30, to which Maddie loudly protested, claiming Tyler had suggested it in the first place. Josh watched the bickering with quiet amusement from the doorway of the living room, suddenly feeling a bit overwhelmed at the idea of hanging out with Tyler along with his whole family, sans one sibling. This was almost as bad as having his boyfriend bring him home for Christmas for the first time. Not that Josh was experienced with that, but. It was probably similar.

Josh could hear Tyler’s parents in the kitchen; Tyler’s youngest brother was laying in front of the TV on his phone, ignoring him, thankfully; and Maddie was waving the remote control in the air, shuffling through the bonus material on the DVD, temporarily distracted. Tyler was sprawled on the couch, legs stretched out and resting on the coffee table when he twisted towards Josh, a shit eating grin on his face (it was the only way Josh could describe it, honest) and motioned Josh over, eyes raking over his body. Josh could feel Tyler’s stare on his skin, and don’t get Josh wrong, it was an amazing feeling, one he wouldn’t change for the entire world, but at the same time he had a niggling feeling inside his head that Tyler was pointedly refusing to comment on his clothes, and therefore making fun of him. Josh reddened as he slipped into the room, perching on the arm rest of the couch next to Tyler and smacking softly at his head.

“Shut up,” he murmured, relieved Tyler’s siblings were too occupied to pay him any attention as he got used to the new surroundings.

Tyler chuckled, hitting at Josh’s arm in return. “I didn’t even open my mouth, you shut up!”

“Yeah, well, it was written all over your face, buddy, loud and clear.” Josh tugged self consciously at the hem of Tyler’s t-shirt. “Your old school?”
“Yep,” Tyler eyed the faded shirt’s design, the words *East Mansfield High Tigers* with a typical high school coat of arms beneath it. He reached out and patted at the symbol on Josh’s tummy. “We were the tigers. Cool, right?”

Josh made a quiet growling sound and Tyler gaped up at him, surprise and glee obvious on his face. “Josh!”

Josh giggled once, squinting his eyes, and Tyler mouthed more than whispered, “That was hot,” making a show of it. Josh could feel red beginning to color his cheeks. *What’s fucking new?*

“Do that again,” Tyler said in his most demanding (whiny) voice.

“Tyler-” Josh glanced awkwardly towards Tyler’s siblings.

“Doooooo it, Jooooosh.” Whine, whine, whine. “It’s hot! It turns me on-

“Tyler-”

“Hey, Josh, you like hot chocolate, right?” Mrs. Joseph leaned in from the kitchen, and Josh had never been happier to see a friend’s mom before. “Madison made some earlier, I just reheated it if you want some? Jay, Maddie, you guys want more?”

“Um,” Tyler declared loudly over Jay’s reply. “I’d like some.”

Mrs. Joseph gave the back of Tyler’s head a look before disappearing into the kitchen again. Josh snickered at the pout on Tyler’s face. He would have kissed that pout right off his mouth, except that that would mean having an audience, which was definitely not on the agenda, so Josh poked at Tyler’s cheek instead.

“Baby,” he teased, thoroughly enjoying being alive when Tyler redirected his half pout, half glare up at him. Josh leaned forward just enough to say in a low voice, “You’re adorable.”

A smug smile replaced Tyler’s pout quickly enough to make Josh laugh again as Tyler whispered back, “I know.”

Josh scoffed good-naturedly while Tyler bounced a little in his seat, scooting over to the middle of the couch and patting the cushion next to him.

“Sit down. Sit next to me, J!”

“Dude,” Josh said, slipping around the couch and plopping down next to Tyler. He didn’t have to be told twice. “It’s like you’ve never had a friend over before or something.”

“Cause he hasn’t,” Jay said from across the room, not looking up from his phone.

“Shut the fuck-”

“Ty, hon, ask Josh if he wants some cookies.” Mrs. Joseph again.

“He said yeah,” Tyler yelled in response way too quickly to have genuinely asked. Josh made a face at him as Tyler glared at Jay.

“I do have friends over, I just don’t want them to see my creep of a little brother. You’d scare them away,” Tyler retorted, his arms crossed. Tyler looked cute when he was mad, in Josh’s opinion.

“Oh, yeah? I thought you did a pretty good job of scaring them away by yourself-”
“Guys, stop fighting, leave him alone, Jay,” Maddie interrupted, turning up the volume on the home screen. “I’m starting the movie so be quiet.”

Jay sighed loudly in a way that was identical to Tyler’s when he was being whiny. “I don’t wanna watch this movie, let’s pick something else.”

“No, me and Ty both want to watch this.”

“Actually-” Tyler cut in.

“A vote, okay, Josh, what do you wanna watch?” Maddie turned to Josh expectantly, and Josh wished that little sisters would stop intimidating him so much. It wasn’t very manly of him.

“Uuuuuuh…I mean, I don’t mind, whatever you guys want….”

Jay snorted, and Tyler glared at him again for Josh’s sake. “Shut up, Jay.”

“Shut up, Jay,” Jay mimicked, to which Maddie began protesting all the fighting again.

Tyler rolled his eyes and looked at Josh, and Josh wanted to kiss him. He didn’t want hot chocolate and a movie, he wanted Tyler. But he had to admit, this slightly uncomfortable situation was worlds better than if he had had to go to the dance, so he wouldn’t complain.

Josh wasn’t sure if Tyler knew part of what he was thinking or not, but the minor irritation on his face disappeared and he started smirking at Josh instead, his eyes close and so brown. Josh might have sighed out loud, he wasn’t sure.

“This shirt smells like you.” Josh wasn’t sure why he said that just then, but he had, so he guessed he had to own it. Which of course Tyler made more difficult, his eyebrows shooting up playfully.

“Oh? And do you always smell other people’s clothes when they’re not around?”

“I don’t know, do you always keep a diary on your nightstand?”

Tyler blushed immediately, which was honestly a little surprising to Josh- his comeback had been weak, at best- and he tried not to look too amused at the concern in Tyler’s voice.

“Did you look at it?”

“Nah, man, I wouldn’t do that,” Josh assured him, Tyler visibly relaxing. “Why, you write about me?”

Tyler started to glare at him, but when he saw Josh was smiling it softened a little. He shrugged a shoulder. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Awww,” Josh said, leaning in, just loud enough for the two of them to hear. They both dissolved into giggles.

“Okay then, guys, Nemo or Monsters Inc.? Maddie demanded as their mom bustled back into the room, handing Josh a mug and setting down a box of frosted sugar cookies.

“Aww, pink icing,” Tyler piped, slumped back into the couch. He pushed at the box with his foot as Jay made a nosedive for it. “Thanks, mom. Where’s our hot chocolate?”

“Yours is in the kitchen,” Mrs. Joseph said. “Josh, you good, hon? You need anything?”
“Oh, no, uh, I’m fine, um...thank you,” Josh replied, regripping the mug (it was hot!) and feeling embarrassed. Tyler made a quiet huffing sound beside him. Probably laughing at him, the dick.

“Josh, hon, you good, sweetie, you need anything?” Tyler mimicked, and Josh started blushing even harder, and Jay started laughing, and Mrs. Joseph glared at Tyler.

Mr. Joseph wandered in then from the kitchen and joined Tyler’s mom across the room in some recliners, pulling out an iPad.

“Don’t let us bother you kids,” he said genially, winking at Josh. “Don’t mind us.”

Tyler rolled his eyes in Josh’s direction before a new smirk appeared on his face. He leaned closer to Josh as Josh was cautiously placing his scalding mug down on a coaster and whispered, in a voice still way too loud in Josh’s opinion, “Hey, Joshie...make that sound again.” Tyler howled with laughter as Josh nearly dropped the mug and squirmed uncomfortably. How could he hate Tyler so much while lo- liking him so much at the same time? God.

They settled on Monsters Inc. Settled being more like Maddie finally getting annoyed with a lack of response to the vote she had initiated, so she threw the DVD in with a huff, stating loudly that this was the popular choice based on the votes, because she had voted and no one else had bothered, and they were watching it like or not and you all better be quiet. This got Tyler laughing, and Maddie threw a pillow at him as she sat down on the other end of the couch. Tyler used it to stifle his laughter, though his shoulders were still shaking. Josh was mildly concerned Tyler was going crazy, but the rest of his family were acting as if he were normal enough, so Josh let it slide. At least he wasn’t picking on him anymore.

Truth be told, Josh was feeling a little giddy himself. He was fiddling with his phone in his lap, but it wasn’t on, and he had silenced any notifications. He was with Tyler, what else could he possibly need to be doing anyways? Josh would have gladly smashed his phone right then and there to be able to just keep on sitting next to him. Tyler was sitting with his knees pulled up against his chest like a kid, and, Josh noticed with glee, sitting half on Josh’s cushion and half on his own. He had finally stopped giggling and was staring at the screen, the dim light in the room reflecting on his eyes. He looked beautiful.

Josh sipped on his hot chocolate after it had cooled and was only half interested in the movie playing; sure, he liked the movie, but he was pretty certain that they could have been watching Kill Bill or something and he still wouldn’t have been distracted from watching Tyler’s face in profile instead. God, did that make him sappy? Fine, then, Josh was sappy. It was Valentine’s day, c’mon.

It must have been a Joseph thing to be one hundred and ten percent distracted by the television, regardless of what was playing, because both Tyler’s siblings were staring as raptly as he was. Josh sneaked a glance towards Tyler’s parents. They, too, were distracted enough with an iPad and magazine that Josh felt slightly more comfortable than he had earlier, when it felt that everyone was being way too mindful of him. He shifted to place his empty mug back on the coffee table and tucked his leg beneath him, and Tyler’s eyes flickered over to him for a second. He smiled at Josh, eyes warm and safe and happy, and Josh could feel his own face reflecting the same sentiment. If he had known breaking up with Jenna would make things feel this good between him and Tyler, he’d have done it ages ago. Then Tyler was looking away, and Josh was settling back against the sofa, hyper aware of the warmth and pressure of Tyler’s leg against his, hoping the movie would last forever so he wouldn’t have to move out of Tyler’s touch.

It was about an hour later when Tyler finally shifted again, and Josh started, realizing he had dozed off for a minute. But he was wide awake now, because Tyler was stretching out his legs and turning on the couch to lean against Josh, head falling back against his shoulder. Josh stiffened, eyes jumping
to Tyler’s parents. They hadn’t noticed- or if they had, they must not have thought anything of it. Just two kids, two friends. Josh tried to remind himself of that as Tyler wiggled against him, getting comfy. He stretched his legs out over his sister’s lap, and she looked away from the TV long enough to glare at him and prod his thigh a bit, but she didn’t make him move. Josh jumped again when he felt Tyler’s hand in his lap.

It was dark enough in the family room that Josh figured no one could see, the only light coming from the television and a small lamp by Mrs. Joseph’s chair that she could read by. Unless someone was looking specifically, they probably wouldn’t notice. So Josh gently took Tyler’s hand in both of his and toyed with his fingers as the movie played on. Josh could get used to this.

When the credits started rolling, Maddie hopped up to take the movie out, and Mrs. Joseph abandoned her magazine to turn on the overhead lights, Mr. Joseph squinting as he woke out of his doze. Josh immediately tensed again, dropping Tyler’s hand, but Tyler didn’t seem in any big hurry to move off of Josh; in fact, without Maddie taking up a third of the couch anymore, he reclined even further, twisting away from Josh so his head could slip down into Josh’s lap. His eyes were closed as he reached a hand up and poked at Josh’s face.

“Ow, dude, that was my eye,” Josh chuckled, mostly out of tension over what Tyler’s parents would say about their son lying in Josh’s lap. “Hey, you wanna, um...sit up?” Josh lowered his voice.

Tyler shook his head sleepily, pulling at Josh’s ear now. “Nah.”

“If you rip my gauge out, I swear to God, Ty....” Josh tried to sound threatening, but Tyler only laughed once, loud in the room now with the movie finished, and tried wiggling his pinkie through the earring.

“Tyler, leave that poor boy alone,” was the only comment from Mrs. Joseph as she checked her phone, half distracted. Tyler and Josh both snickered, Josh feeling incredibly more at ease than he had for a long time.

“Zack should be here any minute, he sent me a text twenty minutes ago,” Mrs. Joseph was saying, tapping at her phone in a mom-like manner. “Chris, are you awake? You wanna give Josh a lift home, I don’t think he should be out at this time of night alone-”

“Nooooooo, Mom!” Tyler wailed, sitting up so quickly his head collided with Josh’s chin. Josh winced and rubbed at his chin, Tyler sending him an apologetic look but still managing to not appear too sorry. “No, Mom!” he repeated, in case anyone in the room had managed to sleep through his first outburst. “Don’t make him go home, he wants to spend the night!”

“I.”

Tyler cut Josh off and continued, “We’re both going to school at the same time tomorrow anyways, and it’s only a half day for us anyways ‘cuz of the game! C’mon, pleaseeeease?”

Mrs. Joseph was crossing her arms. “Tyler, you’re supposed to be grounded right now, I hardly think a sleepover constitutes being grounded, do you?”

“Uh, yeah, totally, Josh snores like crazy!” Tyler said, and Josh narrowed his eyes at him.

“How do you know?” Maddie piped unwittingly, meant as a joke, but Josh started to sweat all the same. Tyler continued so quickly he had talked over her comment anyways.

“And it’s sooooo late, Mom, he’d get way more sleep if he just stayed here and we all went to bed now! We have to get a lot of rest, y’know, for the game! Please? Please, please, please, please,
“Okay, Tyler, **enough** of that, goodness. You’re not five,” Mrs. Joseph interrupted, sounding exasperated, and Josh almost laughed. Tyler looked over at him with a smug look on his face, as if he already knew he was winning.

Before the conversation could continue, a loud thumping noise sounded from the front door, and Mrs. Joseph hurried down the hall to let Zack in. Jay and Maddie were drifting after her, apparently at least semi interested in hearing Zack’s account of the evening. Tyler bounced in his seat again as he turned on his dad, halfway into the hall, looking half asleep already.

“Dad, how about it? Can Josh stay? I know I’m grounded and all, but it’s Josh, c’mon, *pleeease-*”

“But your mom, Ty-guy, you know I don’t mind,” his dad waved him off, smiling fondly. “Get some rest either way, both of you. Big game tomorrow!”

Tyler rolled his eyes but called goodnight to his dad anyways. He rounded on Josh so quickly that Josh jumped and started giggling on principle.

“Won’t this be fun, J, a sleepover!”

“Tyler,” Josh leaned back an inch; Tyler was leaning forward into his space, his nose only a brush away from Josh’s. It was hella cute, Josh wasn’t gonna lie, but there were people around. He couldn’t hide the grin on his face, Tyler’s excitement contagious, even though Josh too was getting sleepy. Late night movies did that to a guy. “You are **way** too excited about this. Your mom hasn’t even said yes yet-”

“She will if I do this,” Tyler was talking quickly- he did that when he was excited, Josh noted- and he stuck out his bottom lip and peeked up at Josh through his eyelashes, tilting his head in the infuriatingly adorable manner that rendered Josh completely helpless to resist.

“*Pwease,*” Tyler said in a quiet, high voice, and Josh started laughing out of pure adoration. He leaned forward an inch and nipped at Tyler’s bottom lip- *I can do that, heck yeah! My boyfriend, bro, he’s my boyfriend! Fucking score!* Tyler’s face split into a grin and he pressed a quick kiss to the corner of Josh’s mouth, even as Josh had to push him away by the shoulder, hands lingering.

“*Later,*” Josh said, promised quietly, just as Mrs. Joseph came back into the room, the sound of the rest of the Joseph gang stomping upstairs behind her.

“Well, Josh, Zack’s gonna sleep in the basement tonight, so you can have his bed,” she said, eyeing Tyler. “Listen, Tyler, I’m only letting you two do this because Josh is already here, and it is getting late, and there is a big game tomorrow, so I know you two are excited...don’t make me regret this, Ty, or else you’ll be grounded for another w-”

Tyler was up off the couch and tackling his mom in a hug, cutting her off before Josh had even stood up. “Thanks, Mom, we’ll be good and go straight to sleep, okay, thanks, thankyouthankyouthankyouso much, c’mon, Josh, hurry, hurry-”

Mrs. Joseph grabbed Tyler by his hoodie before he could dash off. “Chill out a minute, Ty,” she almost laughed, and that at least made Josh a little more comfortable as he stood up, fumbling awkwardly with his phone for something to do with his hands. He wished this t-shirt weren’t so damn tight. The sleeves were riding up a little, hugging his biceps, and he was suddenly for the first time in a long time anxious about what an adult would think of his tattoos.

“There’s an extra toothbrush in the bathroom cupboard,” Mrs. Joseph said, directing this to Josh;
Tyler’s arms were crossed as he tapped a foot impatiently, held in place by his mom’s iron grip on his hood. Josh almost snickered. “Now what about tomorrow, Josh, have you packed yet? It’s an overnight trip, I’d hate for you to not be prepared just because you didn’t.”

“He packed already, Mooom,” Tyler whined, almost stomping a foot, but when his mom gave him a sharp look he stopped fidgeting pretty quick. “Uh...right, J, you’ve packed?”

“Uh, yeah, I have...packed....” Josh lied, shifting in place.

“Well, you two can stop by your house in the morning and pick it up on the way to school, does that work?” Mrs. Joseph finally released Tyler and Tyler took a couple steps away out of principle, grumbling under his breath. “Is your mom okay with this? You wanna call her?”

“Yeah, uh, I’ll text her, it’ll be fine,” Josh promised. “If, I mean, if it’s alright with you, right, like...I mean, I don’t wanna make Zack give up his bed or anything just because-”

“Josh, he doesn’t care, he likes bunking in the basement!” Tyler interrupted. “And my mom loves you, okay, just c’mon, you are spending the night and that’s that!”

Mrs. Joseph looked at Josh and almost rolled her eyes- almost- and Josh almost laughed. “Well, you heard him,” she said, shaking her head. “Tyler, honestly-”

“She loves you, bro,” Tyler assured him, slipping back into the room to grab a handful of Josh’s shirt and physically haul him out after him, the hem of his shirt riding up above his belly button. Josh struggled to remove Tyler’s hands- for Mrs. Joseph’s sake; Tyler was close to pulling the damn shirt off him- and thanking Mrs. Joseph as politely as he could as Tyler dragged him out of the living room.

“You’re good, hon, you know you’re so welcome here,” Mrs. Joseph repeated, Tyler finally releasing Josh’s shirt to run up the staircase on all fours, way too energetic for it being almost midnight, acting so much like a kid that Josh was fondly reminded of sleepovers he’d have with Brendon back in the day. He wished suddenly that he had known Tyler for as long as he had known Brendon; all the childhood memories they could have had and made together, all the fun times. He wondered if they’d have had crushes on each other if they had been friends since first grade, and when and how those crushes would have developed. Maybe they’d have been together, and out even, since seventh or eighth grade, one of those couples that starts high school already an item. If he had known Tyler back then, then that meant Brendon would have known him, too; maybe they’d all three have been the tightest of friends, against the rest of the world, or at least the rest of Worthington. Man, junior high? Tyler and Brendon? The three of them would have thought they were the coolest fucking shit ever. Josh started smiling at the thought. They’d have literally been invincible.

Josh wasn’t paying attention to his surroundings, too caught up in his daydream, and he knocked into Tyler at the top of the stairs, Tyler giggling like they were sharing a secret, his hands reaching out and grasping Josh’s arms as if afraid Josh might topple back down the steps. His fingers felt so right on Josh’s skin he thought he would cry, unaware he was missing them until he felt them, felt him; Josh hoped Tyler’s fingers would burn marks that would last longer than his tattoos. Josh looked into Tyler’s face, and sure, he’d seen his face probably half a gazillion times by now- and at pretty close range some of those times- but he was blown away right then nonetheless. Tyler’s face was so brown, no, golden, even in the dark hallway, the only light coming from his open bedroom door behind him, but that light was still somehow reflecting off his eyes and making them shine. Josh didn’t know how Tyler did it. He suddenly felt that Tyler was incredibly fragile, that they were incredibly fragile, and he had risked so, so much, so stupidly, so recklessly and unwittingly, messing around the way he had the past year. Josh thanked God right then and there, looking into Tyler’s
eyes. Just thank you.

“You gonna blow a chunk on me? You look sick,” Tyler commented, small grin on his face, head lowered, showing off his dimples.

*Oh, God, Josh thought. Jesus fuckin’ Christ...I love him.*

The feeling, like a wave building that you can see from shore and know will envelope you soon, soon, any time, hit Josh square on the chest; it knocked the air from the organs in his body, and he *would* have toppled backwards then, or else blown chunks as Tyler so eloquently put it, except Zack bustled out of his shared bedroom then, burdened with a couple blankets and a pillow and his backpack, bumping into Tyler to get past him and making a face at Josh, making a comment similar to Tyler’s before shoving past to descend the staircase. Josh could hear Mrs. Joseph in the hall downstairs, a moment from coming up to bed herself, and it was all white noise, empty static, a flood in Josh’s ears blocking out everything else except the rushing water, his life source, pounding *I love him I love him I love him*, as if the dam had finally caved.

Tyler was pulling Josh into his bedroom, saying something, saying his name. Josh’s eyes were fixed on Tyler’s hand on his wrist, fingers warm on his pulse point, all he could focus on; he felt *dizzy*, dumbfounded by his own emotions. He loved him. Tyler’s voice was in his ears, his veins, reaching past all the noise and quiet and flooding and beating and blanketing itself on his heart, calming him, reviving him, regulating his heartbeat. Josh could feel him. He’d never felt this way before. He felt high. That’s what Brendon would tell him.

“I didn’t know you could feel like this,” he murmured, surprised he could still speak at all after encountering God, and Tyler smiled at him, probably didn’t hear him, probably didn’t understand, but that was okay, it was okay for now- *Josh* didn’t understand it yet, wasn’t sure *anyone* could understand this sort of thing. But it could wait. Tyler was here, *he* was here, they were together right then and it was all okay, regardless of whether or not Josh’s heart was trying to break his rib cage into splinters. He was still breathing, Tyler was still smiling and still talking, his voice honey, and his eyes were still brown and he was still golden, and he was still looking at Josh like he loved him, too. Even in his semi-delirious state, Josh knew that wasn’t it- it was just his own emotions reflected in Tyler’s eyes, in his smile, the curve of his lips and flash of his teeth. *Josh* loved Tyler, and Tyler liked him a lot; and even with the knowledge that that dynamic would be like a dull knife in his stomach later on, when he would finally grow weary of running and the pain would break even with him, in the middle of the night in his own room or surrounded and alone with his friends; and it would grow bigger and fuller till it threatened to choke him; he would swallow it back down, would cover the wound and press the blood back in with both hands, because Tyler, because *this golden boy* liked him, and that was enough. Josh swore it would be enough.

And it was so sweet, so *easy* to truly believe it when he was standing in Tyler’s room at midnight on a school night, dressed in clothes that enveloped him with Tyler’s scent and warmth, with Tyler dancing around before him as giddy and endearing as only Tyler could ever be, struggling to pull his hoodie off over his head, his stupid Transformers t-shirt riding up his torso and revealing his cute, tanned tummy. Oh, *man*, could Josh believe it.

Reason and the present hummed through his body once again, the feeling of descending back to earth and solid ground beneath one’s feet, and Josh heard himself laughing. His brain was remembering how to work. He smiled at Tyler’s antics, unable to hide his affection, unwilling to believe there could be an issue right now with expressing his love, albeit wordlessly. Tyler didn’t have to know. He didn’t ever have to know he was loved more than life itself.

Tyler stomped a socked foot and burped from beneath his hoodie, and Josh’s head was finally back
in the game; he darted out a hand to scramble his fingers against Tyler’s skin, over his belly button, and Tyler squealed so loudly Josh immediately shushed him, sure his parents would be bursting in any moment and demanding that Josh go home, they were being too loud, this was a bad idea after all, Tyler, you’re grounded, act like it, yada yada. Tyler was stumbling backwards away from Josh’s grasp and falling back onto his bed, ripping the hoodie from his head and hurling it towards Josh.

“Dude, you suck,” Tyler laughed, dodging the hoodie when Josh tossed it back. He settled cross legged on the bed and reached out a hand to grab a fistful of Josh’s shirt, tugging him closer towards him. “Bro, you’re spending the night!” he said in a secretive tone, as if Josh didn’t know.

Josh smiled down at him, almost bashful. “Good.”

“Good,” Tyler repeated, then- “I’ll beat you to the bathroom!”

Tyler may have beat Josh down the hall, but they both had to wait for Maddie to finish brushing her teeth, then Jay and Tyler fought for the next turn, then Zack had come back upstairs to get his toothbrush and hair gel, then Josh got to have his turn. When Josh finished and came back out into the hallway, it was dark and the bedroom doors were all closed, except for the door at the end of the hall, half open with soft, yellow light leaking out. It had a magnetic pull on Josh’s heart, and he gladly padded down the hall towards it.

Tyler was propped up in his bed against a couple of pillows, blankets piled snugly around him and a couple of stuffed animals hiding between the headboard and the mattress. He was tapping on his phone, his brow furrowed, the steady scroll and pause of his thumb suggesting Instagram. The room was warmer than the hallway by at least a couple degrees, Josh could feel it as he closed the door softly behind him; no ceiling fan either. He was already in a t-shirt and sweating, but Tyler looked completely comfortable in his blanket fort. His eyes jumped up when he heard Josh in the room, that same sunshine smile lighting his entire face. Josh felt it in his chest.

“Josh!” he exclaimed, bouncing a little beneath his blankets. “I missed you!”

In all honesty, during the ten minutes that he and Tyler had been separated, both busy getting ready for bed, he had missed him, too. But teasing was more fun.

“It was literally five minutes, man,” Josh said. “Why do you sleep with stuffed animals? And why is it literally ninety degrees in here?”

Tyler peered down his nose at Josh, like he was used to defending his stranger habits to anyone who would point them out. Josh wandered into the room and sat on the other bed as Tyler responded. “I don’t usually sleep with stuffed toys, I just haven’t found a good place to put them yet after we moved. And it’s cold outside, it should be warm in here. This is the perfect temperature.”

“Yeah, for a sauna,” Josh said. “And you moved months ago, that stuffed animal excuse is a little flimsy, if you ask me.”

“I wasn’t asking,” Tyler pointed out.

Josh made a quiet scoffing noise as he stood back up to untie his sweatpants- Tyler’s sweatpants; no way in hell had he been going to wear any of his leggings. “Do you mind if I...I can’t sleep in pants.”

Tyler had looked back to his phone and did a laughably animated double take, though Josh suspected it had been partly genuine, the notion amplifying the red growing in his cheeks.

Tyler smirked and raised an eyebrow. “Do you really think I’d mind?”
Josh raised an eyebrow right back and didn’t reply, just stared at Tyler as he—embarrassingly—finished with the strings and proceeded to trip out of the sweatpants, first one leg, then the other, the edge of the bed saving him from hitting the floor. Tyler wasn’t trying to hide the fact that he was looking at Josh’s legs, and yeah, okay, his crotch, too, Josh knew it. Josh was even more red, from the warm, still room, and from Tyler, but Josh didn’t really give a damn right now about his nerves trying to kick in.

“Nice,” Tyler said after a moment, before looking back to his phone in a nonchalant manner and continuing to scroll. Josh paused with his hands on the hem of his t-shirt. “Nice what?” he asked, suspicion peaked.

“Nice dick, what else.” Tyler sounded as innocent as a five year old asking for candy. Josh almost choked on his own tongue.

“Tyler—”

“What, I can’t say that? It’s a compliment, Joshie.”

“Well, yeah, I mean, thanks, but like…” This kid, Josh swore. He was immediately aware of the fact his underwear were pretty tight. He tugged one of the legs down as far as it would go before it slipped back up. “I mean, you’ve seen me...I mean, like, I’ve worn boxers before and—”

“Boxer briefs.”

“-boxer briefs before and you didn’t say anything.”

“Well, sure,” Tyler said, in a tone way too conversational for this topic. “But like, that was back then. It would have been a little forward, don’t you think?”

Josh spluttered. “And now isn’t forward?”

Tyler smiled a smug little grin, burrowing down in his blanket burrito. “Nope.”

Josh would have said something more, but Tyler had already gone back to his phone, the jerk. That cute fucking jerk.

Josh watched Tyler out of the corner of his eyes as he pulled his shirt off over his head—or tried to. Damn, this was a tight t-shirt. He worked instead on getting his arms out of the sleeves.

“Yeah, it’s a little tight on me, too,” Tyler piped, ducking his head to hide a grin, Josh was sure.

“Well, thanks for letting me know,” Josh muttered, voice muffled from beneath the shirt, finally peeling it off his chest and working it up over his head. When he finally freed his face from the cotton confines, he caught Tyler staring at him once again.

“What?” Tyler asked innocently when Josh squinted his eyes at him.

“You’re staring,” Josh stated. “You’re making me feel fat.”

“Joooooosh,” Tyler huffed, half a laugh. “You’re not fat, alright, I was joking! Jesus, man.”

Josh mumbled a reply under his breath as he stood up to fix the bed, his back to Tyler, feeling his eyes on him the entire time. Even with being rid of his clothes, he was sweating big time now, no thanks to that asshole. Despite the minor annoyances though, mostly all Tyler’s fault, Josh could feel a smile working its way onto his lips. He was a sweet asshole, wasn’t he? Josh loved him.
Josh grabbed his phone from the dresser before climbing into his bed, Tyler conspicuously not looking in his direction. He kicked the comforter aside and draped the sheet across his legs, rustling it a little more than needed, waiting for Tyler’s attention to focus on him once again, childish as it may have seemed. He pumped the pillow and sighed loudly as he leaned back against it, sneaking a glance towards Tyler.

“Do I get a stuffed animal?” Josh asked, giving in.

“Shut up,” Tyler quipped. “That’s a touchy subject.”

“Okay,” Josh said, then- “So do they have names?”

Tyler threw one of his pillows at Josh. Josh tucked it beside him against the wall. “Thanks, man, I needed another one of these.”

Tyler groaned at him, but Josh caught him smiling. Tyler pointedly went back to his phone, scrolling, pausing, not tapping.

“Ew,” he murmured after a minute before snickering. “Ew ...dude, check Ryan’s photo on Instagram.” He turned his phone and held it out for Josh to see. A selfie in the bathroom mirror at the high school, Ryan holding the phone with Brendon pressed against his side, a cheeky look on his face as he licked a stripe up Ryan’s cheek, both decked out in their outfits for the dance that evening. “So edgy,” Tyler teased.

“Nasties,” Josh agreed. “Hey, Ryan’s not that bad, y’know, man. He’s kinda quiet, a bit like you.”

“I’m not quiet,” Tyler protested.

“Well, yeah, I know that now,” Josh said, smirking. “But I mean, like, you kind of come across as quiet, I think. You guys would probably like each other.”

Tyler shrugged, continued to scroll. “I guess he’s okay, I’ve never talked to him. I don’t think I’d like anyone though who likes that Urie.”

“Hey, what about me?” Josh teased back.

“You’re the exception, I guess,” Tyler said, tone light. He gave him a look. “Are you trying to make friends for me?”

“No. I don’t know. Maybe,” Josh mused. “Don’t you want friends?”

“You’re enough.”

“Aw, Ty, that’s sweet.”

The door cracked open then and Mrs. Joseph stuck her head in. “You boys got everything you need? You good, Josh, hon, you find that toothbrush? Got enough blankets? Oh- did Zack take the comforter? Here, let me get you another-”

“No, it’s okay, Mom, he’s hot,” Tyler interrupted, waggling his eyebrows at Josh. Josh rolled his eyes, blushing.

“Yes, I’m fine, Ms. J., thanks.” Josh tried to cover his lap with the sheet as lowkey as possible. He suddenly felt way too exposed. There was a lady in the room.

“Alright, hon, if you say so. Remember, Ty, you got a big game tomorrow, you two need your sleep.
Turn that light off, alright?” Tyler’s mom gave Tyler a stern look. “And put that phone away, it’s past midnight. You’ve got an early morning. Josh is all ready to go to sleep, and you’re not even-”

“Al right, Mom, Geex,” Tyler huffed, thumping his phone on the nightstand and flicking off the nightside lamp, his mom illuminated by the hallway light. “We’re going to sleep now, okay? Check on Jay while you’re up, he plays Sims all night long.”

Mrs. Joseph made a face at Tyler that translated roughly as I know you’re trying to change the subject and it’s not going to work, young man, and even though I’m pretending to not care about your distraction tactics, I am definitely going to be checking in on your younger brother anyways. At least that’s what Josh assumed her look meant, since she hurriedly said goodnight and closed the door quietly behind her. He’d seen the same look on his own mom’s face often enough.

With the door closed, Josh blinked, eyes unused to the dark; he listened to the rustling coming from Tyler’s bed as he wriggled down into a lying position, beating at a pillow. Josh too slipped further down his own bed, his foot disrupting the comforter. It slipped to the floor, he kicked at his sheet for a moment, and they both lay in quiet. The porch light had been left on outside, four yellow patches projected softly on the ceiling. Josh stared at it, Tyler let out a quiet sigh; the distant sound of a car turning into the neighborhood, Tyler’s parents’ bedroom door latching shut. It was peaceful, deeply, really calm and nice and-

“Shit, I forgot to text my mom,” Josh scrambled for his phone, legs tangling in the sheet as he twisted onto his side, propping himself up with an elbow as he turned his phone on to sixty-five new texts and six missed calls. “Shit....” he repeated, and Tyler started to giggle.

“Bro, no way, she probably thinks you died.” Tyler, apparently, thought the whole situation was just hilarious. “She thinks you took Jenna to the dance? Man, she must think you and her are at her place for a quick-”

“Shut up, Tyler, it’s not funny,” Josh said, squinting at his phone as he checked his messages. A couple from all three siblings, several from Spencer and Dallon, and Mikey, too, surprisingly; twenty-eight from Brendon, and the rest from his mom. Shit. Brendon had also called him twice, Ashley once, and his mom three times.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Josh murmured quietly as Tyler continued to giggle, a hand covering his mouth from the sound of it. Josh ignored him and opened the first texts his thumb landed on.

Ash: srsrly bro where r u mom’s getting pissed af
Ash: if u need me 2 cover 4 u just let me kno

....

Ash: Brendon? Yeah right
Ash: ok whatever i don’t believe it but mom bought it so ur ass is saved for now. Im waiting for the real story tho

Josh furrowed his brow and chewed on his lip. He didn’t reply to his sister’s texts, just switched over to Brendon’s messages and scrolled to the top. Twenty-eight texts were a lot of texts, but it was kind of expected by now from Brendon. He scrolled through the first half quickly, all asking where he was that evening, making fun. The second half were making fun as well, typical Brendon, and still about his whereabouts, but in a more enlightening way.

Beebo: bruh why ur mom calling me
Beebo: LMAOOO BRUH!!!!

Beebo: srsly J? Ok man u get some i guess but next time let ur mom kno ok lol

Beebo: i covered u man i said ur w me tonite don’t rat urself out lol

Beebo: no offense 2 Jen she’s cool but i want all the nasty deets tomorrow kk get that pussy boy

Beebo: lmao gross af i’m gay

Several strings of Brendon’s most used emojis, all sexual, or at least all easily determined as such when sent by Brendon, then several more texts giving Josh details about his friend and Ryan that Josh really would rather have not read.

“What’s goin’ on?” Tyler asked in a soft, high voice, shaky from restraining his laughter.

“Just a minute,” Josh murmured, taking a deep breath before checking the texts from his mom. He didn’t read them all, just peeked at the last couple. They seemed resolved enough, apologizing for her earlier outburst (Josh figured he had some fun texts to read through later on), a stern reminder to let her know his plans and to answer his phone from now on, and lastly a goodnight text, coming off a little curt, understandably, but softened with a single heart emoji. Josh let out a sigh and turned his phone off, placing it on the nightstand. He couldn’t reply to any of the texts without almost having to reply to them all, and that would just start the whole issue over again. It could wait.

“You’re not going to call her?”

“Nah, ‘s’too late,” Josh said. “She’s usually in bed before eleven anyways.”

“You text her?”

“No. She already freaked out a couple hours ago and called Brendon, I guess; he said I was with him so. She’s mad, but it’s okay. I’ll explain tomorrow if she’s all pressed about it.”

“Well, that’s the first cool thing Brendon’s ever done then,” Tyler piped. “Thank you to your bff.”

“I’ll tell him,” Josh said.

“I bet you will,” Tyler said.

They were both quiet again, the earlier, disruptive sense of urgency at not having conferred with his mom settling back down into calm and stillness. Josh was flushed from the stress it had induced—sixty-five missed text messages!- and was still warm as ever, his face damp with a light sheen of sweat. He kicked at the sheet, slipping it down past his waist, and let out a deep, slow breath.

A second later he heard Tyler rustling around in the dark and a mimicked slow release of breath, a pitch higher than his own. He started smiling, his heartbeat slowing back to normal at the reminder of Tyler, Tyler there with him. He loved him.

“So….” Tyler’s voice sounded in the dark, scratchy, monotone. “You gonna get over here or what?”

A full smile split across Josh’s face, every little thing forgotten, wiped from his mind except that Tyler was wonderful, and Tyler was his, and Tyler was here, and Tyler wanted him even closer. He wasted no time in ridding himself of his sheet and crossing the space to Tyler’s bed, slipping beneath the covers as Tyler scooted over to make room, the shine of Tyler’s smile visible in the dark. Josh grinned even harder.
Tyler pulled the covers back up over the both of them and swung a legging clad leg over Josh’s, and an arm, and his head, and Josh was suddenly so hot he was dying.

“Jesus, Ty, you’re like an octopus,” he joked. “How are you wearing pants, man, I am dying—”

“Oh, you want me to take them off?” Tyler piped from beneath Josh’s chin. “I can arrange that.” He bumped Josh’s chin with his head- for the second time that night- as he sat up in bed. Besides a weak ow Josh didn’t bother saying anything, rubbing at his chin instead as he watched Tyler, or the general dark shape of him, at least, shimmy out of his leggings without getting out of the bed, covers slipping every which way and Tyler cursing as he struggled out of the piece of clothing.

“Who’s clothes are too tight now, hm?”

“Shut up, Josh. They’re leggings, they’re supposed to be tight.”

“...y’know, I could probably make an inappropriate joke about th-”

“Yeah, I bet you could.” Tyler flung the leggings onto the floor and burrowed back down against the bed, opting to lay beside Josh this time on his side, face a couple inches from Josh’s own. Josh mirrored him, flipping onto his side, and they lay staring into the dark until their eyes had adjusted enough to see each other’s faces. Tyler crossed his eyes and made a face, and Josh snickered, and Tyler leaned in to kiss Josh’s nose.

Josh squinted his eyes and touched a hand to his cheek. “Awww. Ty.”

“Shut up,” Tyler started giggling, mischief evident in his eyes, even in the unlit room. “Hey, Josh—”

“No.”

“You don’t even know what I was gonna say!” Tyler objected, a tell-tale smile in his voice.

“It’s you, Tyler, I think I can guess pretty accurately—”

“Make that noise again, please , do it? Do it, Josh—”

“No, not if you keep asking me I won’t.” Josh couldn’t help but chuckle a little as Tyler whined, huffing at him.

“You’re no fun. You suck.” He stuck out his bottom lip and ducked his chin to his chest, peeping up with one eye through those eyelashes. Josh wanted to kiss his eyelids, but he only copied Tyler’s face instead.

“But, Jooo ooosh, it turns me on,” Tyler added in a high voice.

Josh was just forming a response to that when he felt cold fingers at his hip. He jumped, he hadn’t been expecting it, and Tyler’s hands were cold, okay, even beneath fifty fucking blankets. Tyler smirked at him and leaned closer to Josh’s face, his breath ghosting over Josh’s lips.

“Josh,” he murmured, tone playful, voice quiet. “It turns me on , man. It….”

Josh was watching him, amused, mouth fighting a small smile, curious to see what Tyler would initiate. Two of his fingers had slipped beneath the waistband of Josh’s boxers, tugging, teasing. They slowed though, his thumb stroking steady circles on Josh’s hip bone, and he was gazing into the small space between them, at the mattress, or maybe Josh’s shoulder, as if lost in thought.

“It…” he whispered again, voice wavering on the one word. Josh tilted his head, just a slight
movement, but Tyler’s eyes flicked up from the blank space to Josh’s face, his eyes jumping softly between Josh’s eyes, first the left, then the right, then back again. His bottom lip trembled, and there suddenly seemed to be so much behind his big, brown eyes that he wasn’t telling Josh, that Josh didn’t know. Beautiful things, scared things, unsure things, holy things. Josh’s head was spinning and his heart was aching with it. How did Josh not realize he loved this angel laying beside him before tonight?

“I….” Tyler’s lips parted like he wanted to say something, but no words escaped. Josh furrowed his brow lightly, wanting to hear him, needing to hear him, whatever he had to say, the mood suddenly heavier, more emotionally intense. He loved Tyler, he loved what Tyler had to say, he loved listening to him. He loved him.

“Yeah?” Josh mouthed softly, closing the distance between them to press his lips against the corner of Tyler’s mouth. He could do that, man! Josh felt in that moment, was completely convinced, that every single difficult and unpleasant moment that he and Tyler both had endured the past year because of them simply wishing to be together, like this, right now, was worth it; the knowledge of the possible irreconcilability between his two dearest friends, the animosity on the team, their team, his team, the endless lies and secrets and hiding; Josh was convinced Tyler was more than worth it, any of it, all of it. He wouldn’t dream of ever trading it, wouldn’t dream of ever trading Tyler, of what they had right now, were able to share together, quietly, softly, sweetly. He was glad it had happened, all of it, if that’s what it took for him to be here, right now, with this boy he loved. Josh was glad.

“Yeah, Ty?” Josh repeated, his voice hoarse; there was a lot unsaid behind his lips, too, he knew. But not yet- Tyler might not be ready. And what Tyler felt was all that mattered to him.

Josh looked up, met Tyler’s eyes; Tyler was staring at him with a slightly glazed look, lips still parted, voice still hiding. Josh glanced down, blinked, studied Tyler’s mouth, breathed. They were too close, Tyler would be able to read- shit, hear every single one of Josh’s thoughts if he kept staring at him like that.

Tyler didn’t say anything, and that was okay. Josh let his eyes fall shut, and he found Tyler’s mouth instead, and Tyler responded like that was what he had been waiting for. Life came back into his hand and Josh felt him slip it around to the small of his back, pressing against him, pressing him closer. Josh smiled against Tyler’s lips, wanting the same thing, needing it; he draped an arm around Tyler’s neck and cradled his head, fingers carding through the short strands at the base of his neck. He tilted Tyler’s head back gently, pressing his tongue into his mouth, and Tyler whined into his like he was feeling something mystical for the first time. It drove Josh crazy.

He felt Tyler’s legs against his, tangling them; his feet were cold on Josh’s skin, and Josh smiled again, almost laughed, out of pure happiness, contentment. This was his best friend. How in God’s name had he gotten so lucky? Tyler’s lips were so soft, so sweet against his own, his taste surprisingly familiar, like they’d been doing this for a lifetime. Josh sucked on Tyler’s tongue, and Tyler moaned again, a long whine. The noise sent shivers up Josh’s spine and had him seeing stars, and he couldn’t help groaning into Tyler’s mouth. Tyler’s hand was pushing even more persistently on Josh’s back now, and Josh slowly pushed himself up onto an elbow, slipping a leg between Tyler’s and shifting on top of him, their mouths never parting. The covers slipped to the side, possibly to the floor; Josh didn’t know and he didn’t care.

Tyler’s other hand went to the back of Josh’s neck, his hand on Josh’s back slipping further up and grasping at his bare shoulders. Josh’s skin was so heated that Tyler’s fingertips felt like snowflakes across his skin, pure, delicate. It was all so strange- he knew Tyler, but this was learning about him, learning him, learning each other in new and deeper ways, none of it so much of a surprise as it was
deepening a sense that already existed between them. Josh liked that.

Tyler turned his head, pulled his face away to peer up at Josh, kiddish smile back and lighting up his face, even in the dark. His lips were glistening as he spoke, his voice scratchy. “So what, am I the girl?”

“Tyler, you’re a boy,” Josh smiled, leaning closer to drag his open mouth across Tyler’s cheek, not kissing, just touching, just feeling.

“Feels like a girl from down here,” Tyler replied.

Josh took Tyler’s earlobe gently between his teeth, nipping gently, before mumbling, his brow slightly furrowed, “‘S’that okay, though?”

Tyler tilted his head towards Josh so Josh could feel him smile against his neck. His lips and breath tickled his skin as he replied, raising the best kind of goosebumps. “Yeah, sure. For now.”

There was no mistaking the tone of his voice; Josh had heard it creep into Tyler’s words before when they played Mario Kart and Call of Duty, compared twitter followers or homework grades or Pokémon cards or who could eat the most tacos or pizza slices in one go, discussed Jenna, trying to convince Josh to drive, figuring out who was actually the tallest without shoes on, whenever one of them mentioned Brendon. Mostly Josh had heard it when they were talking basketball, or on the court itself, sweaty and charged and blood pumping, pulsing, ready for a fight.

Tyler was fucking competing. He was vying for something.

“Is this a game to you?” Josh huffed, joking, incredulous. Impressed. Turned on. Challenged. He was getting hard, and he didn’t care to think too directly about why it was coming on so strongly now.

Tyler didn’t reply. Or maybe he did, just in a language stronger than words, more precise. He moved his hand from Josh’s neck to the small of his back again, and pressed down as he lifted his hips.

They groaned in unison, loudly enough that Josh’s skin prickled, certain someone would have heard them.

Tyler laughed against Josh’s cheek. “Scaredy cat,” he muttered, voice playful except for that competitive streak hiding in it that Josh now recognized. Before Josh could collect himself, both of Tyler’s hands were now on the small of his back, holding him down as he ground up again, slower, harder, teasing a long and low moan out of Josh. Like it was easy. Like he owned this game.

“Ty- you....” Josh dropped his head next to Tyler’s, forehead pressed against the pillow. He could feel sweat across his forehead and around the edges of his hair, he could feel his heart jumping in his chest at the suggestion of this being something they were competing in. God, he was hard.

Tyler turned his face into Josh’s neck and licked a stripe along the damp skin- oh, God, that’s not fair, fuck, fuuuuuuu- before biting down, rougher than Josh had previously nipped at him. Josh groaned quietly into the pillow. He reached for Tyler with one hand and found cloth instead, and he sneaked his hand beneath Tyler’s t-shirt to rub across the skin of his stomach, his muscles there tight and heaving. Time for a score of his own.

“Ow, no- Josh, don’t, no-” Tyler started giggling, and Josh started grinning. Can you believe this guy?

“How are you so cute....” Josh hummed, unable to keep the thought to himself, resting his forehead
against Tyler’s. Tyler peered up at him, brows lowered and eyes staring.

“Don’t. Tickle me. Joshua,” he said in a serious voice, enunciating each word, trying to sound authoritative.

Josh didn’t respond, just smirked down at Tyler as his hand under his shirt ghosted up to Tyler’s nipples, thumb running lightly over one before pinching it.

Tyler’s initial protest was lost in a moan as he closed his eyes, twisting beneath Josh. One of his knees hit Josh in the groin (And another point to Joseph. Only one though. That was just a free throw.) not with too much force, thankfully- but Josh winced all the same.

“Hey, careful,” he said, just as Tyler’s eyes flew open to stare at Josh.

“Bro, you’re hard already?”

Josh started to blush. Thank fuck it was dark.

“You’re getting there, too,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, but you’re like, really hard,” Tyler insisted, then he grinned. “Josh-ew-uh. Do I turn you on that much, Joshe? Huh? We haven’t even done anything yet.”

“Tyler….,” Josh said, embarrassed. He pinched Tyler’s nipple again, a distraction tactic, but Tyler seemed determined to get a response, kept his head in the game. Josh caved, just a little. “I don’t know, you keep making these...these noises, man, I…."

Josh peeked at Tyler just in time to see his mild confusion turn to glee. Mischievous glee. Another fucking score to Joseph.

“What noises?” he asked, voice dripping. “Oh, you mean... these noises?” Tyler threw his head back against the pillow and moaned, high and long and throaty, and Josh shifted his weight to one arm to free his other hand from Tyler’s shirt, using it instead to cover Tyler’s mouth.

“Tyler, shut up, man, do you fuckin’ want your mom to walk in on us? Or your fucking brother? Your- your sister-”

Tyler was cackling behind Josh’s hand, eyes squinting, and Josh rolled his own before removing his hand, but not before Tyler had licked his palm.

Josh made a show of wiping his hand on Tyler’s shirt. “Bro, seriously, that’s gross, what the hell-”

“You’re insane,” Tyler was still chortling, way too satisfied with his petty little self. (Josh loved him.) “We’re dry humping right now, bro, and it’s gross that I licked you? Get over yourself.”

Josh scoffed down at him, almost laughed. They looked at each other for a minute before Tyler had licked his palm.

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“You’re insane,” Tyler was still chortling, way too satisfied with his petty little self. (Josh loved him.) “We’re dry humping right now, bro, and it’s gross that I licked you? Get over yourself.”

Josh scoffed down at him, almost laughed. They looked at each other for a minute before Tyler started to grin. He whimpered, sounding ridiculously sexy and wanton and needy. Josh almost couldn’t believe his ears. He had no choice but to groan in response, had to fight his hips from grinding down against Tyler’s. He didn’t win that round.

Tyler’s half-faked whimpering rose and grew into another long, real moan as Josh rubbed their crotches together. Josh’s control quickly slipping further and further away from him as he felt for the first time Tyler against him. Like...Tyler...Tyler...Tyler against... him... Josh was nearly going out of his mind. That was Tyler’s cock, and it was goddamn hard, because of him, and even through both their pairs of boxers, Josh could feel the heat radiating off of it.
His eyes had slipped shut; it was all too much. He forced his heavy lids open again to look down at Tyler, his angel, their foreheads still together, sweat mingling. He grinned, panting. “You’re hard now, too, man.” Gotta play it cool.

Tyler was also panting as he too smiled, teeth flashing bright in the black room. Josh pressed his open mouth to Tyler’s just to feel their teeth clank together. Tyler huffed a laugh into his mouth.

“Happy Valentine’s day, Josh,” he whispered, voice hoarse.

Josh chuckled and shook his head. He couldn’t believe Tyler sometimes. It wasn’t a bad thing. “Yeah. Happy D-day, man.” Josh’s cock was aching and he was having trouble thinking straight.

“W-what?”

“Y’know. Valentine’s. V-day. D-day. This is...it’s kind of gay. Y’know? So D-day.”

Tyler huffed again, his breath hot on Josh’s cheek. That alone sent even more blood rushing to Josh’s cock. God, he was literally going to come like that. And that definitely wouldn’t be scoring him any points.

“Bro, you’re stupid,” Tyler was smiling and panting and sweating through his shirt; Josh could make out a patch of sweat over his sternum. Why in holy fuck is his fucking shirt still on-

“Yeah, maybe. It was, uh, Brendon said it...once...he, uh-”

Tyler groaned, not in a sex way this time, though it still sent feel-good shivers throughout Josh’s body. “Seriously, bro, let’s not talk about that jerk while w-we’re fucking.”

Josh’s hips stuttered, and he jerked down again against Tyler, his one hand finding its way beneath Tyler’s shirt, fingers wet from the sweat there pooled beneath the cotton. “Are we fucking?” he murmured, not so much a genuine question, but he liked the way it sounded. He liked the way it sounded when Tyler said it, and he liked that it was about them. Josh loved him.

“What else would you call this,” Tyler said, stomach heaving as Josh grabbed a fistful of Tyler’s shirt and tugged it upwards. As much as Josh didn’t want to be away from Tyler, he sat back on his haunches to give him room to get the shirt off. Tyler got the idea, how couldn’t he when Josh was tugging at his shirt like that, and he sat up, too, Josh straddling his hips. Their hard cocks rubbed against each other’s at a new angle, and Tyler moaned while Josh just focused on ridding Tyler of his stupid shirt.

“Transformers,” Josh muttered, half laughing, as Tyler lifted his arms into the air to let Josh pull the shirt off his body.

Tyler’s face was flushed after his head was free of the clothing, and he took it from Josh only to toss it over Josh’s shoulder. “Yeah, bro. Megatron. You can’t beat that.”

He was leaning in to kiss Josh again when Josh put a hand on Tyler’s chest. “Wait, Megatron, are you fucking kidding me? He sucks ass- I mean, he’s okay, but-”

“Well, who the fuck do you think is best? Not fucking Opti-

“Optimus Prime, who the fuck else?”

“Optimus Prime, are you fucking shitting me?” Tyler gaped at Josh, incredulous. “No fucking way, I can’t believe you are one of those people, Josh.”
“What do you mean one of those people? I’m right!” Josh shot back. Tyler was crazy. Fucking wacko. Josh was dating an asylum escapee.

Tyler rolled his eyes so hard even Josh got a little dizzy, accompanied by the world’s loudest and whiniest sigh. Josh loved him. “Whatever, asshole. Fucking kiss me.”

“Don’t boss me, Tyler,” Josh argued, just because he could, just because Tyler wouldn’t expect it, just because Tyler’s reactions were always the most adorable things Josh had ever seen.

As Josh had foreseen, Tyler’s mouth dropped open, and he glared at Josh with both admiration and a resurgence of that competitive streak that was so innate to him, and Josh loved him.

He cocked an eyebrow at Josh and leaned in an inch closer, their crotches embracing once again, and Josh closed his eyes at the wave of pleasure as it hit him, fully expecting Tyler’s mouth on his own at any second. The bed squeaked and the contact at his hips disappeared, and Josh opened his eyes to see Tyler reclining back on the bed, arms tucked beneath his head, a shit-eating, smug-ass, Cheshire cat grin on his face, the brightest thing in the room.

“Fine,” he quipped, and Josh did not for a single instant trust that tone. “Suck me, then. Josh.”

It was Josh’s turn to gape down at Tyler. He had successfully pulled a shot fake, and Josh hadn’t called it; three points to Joseph. At least.

What could Josh say to a demand like that? What could he do? He gave in, body falling down and forward even as he inched further back down Tyler’s legs, settling himself outstretched on top of them as comfortably and lightly (he didn’t want to squish Tyler or anything; he was pretty skinny) as he could. Tyler’s boxer briefs were tented, and wet, and his cock beneath kept twitching, just slightly, and it was directly in front of Josh’s face. He had never, ever been this intimately close to Tyler before, and Josh suddenly wanted to cry. He loved him.

He looked past Tyler’s covered erection to gaze up into Tyler’s face, their eyes locking beneath long and tangled eyelashes, brown on brown on brown on brown; Tyler’s ribs golden bronze beneath Josh’s cloud white fingertips, the contrast even more pronounced in the unlit bedroom; clouds passing over and through mountain ranges. Josh loved what they were, what they could be, him and Tyler. Tyler. He loved him.

Josh pressed both of his palms flat against Tyler’s sides, felt his stomach rise and fall, his skin finally as overheated as Josh’s. His stomach was moist, and so were Josh’s hands, and they slipped easily up along Tyler’s chest, Josh feeling and counting each lovely rib as his hands glided past, slowly, slowly. He wanted to memorize him, every bump and curve and dip and spot. Hell, he sounded like a Fall Out Boy song. Only the reality of Tyler was so much better than any old song could ever have prepared him for.

He ran the flat of his palms over both of Tyler’s nipples, fingers ghosting back over the two nubs, and Tyler groaned in appreciation, arching his back, a desert shifting, golden sand rearranging itself in the wake of a summer wind. Josh stared at him in awe, watched the goosebumps form beneath his fingertips across Tyler’s chest, felt his torso heaving, belly button falling and rising with his stomach, his ribs so prominent, his arms quaking, now on either side of his head and his hands curled into fists. The bit of light streaming in from outside glistened on the sheen of sweat over his body, on his damp temples and in the dark hair of his armpits, and Josh realized he could see the pores on the skin of Tyler’s neck, even from halfway down his body and in the dark. Josh loved every inch of him so much then that it hurt.

He pressed his face into Tyler’s stomach, lips parted and panting hotly as he mouthed over his
tummy, thumbs still playing with his nipples, rolling and pulling gently, loving the feeling, worshiping the feeling of Tyler’s back arching and his hips rolling, rutting up into Josh’s chest, almost his neck; Josh had inched his body lower without intending to.

He felt himself smiling into Tyler’s tummy, a hip bone probing sharply into Josh’s shoulder. He shifted, pulled back to admire the shimmer of sweat and now spit smeared across Tyler’s abdomen. He looked up and saw Tyler looking at him, eyes veiled by eyelashes, cherry lips parted and glistening, rosy and splotty color splattered across his cheeks and chest. Josh dragged his hands slowly back down Tyler’s chest to his hips. He massaged the skin there with his thumbs, smoothing and soothing circles, clockwise, counterclockwise, just firm enough to keep Tyler’s hips in place against the mattress.

Josh could kiss and touch and lick and bite and admire every bit and piece of Tyler for eternity it felt like to him, but at the same time, Josh’s cock was trapped in his boxers and pressing into Tyler’s knee, and sure, that felt good, but he wanted and fucking needed something more, and Tyler was starting to wriggle his hips in Josh’s grasp, trying to buck up, obviously needing more, too, and soon. Josh knew both of them could come like that right then and there without even taking their boxers off, and he knew Tyler knew it, too, and that they both knew the other knew it; Josh could tell when Tyler’s eyes met his again through those fucking eyelashes, and Tyler’s breath hitched in his throat, leaking out in a whine so quiet and high Josh felt maybe only bats could hear it. And him, but he was special, because he and Tyler were on the same wavelength, okay. He could hear him.

Josh’s chin bumped Tyler’s erection then unintentionally, and Tyler’s whine became louder, though not loud enough for Josh to be too concerned. Luckily for them (especially lucky for Josh, thank fuck, he was roasting alive with the heat) the AC kicked on and the quiet whirring sound coming from the half-closed vent next to the bed comforted the fleeting worries Josh had that someone would hear them. He was a little too busy right then anyways to be too concerned with that line of thinking.

Tyler’s cock twitched against his chin, and Josh didn’t know if most people couldn’t stop smiling while doing this sort of thing, but he couldn’t. He was finally able to do this- he’d be lying if he said he hadn’t thought and daydreamed and, yeah, masturbated even to the thought of this multiple times before, the notion distracting him from his homework on numerous occasions. He was so close he could smell Tyler, more than smell him, the godly scent was filling his nostrils and he was breathing Tyler. Fucking finally. About goddamn time.

Josh smiled into Tyler’s hips, pressing his face down against the cotton and dragging his open mouthed grin up and over Tyler’s dick, mouthing at the base through his boxers. Tyler moaned, tried bucking up, and Josh readjusted his grip on his hips, still running his thumbs lovingly over the taut skin. He mouthed at the base until he had sucked a solid patch of wetness onto the underwear, Tyler’s squirming never ceasing. His legs were trembling on either side of Josh; he could feel the shivers running through him, his leg hair scratching at Josh’s arms and tickling his bare sides. He loved him.

Josh breathed in deeply, nose tracing the dip between a hip bone and side of his cock, pulling away only to lean forward enough to kiss wetly near the head, the outline straining as much as possible in boxer briefs, the tight cotton so tented that the elastic band was pulled taut between Tyler’s hip bones and the tip of his cock would be visible in the open space if Josh were to only lean forward a couple inches more. He kissed at the covered part of the head some more before licking long and slow and steady back down to the base. Tyler huffed.

“Josh,” he panted, and Josh melted at his voice, saying his name. It felt like years since he had last heard Tyler speak- his beautiful, beautiful voice, music in Josh’s ears, in his head, his heart- his heart was breaking and he had never been more happy. It couldn’t have been more than five minutes since
Tyler had last spoken, but Josh had no control over the range of his emotions at this point in time. He was a goner already.

Josh dropped his head lazily to the side, saliva clinging to his chin and a hip bone now pressing sweetly into his temple as he gazed up at Tyler. Tyler’s chest was rising and falling rapidly, fingers curling and uncurling, eyes moving behind his eyelids. Josh kissed his cock again and Tyler jerked. He opened his eyes and looked at Josh, huffed again.

“Jo oooooosh,” he whined, voice scratchy, high, sweet. “Josh, y-you...I said... Josh-” He cut himself and his whine off with a dry sob he tried choking back down, Josh could feel him do so, and Josh’s heart again melted into a mess of a lovesick puddle. His ears ached so sweetly with the sounds that Tyler was making that his chest hurt, he couldn’t catch his breath, was falling, fallen. Tyler was crying, no tears, only sweat on his face, but the noises fighting to slip past his lips were going straight to Josh’s heart, and dick, coincidentally. He had been lowkey humping Tyler’s leg for the past ten minutes now. Lowkey.

Tyler huffed again in frustration and took in a ragged breath that shuddered throughout his body so strongly it sounded like a kid who had just thrown a mega-length tantrum in the middle of the grocery store and had cried themselves sick.

“Aw my God, Tyler baby, hush, shhhhhhh,” Josh cooed, laughed; not meanly, it was just too endearing. Tyler was too endearing- Josh loved him. His brain was shutting down from the inability to fully process just how fucking sweet Tyler was. His boyfriend. Thank you, God. Thank fuck.

“J-Josh….” Tyler tried again, his head turning one way and then another, gasping for breath, still shuddering. Josh petted his thigh, kissed a hip bone, hummed into his skin, and Tyler collected his thoughts, his words, his breath.

“Josh, I...thought I t-told you t-to...to suck me off….” He managed a small smirk, the challenging, expectant look still shining in his eyes, though mixed now with some sort of sweet will to mutually surrender. That was A-okay with Josh.

“J-jerk,” Tyler added, as an afterthought.

Josh huffed into Tyler’s hip. “You are so not in any position to be acting up right now, mister.”

Tyler jerked his hips up, crotch smacking Josh in the nose. “Josh.”

“Jesus, okay,” Josh was laughing, pretending to rub his nose like it had hurt, sitting up again on his knees. He paused and stared down at Tyler, in awe all over again. “Jesus,” he repeated. “Look at you….” He dropped his hand back to Tyler’s thigh, loving the way Tyler was trembling beneath his fingers, and let his eyes wander over the body stretched out before him. This body- Josh remembered admiring it from afar as Tyler played out on the court, reveling in his own skill and ability to run and jump and spin, a natural in the game, his fingers long and hands pronounced, slim shoulders and lean muscles and tight, tanned skin; and those brown, brown eyes; his funky hairline that Josh loved, and his sloped nose and stupidly girlish eyelashes and almost invisible splattering of freckles. Josh had seen Tyler so many times, and now here he was seeing him, Tyler right in front of him and against him. Like an angel.

“I feel like fist pumping,” Josh said, too horny to be embarrassed, thoughts too jumbled.

Tyler let out a hoarse bark of a laugh before slapping his own hand over his mouth, eyes sparkling up at Josh’s. He lowered his hand slowly, as if unsure whether he’d start laughing again or not.
“Fist pump my dick,” he suggested.

“Okay,” Josh agreed. He tugged Tyler’s boxers off quickly enough that Tyler yelped in surprise and sat up to wriggle out of them, kneeling Josh again in the chest as he pulled them from his legs.

“Leggy,” Josh teased, grabbing onto Tyler’s knees, and Tyler shrieked, his hands flying to Josh’s forearms, his fingers digging in.

“Josh, don’t.” His serious voice again. They were sitting closely enough on the bed that their legs were tangled, one of Tyler’s knees still in Josh’s chest. Josh bumped their noses together, but Tyler still eyed him warily.

“Don’t,” he all but prompted, and Josh squeezed his kneecaps, causing Tyler to dissolve into giggles. It was always worth tickling him just to see him turn red and to hear his laughter and to feel him squirm, but Josh grimaced and released Tyler’s legs as the other knee hit him again in the crotch.

“I told you,” Tyler was panting, grinning, and sweatier than before. “I warned you not to tickle me, man.” He eyed Josh rubbing at his chest and added, “Sorry.” He didn’t sound sorry; it was a hard thing to sound while badly suppressing laughter. “Dude, did I knee you? There?”

“You kneeed me everywhere, Tyler, what are you talking about,” Josh grumbled, hiding his smile, trying to not overreact to the fact that Tyler was now naked. And very hard, despite having just endured a tickle attack.

“No, did I knee you there?”

Josh looked on in amusement as Tyler made a show of winking down at Josh’s tented boxers. Still tented, kneed or not.

“Yes, okay, you did.”

“Sorry.”

“Why don’t I believe you?”

“Does it hurt?”

“No, Tyler, you hit me in the dick and it doesn’t hurt at all.”

“Smart ass,” Tyler said, shifting away from Josh to pull his legs up against his chest, hiding himself. Not that Josh had gotten an actual look yet anyways. Unfortunately. “I was gonna kiss it for you but never mind now.”

Josh scoffed at him as Tyler smirked back, way too smug. Then he crossed his arms over himself as if shy all of a sudden. “Take yours off, too, Joshie, I don’t wanna be the only one naked.” His voice was bordering on whiny again, and Josh smiled.

“You are so fucking cute,” he told Tyler, climbing off the bed.

“You already said that.” Tyler smiled up at Josh through his eyelashes and bounced on the mattress once, and Josh almost had a heart attack it was that cute.

Again, Josh was glad the room was mostly dark, even though they could both see without much of an issue anymore. Stripping with an audience had never really been Josh’s thing. Even if the audience was Tyler. But Tyler had already done the same in front of him, and was sitting there on the bed so cutely and waiting so patiently for Josh, and Josh was still so hard that he sucked it up as best he could- sucked his stomach in a little, too- and pulled his boxers down over his erection and
down his thighs to his ankles. He proceeded to trip against the bed as he tried to step out of them, cursing under his breath.

Tyler had started to giggle, because apparently he thought the whole situation was just hilarious, but he wasn’t the one who’d gotten kneed in the crotch and was now making a fool of himself trying to get out of his underwear. *The dickhead- wow. I love him.*

“Josh, c’mere-” Tyler’s hand was on Josh’s arm, tugging; Josh had bent halfway over to try and free himself from his boxers, and, albeit a little hesitantly, straightened up at Tyler’s beckoning. “Lemme see you, baby, I-”

Tyler stopped, and Josh fidgeted. He hadn’t had an erection this full in a long while, and it had been even longer since anyone else had been even remotely involved. *Really,* Tyler didn’t have to inspect him like that, God, this was fucking embarrassing, why could eyes adjust so well to the dark? Fucking unfair. And Josh hadn’t even seen Tyler yet, and now here he was with his fucking dick out waving in the goddamn air, *how* was that *at all* fair? In what world-

“Like I said-” Tyler’s voice jarred Josh from his thoughts; he was nodding animatedly, sticking out his bottom lip in an appraising manner. “-nice dick.”

Josh shook his head in disbelief and huffed out a laugh. “You’re making fun of me again.”

“No, I’m not!”

“Yeah, you are, you’re making fun-”

“I’m *not,* J, honest. If you didn’t have a nice package, I’d tell you.” Tyler sounded like it was the most natural thing to say in the world. Josh squinted his eyes.

“Well, gee, thanks, it’s so great to know I can count on you for things like that.”

Tyler beamed at him. “You’re welcome.”

Josh shook his head again and tried not to laugh, for lack of any other reaction. “I can *not* believe you. You’re an idiot. Did you know that? An *idiot.*”

Tyler smirked at him, his voice scratchy. “But you love me.”

Josh’s heart jumped, hopeful, tripped down at least three steps at Tyler’s words, and he felt his already warm cheeks turning red. He felt a drop of sweat meander slowly down the nape of his neck. *Yeah. I do. I really, really do. Ty. I love you. I love you. I want you to know that. Please.* But an embarrassed look had come across Tyler’s face; embarrassed, because Josh didn’t want to think that it was a frightened expression, didn’t know what that would mean for him, for *them,* and his heart was being pulled in too many directions at once, but he had no choice but to keep things floating. Tyler wasn’t looking at him any more, was looking at the bed like he was confused as to what should happen next, and Josh realized the longer he didn’t respond the worse this situation could become, for *both* of them, for Tyler. He could brush it off for him, take the penalty, lose a point. It didn’t matter; Tyler did.

Josh climbed back onto the bed, and Tyler looked up, almost like he was surprised. Something flashed in Josh’s chest at that, but he didn’t know what it was. He shoved the feeling to the back of his mind, an easy feat when his balls were pulling so heavily between his legs, and slipped forward to straddle Tyler’s thighs, leaning towards him. Tyler naturally fell back against the mattress as Josh hovered over him, hands on either side of Tyler’s head. One of Tyler’s hands surfaced in the corner of Josh’s eye, and he delicately wrapped his warm fingers around Josh’s wrist, shy and gentle. Josh
smiled, the sight, the touch so comforting it made him want to cry.

He leaned down and nipped at Tyler’s nose, earning a small smile, which was all Josh could ever really ask for. He just wanted Tyler to be happy. God fucking dammit. He was gonna cry.

But then there was a mischievous gleam in the smile below him, and a fucking knee nudging at his naked dick, and the waves of pleasure that had been loitering in the background for the past couple of minutes hit him again square in the chest. He jolted forward as he let out a moan, and he heard Tyler make a satisfied sound.

“I’m winning,” he squeaked, voice muffled in Josh’s neck.

Josh pulled back to look at him, gritting his teeth- Tyler’s knee was still pressing into him. “So it is a game? You little shit. This would be interference anyways.”

“Ha!” Tyler taunted. “Says you. It’s only ‘cuz I’m better than you and you know it.”

Tyler’s knee finally dropped away, and Josh could breathe again. “Oh, okay. So that’s how it is?”

Tyler tilted his head at Josh in the way he did when he wanted something. So far Josh had never seen it fail. His lip was out as he replied. “Yes. That’s how it is.”

Josh was smiling, nipped Tyler’s nose again before pressing a soft kiss to it. “Is that your baby voice? I’m just asking ‘cause I couldn’t tell.”

Tyler kneed Josh in the stomach so hard that he lost his balance and fell to the side, the two of them giggling so loudly and the bed squeaking so traitorously, now play wrestling with so much energy that Josh knew if they didn’t tone it down they’d be caught, not by Tyler’s mom, or brother, but by everyone.

“Okay, okay, Ty, wait, stop-” Josh was trapped beneath an arm and a leg, and Tyler’s roving fingers were getting way too close to tickling his armpit for comfort. “Ty, babe, shush- shut up, bro, we’ll literally wake up the whole house.”

“And not by what you’d think!” Tyler was having much too much of a grand time. He feigned a punch to Josh’s jaw. “Yeah, we’re naked, Mom! But it’s okay, we’re just wrestling.” He dissolved into a giggling mess, and Josh started laughing because Tyler was laughing, and he had never been more happy in his entire life, and, short as it was thus far, he knew in his gut that not many things in his future could ever come close to topping this moment, alone with his best friend.

“You’re cute when you laugh,” Tyler said suddenly, rolling off of Josh onto his side to stare at him. “Your eyes, like...get all squinty. And you’ve got these dimples, man.”

Josh’s breathing slowed back to normal as he shifted on his side to mirror Tyler. “Look who’s getting all sappy now.”

In place of a reply, Tyler yawned- an actual yawn, and Josh felt the urge to do the same. He swallowed it down and teased instead, though his eyelids were genuinely heavier than they had been only several minutes ago. “Hey, baby, y’know, if you’re tired, we should probably get to sleep. We’re gonna lose at Akron tomorrow, ‘cause the two star players fucked around all night and were too sleepy to do shit.”

“I think I’d rather fuck around all night,” Tyler said, playing along.

Josh smiled. “You wanna?”
“I want to get off, Josh, this hurts,” Tyler whined. “How do you wanna, y’know. Do this?”

Josh didn’t know, so he reached down and took Tyler’s dick in his hand, and Tyler smiled and gasped at the same time. He was long and a little thin and dripping precum, so the slide was fairly easy and smooth. He was pulsing softly in Josh’s palm, and Josh almost lost it right then and there.

“How’s this good?” he asked, swiping his thumb gently over the head, and Tyler whined, knocking his forehead against Josh’s.

“N-no,” he sighed. “No, Josh, it t-totally sucks.”

Josh laughed once and pressed his lips against Tyler’s, another high whine in Tyler’s throat drowned in Josh’s mouth as he licked into Tyler’s mouth, Tyler tilting his head sweetly to let him in. Josh felt Tyler’s tongue against his own, and he started to grin, even mid-kiss, because the sensation was such a funny one that he loved so dearly when it was with Tyler. One of Tyler’s hands went to Josh’s neck, fingers so delicate like he thought he’d hurt Josh if he were any rougher. Josh loved him.

There was a minute of heavy silence, only broken by the sounds of their mouths moving together and the wet slide of Josh’s hand on Tyler’s cock. Then Josh felt fingers tracing down his chest, down his arm working slowly up and down, over the color and drawings there, back to his chest, to his nipples, not pinching, just gentle, stroking fingers; they teased down Josh’s side and over onto his stomach, dipped playfully into his belly button and stroked at his happy trail, moving lower into the courser hair-

“Your pubes are curly!” Tyler broke their kiss to exclaim this, eyes dancing.

“Tyler, most people’s are.” The cock slipped from Josh’s hand as he replied. He never knew what to expect next with this kid.

“No, yeah, but yours are like, curly curly, bro, like fucking curly.” Tyler was grinning as he tilted his head down to obviously study Josh’s crotch again. Josh rolled his eyes and sighed, waiting for Tyler to finish whatever it was he was doing in his head right then.

“Your hair gets kinda curly down there, too,” Josh added. “Want me to keep going or are you just gonna stare all- ouch, dammit, Ty-”

“Ouch, sorry.” Tyler’s head had collided with Josh’s chin as he straightened back out on the bed, and he actually had the audacity to giggle at the grimace on Josh’s face. “Aw, c’mon, Josh...don’t be mad. Kiss me?”

Tyler’s hand found the back of Josh’s neck again and tugged him closer, like Josh would ever resist anyways. Tyler dipped his tongue into Josh’s mouth this time, and Josh’s hand automatically came up to stroke Tyler’s cheek. Tyler made a noise in Josh’s mouth and pulled back, smiling.

“Gross, dude, there’s cum on your hand.”

“It’s yours!”

“Doesn’t matter, it’s still gross.”

Josh grinned at him and poked his nose with his sticky hand, delighted at the look of minor horror that crossed Tyler’s face, before reaching back down between them.

“No, wait, let me do it,” Tyler said, bumping Josh’s arm out of the way. “Is that okay?”
“That’s like, way more than okay, dude,” Josh murmured as Tyler’s fingers traced through the wispy hair beneath his belly button again. Don’t get him wrong, Josh loved touching Tyler’s dick- he had a lot of serious plans to be getting his hands all over it again in the very near future- but his own cock was actually close to crying with the lack of attention. Tyler tilted his head back down to observe what he was doing, and Josh pressed his forehead into the soft tuft of hair on Tyler’s head, breathing in the comforting scent of Tyler and shampoo.

Tyler was playing with the curls around Josh’s erection now, pointedly ignoring his cock. Josh hissed when a finger got tangled with a strand of hair and it tugged sharply on his skin, though he wouldn’t deny if pressed that it felt incredible.

“Sorry,” Tyler mumbled, and Josh reached up to place his hand on the nape of Tyler’s neck, fingers carding through the soft, short strands there. Josh’s hips inched forwards on their own, finding empty space, and finally Tyler took pity on him, let his fingers ghost softly, dryly, over Josh’s sack and up along a vein towards the head. Josh moaned against Tyler’s skull, hair in his mouth, and he tilted his head down, too, forehead to forehead; one, so he could breathe, and two, so he could see Tyler doing this. Because he really wanted to see it.

His cock was twitching at Tyler’s touch, precum leaking out and onto the mattress, pooling against his hip. It would feel gross, except he was preoccupied with everything else feeling way too good. Tyler noticed, too, and took his hand away to smear at the cum on the sheet.

“Cool,” he murmured, and Josh huffed out a quiet laugh, their hot breaths caressing each other’s lips, foreheads slipping with sweat. Tyler smeared some of the cum across his fingertips and giggled, too, even quieter than Josh had been, and touched his wet fingers to the head of Josh’s cock.

“God, Ty, c’mon, babe,” Josh muttered, hips bucking gently. “Quit teasing, it’s been long enough.”

Josh couldn’t see Tyler’s face too clearly, but he was certain that he had started smirking. Regardless, he listened to Josh’s words and wrapped his full palm around Josh’s cock, swiping his thumb along the slit at the top, and then again. And again.

“Ty- ler…. ” Josh moaned, fighting to keep quiet. “That’s still teasing.”

Tyler hummed in reply and finally, finally slipped his fist down Josh’s cock, slowly, still teasingly, but at least they were going somewhere now. He squeezed it and dragged his hand back up, collecting more precum with his thumb to make the slide smoother. Josh didn’t care. Slick or dry, so long as it was with Tyler, that was all he needed. Anything felt amazing after having ignored himself for so long.

Josh groaned quietly, and he was surprised when Tyler’s cock actually jumped as he made the sound. It hit Tyler’s fist, and Tyler grunted, his own precum smearing on his wrist as he continued to jerk Josh off.

“Hey, wait, baby,” Josh murmured against Tyler’s lips, moving his head to swallow Tyler’s panting, a quick, wet kiss. He rubbed his thumb in a quick circle on Tyler’s neck before moving his own arm down over Tyler’s to reach Tyler’s cock, taking it in his palm again. Tyler cried out and bit his lip, mouth close enough to Josh’s that Josh could feel him do so, could feel Tyler’s teeth on his skin. Tyler was shaking and leaking and Josh slicked his hand as best he could before running his fist soothingly up and down Tyler’s length, cooing softly to him, listening to his growing pants and getting off on it.

Two arms trying to move between them going different directions at different times whilst lying within make-out distance of each other proved to be more difficult than Josh had calculated. It felt
good, so fucking good, but it wasn’t enough for either of them. He shifted his hips, dick slipping from Tyler’s grasp, and Tyler was about to take it in hand again when Josh brushed his cock against Tyler’s, forcing a groan from Josh’s mouth and a long moan from Tyler.

“J-Josh, what are you….” he whispered, hips reaching. Josh scooted an inch closer, their foreheads knocking together once, and wrapped his hand as far around both their cocks as he could. What he couldn’t reach around with his fingers, the silky smooth, slippery skin on skin made up for it. Big time. Fucking score, bitch! Joseph’s going down.

He really was, too, because his moan had turned into a solid, high pitched whining from the back of his throat, and Josh would have laughed if he hadn’t been so turned on. He pressed his mouth to Tyler’s to quiet the sound, shoving his tongue into the heat of Tyler’s mouth as deeply as he could, so hard and so sudden that Tyler tilted his head back to accommodate the intrusion, his sounds choking around Josh’s tongue. His hand was grasping for purchase, first on Josh’s hip, then his forearm, then finally around Josh’s fist working the two of them closer and closer to release. Josh could feel it building rapidly, and judging by the way Tyler was still managing to moan with a tongue down his throat and the feeling of his cock pulsing in Josh’s palm and his fingers digging into Josh’s hand, Tyler was fucking close, too.

Josh came first. He couldn’t help it; he had been focusing, ironically, not on his own cock, but on the feeling of Tyler’s in his hand, and it kept pulsing and twitching and he really was a goner when he started to focus on that. He moved his fist faster to work himself through it fully, Tyler’s cock sliding even more easily now against his, mouth still working against Tyler’s, and Tyler made a surprised sound at the feeling of wet heat rushing down and through his fingers. Josh was still riding his orgasm as Tyler broke their kiss and worked his hand beneath Josh’s, and Josh let him, hand hovering in the small space between their bodies as Tyler took over for Josh, just his dick in his fist this time, moving quickly up and down, squeezing at the base and twisting at the top until Josh had to wrap his fingers around Tyler’s wrist to stop him, the sensitivity too much. Josh once again pressed his forehead to Tyler’s to watch what was happening. Some of his cum had gotten onto Tyler’s belly, and the sight of the milky clear substance in the sparse hair above Tyler’s cock had Josh leaking out a last stream of it, body spasming.

Tyler’s erection brushed against the tip of Josh’s softening dick, precum and cum smearing along Tyler’s length, and Josh thought maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad, embarrassing thing if they ever did decide to do it with the lights on. He could see okay for the most part, but he wanted to burn the more little things like this into his retinas so he would never forget how glorious they were. Tyler was glorious.

And still hard. His fingers were wrapped around his own cock now, his brow furrowed and that fucking whine building quietly in his throat again, and as hot as it all was and as much as Josh would love to watch sometime, he was not in any way going to let Tyler get off on his own right now.

“Shhh, baby,” Josh cooed, the words feeling so natural and coming so easily when Tyler was shivering before him. He loved him. “It’s okay, shhh...let me do it, darling.” Tyler let Josh replace his hand on his dick and buried his head into Josh’s neck, muffling the sweet sounds he was still making. Josh almost thought he could get hard again, with Tyler’s hot breath dampening his neck like that. God, Tyler was hot. Josh still couldn’t believe his luck. And he was holding his dick in his hand! So yeah, maybe he was a little amazed, still in awe of his best friend. Josh didn’t think he would ever stop being amazed by Tyler, even if they grew old together.

Tyler’s dick was the softest thing Josh had ever encountered in his life, even when hard. The smoothest, the silkiest; the skin was so incredibly soft, and Josh just wanted to kiss it, watching the pink head disappear beneath his hand again and again. He slowed for a moment to watch a glob of
precum leak out of the slit, and Josh had to kiss it, or else he’d be getting himself hard all over again.

He sat up, and Tyler rolled onto his back, propping himself up on his elbows. “What’s wrong?” he asked, voice full of emotion. “Did I say some-”

“Tyler, babe, relax,” Josh almost laughed, but only smiled instead; Tyler seemed genuinely concerned about him, and Josh had no idea why. Like he’d be going anywhere. Fat fucking chance.

Josh crawled a few spaces down the bed and settled back on the mattress beside Tyler, holding himself semi-upright with one elbow, and draped one of his legs over Tyler’s. He ran his fingers through the hair on Tyler’s thighs; Tyler was holding himself and his muscles tensed, but Josh could feel him relaxing as he massaged his thighs, lowering himself back down to the bed. Josh kissed his thigh, sucked a mark on the tanned skin, felt Tyler starting to tremble again. He was still licking him there as he moved his hand up to Tyler’s cock, taking it in hand again and stroking him with steady movements. Tyler groaned and half chuckled, and Josh smiled against his leg, nipping once before scooting further up the bed to do what it was he had really wanted to.

He watched for a minute at close range as his hand continued to work up and down, more precum leaking everywhere, dripping onto Tyler’s belly and Josh’s fingers. Josh stilled his hand at the base of Tyler’s cock, holding it still as he leaned forward and breathed in, wrapped his lips as gently as he could around the head.

Tyler convulsed with the new sensation, hands flying to Josh’s head, fingers tangling for grip in his curls, new sounds spilling from his mouth that Josh had never even dared to imagine he could make. High sounds, beautiful sounds, sounds wanting and needing and for him. Josh’s cock was definitely getting interested again. He ignored it as he slipped Tyler further down his throat, the silkiness and weight of it in his mouth the best thing he’d ever encountered in his life, the taste not unsimilar to Tyler’s lips and mouth, but so much more condensed. It tasted heavy, and Josh loved it.

Tyler’s fingers in his hair urged him faster, pushing at his head, and Josh would have grinned if he wasn’t about to choke. His eyes watered, but he forced himself to take in as much as he could, moving his hand again to cover the bit he couldn’t reach. Josh had never done this before, but he tried to imagine what he would like if this situation were reversed, and what he could recall from those low quality videos he and Brendon used to watch and make fun of. Eighth grade, okay?

Josh moved back to the tip of Tyler’s dick and dug his tongue against the slit, wriggled it, and Tyler cried out, loudly, one of his hands leaving Josh’s hair to cover his mouth, his hips jerking seemingly of their own accord. Josh rubbed circles into Tyler’s hip with his free hand, the arm holding him up, and sped up the movements of his fist. He pulled his mouth away, his jaw already tired, and watched a string of cum connecting his bottom lip to Tyler’s cock sway and break, dripping down his chin and Tyler’s stomach. He leaned in and pressed a kiss to the tip, the prettiest shade of glimmering wet pink Josh had ever seen. He would never be able to see that color again without thinking of this. He kissed it again, and Tyler whimpered behind his palm and pressed on the back of Josh’s head, and Josh smiled and gave him what he wanted.

Tyler came with a long, that’s-loud-enough-I’m-concerned-again moan when he was buried so deeply in Josh’s throat that some of his pubic hair was tickling Josh’s nose. Tyler’s hand tightened in Josh’s hair and tugged painfully on a few strands, but Josh couldn’t be bothered to give a shit right then, everything he was hearing and feeling and tasting too good to process. And too weird. Long strings of cum shot down his throat, and the only reason he didn’t pull off, besides Tyler trying to hold him in place, was that he was certain he’d throw up if he didn’t have a dick down his throat forcing everything down. A little gross, a little strange, and so fucking hot that Josh knew the next time they wanted to get off, he could just suck Tyler and it would do the job for him, too.
Tyler was panting when Josh finally slid back up his dick, already softening in his mouth, and he gagged a little once his throat was clear, cum dribbling down his chin. He had swallowed a lot of it, Tyler had been too far down his throat for him to do anything else with it, but there was still some pooled on his tongue that he’d rather not have to.

“Just spit it,” Tyler said between heavy breaths, reading Josh’s mind. Josh looked at him, and Tyler pointed at the cum stain Josh had made earlier. “It’s already a mess, it’s fine. Just spit it anywhere.”

Josh did, which, again, was a little gross, and he realized they should probably have had some rags ready or a towel, or even some classic tissues would have helped with the aftermath. But then they hadn’t really planned all of this, so Josh guessed the mess was inevitable. It was their first time after all, they could afford to make a few mistakes.

After Josh could close his mouth without having to swallow anything, he laid on his side between the new stain and Tyler. Tyler had rolled onto his side already and was grinning at him, trying not to beam, and he swiped his thumb across Josh’s chin, wiping away a string of spit. They looked at each other for a minute, a small smile growing on Josh’s face, and then Tyler leaned forward to kiss him, slower than they had before, his hand on Josh’s jaw, Josh’s hand coming to Tyler’s neck.

Tyler murmured against Josh’s lips, “You didn’t have to do that...y’know, if you didn’t want to...we could’ve just-”

“I literally wanted to, so shut up,” Josh said back, causing Tyler to giggle, and Josh kissed him again, more teeth than anything else. “You tasted good.”

“Yeah, of course. And that’s why you blew chunks on my bed.”

“Goddammit, Tyler,” Josh huffed, pulling away, and Tyler started laughing, rolling onto his back again and draping an arm over his face, trying to quiet the sound.

“You sound like a girl when you moan,” Josh informed him, just an attempt to level the playing fields.

“Whatsoever, dude. Like you would know,” Tyler retorted, and Josh scoffed. “You seemed to be enjoying it anyways. Looks like I won.”

“Whatsoever. It’s not a game,” Josh huffed.

“Sounds like you lost.”

“Ty -ler-”

Tyler spit his tongue out at Josh, and Josh tried not to laugh. Cuteness overload! My boyfriend’s being so cute I want to shoot myself!

“I hate you. You are so annoying,” Josh muttered, grinning, and Tyler grinned back, mouth opening with a reply.

“But you lo-” he stopped and blinked, and then stretched instead of finishing his sentence, yawning as he scrambled off the bed, muttering something about finding his boxers.

Josh tried to swallow the sudden lump that had materialized in his throat. Tyler hadn’t said it, but Josh knew what he had been going to say. And he hadn’t. For the second time that night.

A pair of boxers hit Josh in the head before he could go and get too sentimental and start crying or
blubbering or something embarrassingly horrifying like that. Josh sat up to see Tyler on one leg, shimmying back into his underwear. Admittedly, it was a pretty cute thing to watch, humorous enough for Josh to push his own issues to the back of his mind. Later. He pulled his own underwear back on without getting off the bed.

“Goodbye,” Tyler said in a sing-song voice, hopping on the bed next to Josh again as Josh was tucking his junk into the boxers. He stared at Tyler.

“I know I’ve said it before, but I do not fucking believe you,” he said, and Tyler dissolved into quiet giggles, leaning against Josh and bumping his head against Josh’s shoulder a couple of times. It was cute, even though he was a fucking weird kid; Josh guessed he knew that when he got himself into this whole thing, and truth be told, it didn’t bother him. He petted at Tyler’s hair and turned to kiss his nose.

“Can you stay here?” Tyler asked, back to whispering. Like they hadn’t just made plenty of noise, and anything beyond a whisper would disturb the other people in the house.

“I am spending the night,” Josh whispered back.

“No, I mean...” Tyler tugged the sheet and covers back up the bed as he spoke, seemingly unconcerned with the damp patches still scattered across the mattress, much less the dried cum on their own bodies. “I mean can you stay here? Like sleep here? With me?”

“In this bed?”

“Yeah, Jishwa.”

Josh gave him a look but didn’t comment on the name. “Honestly, bro, I wasn’t planning on leaving.”

Tyler’s face split into a grin, and he kissed Josh’s bare shoulder before slipping down the mattress and wiggling beneath the covers, patting the space next to him. He tugged on Josh’s arm when Josh apparently wasn’t moving fast enough for him, and once Josh had laid down beside him, grimacing at the wet spot on the sheet beneath his back, Tyler threw the covers over Josh, too, arranging them neatly before sneaking under Josh’s arm to rest his head on his bicep, fingers curling gently on his chest. A leg over Josh’s and cold feet tangled in his own—Again? How is that even possible? He’s probably fricking iron deficient—Tyler let out a little sigh, and Josh could feel his eyelashes fluttering on his arm.

Josh’s heart was melting. He loved him. God, he loved him, he loved him, he loved him.

Several minutes passed. Josh was content in that moment to just lay there with Tyler cuddled up next to him, staring up at the dark and the ceiling with no ceiling fan, listening to Tyler’s breathing start to even out. Sweat was beginning to creep down his forehead again, but he couldn’t be bothered to care, not when it was in part due to Tyler lying half on top of him, their bare skin on skin and the wet patch at his back a reminder of what they had just done. Josh wouldn’t change this moment for fucking anything.

The longer he blinked up at the ceiling, the more thoughts started surfacing of their own accord, and something that had been said earlier that evening popped into his brain.

“Hey, Ty?” he turned his head and whispered against Tyler’s forehead. “Are you still awake?”

Tyler made a tiny groan as he shifted, hand slipping down Josh’s chest to rest on his stomach instead. “Yeah. I’m awake.”
“Can I ask you a question?”

Even in his sleep-fogged state, Tyler was honestly impressive to Josh. He could still be an asshole. “You just did.”

“Well, can I ask you another one, smart ass?”

Josh felt Tyler smile against his arm. “Hit me.”

“Well...earlier tonight, your mom said something about, like...it was about the school dance, and how you, um, y’know...you’re actually kind of into them, and I...”

Tyler was still laying stationary against Josh, though not in the same way he had been before; it was more conscious, almost tense. He uncurled his fingers on Josh’s stomach and splayed his hand there, pinky dipping into his belly button, the touch warm but not heavy. “…yeah?”

“Well, I...I was just...just, y’know, wondering if maybe she was right, like. If you...if you really are...y’know?”

“...If I really am into school dances?”

“Yeah.”

Tyler patted Josh’s tummy once. “I haven’t been, no. In the past.”

“Oh. So, um...why not?”

“Because, Josh, it always had to be with girls and I’m gay and the last time I went I threw up on her shoes.”

Josh didn’t know how to reply, was afraid he had maybe pissed Tyler off a little. But he was still curled into Josh’s body, eyelashes still brushing Josh’s bicep every time he blinked, hand still resting on his abdomen, so Josh guessed they were okay.

“Okay...right, um...sorry...” Josh moved his free hand to his stomach, and Tyler readily intertwined their fingers. Good sign. Good. “So, uh...so you’re gay?”

Tyler was smiling again. “Yeah, believe it or not, Joshie, but this right here is kind of gay.”

“Well, sure, I know that, but like...y’know...it doesn’t mean you’re like...it doesn’t have to mean you’re like, all gay...”

Tyler was silent for a beat. “So you’re not?”

“I...don’t know...” Josh was paranoid that leaving his statement as was would upset Tyler, so he quickly added, “I just like you.”

Tyler’s hand was cold, so Josh rubbed his thumb across his fingers, surprised suddenly by how expressive Tyler’s hands were, acutely aware of every minute twitch of his fingers. He felt like he knew him, really knew him, and just from his hands.

It was another minute before Tyler spoke, voice scratchy. “If...if they were with you...then yes.”

Josh blinked. “Huh?”

“Dances and school shit like that, idiot.”
“Oh. You’d...you would be into them...if like...if it was you and me?”

“Yes. Definitely. Very much.”

“So like...” Tyler’s fingers were playing back with Josh’s, so simple and so sweet. Josh didn’t want to hurt him ever again. “...so like tonight, you would have...um....”

Tyler breathed in through his mouth, a quiet gasping sound before responding. “If you’d’ve asked me,” he mumbled into Josh’s arm, and Josh could feel his breath on his rib and armpit. “I would’ve said yes.” It could have sounded guilting, or hurt, or betrayed, or bitter even, but Tyler’s voice was raw and open, and Josh could hear nothing in it but honesty. And that made everything that much harder.

“Ty...Tyler, I’m sorry, baby, I’m...I hope you can like, fully know that someday, y’know, but...I really am.”

“Josh, I know. It’s okay.”

It wasn’t okay, Josh wasn’t okay with Tyler being okay with this, but Tyler pulled his hand away from Josh’s then and sat up just enough to kiss Josh on the corner of his mouth. His eyes looked sleepy, and he smiled down at him.

“M’tired. I’m going to sleep, okay?” he kissed Josh again, and Josh kissed him back, and Tyler turned around beneath the covers to face the other way, pulling his knees up against his chest.

Josh lay there, just breathing, just blinking, mind only able to focus on the space between them now. Tyler hadn’t seemed mad or even too pissed about it, any of it, but Josh still felt guilty as hell. He wished that they could just enjoy what they had been able to do that night for the first time together and not have anything else interfere, not ex-girlfriends or missed dances or future games or other friends. Just them. And now there was this space between them, and Josh didn’t know what to do about it.

The sheets rustled as Tyler peeked over his shoulder, not looking at Josh, but close enough. Josh could see his little scoop nose perfectly illuminated by the small amount of outside light leaking through the shades, and he loved him dearly.

“Hold me?” Tyler’s voice was scratchy and monotone and a few pitches higher than Josh’s, all of which it most often always was anyways, and it wasn’t necessarily a quiet voice, he hadn’t been whispering; but it was the smallest voice Josh had ever heard come from his mouth before, and the two words trembled.

Josh didn’t know of what he was being convinced right then, but his heart was completely persuaded, convinced of Tyler, maybe, Josh didn’t know. Something washed over his heart more strongly than he had ever felt any emotion before, and he only knew with certainty that he loved the boy who was beside him and turned away from him. Josh didn’t reply with words, wouldn’t have been able to think of what to say if he had tried; he rolled onto his side and tucked himself against Tyler, his bare chest to his bare back, tucking a leg between Tyler’s and looping an arm around Tyler’s waist. He pressed his nose to the base of Tyler’s neck and breathed him in, the scent more home than his own bedroom. Josh didn’t know how he was ever supposed to sleep in his own bed alone after this. Tyler’s hand found his again, and he laced their fingers together, and Josh let him.

“Thank you,” Tyler mumbled, obviously half asleep judging by his voice, and Josh closed his eyes, they were forced closed, overwhelmed with being. He rubbed his nose gently against Tyler’s skin before placing a dry, chaste kiss to the base of his neck and settling in to sleep as well. He loved him.
Josh envisioned behind his closed eyes, the smell of Tyler’s skin and shampoo still strong in the air he was breathing, Tyler’s hand still warm and motionless in his, what his reaction would have been if Josh had accidentally let slip how strongly he truly felt towards him, or had even just told him straight out. When Tyler had freaked out earlier after saying Josh loved him, as a joke, Josh had seen the look on his face, the way he had immediately closed in on himself, the way it had taken several minutes just for him to be able to look at Josh again, like the bond they had so carefully been building was completely foreign to him and he didn’t trust the foundations to hold him. Josh didn’t think his heart would be able to keep beating if Tyler looked him in the eye and saw a stranger.

But Tyler was here with him, Tyler was his best friend, and Tyler liked him. Tyler liked him.

Josh had sworn earlier that it would be enough. It had to be.

Chapter End Notes

lmao @ FOB mention, i luv myself i’m so punny hahaha anyways yall omg! please lemme kno ur thoughts?? i just wANNA KNO WHAT'S ON UR MIND!!! <3333 the next chapter will be this month(ish) bbys i lov u
everybody's talking, but what's anybody saying?

Chapter Notes

FRIENDS. IN TWO DAYS I'M SEEING OUR BOYS FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE :"))) my heart is NUTTING

ok ALSO ily all SO MUCH there were soooooo many BEAUTIFUL comments on the last chapter holy shit!????? i do NOT deserve u guys <33333 as always THANK YOU ANGELS. i hope ur all enjoying Trench!?????? what songs do you fucking stan!?????????

btw this iconic line is featured in this chapt lmao ur welcome <3333

chapter title from R.I.P. 2 my Youth by the Neighbourhood

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Tyler stirred and rolled over onto his back, he was alone, sprawled in the middle of his bed with the blankets tangled around his legs. He blinked, squinting at the dim light filtering through the blinds. He could hear the muted sound of rain outside, just a drizzle, and he smiled as he closed his eyes again, snuggling beneath the blankets. There was probably a few minutes still until his alarm went off. Zack’s alarm hadn’t woken him up that morning either, which was unusual; his brother got up a half hour earlier than him to claim the shower first, which Tyler hated, because his stupid alarm would always wake him up, too. They argued endlessly over it. One of the many, many cons of shared bedrooms.

But today Tyler had thankfully managed to sleep through it- thankfully, because he was bone tired. So that’s why I don’t stay up past midnight on school ni-

Tyler suddenly remembered the dance last night that he had not attended. More importantly, he suddenly remembered the dance last night that Josh had not attended. His eyes shot open and his cheeks heated up as he realized he was only in his boxers, and his nether regions felt a little...sticky. Memories flooded his brain like details of a dream you had just been awoken from, and he couldn’t help the smirk that grew on his face. But why was his bed empty…?

A quiet snoring sound came from across the room. It startled Tyler for a minute, because it was definitely not Zack. Sure, Zack snored like there was no tomorrow, but this wasn’t him; Tyler’s heart leaped and tripped and melted all at once as he rolled over onto his side to face his brother’s bed.

Josh was face down on the bed, the duvet hanging from one end of the mattress and the sheet only barely covering his lower body, the dip of his back disappearing beneath it. Tyler smiled and propped himself up on one elbow to study his boyfriend. His hair was a dark mess of curls on the white pillow case, his cheek pressed against a forearm, and at that angle, Tyler readily admitted his muscles looked good, and his tattoo, too. Not that his muscles didn’t always look good, and extremely prominent in comparison to his own lanky self, but they were even more pronounced right then. God, he was hot. Tyler loved him.

Tyler suddenly remembered about that, too. He did love him. He wasn’t just a crush anymore, or even just a boyfriend (though Tyler still didn’t feel he had been adequately or romantically implored
enough to be an official boyfriend yet, thankyouverymuch) or even his best friend, which he absolutely was. He like... loved this dude. Tyler thought for a minute, took a deep breath and held it, tried to give his mind and his heart time to catch up. He loved Josh...and that was okay...it would be okay. Cool.

Tyler released his breath in a quick huff, relieved he wasn’t freaking out on himself about it. He’d had issues in the past with like, emotions and shit, and he tried to ignore the quiet voice warning him it could still happen again. This time was different. This was Josh. And even though Tyler knew he felt more strongly about it than Josh did, as long as he didn’t slip up like he did last night, as long he didn’t let slip just how much he liked Josh- he knew Josh wouldn’t hurt him. They’d be okay.

He huffed again for the sake of it, and maybe ever so slightly in the hopes it would awaken his boyfriend, and blinked the sleep out of his eyes, watching Josh’s back gently rise and fall, his skin milky. He blushed despite himself at the memory of all that soft and pale skin beneath his fingers and his mouth, just a few hours previously. Or to be more correct, all that soft and pale skin above him...remembering the feeling of Josh on top of him, the way he blocked out everything else in the room, in the damn world, when Tyler looked up at him, like all there was was him, like a...like a fucking girl... Tyler had never expected to be as into that as he had been last night, though at the current moment, a core part of him was a little miffed he had ended up on the bottom. How was that fair? They hadn’t discussed that. Tyler adamantly maintained that he had been the one very much in charge, thank you very much. Josh was putty in his hands, on top or not. In Tyler’s opinion. And next time, maybe it would be Josh who’d end up in that position. So there.

Tyler was just reveling in the notion of there definitely being a next time, when Smash Mouth’s All Star blared in his ear, and he cursed as his elbow slipped out from beneath him. He grappled around for his phone. The volume was set really loud.

Tyler vaguely registered Josh groaning and then chuckling as Tyler got to his knees on the bed, the covers slipping to the floor as he dug around beneath the pillows. He gave Josh’s general direction the finger as he leaned down to grab his phone from the floor, finally silencing it.

“Dude-”

“Don’t start, Joshua,” Tyler snipped, and Josh rolled onto his back to muffle his giggling with an arm over his face. Tyler kneeled on his own bed across the room from him and crossed his arms, waiting for Josh to get over himself.

“You’re not cute,” Tyler told him, and Josh managed to stop laughing long enough to peek out at Tyler from beneath his arm with the sweetest pair of puppy dog eyes Tyler had seen yet. Tyler tilted his head and squinted his eyes, trying not to crack, fighting his stupid mouth from breaking into a grin. He didn’t succeed.

“You are so cute,” he gave in with a huff, laughing at the smile on Josh’s face, big enough that it made his eyes scrunch up. Tyler hopped off the bed, tripped on a sheet tangled around his foot, and collapsed a bit more dramatically than was necessary on top of Josh. He huffed loudly in Tyler’s ear, the breath knocked out of him.

“Holy crap, Tyler,” he murmured, and Tyler peeked down at him. They just looked at each other for a minute before they both started to giggle.

“Why’d you come over here?” Tyler pouted after they had stopped laughing, swinging his legs up so he was lying on top of Josh and peering down into his face. Josh grunted.

“So someone wouldn’t walk in on us like this.”
Tyler smirked down at Josh and buried his head in his neck. His voice was muffled. “But I missed you.”

Josh laughed lightly, and Tyler’s heart jumped. “You did not, you were fast asleep. Besides, I only got up like thirty minutes ago anyways.”

Tyler harumphed against Josh’s skin, and he could feel the vibrations against his lips of Josh chuckling silently. He smiled and closed his eyes and breathed in as deep as he could.

Josh’s hands were suddenly on his bare back, gentle and warm, stroking slowly. Josh was breathing a little heavier than normal with Tyler crushing his chest like he was, but it was comforting to Tyler nonetheless, their chests moving together, warm skin on skin, though Tyler was starting to get goosebumps as Josh’s touch continued to caress his back.

_I could fall asleep like this_, Tyler thought lazily as he closed his eyes, unwilling to move just then even if his entire family crashed into the bedroom. _Damn- that’d be...fucking awkward. So maybe I would move if I heard someone in the hallway._

The lyrics to _All Star_ blared from across the room again, and both Tyler and Josh groaned, though Josh’s quickly turned to giggles once again. Tyler grudgingly sat up, the warmth of Josh’s hands and chest falling away as he did so, and sighed as loudly and dramatically as he could, just for good measure.

“You hit fucking snooze?” Josh chuckled, not a real question, and Tyler glared down at him from where he was still perched on his lap. His phone was _so far_ away.

“Yes, I hit snooze, fucking asshole,” he retorted, but before he could say anything else or muster the energy to get up and go silence his phone, Josh’s hand was on his lower back, almost his ass, and Tyler jumped in surprise as Josh sat up and pressed their mouths together, his other arm wrapping around Tyler’s back. Tyler gladly reciprocated, tilting his head and begging for Josh’s tongue in his mouth, his own hands going behind Josh’s neck and keeping him close.

Tyler let out a quiet moan when Josh’s hand moved lower and squeezed at his ass, and Josh smiled into their kiss. Smirked, more like, in Tyler’s opinion. Well, Tyler would rather _die_ than let Josh pull ahead like that. He shifted in Josh’s lap, his turn to smirk into their kiss when Josh grunted quietly, their crotches rubbing together through their underwear. Tyler raked his fingernails down Josh’s back, digging them in a little harder when he felt Josh’s dick actually twitch in his drawers at his action. Josh broke the kiss to let out a ragged moan against Tyler’s cheek.

“So...how does it feel to not be a virgin anymore?” Tyler teased, because why not? He loved Josh, and he loved the sounds he made, and he loved the blush that would undoubtedly rise to his cheeks, and he loved picking on him. The poor guy.

Josh gaped at Tyler for a moment, face pink, before cracking a small smile. “Fuck you.”

Tyler chuckled, his voice low, and Josh shoved his tongue back down Tyler’s throat, probably to keep him from making any more smart comments, and Tyler didn’t really mind. He could save the sarcastic quips for later.

Somewhere in the back of Tyler’s mind he realized his alarm had finished playing the song through once and was starting it back up again at the beginning. _Gag._ Josh must have noticed, too, because Tyler felt him starting to smile, and Tyler broke their kiss.

“Cross _this_ off my bucket list,” he deadpanned against Josh’s lips, and Josh pulled back an inch to
look at him in disbelief.

“Making out to Smash Mouth is on your bucket list?”

Tyler nodded gravely, and they both broke down giggling again, just as loud, stomping footsteps sounded from the hallway.

They both jumped up so quickly they bumped into each other, Tyler slipping from Josh’s lap to the foot of the bed, and Josh tripping to his feet, sheet tangled around his legs. He let out a string of curses as he stumbled against the night stand, Tyler’s phone still playing on an annoyingly loud volume as it clattered to the floor. Tyler started to laugh and couldn’t stop, hiding his face in his hands as the door was thrown open. He felt they’d both been through this before, too many times. It was getting old.

“Need my charger…” Zack mumbled as he crashed into the room and dug through a dresser drawer, thankfully oblivious to Tyler on his bed and Josh shifting awkwardly behind him, face red as a tomato. Tyler made a mental note to give Josh hell for that later on. Lovingly, though.

“You could knock, you know,” Tyler huffed, just for the sake of it. He heard Josh rummaging around behind him, and then his alarm being turned off. “Jerk,” he added for good measure.

Zack only shrugged, unconcerned with his brother’s bitching, and slammed the drawer shut to check the one beneath it.

“Hey, that’s my drawer-”

“I’m looking for my charger-”

“Well, it’s not in there, asshole, get out of it.”

Zack stalled a minute before slamming that drawer shut as well, shifting through some of the items on top of the crowded dresser before turning around and observing the room.

“I think you left it downstairs-” Tyler started, but Zack took off around the bed and bumped past Josh to check in the night stand. Tyler turned on the bed to watch, laughing silently at the awkward way Josh was leaning away from Zack, arms crossed over his chest. He glared at Tyler over Zack’s back, and Tyler blew him a kiss.

“Shit, it’s not here, Tyler, where’d you hide my fucking charger-”

“I didn’t touch it, jackass-”

“How am I supposed to know where you left it? It’s probably up your ass, check there,” Tyler retorted as Zack pushed past Josh again, who was watching the match with a constant blush on his face, looking so out of place that Tyler almost felt sorry for him. He dodged a punch from Zack and kicked out at him with his leg as he passed the bed. He left the room without closing the door and stomped down the steps.

Tyler looked at Josh and snickered, and after a minute, the visible tension in Josh’s shoulder and forehead eased, and he smiled back at Tyler, sinking onto the edge of the bed across from him.

“That’d be me and Jordan if we had to share a room,” he said. “It’s bad enough as it is.”
Tyler sighed loudly and rolled his eyes. “Tell me about it. Little brothers suck ass, honestly.”

Josh spluttered on a laugh as Tyler hopped off the bed and placed a dramatic, loud, wet kiss on Josh’s forehead before dancing across the room to the dresser for some clothes. He’d be lying if he said he didn’t wiggle his ass a little more than he usually would when just jigging around the bedroom.

Tyler could hear Josh chuckle quietly behind him as he shifted through the contents of his drawer, and he smiled to himself as he pulled on a long sleeved shirt, rummaging again for a graphic tee to wear over it.

“Long sleeves and boxers,” Josh stated, a lot closer to Tyler than he had been a few seconds before. Tyler ducked his head to his chest to hide his smile as he heard Josh moving closer behind him. “That’s a cute look.”

“Boxer briefs,” Tyler corrected as Josh’s arms wound around his middle, and he was pulled back against Josh’s chest, his breath on Tyler’s neck. “What’s the difference?” Josh muttered against Tyler’s skin, and Tyler felt shivers run through his body. His hands found Josh’s resting on his stomach, and he intertwined their fingers. He hummed before responding.

“Briefs are sexy. Boxers not so much.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Well, when your briefs are this short, I’ve got to agree.”

Tyler pressed his ass back, just a bit, just to stay ahead, and Josh smirked against his neck before sucking at the junction of his neck and shoulder. Tyler heard himself moan and he cursed himself for losing that round.

Then Josh was pulling away again, and before Tyler could complain- and trust him, he was gonna complain- Josh slapped his ass, and Tyler yelped in surprise. That actually hurt, what the hell? Fucking dick-

“Josh! You bitch, I’m gonna fucking-”

Josh was already snickering at him as Tyler lunged for him, the two of them tripping backwards onto Zack’s bed and catapulting to the floor. Josh’s hands were on him again, and Tyler found himself under a tickle attack, Josh’s finger roaming all over his sides and tummy. Tyler curled in on himself on the floor, a stray shoe digging into his back, as he tried to breathe through his laughter while also yelling curses at Josh, hands on his bare arms and chest, trying to push him away. He loved this idiot.

“Ty- ler, didn’t you hear me calling you? It’s almost seven already, and you two need to stop by Josh’s before school, remember?”

Tyler tried desperately to stifle his laughter with his hands as Josh all but flew up and off of him, quickly snatching his (Tyler’s) shirt from the corner and holding it in front of him like he had tits or something. Tyler rolled onto his back and grinned up at his mom, who appeared upside down in the doorway with her arms crossed from where he was lying on the floor.

“Mo ooom, we’ll be fine, stop worrying-”
“You will not be fine if you’re late to school again, Tyler. Just because you have a game tonight doesn’t mean I’ll let you off the hook if you.”

“Okay, okay, okay, we’re ready, alright?” Tyler shoved himself into a sitting position and grabbed his Transformers shirt from last night off the floor, tugging it on over his head. He peeked over his shoulder at Josh, who had somehow in ten seconds managed to put on the sweats and too-small Mansfield shirt he had borrowed the previous evening. His face was red. Tyler waggled his eyebrows at him, and Josh sent him a death glare. Tyler wanted to kiss him.

But just then his mom was still in the doorway and glaring down at him. “Just hurry up, your siblings have already left. You can drive the van, that way you guys have time to get Josh’s things for tonight. Park out back, okay, and leave it unlocked, remember what your dad said—”

“Yeah, I remember,” Tyler interrupted, still on the floor, shimmying into a pair of jeans he found beneath Zack’s bed. They were probably Zack’s, but whatever. Apparently they were rushed for time.

“—and you’re going in the bus, so your dad and your siblings and I will take the van. Leave the keys in the glove compartment, alright? I suppose that public school has security cameras, doesn’t it? I don’t want any shady characters skipping classes and taking off in—”

“Ugh, don’t worry, Mom,” Tyler said as he scrambled to his feet and grabbed his bag from the corner, grabbing onto Josh’s arm as well as he dragged him around the bed to the door. Josh hadn’t even muttered a word the entire time his mom had been in the room, and he was so stiff and embarrassed Tyler could feel it radiating off of him. He really wanted to just tackle him in a hug. It hadn’t been five minutes and he missed him. Poor Joshie.

“I told your dad he should have dropped you off today instead so we could keep the van, you know I don’t like leaving it at that school.” Wow, his mom was really on a roll this morning. Tyler stopped in front of her, and Josh bumped into him from behind, his wrist still trapped in Tyler’s hand. “I know there’s a lot of nice students there— that Gerard is so polite— but there’s also dropouts and troublemakers, you know, high school delinquents—”

Tyler rolled his eyes and almost stomped a foot. Almost. “Look, Mom, I told you, don’t worry. The only high school delinquent at Worthington is Josh, and I’ve got my eye on him.”

“Tyler.” Both Josh and Tyler’s mom started at the same time, and Tyler smirked, only a little giddy. He was fucking ready for the goddamn day, dammit! A game! An overnight trip! His first game since being back on the team! Josh and him had just fucked, that meant they were now on fucking terms! They could fuck around whenever they wanted! Josh and Jenna had broken up! Tyler was getting himself fucking pumped for this day, bouncing on the balls of his feet, grin stretched across his face.

“Besides, no one’s gonna lift a mom van,” he pointed out when he realized that his mom was still complaining at him. “Where are the keys, downstairs?”

Tyler slipped past his mom in the doorway as politely as a kid could to her protests that it’s a minivan, Tyler, don’t be smart, and Josh finally freed himself from Tyler’s grasp to stammer out an apology, for whatever reason. He was too nice for his own good sometimes. Tyler skipped down the steps to the sound of his mom eating out of the palm of Josh’s hand. Tyler rolled his eyes again. His mom just loved Josh, he could tell. But who could blame her? Josh did seem to have that effect on people. He was amazing, and Tyler loved him.

After a rushed goodbye and Tyler had to haul Josh out of the house— “Enough talk already, Josh,
Mom, you ladies can gossip later!” - a dirty look from his mother, and more protests from Josh, Tyler had the van running and was backing out of the driveway as a light rain coated the windshield. Josh was holding onto the armrest with both hands.

“Do you mind if I buckle my seat belt first?” he huffed, annoyance in his voice, and Tyler smirked sideways at him.

“What for? We have to get out again and deal with your mom next, in like, a minute.”

“Well, yeah, sure, but I’d like to get there alive, thanks, how about you slow down—”

Josh’s bitching turned into a shriek as Tyler turned the corner a little too sharply and scraped the curb. Josh glared at Tyler so hard Tyler didn’t even have to look at him to see it, he could feel his eyes boring into him. Tyler beamed. In Josh’s defense, Tyler had been going twenty-five in a fifteen mile zone and probably wouldn’t have hit the curb if he had slowed down. In Tyler’s defense, he had hit it on purpose.

Either way, they arrived at Josh’s house in one piece, and in record time, too, though Josh actually looked a little green. Tyler told him so as he hopped from the car and followed Josh up the driveway.

“But don’t worry, it’s cute on you,” Tyler reassured him, and Josh gave him a miffed look. Tyler suddenly felt a little unsure.

“What’s up with you?” he added, sneaking out a hand to grab Josh’s. “I...didn’t mean to make you mad, Josh, I’m sorry—”

“No, it’s not that, sorry, I’m....” Josh flashed Tyler a small smile, though Tyler still didn’t believe something wasn’t up. “Sorry, it’s just...it’s not a big deal, just, well, my mom’s gonna—”

“Oooh,” Tyler cut in, nodding. “Yeah. About last night?”

“Yeah.” Josh sounded sheepish. They were outside the front door now, sheltered from the drizzle beneath the porch roof. Most of the blinds were closed, and it was still fucking early, so Tyler decided it wasn’t too risky as he leaned forward to press a quick kiss to Josh’s cheek.

“C’mon, J,” he used a slightly singsong voice, hoping to ease some of Josh’s sudden stress. “Just ten minutes and we’ll be outta here, alright? C’mon, dude, it’s a game tonight, we should be having fun! We get to skip school after lunch, too, remember? ‘Sides, we’ll be late if your mom yells at you for too long, y’know? Tell her that if she starts in on you.”

Josh nodded and smiled a little, and Tyler squeezed his hand. Josh didn’t look convinced.

There was the typical morning chatter coming from the kitchen, the light streaming in from around the corner into the dark living room. Tyler closed the front door as quietly as he could, but Josh didn’t seem to notice. He hesitated before turning to Tyler, his voice low. “Hey, I’ll meet you upstairs, okay? I guess I should...I should go explain to my mom real quick. Y’know?”

“No, yeah, sure, totally, I get you.” Tyler still had Josh’s hand and he played with his fingers as he replied. “Your bag—”

“I didn’t pack yet.” Josh looked sheepish again.

“Poor baby, don’t look so worried,” Tyler said, kind of by accident, dropping Josh’s hand to pinch at his cheeks instead. Josh squinted at him longsufferingly, and Tyler pecked a kiss on his nose. “I’ll pack for you while you explain. Okay?”
Josh only nodded and drifted off towards the kitchen. Tyler’s heart flipped as he watched him go. Why was he taking this so hard? He just had to apologize to his mom for disappearing last night and then they could burn rubber to get to school, right? No problem. Mrs. Dun was nice, she wouldn’t give Josh too hard a time. Tyler liked her. But Josh looked sad, even from the back and across the room, hovering in the kitchen doorway, and Tyler didn’t know why. He dashed upstairs to keep from worrying about it. Today was going to be fun, and Tyler was determined to help Josh have fun, too. Besides, there were going to be scouts at tonight’s game. They couldn’t afford to be tense right then.

Josh’s backpack was surprisingly difficult to find. The bean bag chair in the corner was on top of it; Tyler hadn’t even known Josh owned a bean bag chair. It was tucked in the corner beside the dresser and partially covered in clothes and video game boxes, so Tyler guessed because Josh was almost eligible for Hoarding: Buried Alive was why he hadn’t noticed it before. He laughed a little to himself. Josh was so cute.

He hauled the backpack onto the unmade bed, pencils and a few books falling to the floor, and shoved its contents back inside. One book slipped beneath the bed; Tyler hoped it wasn’t important, because he wasn’t about to go crawling under that death trap for it. Josh could borrow Brendon’s if it was so important. Eugh.

Tyler danced across the room to the dresser, pre-game energy already surging through him. I need caffeine! Well, I don’t, but I want some. Hey, we forgot breakfast! Tyler’s stomach growled uncomfortably at the reminder it was empty as he shuffled through the drawers even messier than his own. Am I supposed to just pick out random shit? Whatever I want? I don’t know what he wants to wear...oh! Better find his jersey, he’ll be needing that. Pajamas? He doesn’t wear pajamas...will Coach make us all wear pajamas tonight? Since we’re like, in a motel? Did I pack my pajamas-

Tyler grabbed a pair of track pants and a random t-shirt and tossed them on the bed, along with some socks and underclothes. Deodorant? Razor? Oh- a toothbrush! Duh...ugh, why didn’t this idiot pack yesterday? Idiot.

Tyler shoved the clothes into Josh’s backpack and yanked on the zipper, swinging it onto his back as he crossed the room. He grabbed the hoodie laying across the foot of the bed and spotted Josh’s sports pack behind the door, snatching it up on his way out. He closed the door behind him. Gotta keep the little siblings out. Pests.

Tyler dropped the bags and jacket outside Josh’s door and padded down the hall to the bathroom. He slowed, though, halfway there, when the family photos along the wall caught his eye. He had seen them once, back when...Tyler couldn’t remember exactly when, maybe when he’d been over to play video games, maybe when he’d helped to dye Josh’s hair that one time. But he recognized the pictures of baby Josh and his siblings that he had admired before, Josh’s little baby face smiling out at him, and Tyler tried not to smile too big as he stared for a minute. Damn, he was a cute kid. Ha, still is. Tyler was gonna remind him of that, too.

A door slammed downstairs, and Tyler figured he’d better hurry up and get down there- just in case Josh needed him. He was still unsure as to how he would be able to differentiate Josh’s toothbrush from his siblings’, but he was holding out hope for his name to be written on it. That’s normal...right?

Tyler was still pondering over this in his head when he reached the bathroom door, only to collide with one of Josh’s siblings.

Oh, shit- Tyler saw red, waving hair and mascara and almost had a panic attack. He didn’t want to have to deal with Abby that early in the morning, not when she had a crush on him. Awkward! A
little funny, but...no, it's just awkward.... But it was Ashley staring at him when he finally recognized the face, and he let out a little sigh. Ashley had seemed in the past, on the few scattered occasions that they had met, to lowkey hate him. Okay, maybe not hate, but she definitely wasn’t very hospitable. Better that than a crush though.

“Oh- what are you doing here?” Ashley had just come out of the bathroom and- shit...uh...don’t, like, stare, Ty-guy, that definitely wouldn’t be very cash money of you.... Apparently none of the Dun children liked sleeping in pajamas, because Ashley was wearing a small t-shirt and even smaller underwear and, uuuuuuuuuuh-

“Why are you blushing?” she deadpanned, and Tyler blushed harder. Thank God Josh’s not this difficult, I swear to God I would still hate his guts like when we first met if he was-

“I’m- I’m not, I was just...sorry, I didn’t mean to, y’know, um...bump into you....” Great, Ty, as per usual. Fucking smooth. And don’t look down, for God’s sake, she’ll probably fucking clock you one if you so much as-

Ashley raised an eyebrow. “Yeah. What are you doing here?”

“And I live here?” Tyler tried a joke. Josh always laughed at his jokes.

Ashley raised her head an inch, and- wow, okay, that’s more intimidating than I had thought... Josh is never this intimidating. Even when he tries to be, aww, the cute dummy-

“Ha. You’re so funny. Now I know why Josh loves being around you.”

Tyler squinted his eyes at this girl that looked so much like Josh and acted so differently. He didn’t trust her. He didn’t trust people who didn’t laugh at his jokes. He was funny, okay.

“Um, yeah, well. Now I know why he doesn’t like being around you.”

Oh- um...was that mean? That was a little mean. Good job, Ty-guy, that wasn’t even funny, now she’ll really hate you-

Ashley actually grinned lopsidedly at Tyler, just a bit. “Ouch. You guys are both lame enough that you’re almost cute. Almost.” Tyler thought she was going to leave then, but she added casually enough that Tyler’s suspicions were immediately piqued: “Have fun last night?”

“We-” Tyler stopped, thoughts crashing around in his head. What does she know? Josh totally didn’t tell her anything about...about them, right? No way. Maybe she didn’t mean like, them them, just like...last night, in general...and...?

When Tyler didn’t reply, Ashley snorted and shook her head. “I knew it.”

Tyler spluttered a moment; it was the only thing he could say.

Ashley rolled her eyes, looking exactly like Josh when he was annoyed at Tyler. Only...minus the girl underwear. “Chill out, dude, you’re like, having a heart attack. Chill.”

“I am chill-” Tyler knew he sounded defensive, but he fucking was, okay, how was he supposed to hide that much unexpected emotion? Did she like... know know...about them? Them them? How, for fuck’s sake? And what would Josh say- Tyler felt suddenly that this entire situation- not just him and Josh’s sister in skimpy pajamas going at it in the hallway at seven in the morning, but like...everything - was a losing battle. He was going to lose, he knew it. Lose...what? The thought scared him, the desperation that came with it popping up out of nowhere, and he didn’t know what it meant,
so he shoved it aside as quickly as he could. They were going to be o-fucking-kay. He said so. So there.

“I am chill,” Tyler repeated, brain still churning. “If you’re...if you’re talking about the school’s Valentine’s thing, I didn’t go. I’m grounded.” Yes, way to go, Ty! Distraction tactic! This chick doesn’t play basketball, she won’t know to call your bluff-

Ashley nodded once. “Sucks to suck. Speaking of, I spent the night at your place, right?”

Shit, shit! She must play softball. Red blossomed across Tyler’s cheeks, and he tried not to shift in place too obviously. He wasn’t the one in his underwear right now, why should he be the embarrassed one? He coughed once, couldn’t help himself; his voice would come out way too high and strained if he didn’t.

“He, um...he spent the night with Brendon. I’m just, y’know...giving him a ride. To school.” Tyler felt the ridiculous need to clarify. This girl was giving him an inappropriate vibe. What did she mean anyways, sucks to-”

“Bull. How’d he end up at your place?”

Tyler blinked once. We actually...could use her on the team...not gonna lie.... “I said, I was giving him a ride-”

“You said you picked him up.”

“I did-”

“But he was at your house.”

“Yeah, but-”

“So he did spend the night? Did he even go to the dance?”

“He did, he just-”

“Left early? I figured.”

“How- wait, I don’t....” Tyler felt like laughing, but this chick was staring at him, almost smirking, and Tyler didn’t like the way she was leaning so confidently against the bathroom door. He had just wanted to grab Josh’s fucking toothbrush, not get the third degree from his little sister in her lack of pajamas. The game’s tonight, asshole, not now. He narrowed his eyes at female, not-nice Josh. She narrowed hers back.

“What’d he end up telling Black? Don’t tell me he just dumped her on the side of the road.”

“I, um....” Tyler wondered vaguely how long it could possibly take Josh downstairs. And where the hell was Jordan? Even- even Abby. Tyler would have welcomed any one of the other Dun siblings to come along just then and interrupt this increasingly uncomfortable interrogation. “I don’t...know...? Who’s-”

“Oh, my God,” Ashley groaned and eyed Tyler up and down. “Really? That’s impressive. Jenna. Joshua’s girlfriend. He was taking her to the dance. But I guess that sort of thing doesn’t mean anything to you.”

Tyler bristled. “What do you mean by that? And what’s it to you, any of this-”
Ashley interrupted him with a short laugh. Tyler didn’t think any of this conversation was especially funny. “I don’t care, actually, not really. What you guys do is your business. Fuck everyone else, right? I just don’t want Josh to start freaking out. It bugs the crap out of me, he’s so obvious.”

Tyler still didn’t know how in hell Ashley knew about him and Josh, and Jenna, too; maybe she was bluffing, but he didn’t feel sure enough to call it. Still, he didn’t want to let on too much, just in case. She was certain, and she looked it, and he was confused, and he was sure it was written all over his face. Great.

“Josh, he...I don’t know what they did, but...they broke up. It was a mutual thing-” Tyler started, treading slowly.

“Sure, it was. That’s why he took her to the party on fucking Valentine’s.”

“-it was. That’s all I know. I didn’t ask for a play by play.”

Ashley looked at him for a long minute, and Tyler had to clench his teeth to keep from backing off a step. Girls could be fucking intimidating, man. Not that you’d catch Tyler admitting that to anyone but himself, and even that was hard to do.

For a minute it looked like Ashley was going to say more, press Tyler for more information there was no way in hell he’d share. But then she stood up from her leaning position, arms still crossed, and time started to move at a normal pace once again.

“Whatever, Tyler. I don’t care either way really, just so long as J doesn’t freak like last time. Try an’ keep him under control, ‘kay?” She smiled a not-Josh-Dun smile that wasn’t really a smile at all, in Tyler’s eyes, and brushed past him with a little extra force than was probably necessary.

Tyler grabbed her arm. His heart had stopped.

“What?” Ashley’s voice sounded muffled and annoyed, like it was coming from a room away, even though she was closer now to Tyler than she had been before, her arm under Tyler’s hand. Everything felt so far away.

“What?” She repeated. Her voice was harder this time, and Tyler felt the world shift slowly back into focus around him. The shag carpet beneath his feet solidified, and the light from the bathroom glinted off the baby Josh photo hanging on the wall. He felt so far away.

“I...you said, um....” Tyler still wasn’t sure what he was asking.

“Look-” Ashley ripped her arm from Tyler’s grasp. “-I won’t tell anyone about you guys, okay? If that’s what you’re spazzed about.”

“I...no, not that, it’s, um...you said...you said you didn’t want Josh to, um, to freak out....”

“Yeah, he’s a bitch. When he mopes you can feel it in the entire damn house. It’s tiring, I just don’t wanna deal with him acting like a little fucking kid again.”

Tyler cringed, and he wasn’t sure why. It was that word, but he didn’t know what it meant. “But...um....” He didn’t want to say it. He didn’t want to say it, he didn’t wanna....

“...again?”

Ashley just stared at him like Tyler was crazy. Maybe he was. He just didn’t understand, what did she mean when she- she must have meant that old girlfriend of Josh’s, what was her name...Tyler
didn’t even think he had ever heard her name, Josh had never talked about her. He had flashbacks to snooping in Josh’s room once and seeing a photograph of the two of them, him and her, and the old pang of jealousy he had felt even then hit him now, which was ridiculous, Tyler realized, they were dating, they were boyfriends, practically official, why should he be jealous?

“Dude, you’re spacing out.”

“Oh, um….” Tyler tried to regain control of his breathing. Okay, just a mini freak out, nothing was wrong. They would be okay. But….“W-what did you mean when you said, um...you said you didn’t want him to...to freak out...again?”

Ashley tilted her head like she still thought Tyler was crazy, and Tyler felt himself getting the urge to ramble. “I mean...you mean...you just mean with his, his old girlfriend, right? What was her name, um...Donna-”

“Debby.”

“Yeah, Debby. That’s what you meant, right, like...he freaked out then...with Debby…?”

Ashley didn’t reply for a beat. “Yeah,” she said slowly. Tyler knew she knew he was crazy now. Just a crazy, clingy boyfriend. “Yeah, sure. I meant with Debby.”

Tyler tried not to visibly sigh, the tension that had built up in his shoulders easing immediately. “Oh...okay...um... good. Good, I just….”

Ashley chewed on her lip for a second before huffing quietly. “Hey, look, I-”

“Hey, you ready, baby-” Josh was at the top of the stairs, and he froze when he saw Tyler and Ashley at the other end of the hall. Tyler felt his heart soar at the sight of him. He seemed incredibly far away.

“Oh, um-” Josh laughed once, red growing on his face, and Tyler cringed. This...could get awkward. “I mean...um, I was just... Tyler, you ready to, um-”

Ashley huffed and rolled her eyes again. “You guys are gross.” She turned and left Tyler standing by the open bathroom door, sauntering down the hallway towards her room. Tyler jerked his eyes up to Josh’s face to avoid looking at her- well, yeah. Damn those Dun kids. Their mom needed to buy them fucking pajamas. Ten bucks at Walmart.

Even from the opposite end of the dark hallway, Tyler could see the panic in Josh’s face, and he was still stammering something when Ashley said, “J, chill out. It’s whatever.”

“It’s... what’s... whatever?” Josh’s eyes jumped from his sister to Tyler, and Tyler shrugged.

“Us, I guess,” he answered. Why did he suddenly feel so, so...elated? Relieved? This wasn’t so bad after all, people knowing about them...Tyler kind of liked it. The earth was still spinning, after all; Tyler still loved Josh...and Josh was still there, with him, despite old girlfriends. Despite his sister claiming he had freaked out. Tyler wondered-

“I...she...you know?” Josh looked a little put out as he turned back to Ashley, eyeing her suspiciously. He didn’t say anything for a minute, and neither did she, and the whole situation began to grow uncomfortably awkward. Tyler rolled his eyes to himself; he was about to save the day by beatboxing the theme song from Bill Nye the Science Guy, but then Josh huffed once, almost a laugh. Oh, well, Tyler would have to impress Josh with that specific skill of his some other time.
“But we...how did....” Josh trailed off, looking helpless, and Tyler wanted nothing more than to dash down the hall and kiss that sweet pout off his face, suddenly overwhelmed with the emotional need to be near him. He would, too, if Ashley hadn’t still been standing between them.

She rolled her eyes then, Tyler could tell without even having to see her face, and he edged down the hall towards the siblings, wanting to be nearer Josh. It felt like he’d been away from him for a long, long time, and, yeah, Tyler was fully aware of how far gone he was, thanks.

“I’m your sister, I just know these things,” Ashley was saying in means of explanation to Josh, and Josh glanced back at Tyler as if for confirmation. He squinted his eyes then at Tyler, and Tyler squinted them right back.

“Did you-”

“I didn’t tell her, Jesus, J....” Tyler muttered, putting on a hurt voice. He had seen that one coming.

“Okay, okay, I was just asking....” In Josh’s defense, he did look a little sorry for having mentioned it.

“You’re just really obvious, J,” Ashley added. Josh looked put out again, and Tyler crossed his arms, hiding his smile behind his hand. “Just FYI. Anyways, guys, I don’t know about you, but I gotta run or else I’ll be late. One more demerit and I’ll be suspended. Yay, school!”

The bedroom door closed with a thud, and Tyler and Josh were left standing a few paces apart in the silent hallway. Josh still looked a little stunned, and after a moment of mutual silence, Tyler started to snicker behind his hand.

Josh crossed his arms and made a face close to a grimace. “Explain to me how this is funny, Tyler.”

Tyler chortled and stepped closer to Josh, pushing at his arm. “Explain to me how you always have something up your ass, Joshua.”

Josh only scoffed at him before turning around and promptly tripping over the bags Tyler had set outside his door. Tyler couldn’t not start laughing at that. Josh glared at him.

“You never stop, do you?”

Tyler gasped for breath and threw an arm around Josh, going in for a hug though Josh remained stubbornly rigid, arms still crossed. “I don’t know, I’ll stop laughing when you stop being cute.”

“I could’ve broken my leg-”

“It’s a backpack, J, you’re fine. What a baby.”

Josh pulled away, mumbling under his breath as he grabbed his hoodie and threw it on. Tyler watched him in amusement before a thought came to him.

“So, how’d things go downstairs, y’know, with your mom?” Maybe that’s why Josh had his pants in a twist.

Josh groaned once, more in a slightly annoyed way than in a fuck my life way, so Tyler relaxed a little. Josh shrugged.

“It’s whatever, she was just pissed, you know?” He shrugged his backpack onto his shoulders and seemed to hesitate a moment before adding, “She was seriously convinced I was with- well, with
Jenna, and she was really pissed about that. If Brendon hadn’t covered me last night, I swear she’d never believe me.”

Tyler grabbed Josh’s sports pack and swung it over one shoulder. He huffed. “Yeah, well. I’m just surprised she’d believe that jackass.”

Josh looked a little torn. “He’s not...a total jackass....”

Tyler sighed loudly and pouted at Josh. He had to spend the majority of the day in the general vicinity of Brendon, and Pete for that matter, and who knew what kind of awful sleeping arrangement they’d have to endure that night- overnight trip and all. He’d be getting enough of those guys in just the next twenty-four hours to last him, like, forever. And that many hours surrounded by all those dicks at school and on the team versus the pitifully small amount of time he had alone with Josh...that ratio sucked ass. Tyler pouted harder.

After a minute Josh cracked, and he was smiling at Tyler, his hand moving to the back of Tyler's neck and pulling him close against his chest. Tyler let himself be guided, wouldn’t have stayed away if you fucking paid him. And he could really use the cash.

“Aw, babe, don’t be like that,” Josh murmured when Tyler hadn’t bothered to stop pouting yet. He bumped his nose against Tyler’s, and Tyler reached out to play with the drawstrings of Josh’s hoodie. “Don’t be sad, Ty, ‘kay? We’ll have more time together, I promise.”

Tyler huffed, not for any real reason, just because he felt like being a tad difficult that morning. Maybe he just wanted some food. And a bit more attention, whatever. He was still trying to shake the dregs of that conversation with Ashley, and some extra attention from Josh would do just the trick. It was nothing, and he refused to let himself worry over nothing. “When?” he prompted in a quiet voice, peeking up at Josh through one eye.

“Like, so soon, dude, I promise.”

“Like, so soon?”

“So soon,” Josh agreed, kissing the tip of Tyler’s nose. Tyler scrunched up his face, trying to fight the smile that was fighting to come out. How could he not smile when the full force of the literal sun was smacking him straight in the face? Past girlfriends be damned.

Josh peppered soft kisses of sunlight on his cheek, his thumb stroking small circles in the dip of Tyler’s skull, and Tyler tilted his head to find Josh’s mouth, just for a quick kiss. Before Ashley showed up again.

“We should...go…” Tyler broke the kiss to speak, lips brushing against Josh’s, Josh’s eyelashes fluttering on his temple.

Josh chuckled, and the sound vibrated between them. It surprised Tyler a little, and it wasn’t hard for him to imagine himself being able to get very hard very quickly right then.

“And I thought you were the one who was crying for more alone time,” Josh replied, kissing Tyler on the mouth again, tongue finding its way inside. Tyler had a sneaking suspicion that Josh was beginning to use that as a distraction tactic to keep him from being difficult and making smart remarks. Tyler also had a sneaking suspicion that he didn’t really mind Josh’s tactics at all.

After another minute Josh pulled away, and Tyler opened his eyes- he hadn’t realized he had closed them until Josh’s face and warm eyes flooded his vision again. Light from the bathroom reflected off Josh’s lips, wet with both of their saliva, and he smiled softly at Tyler, his eyes so warm Tyler felt
himself melting. Tyler’s heart actually skipped, and he felt dizzy for a minute. He wanted to tell him. He wanted to *tell Josh so bad*, but...he sneaked out a hand and tugged gently at Josh’s ear gauge instead, letting himself dissolve into giggles at the sudden grimace on Josh’s face so he didn’t have to focus so much on his heart skipping painfully inside him. It was easier to just laugh and bask in Josh’s light.

“You suck,” Josh half chuckled as Tyler dashed around him to the staircase, successfully dodging Josh’s hands. He knew Josh’s evil mind had been planning on tickling him. *Not today, Satan! Well, not again….*

“Mm, I’m pretty sure *you* were the one last night who-”

“*Tyler-*”

Tyler turned and skipped down the staircase, humming happily and smiling secretly to himself as he heard Josh thumping down behind him. God, he loved him, he….

This was gonna be a little harder than Tyler had planned. Dammit.

Josh jumped down the last three stairs and landed next to Tyler, stumbling into him, and Tyler turned around, ready to kiss Josh on the nose just for being so *cute*, when Mrs. Dun was suddenly there in the hallway. Josh smirked at him like he knew what Tyler had been planning, and Tyler spit his tongue at him.

“Josh, do you mind if- *oh-* *oh*, Tyler? I didn’t know you were here, it’s been a while! How are you? How’s your mom?”

This was Tyler’s third encounter with a Dun that morning, and it was barely past seven. Though he guessed Josh didn’t really count. He smiled politely anyways. “Hi, she’s, um, she’s good.”

Mrs. Dun beamed at him, and Tyler squirmed. Adults. “Oh, that’s nice! I’ve been meaning to get over there sometime this week, though I guess I’ll see her at the game tonight! Your family’s going, aren’t they?”

“Yes-”

“This one’s a big one, I hear! I’ve been reminding Josh of that all week, there’s going to be scouts, you know!”

“We know, Mom,” Josh interrupted, and Tyler was the one to beam then. Man, he *loved* Josh. Boy, was he fucking *fucked*. Just the sound of his voice beside him was enough to make him feel as if the sunshine had swallowed his entire body. “Coach has been telling us that for the past month practically.”

Mrs. Dun didn’t seem to hear Josh, just continued at Tyler. “And isn’t- oh, this is your first game in a while, isn’t it, Tyler? I don’t think I saw you at that home game, what was it, a week ago?”

“Two,” Josh cut in again, making a show of glancing at his watch. “Class starts in ten minutes, Mom, can we go?”

“But- where’s Brendon?” Mrs. Dun suddenly looked suspicious, and Tyler understood what Josh had meant upstairs. “I thought you spent the night-”

“I *did*, but he, um...he left early, and Tyler offered me a ride, so....”
Tyler raised his eyebrows at Josh, but Josh pointedly ignored him as Mrs. Dun seemed to be considering the validity of Josh’s explanation. After a moment she simply laughed once, rolling her eyes a little. “Well. I’ve never known that boy to be up in the morning before you, or particularly interested in punctuality. This is a positive change, though. Maybe it will rub off on you, huh, Josh? Wouldn’t that be nice?”

“Ha,” Josh sounded incredibly done (Dun! Ha, ha, I’m so witty...I should tell Josh that one, he’s probably never gotten that before....) and Tyler decided Josh would be done with him too if he kept snickering at him, so he tried biting his tongue, dancing in place a little. Man, he was hungry.

“Oh, goodness, you’re right, it is almost seven thirty- it’s that late already? Honestly, I don’t know where the time goes- Josh, honey, wait for Jordan, he’s finishing his breakfast, you two don’t mind if he-”

Halfway to the front door and Josh was spinning around in front of Tyler. “What? Ew, no, Mom, c’mon, do we have to?”

Tyler stopped in his tracks and gaped at Josh a little. He had never heard his voice so whiny before, and he kind of loved it. Josh seemed genuinely put out though as his mom crossed her arms.

“I’m not going to argue about this with you, Joshua, it’s late enough and I don’t want your brother to be late just because you-”

“But-”

“Josh? Do I have to call your father at work over this?”

Josh pouted and Tyler snickered at him. Jordan bounded out of the kitchen then, distracted with his phone, almost knocking Mrs. Dun over with his backpack and skidding into Tyler. Tyler fell against Josh, which he didn’t mind at all; in fact, he almost felt inclined to thank Jordan, but Josh seemed completely oblivious to Tyler as he glared daggers at his younger brother.

“Mom…?” he tried one more time, and Tyler started again for the door, only slightly put out by being so rudely ignored. Jordan beat him to it though, racing past him without so much as a word, backpack actually knocking the breath out of Tyler as it crashed into him in passing. Okay, so maybe Tyler got where Josh was coming from on this one.

“-and I don’t want to hear any more about it, you hear me?” Mrs. Dun was saying in a snippy, parental tone. Josh looked deflated, resigned to his fate. It was pretty fucking cute. Tyler wondered what Josh would say if he told him that. “I’ll see you and your brother tonight, alright, honey? Oh, and you, too, Tyler, dear, I know you boys will all do amazing! Down with Akron, right? Go team!”

Josh actually groaned a little, but Tyler pumped a fist in the air anyways. Mrs. Dun was cute. Josh glared at Tyler like he had converted to the enemy as he too brushed past- minus the backpack smashing into his gut- and pushed open the storm door, Tyler following on his tail.

“I call shotgun!” Jordan screamed from across the front yard, tugging at the locked car door.

“We’re not even at school yet, can this day get any worse?” Josh groaned as he squinted up at the grey sky. It wasn’t raining right then, but looked like it could start any minute. Tyler pulled his hoodie over his head and slung an arm around Josh’s shoulders as they headed for the mom van, Josh’s arm immediately falling around Tyler’s waist. It all felt so natural. Tyler could get fucking used to this, man.

“It’s not that bad, J, don’t be mad.”
Josh huffed. “Yeah, well, we don’t have to drive to school with your little brother. And I mean, what if he….”

Tyler stiffened, but only slightly; Josh probably wouldn’t even be able to notice. “What if he…?”

“Y’know...tells people, the team, y’know....”

There it was again, that innate urge deep inside of Tyler to be difficult just for the hell of it, crawling its way to the surface. His thoughts drifted back unwillingly to what Ashley had said just a few moments earlier, about Josh...freaking out. Tyler kept his voice as carefully blank as he could. “Tells them what?”

Josh fidgeted, and they had to pull apart once they got to the driveway, Jordan yelling something about unlocking the car. Tyler dug around in his jeans pocket for the keys, missing the weight of Josh’s hand on his waist already. The thought briefly crossed his mind if Josh missed his touch as well.

“Y’know, Tyler, about...about us, man, I mean...the team doesn’t really pay any attention to him, but still...this isn’t exactly being very...very cautious, you know?”

Tyler harumphed quietly, walking to the driver’s side of the van. “Oh, well, I didn’t realize people had to be cautious of me, I didn’t realize I was dangerous-”

“God, Ty, c’mon, that’s not what I meant,” Josh spoke over the hood from the passenger side, looking at Tyler so intensely that Tyler dropped his hand from its grip on the door handle to hear Josh out. He sneaked a peek at Jordan in the front seat through the windshield, but he was talking at the phone in his hands, eyes cast down.

Josh continued, regaining Tyler’s attention. “I mean cautious of us, not you, Ty. Jordan just might, y’know, say something offhand and it would just get all the guys talking, you know how they are. They’d figure it out for sure, and I just don’t want that to happen, you know? That would be the worst.”

Tyler tried to swallow the sudden lump that seemed to have appeared in his throat. His head kind of hurt. He always did seem to get head colds around this time of year.

“Ty, you’re...you’re okay, right? Babe?” Josh’s voice was soft and familiar again. It fucking hurt, but Tyler loved all of him.

“Yeah...I know. It...it would be the...the worst.” Tyler glanced back at Jordan, then down at the cold key in his hand. He thought he heard a raindrop on the car hood. “It’s okay, J, I was just...I was just joshin’ ya. I know what you meant.”

Tyler peeked up at Josh; Josh’s brow was furrowed as he studied Tyler from the other side of the van, and Tyler forced a smile. “Get it, J? I’m joshin’ ya! Joshin’.”

After a pause that felt slightly longer than necessary, Josh grinned at Tyler, and it was a natural response for a genuine smile this time to slip over Tyler’s face. They would be okay. They would be okay. We will be okay. We’ll be okay, we’ll be....

“Get in, loser, we’ll be late,” Tyler called, shuffling the embers of the energy he had been burning with all morning and bouncing in place a moment, before hopping into the driver’s seat and slinging Josh’s sport pack into the back seat. He could see Josh’s smile widen through the windshield, the front passenger door opening a minute later.
“Hey-” Jordan immediately protested as Josh snatched his phone from his hands and tossed it into the back seat along with his own backpack, smacking Jordan lightly in the face with it. “Cut it out, Josh, I called shotgun-”

“It’s not up for grabs, move;” Josh retorted, and Tyler choked on a laugh, Josh grinning at him over Jordan’s shoulder as Jordan begrudgingly unbuckled his seat belt and climbed over the console to the back seat, muttering curses the whole time.

“I’ll tell Mom….” he muttered halfheartedly, and Josh ignored him, climbing into the van and slamming the door. Tyler studied Josh out of the corner of his eye before looking at Jordan in the rearview mirror.

“‘S’okay, Jordan, just ignore him, he’s a little touchy today.” Tyler pretended not to notice when Josh sent a suspicious look his way. He put the car in reverse and backed out of the driveway as several raindrops began to coat the windshield. “He’s on his period, he’ll get over himself soon- ow, fuck you, Josh-”

“Fuck you, I’m not on my period, you’re just a hangry bitch,” Josh retorted as Jordan snickered in the back seat, though his voice didn’t hold much heat at all; Tyler couldn’t recall Josh ever sounding mean, even when they were just messing. He seriously doubted Josh was capable of actually sounding mean, maybe of even being mean. Tyler grinned to himself, and Josh smacked his arm again.

“Yo, dude, not while I’m driving-”

“Yeah, not while he’s driving-”

“Shut up, Jordan,” Josh snarked, though Tyler could see him buckling his seat belt anyways. Lowkey though.

After a few moments of driving in silence, Tyler felt Josh looking at him, and he turned his head to make eye contact. Tyler knew he had spazzed out earlier; his adrenaline and emotions were high today already, and all over the place, and it was still fucking early, and he still hadn’t eaten. He hadn’t meant to overreact to anything or to be too difficult, he was just...he was on edge, and he knew it, and he knew why, too; he was on edge, even though he was still riding the high of being with Josh in...well, every sense of the word, in recent events. It was a high that his inner critic of a brain was warning him would come down soon, as evidenced by how easily Tyler could flip, but Tyler hated that voice inside him and gave it the mental middle finger.

Because despite what his brain was trying to tell him, Josh was still there, and when Tyler looked into Josh’s eyes, he felt nothing but love, even if that wasn’t a word Josh wanted to use just yet. That was okay with Tyler. It was. The soft corners of Josh’s mouth turned upwards, and Tyler felt hope regripping itself in his brain. **We’ll be okay.**

Tyler smiled back, and he felt a little dizzy again, but in that good way he’d gotten somewhat used to and never wanted to stop feeling whenever Josh kissed him, and looked at him, and touched him, and-

Josh’s stomach growled loud in the enclosed space, despite the light sound of the rain, and Tyler started to laugh silently. He could feel Josh getting embarrassed beside him.

“Dude….,” he started, groaning, voice shy. Tyler loved, loved, **loved** him.

“Is Burger King okay?” Tyler said in reply, and he could feel Josh starting to smile.
They were going to be okay.

Chapter End Notes

AHHH i'm sorry if this chapt was boring? i genuinely don't know, i felt a lil anxious writing lately bc i LOVE this story and i have so much left i want to happen (rrly rrly good stuff, trust me!!) but i'm paranoid ppl won't read it bc it's getting too long :'(( do u guys have any thoughts/opinions?? lov u friends ||-//
They were surrounded. They couldn’t even take a moment to breathe, alone together, before the whole world was pressing back in again. And if you asked him, Josh was getting goddamn tired of it.

They were halfway to the school, and it was raining lightly now; Josh was slouched semi-moodily against the window, watching raindrops meander down the glass and counting the names in his head, an ongoing mental list of all the weak spots in their defense. Mikey, Spencer, Jenna, his sister...even stupid Jordan now, too. Josh added his brother’s name to the list with distaste, ignoring whatever it was he was rambling on about just then from the back seat. He was not interested, thanks. Let Tyler deal with him if he wanted to.

Do our families count? Both our families...and all our siblings now, mine and Tyler’s...and everyone knows you can’t trust younger siblings. Traitors, all of them. Ugh. That’s like...twenty people, bro. Jeez...so much for keeping this thing a secret.

It was a slight comfort to Josh as he realized the list of people who knew about him and Tyler being, like, together was dramatically shorter than the continually growing list of people who knew about them as friends. Mikey, Jenna...Josh supposed Ashley now counted in that smaller group, but that wasn’t too many people at all. And Mikey was on their side anyways, theoretically. He had to be, since Josh knew about him and his secret relationship. And Mikey and Tyler were friends, he wouldn’t hurt Tyler by ratting them out. Then there was Jenna...but she was a cool kid, they’d be okay. As for Ashley, she might give them shit- hell, she just had- but she wouldn’t like, out them or anything, no way. Josh cringed at that word anyways, didn’t like the way it sounded, didn’t like thinking about it. There was nothing to out, Josh wasn’t gay- though Tyler was, apparently; Josh hadn’t know that about him- he just liked Tyler, they were just best friends...the only problem was Josh’s other friends not liking this friend. That was all. Nothing to out.

Part of Josh’s brain piped up in quiet protest then that if there was nothing to out, there was no reason to hide. It was shut down by the rest of his brain pretty quick. What was he thinking, that they could just walk hand in hand into school and everything would work itself out? Bullshit. Josh knew better than that, he...he knew Brendon better than that. Guilt immediately washed over him at the thought, but it was true. Josh was terrified of what his friend would say about him and Tyler.
He just needed some more time to think. They could work the kinks out. They could.

Josh perked up a little as the raindrop he had been eyeing beat its component to the edge of the window, disappearing from the glass, as he suddenly realized he couldn’t pick three other people he’d trust more with this secret than Mikey, Jenna, and his sister. That was pretty lucky, for them, him and Tyler. For once.

That thought combated the wariness that was threatening to overtake what little energy Josh had woken up with that morning. They hadn’t gotten much sleep last night. Despite the cynicism Josh was currently grappling with, a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as his thoughts again turned to last night. To Tyler.

To the two of them, together, alone, the best respite he could have asked for, given the circumstances. He wanted to remember it and bask in the memory of it for as long as he could, but his mind and libido were already rushing towards the next opportunity he could get alone with Tyler. Josh didn’t half mind.

Tyler, Tyler...Josh loved him. He peeked over at him then in the driver’s seat, watched his hands tapping on the steering wheel to whatever tune it was playing in his head. Who knew what that was, probably the Pac-Man theme song or some shit, knowing Tyler like Josh did. His smile grew a little more at that, at how crazy Tyler was, how cute Tyler was, how quietly happy, and honestly, who could stay miffed and sleep deprived and pessimistic when Tyler, his fucking boyfriend, was beside him? Being all cute and shit? Josh repeated the word boyfriend in his head, liking the way it sounded now that he was really with Tyler, and only Tyler. His boyfriend. Fucking score.

Speaking of boyfriends...the half of Josh’s brain that was acting up that morning was also anxious, anxious about the whole girlfriend thing. Josh fought a grimace; it sucked some serious balls that there even was a “girlfriend thing” still, even after breaking up. Could things never go the way he had planned? Apparently not.

“Does he always talk this much?” Tyler whispered in a low voice, and Josh hummed in response. He had completely tuned out Jordan’s chattering the second it had started; it was a mode of survival in the Dun household.

Tyler glanced over at Josh, and Josh shrugged, leaning in slightly to reply. “No more than you do.”

Tyler scoffed quietly. “I hate you,” he smiled, voice scratchy, slapping out gently at Josh’s arm. Josh’s heart flipped. God, he loved him. Does he know he makes my heart do shit like that? Would that be borderline risky to tell him that?

Tyler’s hand lingered a little longer than would be considered friendly against Josh’s arm, and Josh grabbed at it with his own, just for a minute, intertwining their fingers. Jordan wasn’t paying attention anyways, phone in his face, reading aloud some game score from a screenshot he had taken, way too pumped for such a mediocre placing. Josh would have rolled his eyes on principle, except he was too busy loving the fact that he was holding Tyler’s hand. Man, I’m such a fucking goner...I fucking love him. I love him. This is sick, dude. It’s actually sick. This...isn’t bad at all.

I wanna tell him.

Tyler pulled his hand away then, playful smile on his lips, and Josh reckoned it was a good thing. He needed a moment to reel his feelings back in.

“-and then this total loser joined our team and I was like, dude, you gotta leave the team, but before we could do anything he walls us in with the guy with a purple skin, right, and that is just crazy, bro,
and Jesse started yelling at him to *leave the game*, it was so funny, except it wasn’t then because we were ahead but then like half the guys in our squad died, and so I—"

Tyler glanced back over at Josh and raised an eyebrow, and Josh started to snicker, he couldn’t help it. His brother was so stupid, and Tyler was so fucking *cute*, and why did they keep finding themselves in increasingly ridiculous situations like this? Tyler rolled his eyes at Josh before prompting Jordan to keep rambling by asking him another question. Josh groaned at the both of them.

“*I told* him that, but by then we were gonna lose anyways. It sucked a lot. And then my mom came in my bedroom and got mad I was still up because *blah blah blah* it’s a school night *blah blah-*”

“Jordan, can you shut up,” Josh interrupted, peering at his brother in the rearview mirror.

“I’m *talking* to Tyler, not you,” Jordan’s tone was so snippy that Tyler started to giggle, and Josh threw his hands up in the air, slightly annoyed.

“Keep going, Jordan, what happened after you fell off the tower? Why didn’t you skydive?” Josh gaped over at Tyler.

“Why are you encouraging him?” he whispered, not caring if Jordan could hear or not.

“What!? I’m actually interested,” Tyler replied, smirking. Josh couldn’t believe this.

Jordan, for one, seemed extremely pleased that Tyler was taking such an interest in his *horrendous* gaming skills, and picked his rambling back up where he left off, ignoring Josh and scrolling through his phone again for more photos he had taken of the game stats.

Josh was busy ignoring the two of them and failing, Tyler’s growing enthusiasm too endearing and the urge to kiss him growing with every second, when a phone started to beep with incoming texts.

Josh stirred and turned around in his seat to rummage around in Tyler’s backpack, Jordan continuing his story without even stopping for breath.

“Dude, wait, wait, what’s your name? Maybe I played you once.”

“Junk yard dunky-”

“*Junk yard-*”

Josh pulled out Tyler’s phone to another incoming text, squinting at the dimmed screen. Tyler hadn’t noticed his phone going off, still too busy with Jordan.

“Yo, dude, it’s you,” Josh interrupted, waving the phone towards Tyler.

Tyler looked adorably baffled for a moment as Jordan continued rambling, oblivious to the sudden lack of attention from Tyler. “Oh- oh, I got a text? Who from?”

Josh huffed. “Yeah, dude, you got like, ten texts. I don’t know who from, your phone screen’s legit black, why do you dim it so much-”

“Lay off, *Josh*, you’re not my mom, just check for me, okay? I’m *driving*.”

Josh rolled his eyes fondly, typing in the passcode and turning up the brightness to read the texts.

“It’s Mikey.”
“Oh, what’s he say?”

Jordan’s head suddenly appeared above the console, leaning forward into the front seat.

“Hey, you know his password?”

“Fuck off, Jordan-”

“Nobody knows my password-”

“It’s a pass code.”

“Fuck you, Josh, same difference.”

“He’s not wrong,” Tyler threw in.

Josh sent Tyler’s side smirk a brief glare, turning in his seat so Jordan couldn’t read the texts over his shoulder.

“I thought only Brendon knew your password, how come you know Tyler’s-”

“Leave me alone,” Josh groaned, shoving at his brother’s face. Tyler was red, choking on a laugh, and the giant urge to kiss him washed over Josh again, even though he was a little pissed. That motherfucker. I love him.

Thankfully Jordan retreated to the back seat then, and Josh could read the string of texts.

Mikey: r u mad at me bro? Im sorry i said that i was drunk lol

M: not lol just sorry, really dude

M: can u maybe pick me up

M: its raining and gee left me fml

“He wants you to pick him up,” Josh paraphrased. “Are you mad at him?”

Tyler furrowed his eyebrows. “What? Why would I be mad at him?”

“He asked if you’re mad at him, he says he’s sorry and he was drunk-”

“Let me see-”

“No, you’re driving-”

“Well, tell him I’ll be there in five minutes, and I’m not mad,” Tyler huffed at Josh, jerking the van across three lanes of traffic to the opposite side of the road, only barely making the turn.

“Whooooooaaaaaaa!” Jordan whooped from the back seat.

“Jesus Christ, Tyler-” Josh started, nearly dropping the phone.

Tyler ignored them both and upped the speed on the windshield wipers. They squeaked loudly against the glass as the rain continued to steadily coat the van. Josh took a deep breath and slowly released the armrest of his death grip, eyeing Tyler warily, not trusting him to not gun the engine again. He shakily tapped a reply to Mikey’s texts and as discreetly as possible double checked that his seat belt was fastened. Couldn’t be too sure. Not with Tyler’s driving.
Mikey’s house wasn’t far - not that Josh knew the way, he had never been to Mikey’s house, had never even hung out with Mikey before on his own - but Tyler had plenty of times, and after a couple of minutes the tires squealed to a stop on the wet pavement in front of a semi-detached townhouse. Mikey was sitting on the front stoop, only slightly protected from the rain by a small awning, and Josh waved through the window at him. Mikey glared at him. Or maybe he glared, Josh could never tell with this kid, not from behind his steamed glasses and beneath his heavy eyebrows, not when his resting face was a kind of a glare anyways.

He jogged around the van and clambered into the back seat next to Jordan. Josh was opening his mouth to say hey when Mikey spoke over him, leaning forward over the console between Josh and Tyler.

“Do we like him right now?” he muttered to Tyler, squinting his eyes at Josh in way of hello.

Josh huffed. “Well, hi to you, too, man. Good to see you.”

Mikey definitely glared at him then, and Josh glared back, just on principle, but his eyes jumped to Tyler behind Mikey, his face a little flushed and a grin on his lips. He looked close to laughing as he rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, Mikey, we like him right now.” He bumped Mikey’s shoulder with his own, though Mikey didn’t seem to loosen up too much. He continued squinting at Josh.

“Really? You sure? What about...y’know.”

“Y’know what?” Tyler asked, and Josh didn’t trust that tone he was using, or the way his mouth kept twitching like he was trying to hide an even bigger grin.

“You know... .” Mikey shrugged one shoulder, staring at Tyler, and Josh felt himself getting a little riled up. Mikey’s face was really close to Tyler’s. He shook himself as soon as the thought struck him.

Tyler did laugh then as he replied. “It’s fine, I told you. Don’t worry about it, okay, I’ll explain later.”

“Whoa, wait, no you won’t explain later.” Josh waved some quick air quotes in Mikey’s face for emphasis. “Explain what? I’m right here, guys.”

Mikey smiled a little then- smirked, more like- at Tyler, and to Josh’s indignation, Tyler smirked back, only a little, but it was enough to make Josh feel incredibly suspicious and incredibly left out.

“What did I do?” he demanded, lowering his voice when Jordan shifting in the back seat caught his eye. “What’d I do to you?” he nodded at Mikey then, and Mikey lifted his head moodily.

“None of your business.”

“Obviously it’s my business, it’s about me!”

“Whatever, dude, we don’t.”

“Okay, okay, guys, stop.” Tyler was laughing full out now, that dry, adorable giggle that always melted Josh’s heart instantly, and it wasn’t failing this time around either. He loved him. Even though he was being a minor pain in the ass right now.

Mikey mumbled something under his breath before slouching back in the back seat, buckling his seat belt before even dropping his bag to the floor. He had obviously ridden with Tyler before.
Josh watched him warily a moment before looking over to Tyler, who only grinned at him, face red and dimples flashing. Fucking cute as he was, Josh tried not to grimace at him; he didn’t see what was so funny about this whole thing. Him and Mikey were acting like two girls. Even his own sisters weren’t this stupid, even Abby, and she could be pretty ridiculous, even more so than Jordan. And that was pretty fucking stupid.

Tyler gunned the engine- again- driving to the end of the street to make a U-turn before Mikey spoke up.

“So why does he get shotgun?”

“Yeah, why does he get shotgun-” Jordan was all too quick to jump in on the conversation. The back seat was turning into a fucking gang.

Before Josh could yell at them to shut up, Tyler was chuckling as he responded, turning back onto the main road. “It’s not up for grabs, guys, sorry.”

Josh wanted to fucking kiss him on the fucking mouth.

Mikey huffed again, and Jordan protested for a short moment before once again manipulating the conversation- or lack of conversation- with a dramatic and exaggerated retelling of the Fortnite game he had stayed up till four last night playing. Josh almost laughed out loud. They really couldn’t get a break, could they?

But it was okay. Jordan was being annoying as fuck, but what was new; Mikey was apparently pissed at him for Tyler, who knew what that was all about; Josh’s mom was pissed as shit he had been gone all night without a word, and Josh still didn’t believe she didn’t believe he wasn’t with Jenna. Oh, yeah, and he’d see Jenna today, too- Josh was a little anxious to think about where that could lead. And Brendon would have questions about last night, thousands of them. God, what would he tell him? What if he…. Josh shook his head, trying to clear it. This felt like a lot for anyone’s plate.

But then, as if on some divine cue, he felt Tyler’s warm eyes land on his skin, and he sneaked a glance over to the driver’s seat. Tyler was smiling at him, at him, just him, a smile that was knowing and familiar and exclusive and only ever shared with him and him alone , with Josh. Josh was sure of that in the brief moment that their eyes met before Tyler was looking back at the road in front of them, soft smile on his lips, like they had somehow just shared a secret, nonverbally and in less than five seconds. Josh loved that, and, God, did he love Tyler. He felt a little dizzy with how much he wanted to kiss the corner of his mouth just then, and even more dizzy with how much he loved him. God, I...I want to tell him.

Josh was still staring at the soft pink of Tyler’s mouth, remembering the taste of it, the noises that had come out of it last night, because of him, holy crap- when Tyler was laughing, looking in the rearview mirror.

“Dude, no way, really? But why didn’t-”

“Cuz we had a quad launcher, with a purple skin-”

“Oh, my God-”

Josh rolled his eyes. A quad launcher, so what? Big deal. He had got one before, it wasn’t that rare. Especially when you played video games as much as the Dun kids had growing up. Jordan was totally milking it now. Looked like Josh wasn’t the only Dun who loved getting Tyler’s attention.
Jesus, I’m pathetic.

“Oh, hey, we’re stopping at Burger King, Mikey, is that okay?” Tyler interrupted Jordan then and smirked over at Josh, and Josh was temporarily frozen again, words failing him. Tyler was crazy, and he fucking loved him, dammit. God, he needed help, he couldn’t concentrate. Was that what happened after fucking around with someone for the first time? Was that what happened when you realize you love that person? Jesus Christ.

“Class started ten minutes ago,” Mikey started, sounding thoughtful. “Totally, let’s stop at Burger King.”

Jordan whooped from behind Josh, and Tyler started to giggle. Maybe this whole thing wasn’t sucking that bad after all. Especially if they were skipping class to get food instead.

The restaurant was only a block away from the high school, and in five minutes they had pulled into a parking space, rain still steadily drizzling down. Josh tossed a twenty dollar bill into the back seat and demanded Jordan to go inside and order.

“It’s quicker than the drive-through,” he insisted. Jordan wasn’t buying it.

“C’moooooon, just ’cuz I’m younger than you doesn’t mean you can boss me,” he whined, and Josh huffed loudly.

“Jordan, come on, just do it, okay? We don’t have all day.”

“Why can’t you do it?”

“I’ll tell mom you were up all night on the computer.”

“Ha, she already knows!”

“Just get the food, idiot.”

“Hey, don’t call me-”

Tyler interrupted, turning around halfway in his seat. “Yo, Jordan, do you mind? Be cool, okay.”

Tyler’s tone wasn’t mean, only slightly patronizing, and Jordan eyed him warily, seemingly considering it. After a moment he rolled his eyes and huffed, muttering, “I guess. If you say so….”

Casting one last glare in Josh’s direction, he grabbed the dollar bill and hopped out of the van into the rain, attempting to slam the sliding door after him. Josh choked on a snicker.

“Dude, he loves you,” he laughed to Tyler once the door had slid shut.

“All Duns love me,” Tyler reminded Josh, not trying to hide the fact that he was beaming, his grin smug.

“Except Ashley.”

Josh and Tyler dissolved into snickers for a moment before Mikey cleared his throat. Josh had nearly forgotten he existed back there.

“So what’s the story?” he asked, tone level. Josh didn’t trust it. He peeked over at Tyler.

“What story?” he, too, prompted. Tyler was still beaming, his eyes shining. He looked incredibly satisfied with himself, and Josh kind of hated it, but it was also kind of the cutest thing he had seen.
yet that morning.

“There’s no story, Mike, honest.” Tyler said in way of explanation. “Josh didn’t go to the dance.”

“He- you didn’t?” Mikey turned his attention to Josh, energy slightly more positive now, though as usual, it was kind of hard for Josh to tell. He still looked a little like he was grimacing behind those glasses.

“Um...no...?” Josh, for whatever fucked reason, felt his cheeks heating up. This suddenly felt like a lot of attention on him, on them, Tyler, their relationship- they’d never really discussed them with anyone else before. Well, there was Jenna, but that hardly seemed to count. But Mikey already knew all about them anyways, this shouldn’t feel weird- he’d pushed them together in the first place! Josh wondered briefly if he had ever thanked Mikey for that, because he really fucking should-

“What about Jenna?” Mikey asked, eyes sliding back to Tyler.

Tyler pulled one knee up to his chest and hugged his leg like a little kid, and Josh wanted to lean over the console and kiss his dimples, Mikey present or not. God, Tyler was so fucking cute-

“They broke up.” Tyler hummed, apple cheeks red and popping. Great, so much for keeping their relationship private.

“They...really?” Mikey turned to Josh again like he remembered he actually was there to hear this conversation, thanks a lot.

Josh shrugged one shoulder. “We...yeah.”

“And you didn’t go to the dance?”

“No...that would have been a little awkward, don’t you think?”

Mikey stuck his nose in the air and eyed Josh a little icily. “I don’t know, you’re the expert on seeing two people at once.”

Tyler cut in before Josh could defend himself. “Aw, c’mon, Mikes, that’s not fair. He broke up, dude, didn’t you hear me?”

Tyler was actually bouncing in his seat a little. Josh was gonna burst with how fucking cute he was.

“We’re like, official now, dude, for real!” Tyler continued.

Mikey didn’t say anything for a moment, tossing one more less-than-friendly look in Josh’s direction before finally smiling at Tyler a little. “That’s good, dude.”

“Hell, yeah, it’s good! Right, J?”

Josh wasn’t sharing the same enthusiasm for discussing all of this right now as Tyler apparently was. “Right, Ty,” he managed, blush growing steadily on his cheeks.

“So...he was with you last night?” Mikey asked.

Tyler was nodding before Mikey had even finished the question. “Yep! He came over in his suit and everything, he was so cute and embarrassed and-”

“Tyler-” Josh tried cutting in.
“-and he stayed for a movie, even though I’m grounded, y’know- it’s ‘cuz my mom just loves him- and then he even stayed the night-”

“He slept at your house?”

“Yes, and then-”

“Oh, so that’s why he’s here, I didn’t expect he’d be here when I texted you to pick me up,” Mikey said in a nonchalant tone that suggested Josh wasn’t even in the same van as the two of them.

Josh tried not to huff as he turned to Mikey then. “How is any of this your business-”

Tyler’s indignant harumph interrupted him before he could get started. “Josh, Mikey’s my best friend, he can know about us.”

“I thought I was your best friend….” Josh mumbled and slouched a little.

“You are, J,” Tyler said, rolling his eyes once, stupid smile still on his stupid, cute face. “You know what I mean.”

Mikey made a noise like he was trying not to laugh, and Josh shot him a halfhearted glare.

“So did you go to the dance last night?” Josh questioned, more than ready to not be the center of the discussion anymore.

Mikey regarded him coolly for a short moment. “Yes, but-”

“Did you go with P-”

“I went stag,” Mikey cut in so fast that Josh thought he was maybe having a seizure. He glared at Josh through his glasses harder than Josh had ever felt anyone glare at him before- and his siblings glared at him a lot. Josh glanced to Tyler uncertainly before looked back to Mikey, tilting his head an inch questioningly.

Mikey raised his eyebrows before glancing to Tyler, too, and it finally dawned on Josh that Mikey had told him not to tell anyone about him and...well. Yikes. But Tyler was his best friend-apparently- why hadn’t he told him yet? Unless he-Josh noticed Tyler squinting his eyes at him just then, and Josh tried not to fidget too obviously.

“I mean- oh...oh, okay, um...stag...right....” Josh didn’t mean to say anything else, didn’t want to draw any more attention to his mistake than he already had, but the mumbled words came out nonetheless. Mikey widened his eyes at him, jaw clenched, and Josh tried not to flinch at the look he was giving him.

“Are you guys talking with your eyes right now?” Tyler piped, swiveling more in his seat to look at Mikey. “Let me in on it!”

Josh tried laughing it off, his face heating up even more, and crossed his arms uncomfortably, praying to God Mikey wouldn’t hate him for this.

“Ha, yeah,” Mikey sounded like he always did, but Josh imagined he could hear a slight strain in his words. “Josh couldn’t communicate nonverbally with anyone if he tried.”

Josh was turning around in his seat again to demand what in heck that meant, because that sounded like an unnecessarily rude insult if you asked him, when Tyler beat him to it, wagging his eyebrows
in a way that left no room for misinterpretation.

“Well, I don’t know about that. Last night we were communicating nonverbally like pros, if you know what I mean.”

“Ty-ler, God, why are you like this?” Josh cut in, immediately fifty shades redder, if that was even possible anymore. “Why do you always have to-”

“What’s this?” Mikey cut in, sounding more interested than he ever had before in Josh’s entire memory of him, and probably more than a little eager to switch the subject back to Josh and Tyler, the bastard. Tyler was struggling and failing to not let the smile overtake his entire face, shining eyes jumping to Josh’s, and Josh felt himself quickly losing any control he might have once had over this conversation.

“Wait, did you guys...you guys...?” There was a growing hint of humor in Mikey’s voice.

Josh groaned out loud, covering his face with his hands as he heard Tyler burst into girlish giggles.

“We did,” Tyler verified, way too fucking smug. “We totally did, dude, and it was awesome.”

“Like...I mean, really?”

“Yes, really! Why do you sound so surprised?” Tyler sounded a bit put out.

“No reason, I just thought...way to go, man,” Mikey’s tone was genuinely a little proud. “And on Valentine’s day, too.”

“That’s what I was like! Isn’t Joshua a sweetie?”

Josh groaned again, the noise muffled from behind his palms. He wanted to die. Honestly, he swore, Tyler liked embarrassing him, it was like he got off on it or something, the bully.

Mikey laughed once in response, and Josh would have glared at him if he felt like moving his hands. He could feel on his fingertips how hot his face was.

“The sweetest. So Josh finally had his first time-”

“What does everyone think I’m a virgin?” Josh raised his voice, finally dropping his hands to his lap in a huff. Tyler and Mikey both started snickering. Traitors... Josh thought bitterly, even as hearts fluttered before his eyes at the flush on Tyler’s cheeks and the light sound of his laugh. He did look really happy.

That pestering thought surfaced again in Josh’s mind, taking him once again by surprise.

I want to tell him.

“You just look so innocent, Joshsie. Like a puppy,” Tyler pouted at him, and Josh’s heart flipped. Then Tyler was swiveling around even more in his seat to face Mikey, leaning forward like an elementary student about to share the latest gossip on the playground.

“So, Mikey, you want the deets, right?”

“Of course I want the deets,” Mikey deadpanned, though Josh didn’t not believe him.

“Sick! Okay, so you can’t tell from just looking, but Josh legit-”
“Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait, Tyler, are you serious right now?” Josh could not believe that he chose this fucking kid to fall in fucking love with.

“What!” Tyler looked at Josh like he was the crazy one in this situation. “It’s not bad, J, I’m complimenting you!”

“Well, don’t,” Josh hissed, and Mikey started to really laugh at that, just as Jordan hurled himself against the van door. Thank God. Josh actually loved his baby brother.

“I’ll tell you later,” Tyler mumbled to Mikey moodily, turning back around in his seat to unlock the doors.

Josh gaped at him and spluttered for a moment, but before he could protest, a syrup packet was hitting him in the back of the head as Jordan tossed breakfast burritos and french toast sticks at everyone. He had plenty of time to be miffed at Tyler after breakfast.

If letting Tyler drive wasn’t a fiasco enough on its own- in Josh’s personal opinion- then letting Tyler drive one handed in the rain while trying to dip french toast sticks while also lowkey jamming to the new fun. song on the radio was a death wish. Josh wished he hadn’t had that breakfast burrito.

By some miracle, they arrived at the school in one piece, albeit half an hour late, and pulled into the back parking lot. Jordan was out and racing to the door as soon as they had parked, book bag over his head like an idiot to block the steady drizzle of rain, leaving without so much as a word to any of them, which was totally chill with Josh. The sooner Jordan left him alone the better. In Josh’s personal opinion.

“Well, this will be fun,” Mikey commented, and Josh’s defenses immediately started to rise.

“What do you mean?” Tyler asked, tossing the keys to Josh. Josh put them in the glove compartment, as per Mrs. J’s instructions. He wasn’t the high school delinquent, thank you very much.

Mikey was already climbing out of the back seat and throwing his bag over his shoulder, leaning back into the car to grab his phone. “We’re all in the same homeroom, aren’t we?”

“Yeah…” Tyler started.

Josh had to restrain a groan, and then Tyler got it, eyes widening slightly. “Oh… yeah….”

“I’ll go in first, you guys can come in a minute?” Mikey offered, and Josh nodded, but then Tyler unbuckled his seat belt and was crawling half out of his seat to reach his own bag lying on the floor.

“No, wait, I’ll go with you, Mikey, that’ll be better, don’t you think? And Josh, you come in after us, okay? So no one will know we rode together, okay?”

There seemed to be another question behind his words, behind his eyes as he grabbed his bag and settled back in his seat, gaze locking on Josh’s. Josh studied him for a moment, but Mikey was still right there waiting in the rain and the car was still making beeping noises because Tyler hadn’t turned the headlights off yet, and Josh couldn’t figure out what it was that Tyler was trying to really ask behind his posed question. So Josh only nodded, wishing to God that Tyler would never have to leave, that he’d never have to stop looking into those brown eyes that he loved so much, that were shining back at his own.
Tyler smiled at him, unaware, and pulled his hood back over his head. He leaned over the console into Josh’s space and bumped his nose against Josh’s, eyes squinting from the smile on his face.

“You look sad, cut it out,” he murmured, tilting his head to graze his dry lips over Josh’s. One of his hands came to Josh’s thigh to steady himself in his leaning position, and Josh curled his fingers around Tyler’s wrist instead of replying, never wanting to let go, never wanting Tyler to leave.

Tyler kissed him then, just a quick, sweet, slightly Burger King flavored peck on Josh’s mouth, smile in place the whole time. Josh loved him.

“Miss you already, babe,” Tyler spoke against his lips, and Josh pressed his mouth back to Tyler’s before he could pull away, swiping his tongue along Tyler’s bottom lip. He wasn’t ready for this, dammit, none of this; facing his friends and the team and the whole school, a whole day without Tyler, he couldn’t do it, he couldn’t.

“Miss you, too,” Josh repeated, voice hoarse, because he couldn’t say what he really wanted to. Not yet.

Mikey faked a cough, and Josh could feel Tyler starting to grin again, his eyes jumping between both of Josh’s, like he was trying to tell him a secret. Josh loved him.

“You know I hate to break this up, but we’re all getting demerits today as it is, don’t wanna make it worse, y’know?” Mikey had a point.

Tyler smirked at Josh and licked the tip of his nose, darting away before Josh could smack at him. He was in fucking love.

“See you inside, J!” Tyler waved like a little kid once he was out of the car, slamming the door and jogging across the parking lot with Mikey, dodging raindrops. Josh watched them until they disappeared inside, Tyler’s last glance over his shoulder before the door shut yanking on Josh’s heartstrings.

He shoved aside his emotions- for now- grabbed his bags, and followed.

When Josh reached their homeroom five minutes after Tyler and Mikey had, he didn’t expect to bump right into Tyler the second he opened the door and slipped inside. He made quick eye contact with him before Tyler was edging away closer to Mikey, and Josh took a step in the opposite direction as well, for good measure, just as Ms. Moore rounded on him.

One too many students must have been late that morning, because she had been in the middle of letting Tyler and Mikey have it, carrying on in front of the whole class and in the middle of her lesson, too, and she quickly included Josh in her venting.

“I’ve had it up to here with you boys!” she was saying, voice rising, waving an arm in the air. “Up to here! Game tonight or not, it’s no excuse to be coming in late to class and disrupting everything, it’s disrespectful to all the other kids who decided to be on time!”

Josh shuffled awkwardly in place, stuffing his hands down into his hoodie pockets, and tilted his head so a bit of bangs fell over his face. He peaked up at the other kids in the classroom, an ironic number of which were taking the temporary halt in the lesson to mess around on their phones, unconcerned with the current spectacle at the front of the room, only a scattered few watching on in amusement. His eyes landed on Brendon and Dallon across the room, both already smirking at Josh, and Josh made a quick face at his friends. Brendon mimed giving a handjob, and Dallon snorted out
loud. Josh almost did, too.

Ms. Moore must have noticed, because she directed her general ranting at Josh. “You think this is a joke, Dun? Just because the principal lets you get away breaking dress code doesn’t mean you get a free pass to come in forty minutes late to my class. I have had it! You, you—” she jabbed a finger at Mikey and Tyler respectively, then lastly at Josh. “—and you, all get detention next week.”

“But we have practice after school—” Tyler started.

“You can come in next Saturday then. I’m not playing around with you kids anymore, I’ve had it. Now sit down, and if it’s alright with you three, I will continue my lesson.” She stomped back to the whiteboard.

Tyler followed Mikey to the back of the room, slipping past Josh a little closer than was necessary and winking at him. Josh tried not to grin too obviously as he crossed the front of the room to the seat Brendon and Dallon had saved for him. You can’t be caught looking too happy after just receiving a weekend detention.

“Sucks, right?” Brendon said as Josh collapsed in his seat next to him, dropping his bags to the floor. “’S’okay, man, I got it, too.”

“You came in late?” Josh eyed his friend as Dallon leaned closer to answer for him.

“She already yelled at Bren for like ten minutes before you guys all came in—”

“Yeah, this class has been like a total of fifteen minutes, it’s been great,” Brendon grinned.

Josh choked back a laugh, not wanting to get Ms. Moore all worked up again. He pulled out a notebook, even though he had no intention of writing anything down that early in the morning.

“You get your shit all ready for tonight?” Brendon elbowed Josh in the side, bouncing in his seat a little. He looked like he’d had a pack of Red Bulls for breakfast.

Josh nodded, and Brendon mimicked in a high voice, “I’ve had it with you, Joshua, I’ve had it up to here—”

“Urie, do I need to get the principal in here?”

Josh slouched in his seat, hiding his face with one hand to try and cover his smile while Dallon piped up. “Sorry, sorry, we’ll be quiet, we were just, um, taking notes.”

The teacher turned back to the board, and Brendon coughed once dramatically, muttering something definitely I-need-to-get-the-principal-in-here worthy. Josh side eyed him in amusement.

“You’re gonna get us in more trouble, B,” he told him in a low voice.

Brendon rolled his eyes at Josh. “Whatever. Oh, and by the fucking way, dude, you owe me a big explanation about last night. I need all the details, you slut.”

“What happened?” Dallon leaned in closer, and Josh tried to remain casual, even as a wave of anxiety washed over him. He rolled his eyes as he shoved Brendon away from him.

“Nothing.”

“Josh and Jenna were fucking all night—”
“Brendon-”

“Dun, Urie, I will separate you two if I have to stop this class one more time. Do not make me lose my temper with you.” Ms. Moore whipped back around to face the whiteboard, scribbling furiously with a marker.

Brendon caught Josh’s eye one last time and snickered before tugging out his phone and turning to show Dallon something. Josh tuned out what they were saying, staring at the wrinkled page in his notebook on the desk in front of him.

What was he gonna tell Brendon? What would Jenna tell Brendon? What would they do when lunch period came, where would Josh tell Brendon he’d been last night, what if Jordan tried to sit at their table, God, what if….

Josh closed his eyes for a moment and focused on taking some deep breaths. There was totally no need to panic over something like this. He could work it out. He’d tell Brendon something. And Jenna had promised not to tell anyone, he could trust her. This wasn’t a big deal at all.

Ms. Moore still had her back to the class, and Brendon was still busy with Dallon, and Josh really needed something to ground him right then- he looked out at the classroom for a moment, no one paying him any attention, and he risked a quick look over his shoulder to the back corner where Tyler always sat with Mikey.

Tyler was already looking at him, elbow on the desk and chin in his hand, and his face lit up when Josh’s eyes met his. Josh smiled, couldn’t have prevented it if he had tried, and Tyler tilted his head shyly, blowing him a kiss.

What on earth had Josh been worrying about again?

Chapter End Notes

next chapter will be up this month prolly around thxgiving OH MY GOSH I LOV U GUYS lemme kno ur thoughts pls?? i LOVE YOU! <333

P.S. Jordan's a lil bitch and a lil puppy dog and i LOVE him
The rest of the morning classes passed quickly- Josh had never been quite so thankful to have all his classes with Tyler and not so many with Brendon. As much as he loved his friend, he was dreading the confrontation he knew was coming. It was inevitable. It was **Brendon. God.**

Josh knew he was supposed to be acting careful not to let on about him and Tyler, especially today when they were both receiving more attention than they normally would. Big games did that to guys in a smallish school if they were on the team. Hell, Josh bet even Jordan was getting more attention than usual from the entire high school that morning. Stupid freshmen.

But even as Josh grimaced his way through the morning lectures under the extra unwanted scrutiny from his classmates, he *finally* felt the excitement of the game washing over himself, too. About fucking time. This game had been a long anticipated one, and they were gonna fucking *smash it.* With Tyler on the team, how couldn’t they? Josh smirked into his palm the second the thought flashed through his head, thoroughly zoned out to the ending remarks of their history teacher. At the beginning of the year, he would have rather *died* than admit that to himself. He would have rather died than do a *lot* of things regarding Tyler.

He was pretty pleased with the change of direction as of late.

He was pretty pleased to *love* that cute idiot.

The bell rang, and Josh may or may not have let out a quiet, yet audible moan of relief as he shoved his books back into his bag. Lunch period could never come too soon in his opinion. He turned in his seat to scrabble with his backpack, and his eyes slipped across the room to Tyler (*why does the idiot always sit in the back? If he sat in front of me sometime I could daydream in class better...I could*
Tyler was slumped over his open book in a suspiciously napping manner, and his punk friend shoved at his arm. Josh ducked his head to hide the smile growing on his face as he watched Tyler startle awake, to hide the smirk growing on his face. Josh knew why Tyler was tired that morning.

Maybe Tyler felt Josh laughing at him, or maybe- Josh hoped- Tyler just wanted to see Josh, too, because suddenly their eyes were meeting as students exited the room, and Tyler scoffed silently at what Josh could only assume was the obviously smug grin on his face. He didn’t try to hide it as he slung his bag onto one shoulder and idled out of the room, leaving half his heart back there with Tyler. Wow...just being able to walk down the fucking hall together sounded heavenly enough to Josh right then to give him another orgasm if he imagined it too hard, the warmth of Tyler’s body next to his, just the warmth of his presence being near. His voice. His stupid laugh. His stupid little dance moves. God.

Or maybe Josh was just horny. Or hungry.

Whatever. Either way, his mood was greatly improved since earlier that day, and things were looking even brighter since it was lunchtime, and Josh refused to let the impending interrogation from Brendon dampen his spirits. He refused, okay. Goddammit.

Josh entered the crowded lunchroom with only some apprehension, glancing about for his friends. Of course- Brendon was already at their usual table, along with half the basketball team and several girls from the cheer team. A pretty typical scene whenever it was close to a game. Especially with Akron. Especially with scouts.

Josh dragged his feet in the line as he waited for a slice of pizza and a coke, one hand stuffed in his hoodie pocket and clamped around his phone, waiting for it, willing for it to buzz with a text from Tyler. Why wasn’t he texting him? He wasn’t even with Mikey right now probably, what could be so important with those other weirdos he hung out with? Josh tugged out his phone and sent Tyler a quick pizza and drooling emoji. It was better than no communication at all.

Tray in hand and no other options left, Josh sauntered as casually as possible to his usual seat at the already overcrowded table. Ugh, why did they always have to sit in such a central part of the lunchroom? There was never any privacy there, people were always looking at them, at him. Josh spotted Mikey’s brother- Gerard, right, not a weirdo, sorry...geez, Ty’d kill me if he heard me say that.... - at the table in the corner Tyler and his little gang always occupied, looking angry as hell, and Josh glanced away quickly, wondering where Tyler was, wishing, despite Gerard’s less than welcoming attitude, that he could slip away to the corner of the cafeteria and sit with them instead of dealing with this.

This consisting of one of the cheer girls in Josh’s usual seat, and him hovering awkwardly behind her for a moment, unsure of what to do. God, why am I so dumb, I’m so fucking stupid, people are probably laughing at me and I can’t even-

“All right, my friends!” Josh closed his eyes for a quick moment and let out a quiet groan. Jesus Christ, Brendon.

All eyes at their table turned on Josh, and he could feel the heat taking over his neck and cheeks. The girl moved out of the way, and he tried to smile at her in thanks, though smiling seemed nearly impossible right now. He edged stiffly into his seat and wished Tyler was there, or at least for a text. He wished he had re-dyed his hair before now, too. Red again?
“Hey, guys—” Josh started shyly before being jostled forward as Spencer threw an arm around his shoulders. “Sup, J! I heard you got detention, Bren was telling us all about it. Sucks, man. On the weekend, too. That’s shit luck.”

“Hey, that’s not what you said about me getting stuck with it, too—” Brendon cut in, and Spencer rolled his eyes.

“That’s ‘cuz you deserved it—”

“You weren’t even there—”

“Yeah, but he’s right, you did deserve it,” Dallon confirmed, and Brendon shot him a glare from across the table. Ryan discreetly hid his smile with his palm.

Josh let out a quiet breath and tried to ease into the swing of things, at least mentally. This wasn’t so bad. Just his friends messing around, like normal, like they always did. Just a few extra cheerleaders hanging around this time, but everything else was completely normal. He’d be okay, he could do this. I can do this. No need to freak.

Brendon started in on both Spencer and Dallon about how unfair they were being and how they probably secretly hated him, and Josh felt a little more tension dissipate from his shoulders. He snapped open the tab on his soda can.

Brendon must have noticed Ryan smiling then, and he included him in his increasingly ridiculous accusations, acting a little crazier than usual just for laughs. He always hammed it up when the cheer team was around. He did even when they were back in junior high. Josh almost laughed at the memory. He didn’t care what crap Brendon was going on about so long as it distracted him from creating a scene in front of the entire table about last night involving Josh and—

Oh, shit.

Jenna was picking her way delicately through the crowded lunchroom, chatting with a girl from the cheer team. And heading in this direction. Josh was doomed.

Suddenly Josh didn’t care if his pizza went cold; he couldn’t eat now. If he tried he’d probably end up with vomit on his shoes and that wouldn’t go over well for anyone. He wasn’t quite sure what he had expected Jenna to do the day after they had—after he had...well...he hadn’t really given it much thought, hadn’t had time to, for fuck’s sake. It hadn’t even been twenty-four hours yet.

She was giggling about something her friend had just said, almost at the table, pink nails stark against the tray she was holding, when she noticed Josh looking at her. Josh felt himself starting to sweat. He tried smiling. To his pleasant surprise, she didn’t scowl at him, though her laughter did die away. She didn’t quite smile back, but Josh didn’t blame her for that. She looked tired underneath her makeup. Josh felt a pang of guilt.

The rest of the guys at the table hadn’t noticed yet. Spencer and Ryan were in the middle of trying to explain something to Brendon when Brendon was interrupting, voice loud even in the noisy room.

“-shut up, guys, that makes no sense, don’t try to analyze me just ‘cause you watch too many NCIS episodes—”

“It’s true, though,” Spencer cut in. “You’re sarcastic as like, I don’t know, a coping mechanism— a defense mechanism—”

“Am not. And- Ryan, stop laughing, why do you two always gang together, it’s not cute. Just
because you and Spence were best friends growing up, whatever-

“But you always say that about you and Josh,” Ryan pointed out, and Josh’s eyes drifted from Jenna only a few paces away to his friends across the table from him, mid-bickering.

“Yeah, well, me and Josh aren’t dating, thank you very much,” Brendon huffed, glaring at Ryan. Ryan raised his eyebrows. Josh felt Spencer tense beside him. A small wave of panic washed over Josh, and it wasn’t because of Jenna.

Brendon didn’t seem to realize the slight shift in mood as he carried on in his usual joking manner. “I don’t need your psycho babble, one-o’-one bullshit-”

“Brendon-” Ryan started, though Josh was too busy right then being relieved to care what other topic Brendon decided to spaz out about. So long as it wasn’t that.

“I’m just kidding, that’s another defense mechanism. See?” Brendon waved an arm and almost knocked over Josh’s soda. “I’m attacking you because I love you.”

Ryan rolled his eyes and Spencer groaned. “That’s not how it works, you can’t do it on purpose-”

Josh was still trying to just breathe properly when Jenna and the other girl pulled up chairs at the opposite end of the table and joined the group. Patrick smiled at them (Josh hadn’t even noticed Pat tucked away in the far corner of the table) and to Josh’s horror, Dallon noticed the girls then, too, turning to say hey instead of continuing to humor Brendon’s conversation. Great. It was only a matter of time now.

Josh’s phone buzzed in his pocket. He couldn’t know one hundred percent who it was, but relief was already flooding his system. He peeked across the table at Brendon and the few cheer team girls hovering around before digging his phone out and reading the screen.

Ty: no fair i want pizza

Ty: my mom packed me leftovers :( 

Ty: save me a bite??

Josh smiled in spite of himself, in spite of his current situation, and sneaked a glance across the lunchroom. Gerard was the only one at the table still, still looking angry as all get out; Josh peered over his shoulder and studied the lunchline a moment. Mikey was fidgeting in line, wearing a similar expression to his brother’s, and Tyler was there at this side, phone in hand and pout on his face, already looking at Josh. God, Josh wanted to kiss him. He turned back around instead.

J: :,,( 

J: f

Ty: ?? is that f to pay respects

J: yep

Ty: :OO ur mean i rlly wanted pizza

J: get some from mikey

Ty: :( its not the same
Ty: i want pizza w UR germs

J: gross!

Ty: :(

J: stop pouting

J: it makes me want 2 kiss u

Spencer jostled into Josh’s side, and Josh tilted his phone- just in case. Josh hadn’t been following what the conversation at the table was right then, but it wasn’t about him- yet. Thank God. Brendon hadn’t yet noticed Jenna, conspicuously (at least in Josh’s mind) at the opposite end of the table from him. The phone buzzed in his lap again, and Josh promptly forgot about anything that wasn’t Tyler.

Ty: so kiss me then

Ty: asshole

Josh’s heart soared and he hid the sudden smile burning his cheeks in the shoulder of his hoodie, hands shaking as he typed a reply. God, god, god, I love him, god, he’s the fucking cutest, I wanna....

J: get over here n i will

J: jackass

Brendon laughed loudly at something, Dallon was waving an arm around, Jenna was engaged in conversation with the other girl and Patrick, and still Josh seemed to be unobserved. God, it was getting loud in that cafeteria.

Ty: :O scandalous, J. What would urie say

J: who cares

Josh was staring down at his phone in his lap, waiting as Tyler typed a response, when Spencer elbowed him. Josh looked up- everyone at the table was looking at him. Except for Jenna; Josh realized slowly that she was looking down and picking at her food, a blush on her cheekbones. He wished then she was staring at him instead, too. Then maybe this wouldn’t mean what he was afraid it meant.

“W-what?” he stammered out, voice shaky. He took a deep breath and glanced at Spencer, trying to regain his composure before he lost it entirely.

“Didn't you hear Bren? Geez, what are you doing on your phone, man?” Spencer chuckled, and Josh felt his cheeks growing hot. He slipped his phone back into his pocket even as he felt it buzz with another text. Tyler felt miles and miles away, and Josh had never felt more lonely in his life.

“Nah, he heard me, he just doesn’t want to, isn’t that right, J?” Brendon was smirking, leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed over his chest, and Josh didn’t trust for one second that gleam in his eye.

“Brendon-” Josh started quietly, eyes jumping again to Jenna, hoping, praying Brendon would just let it slide.

“I mean, we were all at the dance, y’know, like normal people. Josh over here’s a lady killer though,
he just skips to the end of the evening, if y’know what I mean—"

“Brendon-” Josh started again, raising his voice a little. Brendon started laughing as he continued.

“Guys, you won’t believe this, an hour after the dance ended and I’m with Ryan, right, and his mom calls me-”

Josh groaned and closed his eyes briefly. Why did he like this guy again? God. Everyone at the table was listening to Brendon’s retelling of the previous evening with growing interest; Dallon shot an inquisitive look at Josh and Josh shook his head at him. Honestly, they couldn’t believe this, could they, they knew what Brendon was like. Josh caught Jenna’s eye then, and he opened his mouth, nothing coming out, wanting to say he was sorry, please don’t hate me for this, but she glanced away again before he could communicate what he was feeling. The girl with her- Josh thought she was on the cheer team but he wasn’t sure- glanced at Jenna nervously, and Patrick looked flushed. Josh was willing to bet he looked flushed right then, too.

“-and with, who fuckin’ else, ha, Jenna. Isn’t that right, babe?” Brendon made a show of winking down the table at Jenna, to Josh’s horror, and she laughed once awkwardly, hand brushing a loose strand of white blonde from her cheek.

“You’re full of it, B,” she said, voice giving nothing away. Josh was impressed. He felt like a fucking mess, like he was falling apart, and he had said nothing more than two words this entire time.

“Well, I’m not wrong, and you know it- you both know it. Josh was giving me all the details this morning in homeroom, that’s why we really got detention, right, Josh-”

“Shut up, Bren, we did not,” Josh was horrified; Jenna was squinting at him like she wasn’t sure whether to trust Brendon or not. God, this situation was hopeless.

“Oh, c’mon, Josh, you can tell us! I tell you all the shit me and Ry get up to-”

“Yeah, and I never want you to,” Josh cut in as Ryan crossed his arms, glaring at Brendon: “You tell him what now?”

Brendon rolled his eyes dramatically at his two friends and ignored their protests.

“Seriously, guys. You think you can just not show up at the dance and then not have questions asked? I see you,” Brendon was smirking now, and damn, was he really starting to get on Josh’s nerves.

“I didn’t go to the dance,” Patrick said, and Josh was thankful he at least was on his side and trying to make this thing less awkward. Maybe Patrick would be his new best friend; Brendon who?

“You didn’t even have a date,” Spencer pointed out.

Patrick huffed a little, and Brendon laughed. “We could’ve gotten you a date if you’d asked, Pat, Josh’s got us to thank for him and Jenna, remember, J? My children, I’m so proud. I ship you guys.”

Josh tried not to roll his eyes. This was a long fucking lunch period, maybe the vice principal was right when he suggested a shorter lunch break last quarter….

Josh tried taking a sip of his soda in an attempt to regain his composure as the chatter at the table continued. Bad timing though, because Brendon took that moment to make an inappropriate hand gesture as he joked, “Well, I guess it was better for you guys to take it to the bedroom than to be humping at the dance, the chaperones would’ve-”
“God, Brendon,” Josh nearly choked, blood rushing to his face so fast that he got dizzy. Spencer was red, too, but from very obviously trying to not laugh, and Josh glared at him.

“That is the last thing we would’ve done if we went last night,” Jenna remarked, not looking at Josh, and Brendon raised his eyebrows. Josh groaned at the look that had just flashed in his eyes.

“Oooh, what’s this? You mad, Jen?”

“Brendon—”

“Josh, my man, you might know what you’re doing in the sheets, but you obviously don’t know how to treat a lady.”

Josh didn’t respond, just squinted his eyes from across the table at Brendon, willing him to just stop talking more than anything else. There was no saving himself from this conversation, the best he could hope for was for the end to come swiftly. One stroke.

“-okay, tell us the truth, Jen, is Josh really a good lay? Be honest, he can take it.”

Josh wanted to die. He wanted to die. He didn’t want to look, but his eyes jumped to Jenna’s face on their own; her face was flushed now, too, and her eyebrows were drawn. She looked pissed (Josh should know,) and she was opening her mouth to retaliate, composure finally cracking from Brendon’s ceaseless remarks, when her eyes slid to Josh, and she paused. If she said something right now, Brendon- hell, everyone- would figure out that they weren’t together anymore, and that...well. That would turn everything upside down. God knows what Brendon would start to assume then. And Jenna had promised she wouldn’t say anything, she had promised, she had...well, she hadn’t promised not to say they weren’t together exactly, but. Josh just needed time, dammit, he wasn’t ready for this right now, not right now, he needed.....

Josh tried to convey some of this desperation in his eyes, hoping Jenna would understand, hoping she’d remember she had promised to...well, not exactly help him, but she had promised not to out him, surely that meant she’d help him out now...right?

Jenna floundered for a moment, eyes jumping from Josh to Brendon, before she finally shrugged a shoulder. “Shut up, Urie,” she murmured, tugging out her phone and burying her nose in it. Her cheeks were still red.

Brendon started to snicker, and Josh let out a little sigh, a minute amount of stress lifting from his shoulders. That was close.

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“Hey, guys, wanna have some fun?” he quipped, directing everyone’s attention to him. Josh felt like just rolling his eyes, telling Brendon to stuff it you-know-where and leave the rest of the table alone, they’ll have a whole game tonight to act crazy, not to mention an hour or so long bus ride to mess around all they want, how about giving them a break right then, when suddenly, for whatever reason, it hit Josh.

_Oh, no._

“Yo, Joseph!”

Josh froze, staring down at his hands on the table surface, as everyone else at the table turned their attention behind Josh. This was _so_ not going according to plan.

“Joseph!” Brendon yelled again and waved a hand in the air like an idiot. Josh wanted to disappear, he wanted to disappear with _Tyler_, he didn’t want to have to deal with this-

“What do _you_ want?” Tyler’s voice sounded beside Josh, beside the table, and _man_, was that strange. To someone looking in casually from the outside, they’d have no idea that Josh and his one group of friends weren’t just making chill conversation with Josh’s other group of friends. Even just hearing Brendon and Tyler’s voices within the same five seconds in the same close space felt weird. And if it weren’t for the less than friendly tones that they were both using, Josh realized- he liked it. His two best friends. Why can’t they all just get along, this couldn’t go too badly; they can’t hate each other _that_ much-

“Really missed you in the last game, we’re still waiting to see your cheer routine,” Brendon sneered, and Josh could hear Tyler huff.

“Suck my _dick_, Urie.”

Oh, God, okay. Maybe Josh needed a new approach to this whole situation.

Several kids at the table let out loud snickers as they gaped at Tyler and watched Brendon for his next move. Brendon eyed Tyler distastefully, and Josh felt his heartbeat speeding up as he glanced as casually as he possibly could pretend to be at the moment, up and over at _Tyler_.

His _boyfriend_, who he was in _actual fucking love_ with, whose slender throat he had had his tongue down just that morning, who’s beautiful fucking _orgasm_ he had witnessed just last night, had been the _cause_ of it _himself_, Jesus Christ- Josh wanted to kiss him right then and there.

As for Tyler, he wasn’t looking at Josh. He was scowling down at Brendon, looking almost a little sadistic, mouth hiding a smirk looking almost cruel, and Josh thought he had never seen Tyler look more perfect, more like an angel. He was _fucked_ through and through, and he fucking knew it.

Brendon shrugged dramatically then and replied loudly, “Would if I could find it. Tell me, do you wear panties with the cheer skirt or do you only wear girls’ clothes when you’re in a musical?”

Josh squinted over at Brendon; what he said sounded familiar in a sick sort of way, but he- Josh peeked back up at Tyler. His cheeks were red.

“What do you think, J?” Brendon said, and Josh looked over at him warily, anxiety rising. _No, no, don’t drag me into this, don’t you fucking dare-_ “Think Joseph would be better off on the drama team, don’t you? I hear there’s a girl’s part open in the next show. You’ve had a lot of experience with _being the girl_, haven’t you?”

Tyler grimaced, and Josh glared across the table at his friend. Brendon noticed Josh looking at him
and added, smirking, "Don’t you think he’d look nice in a cheer outfit, J? I think the skimpy skirt would suit him."

Josh opened his mouth but didn’t say anything, not quite yet comprehending what Brendon had said, almost unable to. It was like the words being spoken, so hurtful, so derogatory, could never be meant towards someone as sweet and kind as Tyler, he...Josh’s mind was having trouble keeping up with the conversation, connecting the words being said, hearing the intentions behind them. A part of his heart was hurting; it had been fine a moment ago.

Brendon must have taken Josh’s lack of a verbal response for agreement, because he started to laugh, and it sounded huge and taunting and ugly in Josh’s ears. He wanted to look at Tyler, but he couldn’t, he wanted to make Brendon stop fucking talking, he wanted to do something, to say something himself, to fucking stand up for Tyler, he loved him, but he....

“Honestly, I can’t believe you.” Jenna’s voice sounded over the scattered chatter at the table, and Josh looked over to her, surprised; when Tyler had come over, he had completely forgotten she was even at the table.

Brendon was already responding, making some joke about her being too sensitive, about her being on her period, about her needing to chill, but she was looking at Josh, and Josh knew then what she had actually meant. The guilt that hit him was sudden, and it felt like it was trying to drown him; Josh almost wished it would.

A second later, and Brendon was back to taunting Tyler, oblivious to what was going on right then with Jenna. Josh heard Tyler responding, but wasn’t able to process what he was saying; Jenna was still staring at him too intently for him to really notice anything else going on. A moment more, and she shook her head, dropping her gaze as she stood up from the table. Josh wanted to say something, anything, he didn’t know, but she grabbed her things and stalked away before he could.

“Bet the cheer team at your old school really misses you, huh?”

Josh tuned back into the argument and immediately wished he hadn’t. God, Brendon, didn’t he ever stop?

“If you focused half as much on the game tonight as you do on trying to embarrass me then maybe you’d be first player.” Tyler raised one eyebrow, and Josh nearly choked again on his soda. At least Tyler seemed to be okay- his eyes were shining, and Josh knew him well enough to know that he got off a little on drama like this, the psycho. He didn’t seem to be taking anything Brendon said too much to heart, his own quips and insults coming just as readily. Thank God. Ty can stand on his own two feet, he’s got this-

“Oh, you think you’re fucking smart?” Brendon looked way too smug then to be trusted, in Josh’s opinion. But then again, when didn’t Brendon look smug?

“You think you’re all that ‘cuz you’re still point guard?” he continued. “Just you fucking wait till tonight, my man Josh is gonna beat your ass.”

Josh did choke then, on his own fucking tongue, as he gaped across the table at Brendon. The last thing, the last thing Josh wanted right then was for Tyler to get mad at him, especially only because of something Brendon had said, and Josh knew how much Tyler disliked Brendon, what if Tyler got mad at Josh for-

“Like he could. I’m taking you down, Dun.”
Tyler addressed Josh in front of everyone there at the table for the first time during the whole encounter, and Josh wouldn’t have believed it if he hadn’t been watching Tyler when he said the words— even then, he stared at Tyler’s mouth for a solid couple of seconds after he had spoken, just trying to process things. He didn’t mean to react, but he scoffed a little before he realized, shock and humor and surprise and lust and competitiveness coursing through him all at once. Tyler smirked, looking incredibly pleased, and Josh had no idea why he was doing this.

The jerk. Fuck, he loved him.

For once, Brendon didn’t have a response for Josh, and before he could think about it, Josh heard himself speaking, tone matching the challenge audible in Tyler’s.

“You can try, Joseph.”

Tyler’s smirk widened just enough for a flash of teeth to show, his eyes bright as he stared down at Josh, and okay, if he didn’t cut it out right fucking then Josh was going to have to do something drastic. Like suck him off in a bathroom stall. God.

Josh was vaguely aware of Brendon whooping and making a general spectacle of himself, of the other guys at the table and the cheer girls reacting to the scene, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to look away from Tyler’s face. Tyler was still looking at him, and his gaze was pinning Josh down, keeping him frozen. His arms were crossed and one hip cocked in a manner that exuded dominance and even mild boredom with the conversation, and Josh wanted to fuck him.

Holy hell, where the fuck did that come from, I...God, that’s so...vulgar...it’s practically still Valentine’s day, how unromantic can I get? Jesus Christ-

“Pretty hard to play basketball in a skirt though, isn’t it, Tyler?”

Josh closed his eyes as Brendon spoke, previous thoughts dashed, and—wow, he hadn’t anticipated that sudden pang of possessiveness that surged through him just then, that sudden sense of possessiveness. Did Brendon ever fucking stop?

Josh had never wanted to punch someone so much before in his entire life. And he had three younger siblings.

He might have punched Brendon then, too, God knows what might have happened in the following seconds, if Mikey hadn’t intervened. He had been hovering awkwardly a few feet behind Tyler throughout the whole ordeal, watching things unfold with his usual unreadable glare, and only now spoke to the group.

“You are such a dick,” he said, glaring at Brendon. “Why don’t you get over yourself? You guys all suck.” Josh wished he was mistaken when Mikey’s eyes landed on him, boring holes into his skull, but he wasn’t. Mikey was right, too, and Josh felt like trash for it.

“Sure do, we suck your mom’s dick!” Brendon retorted, and Ryan looked at him like he was an idiot, and he was just then realizing. Josh would have laughed if...well...yeah.

Mikey only shook his head and grimaced at the table in general before turning away and urging Tyler to come with him. Tyler was glaring at Brendon, but his eyes fell to Josh briefly, and Josh thought he saw something softer and familiar flash through them, but he couldn’t be sure. At least his eyebrows unknitted slightly, and he looked a little less stressed than he had only moments before. Tyler turned his head away from the table then and winked once at Josh, and Josh had to wrestle away the smile that was threatening to break out across his face at that, despite everything that had
just happened. Tyler ducked his head to hide his own small smirk. He turned away to follow Mikey, and Josh fucking loved him.

“Such fucking twinks,” Brendon snickered, and oh, fucking Jesus Christ- Josh really, really did want to fucking punch him, but at least Tyler wasn’t in the direct line of fire anymore, he didn’t need to waste his time and energy catfighting with-

Tyler spun around, Brendon actually jumped, and Josh had to stifle a sigh. These fucking guys. Both of them, honestly. They were just egging each other on now. Josh was getting a little sick of it.

“Really, Urie?” Tyler started. “That’s rich, coming from you, gay shit. I’ll show you who’s the fucking twink-”

“Ty- ler-” Josh started before he could catch himself, shock forcing his tongue. Shock, amusement, and, yeah, Josh didn’t mind admitting to himself, the tiniest bit of pride. God, he loved that idiot. He was finding it increasingly difficult to keep from laughing, half out of his aforementioned shock, but laughing at all right then probably wouldn’t look too good for him.

Thankfully, Brendon didn’t seem to notice Josh had spoken; he spluttered hilariously for a moment at Tyler, incredulous, and before he could reply and continue to fuel the argument, Mikey was grabbing at the hood of Tyler’s jacket, bodily hauling Tyler along after him. Josh would have laughed at how dorkily cute he looked right then except for the literal snarl on Tyler’s face as he glared at Brendon. Brendon flipped him the bird, smirking the whole time as he turned his attention back to the table to laugh it off with their friends. Mikey finally got Tyler away from the table, and Josh watched them go, missing Tyler already. Even bitch-mode Tyler.

“He told you, man,” Spencer laughed, nearly rolling on the floor, effectively distracting Josh from staring after his boyfriend like a confused, guilt-ridden, lovesick idiot. Which he was, and didn’t mind admitting, at least to himself. Spencer’s laughter was infectious though, and Josh couldn’t help from smirking, just a little. Ryan started snickering, too, and Brendon did look a little put out about that, though he was making an obvious attempt to cover it up to save face. The conflicted look he was wearing, followed by a grimace at Spencer’s growing (and loud) amusement, was just about the best thing Josh had seen all day.

Thankfully, with both Tyler and Jenna gone (as guilty as Josh felt about both of them just then) the conversation at the table turned once again to much more mundane topics, not making fun of Tyler and not picking fun at Josh and Jenna about the dance last night. After a few moments of trying not to listen to his friends, most of whom Josh wasn’t very fond of right then, and attempting to eat his pizza even though his stomach protested, Josh gave up, slipping from his seat as casually as he could. Spencer noticed and was about to say something, but Josh shook his head at him and made a dash for it before anyone could stop him. He needed some air.

He needed Tyler.

The hallways were fairly clear, but Josh made his way down the hall till he got to the back doors that he and Tyler and Mikey had come through that morning. He pushed through them and sat on the curb, even though it was still damp. The rain had stopped though, so he didn’t mind too much. His pants would dry. He pulled out his phone, his texts with Tyler still open. He sent a row of heart blowing emojis, then tapped out some new texts.

J: hey bbv

J: sorry abt all that
Josh stared at the screen until the Read notification appeared, then nearly fainted when Tyler didn’t reply for a solid minute, then held his breath and fidgeted as he waited for Tyler to type a response. God, he was a mess. Too many people already for one day. And it wasn’t even one in the afternoon yet.

His phone buzzed in his lap, and Josh snatched it up, holding it in front of his nose. Tyler had sent a photo of a slice of pizza on a paper plate, followed by some heart-eyed emojis.

Ty: i’m chill dude

Ty: i got pizza!

Josh smiled at his phone, a small bit of tension easing away, and replied.

J: yay!

A short moment later and Tyler sent another text.

Ty: WAT’S WRONG ur sad i can tell

J: just..

J: r u sure ur ok?? Im sorry abt bren he’s just messing, he sounds meaner than he is

Ty: im pretty sure he’s just mean

Josh resisted the urge to remind Tyler that sometimes he was mean, too- that probably wouldn’t sit too well with him just then. Josh didn’t even really know where that thought had come from; he was on Tyler's side in all of this, after all. Besides, who was Josh to say who was being mean? He felt like shit for not standing up for Tyler earlier. He was the mean one out of the three of them. Tyler was his boyfriend, he was supposed to do stuff like stand up for him.

J: :( so ur not ok?

Ty: no i am rly

J: u sure

Ty: YES bby stop worrying ur worse than my mom

J: :(  

J: i guess u just need xtra looking after

Ty: nope

Ty: worrywart

Ty: hey where r u

J: outside

Ty: why???

J: i got bored
Ty: sure

J: i did

Ty: out back?

J: yeah

Ty: i’ll b right there

Ty: im bringing my pizza

Ty: im bringing the party too but wut’s new

Josh smiled down at his phone in spite of himself still feeling guilty over what had happened during lunch. Tyler did seem to be okay; Brendon really was just being Brendon, the two of them couldn’t go at it any worse than they already had today, and they both seemed to have held their own pretty well. After all, Spencer and Tyler were lowkey chill now, and whenever they were around each other they would fight, too.

Maybe it was a little premature for Josh to get hopeful about it, but despite everything, despite Brendon being an A-level asshole, despite Jenna thinking he was an actual douche of a boyfriend, despite Mikey being mad at him again- Josh couldn’t not feel like maybe they could all learn to get along. Sooner or later. Or maybe he was just tired of feeling like it was all a hopeless situation. Either way, his spirit took an undeniable turn upward. How couldn’t it when Tyler was on his way?

Josh loved him. And this stupid thing would work itself out way sooner than later if Josh had any say in the matter, which he absolutely maintained that he did.

He loved him. How couldn’t it work out?

Chapter End Notes

bitch-mode tyler for the win
here we are again, pretending

Chapter Notes

~~merry christmas frens!!!! happy HOLIDAYS i hope you're all cozy and warm and safe and happy <333 fyi i'm always here for u no matter what, u guys are my family :~))

S/O to patrick, your comments were so lovely and kind you really gOT ME right in the heart <3333

chapter title from fic title song LOVELY :''()}

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tyler was fuming. As Mikey dragged him away from their table, he could still hear fucking Brendon snickering with his stupid friends, with the stupid cheer team, with stupid Josh. Josh hadn’t laughed, Tyler knew, he wouldn’t; even back in the day he had never laughed at Josh. Still, the bitchy part of him couldn’t help but look at Josh sitting at the same table as Urie and the rest of them and feel his heart sink at the sight, and his bitterness rise. Josh should be sitting with him. Or maybe it was just the in-love part of Tyler feeling that. The situation sucked more ass than Urie did.

“Dude, chill,” Mikey commented into the tense silence, and Tyler gave him the stink eye.

“I am chill. Why do you think I’m not chill? I’m totally chill,” Tyler replied as they neared their usual table in the corner. Mikey glanced sideways at him, and Tyler suspected he was hiding a small smirk.

“Okay. So long as you’re chill-”

“I am-”

“Okay, Ty. I mean, Brendon’s always been like that, as long as I’ve known him-”

“Don’t make excuses for him,” Tyler huffed. That guy was a total dick.

“I’m not, I’m just saying. I mean, I don’t like him either, it’s just. Y’know how it is. ”

Tyler rolled his eyes. Sure, he knew how it was; he knew how it was here and he knew how it was back at his old school, too, and he knew it all sucked. People sucked so much. Why did it always happen to him? Maybe something was wrong with him-

“I mean, shouldn’t he have...don’t you think Josh should’ve said something?” Tyler didn’t mean to voice the thought in his head nagging him, but it slipped out all the same. He sounded put out, even to himself, and whiny, too.

To Tyler’s surprise, Mikey didn’t reply right away, just shrugged one shoulder. “I don’t know. That would’ve outed everything, for both of you guys. And you haven’t decided to do that yet, right, the two of you?”
Tyler had to restrain another huff. He didn’t want Mikey to talk reason to him, he just wanted him to bitch with him about how Josh should have been a better boyfriend. He was just a little emotional, okay, he wasn’t really upset, he wasn’t really hurt about anything Urie had said- God knew he was fucking used to that sort of thing- he was just, y’know. Wanting Josh. And pizza. And seeing as how neither of those things were within his reach right then, and Brendon had apparently somehow found out about Tyler’s past in musical theater (as a girl), Tyler was feeling just a little bit pissy about the whole bitchy, unfair thing. Ugh, whatever. Leave him alone.

“And I mean, you didn’t really make it easy for him, y’know? If that’s what you wanted him to do.”

Tyler stammered for a moment, gaping at Mikey. “I didn’t make it easy for him? What are you talking about?”

“Well, like, you were kinda egging Brendon on, Ty.”

“I was egging-”

“And like, what was all that about taking Josh down tonight? In the game?”

“I will, just watch me! Yeah, I like the guy, but I’m better than him on the court and you know it. So does he.”

Mikey shrugged a shoulder again in what Tyler felt was an increasingly annoying manner. “Maybe. But like, you didn’t have to say so to his face.”

“This morning you hated him, now you’re on his side?” Tyler muttered without much heat, for lack of a better, less bitchy response.

Mikey took Tyler’s mood in stride, shooting him another quick, unreadable look. He ignored Tyler’s accusation and instead replied, in his dry and reasonable tone that was really, really starting to grate on Tyler right then: “All I’m saying is you can’t honestly expect him to just up and out you guys in front of that crowd. That’s not the way to do it.”

“Well, what is?” Tyler snapped and immediately regretted it. It wasn’t Mikey’s fault. God, he should’ve gotten more sleep last night. Wait, on second thought...sorry, not sorry. Who needs sleep when instead you and your boyfriend could be- wait, I’m mad at him right now...aren’t I? Ugh, whatever.... “Sorry, Mikes, I didn’t mean to, uh...sorry. I’m just pissed.”

“Then what is?” Tyler snapped and immediately regretted it. It wasn’t Mikey’s fault. God, he should’ve gotten more sleep last night. Wait, on second thought...sorry, not sorry. Who needs sleep when instead you and your boyfriend could be- wait, I’m mad at him right now...aren’t I? Ugh, whatever.... “Sorry, Mikes, I didn’t mean to, uh...sorry. I’m just pissed.”

“No, it’s okay, dude. I get it,” Mikey said in a lowered voice as they reached the table, ending their conversation. Frank waved at them and shoved his bag off a chair to make room.

“You don’t get it....” Tyler couldn’t help but mutter under his breath, though no one could hear. God, he really wanted a slice of pizza. It looked super greasy today. And God, he really, really wanted Josh, too, damn it all. He looked super thick today- no, wait, still mad, I’m still mad, stop thinking that, don’t think about his- NO, TYLER, stop, ugh, I’m an idiot. I can’t think those kinds of things when I’m trying to be mad at the jerk....

Mikey sat next to Frank, and Tyler was too preoccupied in his own mind to notice or care, drifting towards the empty seat next to Gerard. He tried to shake himself out of his mood; he couldn’t treat his other friends like shit just because things weren’t the exact way he wanted them to be with Josh. He nodded to Gerard in greeting, only once though, because he looked pissed about something at the moment, too. Unsurprisingly, Gerard didn’t acknowledge Tyler or Mikey, only prodded moodily at his uncrustable and slouched further down into his hoodie. Tyler didn’t mind too much. He felt like doing the same.
“Bro, what was that over there?” Frank chuckled, buzzing with energy, eyes darting from Mikey to Tyler. “What did they- whoa, Ty, you look pissed as shit.”

Tyler had to restrain the urge to snap at Frank; instead he took a slow breath and shrugged a shoulder as he tugged out his tupperware of cold macaroni. “It’s whatever. They were just being dicks about the game, that’s all.”

“Yeah, I know, I heard that part, you were on fire,” Frank snickered. “You guys were starting to get a lot of attention, did you notice? I think the music teacher almost called for the principal.”

Tyler blinked once, unsure if Frank was exaggerating or not. Mikey was silent, blinking down at his pizza. Gerard was hiding in his hoodie.

“So what did you say? We could hear Urie running his mouth from here,” Frank continued.

“He called him gay shit,” Mikey offered impassively, voice level, and Tyler glared at him for oversharing while Frank burst into laughter.

“Holy shit, Tyler, I knew we liked you for a good fucking reason, right Gee?”

Tyler glanced at Gerard, who didn’t respond, though he did shift a little. Tyler shot Mikey a questioning glance at the same time Mikey conveniently looked back down at the table. The thought crossed Tyler’s mind that maybe something was going on here, and he was the only one left out in the dark. He didn’t like the feeling. It felt all too familiar.

Frank, however, continued like everything was normal. “Ha, and you guys got detention with them, too! Suckers. Y’know Moore gave Urie detention right before you guys came in, right?”

“Lucky us,” Mikey said, but Frank was already continuing.

“And that stupid Dun. The four of you, ha, what a group.”

Tyler shifted uncomfortably. Okay, so maybe he was starting to understand a bit of what it was like for Josh with all his friends always talking-

“That guy gets on my nerves so much, I don’t know why. Almost worse than Urie, honestly. He’s such a fucking loser.”

Frank looked at Tyler with a genial smirk on his face, like he was expecting confirmation, and Tyler felt an instant blush flush his cheeks.

“Ha, um...uh, yeah,” he murmured softly, brows furrowed. As if on queue, his phone buzzed in his pocket, startling him, and an unexpected jab of guilt pinched at Tyler’s heart. He knew damn well who that text was from. And he felt like shit.

Tyler fingered his phone in his pocket and glanced up- Mikey raised one eyebrow at him in an *I-told-you-so* look that was more clearly understood than if he had said the words out loud. Tyler grimaced, more at himself than at Mikey, and looked away. Mikey was right, after all.

Frank prattled on, while Gerard still hadn’t said a solitary word yet at all and was looking incredibly irritable. Tyler eyed him for a moment before shooting an unsure glance at Mikey, more than okay with directing the conversation away from him and Josh. He only caught Mikey’s eye for a moment before Mikey was looking down again. Okay, something was definitely up.

“-don’t know why Black fucks with him, she’s hot. Hot girls always go for douches.”
“Explain how you’re single then,” Mikey muttered, and Tyler tuned back into the conversation as Frank smacked the back of Mikey’s head.

“Who’s Black?” Tyler questioned, only half interested, trying to let go of his earlier annoyance. It’s just Urie being a dick, it’s okay, I’ll show him tonight, all of them actually. And then later on me and Josh can have sex again and I won’t even care about stupid fucking Brendon when I can be with Josh like that. Ha! Who’s the loser now? Definitely not me, assholes-

“Who’s...Jenna? Honestly, Ty, you’ve been here for a whole semester now and you don’t know Jenna Black?”

Frank, of course, and the mention of her name, interrupted Tyler’s thoughts, dashing the small bit of excitement that had started growing at the notion of him and Josh together together again sometime soon. Tyler squirmed in his seat and stabbed his fork at his cold pasta. Her.

“Oh. So that’s her name.”

“Yeah, that’s her name, everyone knows that, she’s the hottest girl in the entire-”

“Frank’s had a crush on her since junior high,” Mikey explained to Tyler, and Tyler snickered hollowly as Frank prodded at Mikey again to shut him up. Tyler didn’t really feel like laughing though.

“Did not, shut up. Apparently she and Dun weren’t at the dance last night-”

Oh, fucking great. Here we go- Tyler didn’t know why he suddenly felt so prickly about the whole thing, about her, about the dance. After all, he knew why neither of them had been at the dance. After all, Josh had broken up with her, they weren’t even together anymore at all, they hadn’t even been sitting together at their table earlier. So why on earth should Tyler be feeling this way over it? After everything, after- fuck, after last night. Josh didn’t even like her. Stop being petty, dude. Shut up.

“I wasn’t at the dance either,” Tyler pointed out before he could convince himself to just be quiet and let this specific conversation topic fizzle out. Shit, why do I always have to talk, I talk too much, I always-

“Yeah, but you were grounded, sucks to suck, Ty,” Frank said, unfazed. “And like, I respect women and all, obviously-”

“Obviously,” Mikey reiterated dryly.

“-but do you know what people say about her? Like, fuck, is Dun a lucky son of a bitch, for real. Most girls won’t ever do shit like that, they’re too scared. I was talking to Dewees a couple days ago, y’know James, Ty? And he told me he saw the two of them only like last week skipping class, you won’t believe what they were-”

Tyler felt it coming, and he tried to stop it, he did, he didn’t mean to say it, honest, but-

“I heard they broke up.”

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, Tyler, what are you doing!? I am such a selfish asshole, I can’t believe you just said that- maybe Frank was too busy drooling over Jenna to notice, maybe he didn’t hear you, he probably won’t believe it anyways-

“What? They what? OMG, Ty, where’d you hear that? That is too good, holy shit.” Frank started
laughing, and Tyler felt his ears growing red, and he suddenly found it incredibly difficult to look in Mikey’s direction. He could see Mikey gaping at him from his peripheral vision.

“Was the team talking about it? Like in practice?” Frank pressed between laughs, and Tyler wanted to be anywhere doing anything but there and doing that. He hated himself.

“I, um…they were…well, like, I just heard it, um…around…y’know…y’know how people talk….” Tyler mumbled, twisting his fork in one hand. He wasn’t sure if he was just paranoid or if Gerard really did seem to be paying more attention to the conversation now than he had been before.

“Yeah, people do talk,” Mikey commented, and Tyler’s eyes jumped to Mikey’s face before he could stop himself. Tyler looked away just as quickly.

His phone buzzed again in his pocket, and Tyler swore it was like Josh knew or something, the guy was psychic. Another wave of guilt hit him. There he was, talking about his boyfriend behind his back to a guy who hated his guts, for whatever reason, while poor Joshol was stuck back there at the team’s table sending him texts. Probably cute ones, too. Josh always sent Tyler the cutest texts. Tyler actually blushed sometimes reading them. Not that he’d be caught dead admitting that, no matter how fucking shitty and guilty he felt. No way.

“Wow, I had no fucking idea! I gotta talk to James about this, see what he knows,” Frank was saying, still chuckling like the whole situation was the funniest thing he’d heard all week. “That guy gets the dirt, I can’t believe he wouldn’t know about this. And this involves Dun, he hates that guy, too. Hey, I guess this means Jenna’s fair game now, right?”

Tyler fidgeted uncomfortably, fingering his own phone in his lap, mind racing ahead of the rest of him at a hundred miles an hour. What if this got back to Josh, what if he found out that Tyler had let it slip that he and Jenna had broken up- God, what if Urie found out? What if Urie caused a big scene, what if Jenna got mad, what if Josh got mad at him- and Tyler wouldn’t blame him for that either, God, he hated himself- and he, he…what if Josh wanted to break up, because he got so mad at Tyler for being a rat that he didn’t want to be with him at all anymore. Tyler’s heart hurt just thinking about the tiniest possibility of that ever happening, of him and Josh not being together. He had lived eighteen years of his life Joshless and to be honest, they all kind of sucked, at least in comparison. And now on top of it all, Tyler had to go and be in real legit love with him, too- Jesus, please, Josh, don’t hate me, don’t get mad, I didn’t mean to… I just couldn’t stand Frank saying that about you and… I just thought…I’m sorry, I’m stupid, I’m sorry, please, I don’t leave me, J, I couldn’t… I couldn’t stand it if you left, I just… I love you, please don’t go-

Tyler was really starting to freak himself out now, entire body burning with the urge, the need to turn around in his seat and see Josh for himself, to see him sitting there at the team’s table, chatting casually with his friends and completely oblivious to the stress Tyler was feeling, to catch his eye and see his shining smile, because Josh would smile at him, he always did, why wouldn’t he? He didn’t know yet that Tyler had gone and ratted him out behind his back. And, oh shit, when he did know-

“If that fuckwad comes over here I’m fucking leaving,” Gerard spat suddenly, stirring for the first time and surprising Tyler so much that his worries were dashed completely from his mind. He had been so quiet up to that point that Tyler had forgotten he was there next to him.

Tyler, Mikey, and Frank all looked over at Gerard. Frank sighed loudly and dropped his head in his hands, and Mikey shifted tensely next to him. Tyler eyed the two brothers uneasily, Gerard’s face stony and angry, Mikey’s reserved and expressionless, before looking out across the cafeteria. Lots of kids were milling about, some familiar, a lot not, several teachers and employees, too, but no one Tyler thought would interest Gerard. So… who… what?
“If who comes over?” Tyler ventured after a moment of silence, but just then Gerard slammed his hands down on the table and stood up, his chair screeching on the floor.

“That’s it, I’m out of here—”

“Why do you have to be such a dick about it? It’s none of your fucking business.” Mikey snapped in a tone Tyler had never heard him use with his brother before. Tyler peeked over at Mikey again; he looked seriously pissed, even more than Gerard had looked earlier, eyes glaring up harshly at his brother.

Gerard just ignored him, snatched up his bag and barked for Frank to come with him before stomping towards the exit. Frank looked sheepish, but started to gather up his own things nonetheless.

“Catch you guys around,” he said. “I guess we, um...might not see you at the game tonight, Mikes, Ty...sorry, guys. Kick that other school’s ass, ‘kay?”

Mikey didn’t respond, and Tyler smiled awkwardly at Frank as he slipped away after Gerard.

Tyler watched him go and drummed his fingers along the edge of the table, feeling sweat starting to form on his temples the longer Mikey didn’t say anything, frozen in place in his seat across from Tyler. This was getting fucking awkward as hell. He scanned the lunchroom again, before turning back to Mikey, opening his mouth to demand what on earth that was all about, but Mikey beat him to it, voice ending the pained silence.

“Sorry, Ty, just, um...family issues, y’know....”

“Uh...no...?” Tyler tilted his head slightly, eyeing Mikey, who seemed suddenly very invested in picking at the peeling corner of the protective screen on his phone. “I mean...shouldn’t you like, um...go after him? Maybe he just misunderstood, maybe you can explain whatever it is—”

“It’s not his business though, that’s the problem!” Mikey snapped, and Tyler shut up quickly, arms inadvertently crossing over his chest, as Mikey continued and waved a hand angrily.

“I didn’t want him to know ‘cuz he’d act like he’s fucking acting now, just like he fucking did last night, I knew he would, I fucking knew it, it was a hot mess. And I didn’t want you to know either because I- I just...I just, I wanted it to be us, not everyone else, and he’s a dick, too, I, I’m....” Mikey seemed to be losing steam, hand falling back to the table and his shoulder slumping. He shrugged once.

“I don’t know. I didn’t...I didn’t want Gee to know yet. I wasn’t...I wasn’t rea-”

The table jostled, and Tyler’s fork fell onto its surface with a clatter. Both he and Mikey looked up to see Pete of all people, leaning against their table with his arms crossed high on his chest in an assertive manner. Fucking great. First Urie, then Frank, then Gerard, I was just about to figure out what the hell’s going on with him and Mikey- now what does this asshole want?

“Where’d the punks slink off to?” Pete hummed in greeting, and Tyler bristled, glaring up at him.

“We just told Urie and those fuckers off, don’t make us go at you, too,” he snapped. Honestly, didn’t this guy have better things to do than to bother them? It must’ve been a team conspiracy or something.

Pete only smirked before turning away from Tyler to face Mikey instead. Something washed over Tyler then, and he could feel his hackles rising. No way, Jose, not with my friend, you fucking
“You need to back off, okay?” Tyler said as he stood up, satisfied with the angry screech of his chair on the linoleum punctuating his words.

Pete looked at him with a flat expression before raising one eyebrow. “Don’t talk to me, Joseph, who the fuck do you think you are?”

Tyler was pleased to note he was several inches taller than Wentz, and he hoped Pete noticed the difference, too. “Just leave, jackass, go fuck around with Urie if you’re so desperate to mess with-”

“Whatever. Mike- can we talk somewhere?”

To Tyler’s complete surprise, Mikey fidgeted for a moment in his seat before making to stand up.

“What, no, Mikey, don’t go with him,” Tyler stammered, blood pumping. Sure, Mikey could take care of himself, he wasn’t a baby- but he was only a junior, and Tyler felt responsible for his well being, especially knowing what an absolute dick Wentz was. He rounded again on Pete. “Whatever you want with him you can say right here-”

“Shut up, Joseph, this doesn’t involve you,” Pete retorted, giving Tyler a bored look.

Tyler was about to further protest, taking what he hoped was a threatening step towards Pete, when Mikey tugged once on Tyler’s arm, looking everywhere but at Tyler’s face. “Ty, it’s...it’s okay, alright? Chill. I’ll...I’ll be back in a bit.”

Tyler spluttered for a moment, but before he could say anything else or ask any questions, Mikey was weaving his way across the lunchroom, and Pete was tossing Tyler a mean look over his shoulder before following.

Tyler stared after them for a minute, at a complete loss, unsure of what to do or what had even just happened, or why, or how. So that’s who Gerard was so angry about? But...but what was Mikey talking about, what about last night, what did he...and why is he all okay with just going with that douche, like? God, I don’t know...this whole day has been crazy. And it’s still only noon, Jesus....

Several kids at a nearby table were looking at Tyler, and he felt his cheeks pinkening as he stuffed his hands into his hoodie pockets and slumped back down at his table. Fuck, on top of everything else that already happened that day, he now had to sit alone at lunch like a loser. Fucking ace.

For lack of any better option for how to continue after all of that...that drama, Tyler picked up his fork and poked once at his cold macaroni. Lunch break was almost over; Mikey had said he’d be back, but God only knew how long it would take him and Wentz to discuss...well, whatever it was they were discussing. Tyler thought fleetingly of maybe telling a teacher, but almost immediately decided against it- he wanted to keep Mikey safe, but maybe not at the expense of having the whole school, or at least the whole team, find out he had tattled to a teacher for help. Maybe only as a last resort he would consider doing that....

Mikey’s untouched slice of pizza across from Tyler caught his eye, and after a quick moment he shoved his tupperware back into bag and pulled Mikey’s plate across the table towards him. Wouldn’t want it to go to waste. That wouldn’t be very eco smart of them.

Another buzz from his pocket. Tyler took a bite of crust as he tugged out his phone, hoping maybe it was from Mikey, maybe an explanation, then he could stop worrying-
Josh’s name popped up on the screen, and in spite of himself, Tyler felt a smile growing on his face. Mikey could take care of himself after all.Whatever it was bothering him and Gee and Wentz apparently, Mikey hadn’t chosen to tell Tyler about it. And he’d figure out soon enough later on that day anyways, Mikey couldn’t avoid him all day, not with an hour long bus drive in their schedule. No use losing any hair over it. Especially not when he had texts waiting for him. Especially not when those texts were from his boyfriend.

Joshie: hey bby

Joshie: sorry abt all that

Joshie: u ok??

Tyler let out a quiet aww before tapping a quick reply. God, Josh was a cutie, all concerned for him. Like he hadn’t owned Brendon earlier.

T: i’m chill dude

T: i got pizza!

Tyler copied the emojis Josh had sent earlier, resting his phone on the table to fold his slice of pizza in half before taking another bite. He watched the dots symboling Josh was typing until his new message came in.

Joshie: yay!

Tyler paused his chewing and waited for another message, started to tap out one himself with greasy fingers before erasing it and giving Josh another minute to respond. After a solid two minutes of nothing, he gave in. He knew Josh better than that. Something was bothering his baby.

Josh responded a short moment later, and Tyler was at least grateful for that.

Joshie: just..

Joshie: r u sure ur ok?? Im sorry abt bren he’s just messing, he sounds meaner than he is

Tyler let out a quiet sigh and maybe even a quick eye roll. Stupid Brendon again. Honestly, Tyler was just getting tired of hearing about him at this point.

T: im pretty sure he’s just mean

Joshie: :( so ur not ok?

Aw, fuck, he’d made him sad. Tyler hated that, hated when he was the cause of Josh’s mood dipping. Josh was like the sunshine, he shouldn’t ever be sad, it didn’t suit him, he was too, too...too sweet to be sad, too pure. Or something. Don’t talk to him about it, Tyler wasn’t proud of being mushy, okay.

T: no i am rily

Joshie: u sure

Typical puppy Josh. Tyler started to grin again. Wow, his boyfriend was cute. He was pretty lucky, wasn’t he? What a cutie.

T: YES bby stop worrying ur worse than my mom
Josh replied with a frowny face and-

Joshie: i guess u just need xtra looking after

Tyler almost snorted out loud. Suuuuuuure. He was the one who needed looking after. Sure.

T: nope

T: worrywart

Tyler started grinning again, couldn’t help himself, smiling down at his phone while all alone at his table in the corner of the lunch room like an idiot. He didn’t even mind too much right then; he’d gotten his pizza after all and was texting Josh. What more could he want, really? He peeked over his shoulder as casually as he could, hoping to share a quick, secret smile with his boyfriend whom he loved- but Josh’s spot at his own overcrowded table was vacant. Well, it was vacant of Josh. Another cheerleader had reclaimed the seat. Tyler frowned, scanning the lunchroom for Josh’s faded blue hair. Mostly brown, it’s not even blue anymore. Blueish, maybe. Barely. We gotta dye it again, maybe he’ll let me pick the color!? Oh, fuck, I can’t wait-

Tyler sent another quick text with one hand asking Josh where he was, while still keeping his eyes peeled for him. Josh loved lunch, he didn’t usually leave early, Tyler wondered where he could have...could this have anything to do with Mikey and Pete? What if they- oh, God, Pete hated Josh, too, what if he was...Tyler didn’t know exactly, but damn, did his sense of possessiveness skyrocket at the worries intruding in his head. He didn’t even know what it was he suddenly was so worried about, all Tyler knew was that no one messed with his baby and got away with it. Fucking no one.

Tyler was just about spazzing out of his seat when his phone beeped at him again, and he snatched it up so quickly he nearly knocked his lunch tray to the floor. Wow, imagine losing Josh and my pizza. My life would be legit over.

Joshie: outside

Tyler glared at the innocent, simple reply, feeling very much like he deserved more of an explanation than that. Josh had nearly given him a heart attack, and the fucker thought he could just go and send a one word response? Lame.

T: why???

When in doubt, triple the punctuation. Tyler analyzed texts very professionally and knew all the ins and outs, in his own professional opinion. Josh couldn’t not answer his question when he had asked with three question marks.

Joshie: i got bored

Tyler looked up at the ceiling and let out a short sigh. That boy, honestly.

T: sure

Joshie: i did

Tyler rolled his eyes again. The dummy.

T: out back?

Joshie: yeah
Tyler turned his phone off and shoved it in his pocket, swung his backpack onto his shoulder, and abandoned the lunch tray to carry his pizza on its paper plate instead, darting across the room as quickly as he could without pitching himself (and the pizza! God, no!) facefirst onto the floor. Brendon called something after him as he passed their table, and he could hear several girls from the cheer team giggling, but he ignored them in favor of getting out of there at breakneck speed instead. He’d have time to show Urie and all those other assholes up later. Right now- Josh.

Tyler glanced at the time on his phone as he scurried down the halls; ten minutes left of their lunch period before Coach would be calling for the team on the loudspeakers to make their way to the gym for a run through of things before they headed out for Akron. He and Josh still had time.

He reached the end of the hall, the nose of his mom’s minivan visible far out in the empty parking lot through the two glass doors, and he pushed through the middle of them, stepping out onto the back stoop. His eyes immediately looked for Josh, and he saw him-

-hunched over, sitting on the curb, and Tyler’s heart lurched into his throat. For whatever reason, his mind jumped back to the time he had seen Josh in the hallway during class having a panic attack, and with what went down inside only a short while before...Tyler felt panic rising in his own chest.

“Josh! Oh, my God, are you okay?” Tyler nearly dropped his plate as he dove for Josh, kneeling next to him and grabbing at his shoulder with his free hand.

Josh yelped, surprise evident in his voice as he laughed once. “Jesus, Ty, you scared me.”

“Are you okay?” Tyler pressed, scanning Josh’s face, staring into his eyes like he could read behind Josh’s words.

Josh gave him a funny look and replied slowly. “Yes, I’m fine...are you?”

“What?”

“What?”

“What are you- I thought you were...what were you....” Tyler let his voice trail off and glanced around. “What were you...?”

Josh blinked once and said, “I was...tying my shoelace. Is...that okay?”

Tyler almost felt like laughing, but it only came out as a strangled huff. He settled a little more casually onto the curb next to Josh, steadying his paper plate in his lap.

“Yeah, that’s okay,” he said after a moment, his heartbeat still trying to slow down to a normal pace. God, he was pent-up today. “I just thought...I don’t know. It’s nothing.”

Josh was still looking at him funny, head cocked to the side, and Tyler glanced away as soon as he met Josh’s eyes. He rambled, “It’s just, y’know, you were all...leaning forward like you were...I thought maybe you were kind of just...I don’t know...freaking out? A bit? I was worried.”

Josh’s eyes softened immediately, and Tyler could feel his face turning red under the attention.
“What?” he mumbled, irritated. “Stop looking at me like that. Joshua, I said stop.”

Thankfully- Tyler could deal with humor much better than he could unwanted emotional intensity, thanks- Josh smirked lightly at him, though his eyes were still warm on Tyler’s skin.

“I heard you,” Josh said, and Tyler smacked at his arm, and Josh laughed, and Tyler’s heart felt all excited.

The thought that it would be so, so easy to just say those three words danced tauntingly across Tyler’s mind, and he shoved a bite of pizza in his mouth to temporarily dislodge the idea. He couldn’t, he knew that. For Josh’s sake. What Ashley had said earlier that morning passed fleetingly into his consciousness as well, but Tyler mentally parkoured the hell away from that, too. He didn’t wanna think about anything outside of him and Josh, right there, right now. Everything else could wait, good and bad.

Tyler heard Josh giggle, and he peaked over at him, mouth full, as Josh reached out a hand to pinch at his cheek. “You’re cute,” he said, and Tyler wanted to die. Josh thought he was cute!? No way was he this fucking lucky, man! No way.

Tyler only smiled smugly at Josh and tilted his head as cutely as he could- and judging by the widening grin on Josh’s face, it was working.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Josh said, his voice affectionate and warm and, oh, god, Tyler was a goner. Josh turned a bit to face him, stretching out a leg and tangling it in between Tyler’s own, and Tyler shifted to accommodate it, his heart bursting. Josh added, “I wish we could sit together during lunch. In classes, too.”

Tyler waved his half-gone slice of pizza in Josh’s face, bumping his nose and getting a dot of red sauce on the tip of it. “We are sitting together for lunch,” Tyler told him, eyeing Josh’s nose. They were safe enough out there, out back behind the building and out of sight of the doors. Mostly everyone was still in the cafeteria right then anyways.

Josh looked cross eyed at his nose before squinting moodily at Tyler, and Tyler felt like his face was bursting with how big he was smiling. He leaned a few inches closer and nipped gently at Josh’s nose, tongue darting out to lick off the sauce, and Josh started giggling, turning his head away, which only caused Tyler to start giggling, too. His boyfriend was so cute he wanted to scream!

“I- love you, Josh. “-love your nose, Josh.”

Josh squinted at him again, still smiling. “Okay, Tyler.”

“I do! Honest.”

“How come everything you say sounds like you’re trolling?”

“Not fair!” Tyler whined, holding out the R sound until Josh started laughing again. Tyler could spend all day making Josh laugh and it wouldn’t feel wasted. This was his favorite pastime. Mario Kart who?

"So why are you here? Tyler asked when they had both quieted down. "Uriel and the rest of them are all still inside."

Josh shrugged and looked away as if embarrassed. Tyler noticed a pink color forming on his
cheekbones. "Oh, y'know...I just needed some air. Some space, you know."

"Oh...." Tyler studied Josh for a minute. "Do you...want me to leave? I can-"

"No!" Josh interrupted, grabbing onto Tyler's arm, and Tyler couldn't help but to start smiling at him. "No...." Josh repeated, loosening his grip on Tyler's arm. "That's not what I meant. I don't need space from you."

Tyler smirked, but only the teeniest bit. "Oh, really?"

"Really."

"Why?"

"Because you're different, you know that."

Tyler looked down at his pizza to keep Josh from seeing just how big he was smiling; he didn't quite know how Josh would take that.

"So what about you? Why are you here?" Josh said. "I mean like, didn’t Mikey and, um...."

Josh furrowed his eyebrows, and Tyler rolled his eyes. "Gerard? And Frank?"

"Yeah, them." Josh looked up sheepishly at Tyler with a small smile. "Didn’t they say anything about you leaving?"

Tyler eyed Josh for a second before deciding to let him not knowing his friends' names- my only friends, gee, thanks - slide and shrugged one shoulder, pulling off a bit of crust and chewing on the end of it. "Nope."

"They didn’t say anything? Well...why not?"

"They weren’t there."

Josh paused. "Where were they?"

Tyler put the piece of crust in his mouth and mumbled around it, “Gerard ‘n’ Mikey’ve got some problem going on right now- I guess, I mean, I don’t know, no one tells me anything- so Gee got mad and left and wherever he goes Frank goes, too.”

Josh blinked a couple of times, staring in the general area of Tyler’s knee. “Oh.”

“Yeah, I know, right. And then- and then, get this, so it’s just me ‘n’ Mikey, right, and then Pete comes up to the table, and he’s all, I don’t know, he’s just being mean and stuff, nothing unusual, but then he’s all ‘yo, Mikey, let’s talk’ and so I’m obviously like ‘uh, no way, I don’t think so,’ ‘cuz this guy’s a dick, right, like obviously you know that, too, and like, Mikey’s only a junior, right, like I know he’s not my little brother or anything but sometimes it feels a little bit like that. So obviously I’m like ‘no way, dipshit’ and Pete’s all like ‘whatever’ but then Mikey goes with him? He’s all ‘it’s chill’ and he just like. Fucking goes with him like this isn’t a big deal. Like that’s a big deal, right, like. I don’t know. It was weird. But so far all of today’s been kind of weird- not like in a bad way, you know, just in a weird way. I don’t know, I don’t...it’s been fine, just...I’m probably just pumped for the game, y’know? Maybe- oh, hey, maybe that’s why Pete came over and...? Ugh, I don’t know, I’m just like...if something was going on with him and Mikes, like, Mikey’d tell me, I’m his best friend, like I don’t know why he wouldn’t tell me if Pete was bothering him or something or. I don’t know, man. I don’t think he’s hiding anything- well, I didn’t earlier, but now I’m not so sure. He’s
hard to read, I don’t know. So yeah. Mikey and Pete went off somewhere to talk-" Tyler waved air quotes in Josh’s face while still holding his slice of pizza- "—about something, and so it was just me at the table when I noticed you were gone, so. I wanted to come find you, I didn’t wanna sit alone at lunch anyways, that wouldn’t help my street cred at all. So I don’t know what’s going on with Gee and Mike- and Pete right now, but y’know. I’ll figure out later on, I’m betting, ‘cuz me and Mikey’ll most definitely sit together on the bus to Akron, y’know, so. I’ll get it out of him then, the whole story. The scoop. The tea. Ugh, bro, I’m so anxious for the game tonight- not just like in a bad way, in an excited anxious way, y’know, but like still anxious anxious, too, you know what I mean? Do you feel that? Like I’m excited as fuck and I’m gonna kick Urie’s ass, which will be so fun, ha, but like. I’m nervous, too. And tonight at the motel, I don’t...I don’t s’pose you ‘n’ me could be in the same room, huh? That probably wouldn’t work out...I just...games and school trips like this are fun and all, right, don’t get me wrong, but. Like, I miss you, J, like...I just wanna...I just want the next time you can sleep over at my house to be here now. That was so fun, last night was so fun, wasn’t it, Josh?”

Josh was still looking down at Tyler’s knee with a blank expression on his face, but when Tyler looked over at him, Josh looked up to meet his eyes.

“\textit{Oh, um...yeah,}” Josh said, jumping a little. “\textit{Last night was so fun, dude, you’re right.}”

Josh was smiling sheepishly again, and Tyler squinted at him. “Am I talking too much? I feel like I’m talking too much.”

Josh shook his head. “No, you’re not talking too much.”

Tyler gave Josh what he hoped was his cutest smug smile. “Okay. Thanks.”

Josh’s face lit up with a grin, and Tyler knew again that it was working. Josh added, “I love to listen to you talk. I’m \textit{really} glad you’re here, Ty.”

“Me, too.”

Those three words crept up inside Tyler’s throat, and they felt alarmingly easier and easier to say with every passing second. He’d have to work on that- he couldn’t afford any slip ups.

“I love that you’re glad I’m here, Josh.”

Josh’s replying smile felt like sunshine, rays warming Tyler’s skin, and in that moment Tyler’s heart was so, \textit{so} full, in spite of all the words he was saying and in spite of the three he couldn’t.

\textit{Chapter End Notes}

\textit{i feel like i’m always saying this but good stuff is cominggggg yall ;(”))) <333333 i love you and oH MY GOD SKDKSKKSKS JIM DUN WOULD GIVE U SO MANY PUPPY KISSES AKDKKSKS HE LOVES U TOO}
baby, give me a break

Chapter Notes

HEY BABIES i'm back, i'm soweet it took so long D': despite this unpromising start i SWEAR i have a 2019 goal to get a hELLUVA LOTTA CHAPTAHS OUT real heckin soon for u guys! a LOT.....of good....GOOD.......stuff is gonna be going DOWN reaaaaaaal soon!!!!! i can't wait omg!!!!!!!! anyways- this chapt was gonna be longer but since it's been so long since an update i decided to go ahead and post what i've got and i'll just post the NEXT chapter sooner hopefully, so i hope none of u are disappointed w this one D:

chapt title from patd Time to Dance!!!! a bop

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When the bell sounded above them signaling the end of lunch break, Tyler and Josh startled apart as if someone had suddenly walked out on them sitting together on the curb, legs tangled and giggling quietly together. Josh stood up and tripped on Tyler's leg in the process, and Tyler started laughing; Josh only glared down at him halfheartedly.

“Dude, not funny. What if I broke my leg again? Then it would be your fault.”

Tyler stopped laughing and shot Josh a pout bordering on a glare of his own. In Josh’s defense (to which Tyler didn’t think he’d ever not attest, no matter the circumstance) Josh did look immediately regretful, and he fidgeted for a moment before holding a hand out to Tyler.

“Sorry, babe, didn’t mean it….” A small and bashful smile played on Josh’s mouth, and Tyler only hesitated a moment before rolling his eyes and letting it go, grabbing onto Josh’s hand and letting his boyfriend pull him to his feet.

“I'm gonna pretend you didn’t say that, Joshua,” Tyler snipped, and Josh gave him his puppy eyes. God, Tyler loved Josh’s puppy eyes. He tugged his hand away from Josh’s, because if he didn’t he’d give in one hundred and ten percent without even putting up a fight. And that was totally embarrassing and not at all acceptable. No way.

“I said sorry,” Josh mumbled as Tyler turned away towards the back door to hide his smirk. He dumped his paper plate and a snippet of burnt crust into the trashcan before turning back to face Josh, crossing his arms, ready to make a sarcastic quip and lead Josh on a bit longer before tackling him in a bear hug. And maybe initiating a tickle fight.

Except that when Tyler saw Josh’s face, Josh looked like he was about to cry, and Tyler’s heart jumped in his rib cage.

“Aw, Joshe, love, I was kidding, I was just kidding,” Tyler said in a rush, skipping to the last part of his plan and throwing his arms around Josh’s neck. Josh stood rigidly, and Tyler rocked the both of them to either side a couple of times, cooing at him and only half joking, until he felt Josh’s body loosen up a bit and his hands settle on his waist.

“Sorry I’m mean, Joshe,” Tyler mumbled into Josh’s neck, and as Josh started to protest that Tyler
wasn’t mean- as Tyler knew he would- Tyler stuck his tongue in Josh’s ear, and Josh let out a shriek louder than the bell had just been.

“Ty- ler! You fucking douche, God, I hate you-”

Tyler doubled over with delighted giggling as Josh shoved him away, though Tyler did note quite smugly that Josh’s hands lingered on his hips as he did so.

“I hate you,” Josh repeated, pouting.

Tyler’s laughter nearly drowned him out. “No, you don’t,” he managed to croak out in between chortles.

Josh crossed his arms in a protective manner over his chest and squinted his eyes at Tyler. “Yes, I do.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Do, too.”

“Do not.”

“I fucking do, Ty-ler.”

“Well, then I hate you, too. Asshole.”

“Bitch baby.”

“Dickhead.”

“I hate you-”

“Well, I hate you more, Josh- ew-uh.”

“I hate you more.”

“I hate you most-

“Wait, what are we arguing about?” Josh furrowed his eyebrows, and Tyler started giggling again, slipping a step closer to Josh and sneaking his arms around Josh’s waist.

“I don’t know, but you started it,” he said, and nuzzled his nose into Josh’s neck. He could feel Josh’s curls brush against his forehead, and- wow, Tyler loved him! He loved this guy. He loved him so, so, so much-

“Are you smelling me?” Josh interrupted Tyler’s thoughts, and Tyler smiled against Josh’s skin.

“Yes. You smell good.”

“Why are you-”

“You smell like...hey, I think you smell like me, dude. Probably ‘cuz I came on you last night-”

“Ty-ler,” Josh gaped and shoved Tyler away again, and once again Tyler dissolved into giggles. “You can’t just say stuff like that, dude! I seriously doubt if you even have a filter-”

Tyler advanced on Josh again, smile stretched across his face. Josh backed into the school’s wall.
behind him, and Tyler snatched at Josh’s hands, pinning them gently against the brick and leaning in to brush his nose against Josh’s cheek.

“But you love it, J,” he sang, pressing a soft kiss to Josh’s cheek, then the corner of his mouth. “You love it….”

Tyler placed a dry kiss to Josh’s bottom lip and paused, his own words catching up with him—God, he couldn’t even talk fucking normally anymore without freaking out about every other word he said. Who’d have thought the word love was so readily used in everyday conversation. It’s not a big deal, bro, you gotta chill. Josh didn’t even notice, there’s nothing to notice…play it cool, play it cool, Ty, c’mon, don’t let….

Tyler peeked up at Josh’s eyes—Josh was staring at him, dazed, soft brown, eyelashes fluttering, and Tyler kept eye contact for as long as he could as he went in for another lingering peck on Josh’s mouth. Josh didn’t react for a minute, only blinked softly at Tyler, and then Tyler had to take a steadying breath, because his heart did that heavy skipping-a-beat thing that felt like an actual heart attack or something—his actual heart organ was giving out, wow, love is dangerous—and he closed his eyes, mouthing more persistently at Josh’s lips, tongue slipping out and wetting the kiss, hands still curled around Josh’s wrists, raising both of their hands higher up against the wall on either side of Josh’s chest, pressed in harder on his wrists and in his mouth, and Josh was moving, tongue against Tyler’s lips and against Tyler’s tongue and in Tyler’s mouth, and Tyler felt Josh’s eyelashes fluttering against his heated cheekbones, and he could feel the warmth of Josh’s breath on his skin, and he could feel Josh’s fingers stroking at his hands holding him down, and he could hear the wet, low noises coming from Josh, from him, from them, and he could feel Josh’s entire body against his, and Tyler pressed a knee between Josh’s legs, gently at first, knee hitting the wall, fingers tightening against Tyler’s lips and against Tyler’s tongue and in Tyler’s mouth, and Josh was moving, tongue against Tyler’s lips and against Tyler’s tongue and in Tyler’s mouth, and Tyler felt Josh’s eyelashes fluttering against his heated cheekbones, and he could feel the warmth of Josh’s breath on his skin, and he could feel Josh’s fingers stroking at his hands holding him down, and he could hear the wet, low noises coming from Josh, from him, from them, and he could feel Josh’s entire body against his, and Tyler pressed a knee between Josh’s legs, gently at first, knee hitting the wall, fingers tightening around Josh, Tyler could feel his pulse, Tyler loved him, Tyler loved him, Tyler was never going to let Josh go—

The back door thumped open, the sound piercing through the little warm bubble Tyler and Josh had been safe in, had been together in, and suddenly Josh was slipping away from Tyler, Tyler was backing away, their eyes were still focused on each other, panting and red lips and heated skin still filling the space growing between them as they moved apart.

The door clanged shut, and Tyler zoned back into the present pretty quickly at the loud sound, panic and paranoia hitting him full in the chest until he saw who it was.

Jordan dashed towards the two of them, oblivious—thank God, thank fuck—and started jumping around Tyler like an excited puppy. At least it was only Jordan and not someone else a little more…observant than he was. Tyler was positive that had it been anyone else they would have taken one look at the state both he and Josh were in and would have known everything instantly.

As it was, Jordan barely even noticed his brother was there at all, opting instead to tell Tyler that Coach had sent him to find him (and you, too, Josh) because it was time to head out for Akron, and no one player on this team was important enough to not leave without if they weren’t in the changing rooms in exactly three minutes, no more. Josh was glaring at Jordan, and Tyler was staring at Josh over Jordan’s head with hearts in his eyes, he was sure, loving Josh more and more with each passing second. God, what was he thinking? He didn’t have time for this, they didn’t have time for this. They had a game, and a big one, too. He had to get his head in the game and away from Josh.

Maybe his head could forget, but Tyler anticipated a hell of a time trying to get his heart in on this.

Jordan started tugging on Tyler’s arm, pulling his hoodie half off his chest in the process. Tyler stumbled and let out a half laugh in amused shock as he let Jordan drag him towards the door; he shrugged one shoulder at Josh as they passed.
already running over the strategy for tonight! You’re point guard obviously- stupid Pete was in there arguing with the coach about it, but Coach told him off, you shoulda been there! He started in on Josh, too- Pete, not Coach Anderson- but then Brendon got mad, and then I said-"

“What did you say?” Josh cut in, sounding suspicious, sounding worried. He yanked Jordan’s hand off of Tyler, and Tyler felt his cheeks pinkening as he struggled to hide his smirk. So his boyfriend was a protective boyfriend, aw, heck, isn’t that cute-

Jordan glared at Josh. “I’m not talking to you, I was talking to Tyler-”

“Tyler doesn’t care, leave him alone,” Josh ordered.

“He does too care! Don’t you care, Tyler?”

“I-” Tyler started.

“Well, I’m telling you to leave,” Josh interrupted, and Tyler put a hand to his face to hide his bemused grin. He wouldn’t be surprised if it pissed off both Dun kids right then.

Jordan squinted at his older brother and whined, “That’s not fair, why do you get to hang out with him? Coach told me to come and-”

“Why do you laugh at everything? You have a problem, Ty, you know that, right?” Josh sounded a little put out, and it sounded more than a little adorable to Tyler.

“Why are you so stressed, chill out, man!” Tyler giggled, leaning forward and pressing a wet kiss to Josh’s cheek. Josh held him close by sneaking his hands into Tyler’s hoodie pockets, and Tyler didn’t half mind. He blinked through his eyelashes at Josh as innocently as he could manage, waiting for Josh to crack.

Josh looked tempted, Tyler noted with pride, and his eyes darted down to Tyler’s lips before settling back on his eyes. “You look so sneaky,” he told him, and Tyler coughed once.

“A small smile tugged on Josh’s mouth, and Tyler pressed another kiss to it.

“Jesus, you’re pretty.” Tyler hadn’t meant to say it, but there it was all the same. Had he ever called Josh pretty before? Or handsome, or beautiful, or anything? Had he ever told him that? Tyler couldn’t remember, but even if he had, he hadn’t told Josh enough, of that he was sure. How could he ever tell Josh that enough? Impossible. He’d have to be bugging him constantly about it until they were both eighty to get anywhere near telling him that enough. Tyler really, really loved him. He bet Josh would be a handsome eighty year old, too. And if that wasn’t real love then Tyler didn’t know what was.

Josh was blushing, and Tyler perked up at that. He made Josh blush! Josh must really like him! Like
legit like him. Which yes, thanks, Tyler knew was a ridiculous things to be amazed about still, considering they were boyfriends, considering last night - but Tyler couldn’t help it. No one had ever liked him like this before, and Tyler had never loved someone like this. Tyler wanted to tell him so fucking bad. But Josh looked down just then, and Tyler swallowed the confession back down, too.

“I don’t… I don’t know if I’ve ever, y’know… said that… said it before, I mean, but. I mean it. Josh?”

“Hm?” Josh peeked up through his eyelashes at Tyler, and Tyler’s heart melted at the warm brown color of his eyes.

“You’re still blushing,” Tyler said on accident, and Josh blushed even harder, looking away and taking his hands back from Tyler’s pockets.

“No, wait, that’s not what I meant to say, what I meant to say was, was-” Tyler grabbed at Josh’s hands, not wanting him to go. God, why did it always feel like Josh was going? Why did he always have to leave. It wasn’t fucking fair.

“What I meant was you’re the handsomest dude I know. Deadass, the handsomest.” Tyler beamed at Josh, at the shade of red on his cheeks getting impossibly darker still. Josh was so frigging cute, tomato colored or not, and Tyler wanted to kiss him.

“Tyler-” Josh started, sounding embarrassed, sounding adorable, but Tyler rushed on.

“You are. Legit, dude. I really- I really, really love your face, Josh. Joshie. You’re the hottest guy ever-”

“Tyler-”

“…besides me, obviously. I’m a bombshell.”

Josh scoffed at him, mouth hanging open, and Tyler darted forward to bump his nose against Josh’s before dropping his hands (which took a lot more effort than Tyler had bargained on) and slipping past him to the door, hauling it open and scanning the empty hall inside.

“Hurry up, Joshie, if we’re late we’ll be off the team again for good this time and then it’ll be your fault.”

Josh was still gaping. “Ty- ler-”

Tyler smirked at him. Who would’ve guessed only a handful of months ago that just hearing Josh say his name would give Tyler such a thrill? Tyler kind of loved his life right then.

“C’mon, cutie, I’ll race you! Last one there bottoms.”

“What did you just fucking-”

Tyler took off down the hall before Josh could get started, heart melting a little more a moment later as he heard Josh’s footsteps behind him.

Tyler skid to a stop outside the gym door and was turning around to face Josh when Josh skid into him, the two of them colliding with each other and the closed doors in turn, giggles overtaking them.

“Dude, dude, stop, we gotta stop, they’re waiting for us already,” Tyler snickered, covering Josh’s mouth with one hand when he didn’t quiet down fast enough. Josh nipped at his pinkie and Tyler
shrieked, snatching his hand back, and they both started laughing again.

“Drama queen,” Josh muttered, smiling. Tyler raised an eyebrow at him.

“Call me that one more time and I’m never kissing you again.”

Josh gave Tyler his puppy eyes and pouted, and it took all of Tyler’s willpower to not lunge for him right then and there, instead rolling his eyes and turning to haul open the door and shuffle into the empty gym, Josh close behind him.

From the sound of it, the entire team was already in the changing rooms. What time was it anyway? They weren’t that late.

“So, um…” Tyler stopped a couple paces away from the door, muted voices coming from behind it. He suddenly felt unsure, and incredibly alone. “Should we, um…how should we…?”

Josh’s hand landed warmly on his shoulder and Tyler felt so relieved at the touch that he thought maybe he could cry. God forbid. He peeked over at Josh, hoping desperately he didn’t look as panicked as he felt at the looming prospect of facing the team in its entirety, on his own. Again.

If Josh knew he was freaking out a little or knew he was embarrassed about it, he didn’t show it- at least not in a way that made Tyler feel small about it. Wow, Tyler loved that guy. What a good guy. Josh rubbed his thumb into Tyler’s shoulder and smiled softly at him.

“It’ll be okay. Want me to go first?”

“Wha- and leave me out here alone? No way!” Tyler tried not to sound too alarmed. He probably failed.

Josh furrowed his eyebrows. He looked torn. “I...you wanna go first?”

Tyler frowned. “And face all of them by myself without you there? That sucks, too.”

Josh dropped his hand from Tyler’s shoulder. “Those are the only two options, Tyler,” he said slowly.

“They both suck,” Tyler informed him.

“Well, which sucks less?”

“Well, they both suck less than you do right now.”

“Babe, c’mon-”

“No, sorry, sorry, I didn’t mean that, it’s...it’s not you, it’s me, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean-”

“No, it’s okay-”

“Let me finish, Josh!”

“Sorry-”

The changing room door swung open and nearly smacked Tyler in the face. He stumbled backwards into Josh before righting himself, the two of them taking a cautionary step apart at the same time as Jordan appeared from around the door.
“Oh, there you guys are! I was just coming to look for you again! What’s taking so long, Coach is getting pissed-”

“Jordan, shut up-” Josh started, but Tyler interrupted him.

“No, wait, I’ll go in with Jordan, ‘kay, J? That works, right?”

Josh was glaring at his little brother over Tyler’s shoulder, and Tyler reached out to prod at Josh’s arm. Josh’s gaze softened when he met Tyler’s eyes, and under different circumstances Tyler would’ve crowed about it, about how Josh was wrapped around his little finger- but now wasn’t the time. Jordan was already beaming smugly, tugging on Tyler’s arm and dragging him towards the changing rooms. Tyler tossed Josh a grin and shrugged one shoulder.

Easier to face the entire team with at least one Dun by his side, even if it wasn’t his Dun of choice. Oh, well. It was the best solution Tyler could think of right then for his current dilemma. And, if Tyler was being completely honest, he was too thrilled at seeing Josh get minorly flustered over Jordan paying attention to him to not go with Jordan. Josh was jealous, and Tyler was sorta living for it.

But then Josh was gone and Tyler found himself facing a changing room full of archenemies.

Well, okay, not arch enemies exactly. Not all of them. Maybe just two. But still. Tyler felt his point held some validity nonetheless.

Coach turned around mid-sentence and whomped Tyler so hard on the shoulder that he collided with a locker. Brendon snickered, and Tyler shot him a glare, as Coach yelled (why is he yelling? Calm down, dude, it’s just a ga-) “And Joseph here! Is a pro at stealing baskets, so you guys let him do the fancy work, ‘kay?”

Brendon’s snickering turned to a glare so fast that Tyler was honestly impressed. If it weren’t for Coach’s hand still on his shoulder he would have hightailed it to the corner of the room Jordan had jogged off to, just for a little rapport.

“-just like in practice this week, you guys got that? Wentz, I swear to God, if you get so much as one foul this game, you’re getting detention, is that clear? And- Urie, you’re the best at passing, so stick to that, pass to Tyler when you can. Weekes, keep him clear so Tyler can sneak a basket, alright? Akron’s got some new players I hear, and the competition’s gonna be close, so I need you guys working together, ‘kay?”

Tyler focused his eyes on the floor, his face red, feeling the glares of at least two certain players burning into his skin. Coach’s speech was not doing his social life any favors right now at all. At least he was almost over, the worst of it was already done-

“And Joseph, you gotta sneak a basket when you can, even if it’s a risky shot, I want you to take it, remember that. You’re the best point we’ve had on this team in five years, if anyone can call a risky shot, it’s you. There’s scouts at this game, guys, remember that! We need to get a strong lead in the first half if we wanna beat Akron. Tyler, that means you gotta be on your toes, ‘kay? Guys?”

Everyone murmured their acknowledgement, and Tyler tried to muffle his groan. God, fucking Brendon was giving him a fucking sunburn right now, he could feel it. Coach clapped him on the back again and sent Tyler forward a step, and Tyler took the opportunity to slip past Brendon as quickly as he could to his locker. Not that he really felt all that safe with his back to Urie either, Coach Anderson present or not. God, where was Josh when he really, really wanted- really, really needed him around-
“DUN, you’re late, do you want to be off the team? ‘Cause that can be arranged, even for you. I promise-”

“Sorry, Coach, sorry, I, um…” Josh was in the doorway rubbing at an elbow, and Tyler could feel the tension easing in his shoulders. It had been all of…three minutes? Five? And he missed Josh already. Dammit, this was gonna be a long fucking day.

“I don’t have time for your excuses, get your gear together, we need to head out in five minutes, max,” Coach said. “I was just telling the team to stick to what we’ve been working on this week; Weekes is going to keep the basket open for you and Joseph while Urie passes to you guys, okay? No funny business, Dun, let Joseph make the fancy shots, but I need the both of you to focus on scoring as many points as you can in the first half, I need you two to work together-”

Tyler would have made eyes across the changing room at Josh if not for the presence of literally every other player. Brendon was pointedly ignoring him just then, and Tyler felt himself growing uneasy over the fact.

Coach still wasn’t finished. “-in practice, Josh, and you two have a chemistry that’s always great to see in sports, you both have different strong points that the other can maximize really well, if you guys have each other’s backs, got it? Dun, Joseph? You guys in?”

As if Tyler didn’t already have a permanent everyone-is-staring-at-me-I-can-tell-and-I-hate-them-for-it complex, he would have sworn on the Bible right then that he could feel the other players’ stares at Coach’s words. And unfortunately, as if Coach Anderson didn’t always pose rhetorical questions, he too was staring across the room at Tyler, hands on his hips, apparently waiting for an answer. Tyler could feel his cheeks heating up.

“Uh, um…” Tyler hated his voice. God, why did Josh like him again? “Yeah, um…I’m in.” His words were quiet in the cold room, especially compared to Coach’s booming voice a moment earlier, but it still felt too loud in Tyler’s opinion. His cheeks got hotter and the pressure of so many gazes forced his head down and he stared at Josh’s shoes.

Coach beamed and clapped a hand on Josh’s back. Josh didn’t jolt forward nearly as far as Tyler had, Tyler noted distastefully. The jerk. Cute though.

“Josh?” Coach prompted, and Tyler suppressed a sigh as everyone turned to look at Josh. Did the coach really have to have an answer from both of them, what the hell, it wasn’t that big of a thing-

Josh laughed once like he was embarrassed- he was, Tyler could tell, his neck was turning red- and shrugged a shoulder, which was apparently enough of a reply for the coach, who clapped him once more the back before turning to bark out some more orders to the team as whole.

Tyler’s heart sank a little. A shrug. A shrug? That was it? Even Tyler himself had managed a better response than that. Jordan beside him was busy rummaging in his locker, throwing his things into a bag, and Tyler knew he should get a move on collecting his own things, but he couldn’t stop staring at Josh. Coach had asked them if they were both in. Tyler was in, he had said so...wasn’t Josh? Tyler wanted to be mad at him, but he was more mad at himself right then, at his own stupid brain for turning this into something else other than just basketball.

Coach was yelling at Brendon and Dallon about something, his back to Tyler and Josh, and Josh peeked up from the floor, eyes meeting Tyler’s. Josh smiled through a longish curl, soft and almost shy and almost apologetic, and Tyler wondered if he maybe knew what he had been thinking. God, was he that obvious? He was too clingy, he was too needy, Josh would never love him back if Tyler kept this up. He took a steadying breath, torn between smiling back or rolling his eyes. He ended up
“Alright then, gang! Five minutes, no more, let’s go!” Coach Anderson’s voice boomed throughout the changing rooms once more. “I’m gonna pull the bus up to the back door, and I’m not waiting for anybody, you guys got that? None of you lot are too good to be left behind if you decide messing around is more important than being on time. The cheer team is riding with us- and I want no funny business during the ride, do you understand? I will have one eye in the rearview mirror at all times and I will be handing out demerits to the first guy who decides to get smart. Am I making myself clear?”

Tyler met Josh’s eye again and smirked, turning his back to dig through his locker as most of the team responded, and the coach marched from the room, reminding them all again- as if they hadn’t heard the first ten times- that the Worthington bus was leaving in five short minutes, regardless.

“What’s your favorite team?”

Tyler blinked and pulled back from his locker; he had forgotten Jordan was there. Funny- Tyler didn’t remember Jordan’s locker being right next to his, either.

“What?” Tyler grimaced at himself for being so awkward socially. It was just Josh’s dumb little brother, but for whatever reason, Tyler was still embarrassed.

“Your favorite team! Who’s your favorite team?” Jordan was bouncing lightly in place in front of his open locker, an impressive amount of random objects stuffed inside, balanced precariously on top of a pile of clothes. Tyler grimaced again. Even he didn’t have that many dirty shorts in his locker- and he had accidentally accumulated a small pile of P.E. clothes he needed to take home and wash, too.

“Oh, um….” Tyler glanced over his shoulder to Josh, a force of habit, but he wasn’t looking just then; he was talking to Brendon. Fucking gag. “Cleveland Cavaliers. I mean, who else?”

“Sick!” Jordan was absolutely beaming. “I mean, mine, too! Who’s your favorite player?”

Tyler stopped fidgeting and thought for a moment. “Kyrie Irving… but Kevin Love is a wizard at rebounds, you gotta love that. And then of course you can’t not love LeBron James. Oh, but- I remember when I was just a kid, my parents would always watch the games and I would, too, right, and Hot Rod Williams was always insane. I love him, too. Also-”

Tyler stopped when he noticed Jordan staring at him with a glazed look on his face. His cheeks instantly started to redden.

“Wh-…what?”

“Dude,” Jordan said, and his voice sounded absolutely identical to Josh’s. “You are so cool.”

Tyler blushed harder, embarrassed at having rambled, embarrassed at Jordan’s attention. “Oh, um…I don’t know-”

“You are, dude, really! All the kids talk about you, even the freshmen! You’re the best player this team has had, like, in legit ever. I can’t believe I get to be on the team with you!”

Tyler didn’t know what to say, but thankfully Jordan kept talking, turning back to his locker- which Tyler was incredibly grateful for, even if he did keep glancing over at Tyler with the same energetic light in his eye every other word- and yanked out a pair of earbuds, the end of the cord whacking Tyler across the chest. Jordan didn’t notice.
“-thought you were mean, like kind of full of yourself, because Josh had heard from Brendon who had heard from Pete who had heard from...from someone, I don’t know who, but they all said you were like, a real dick, so like, I mean I didn’t care ‘cuz I wasn’t gonna be on the team anyways- I mean, I was trying out and everything and I wanted to be, but freshmen hardly like ever get on the team, and like my friends John and Nathan and Aaron all tried out and like whenever we play a game just us three, John always wins so like when I got on the team and he didn’t I totally flipped! Haha, he’s still pissed about that!”

Jordan took a moment to breathe and struggled comically to untangle his earbuds, smacking Tyler’s arm again with a headphone before continuing.

“Yeah... oh, but yeah, like I was all worried a bit that you’d be weird, like totally not chill and shit, but then like you and Josh were hanging out and I was like totally surprised ‘cuz even more than I thought that you weren’t chill, I thought you and Josh were really, really not chill, ‘cuz like I don’t know why but Josh seemed to like legit really hate you, but then like you guys were hanging out, so? You turned out to be not not chill, you get me? Like you’re really cool! And it’s even more cool ‘cuz you and Josh are like, friend friends! Like- dude, I told my friends at lunch today that I drove to school with you, and they legit didn’t believe me, they still don’t really, but I told them that I did too because you and Josh are like best friends-”

“You- oh, you, um…” Tyler was starting to understand part of why Josh had been hesitant that morning to let Jordan ride with them. “You told them that…?”

“Yeah! They still don’t believe me, I don’t get it. But whatever, they’re losers anyways. They’re not the ones on the team, they’re not the ones with the brother who’s best friends with the future player of the Cavs! Hey, can I sit next to you on the bus?”

Before Tyler could answer, Mikey was tugging on Tyler’s elbow, wedging himself between him and Jordan. “Dude, sit by me on the bus, I can’t let...this guy won’t leave me alone.”

“What guy?” Tyler started to look over his shoulder in the direction that Mikey kept glancing in, but Mikey jerked on his arm and kept Tyler from looking.

“Don’t fucking look, Tyler, I swear to God.” Mikey sounded serious enough, so Tyler opted to humor him. “Well, dude, he totally just heard you-”

“Who? I don’t- do you mean Pete?”

Mikey hushed Tyler loudly, and Tyler rolled his eyes, making to turn around again. “Well, dude, he totally just heard you-”

“Don’t look, Tyler, I swear to God.” Mikey sounded serious enough, so Tyler opted to humor him. He’d rather not get Pete involved anyways. Involved with what, though, Tyler still didn’t know.

Coach’s muffled whistle sounded from out in the gymnasium, and Mikey made a beeline for the door before Tyler could say anything else. He tried not to, but he couldn’t help throwing a glance over his shoulder as he grabbed his bag from his locker. Pete was zipping up his hoodie and shooting daggers at Tyler, and Tyler quickly turned back to his own locker, blindly shoving a handful of things into his bag and throwing it over his shoulder, hoping Pete would just leave him alone and not create a scene. If he could just get to the bus, he’d be safe for a solid two hours. Probably three with traffic. None of the guys on the team would be willing to confront him with the coach around. The bus was definitely a safe place.

Tyler slammed his locker shut, turned around, and bumped into Jordan, who had apparently been hovering behind him the whole time.

“Dude, OMG, I have the same Adidas bag, look-”
“Yeah, that’s, um...cool, dude...we should hurry to the bus, why don’t you go ahead-”

Before Tyler could feel bad about brushing mini-Josh off, he noticed Pete in his peripheral vision heading in his direction, and he grabbed onto Jordan’s arm before he could dash away.

“No, wait, man, I- I’ll go with you,” Tyler stammered, feeling stupid for being scared- I’m not scared! I’m not, I’m just...well, Mikey didn’t wanna talk to him, so like...something’s probably up, I don’t wanna talk to him either...not until I figure out what’s going on...I’m not scared, okay, Jesus-

Jordan looked at Tyler with stars in his eyes, and Tyler would have been embarrassed and slightly annoyed at his sudden grasp on Tyler’s hoodie sleeve as he dragged him out of the changing rooms behind him, except that in that moment Tyler was too busy being grateful for the excuse to avoid Pete. He looked once more over his shoulder before he exited the room; Pete had disappeared around a corner of lockers, and Tyler let out a little sigh before his eyes inadvertently found Josh’s, lingering amongst his other friends. The look on his boyfriend’s face was priceless. Tyler snickered and stuck his tongue out at him before the door swung shut on Josh’s stunned, slightly jealous expression. The guy was such an idiot, and Tyler was so in love with him.

Chapter End Notes

next chapter will be LEGIT SOON YALL!!!!! i uhhhh LOVE YOU??????? leave a comment if u wantttt <333333333
Josh watched in jealous disbelief as his younger brother dragged Tyler from the changing rooms, the door clanging shut behind them. He should be the one by Tyler’s side, not stupid Jordan. Ugh, life was so unfair. Since when had they become so chummy anyways? Ugh. As annoyed as Josh was at his brother right then, a small part of him was glad to fixate on his annoyance rather than the impending sense of apprehension he felt lingering in the outskirts of his mind. Jordan was a talker—"as Ty’s probably figuring out right about now, ha, serves the fucker right! Aw...I love him...I miss him...." and he liked to brag, too. That combination, plus an overnight trip with not only the entire basketball team, but the entire cheer team as well, didn’t sound too promising to Josh just then.

“Dude, why the fuck is your bro hanging out with Joseph? Gross, haha,” Brendon laughed in Josh’s ear, zoning Josh back in to his present situation. “What losers- hey, can you believe Coach’s rant about you guys? You and Joseph, ugh. Who does he think you two are, LeBron and Irving or some shit? I swear to God I had a bet going with Ryan that he’d call you guys the ‘dynamic duo’ before he was done talking. If he ever does I’m gonna bust my fucking nuts- oh, shit, did you bring your phone charger? I totally forgot mine-”

“What are you yelling about, B?” Spencer commented, jogging up to Josh and resting an arm on his shoulder. “I can hear you from across the room.”

“Just Coach’s sissy speech, that’s all. Dragging my man Joshua’s good name through the mud with that stupid transfer kid. I can’t even remember his name,” Brendon snickered, turning to his locker to stuff some things into his bag. Spencer gave Josh a look, and Josh shook his head at him.

“Oh, well....” Spencer said, sounding cheery. “That’s tough.” Josh tried not to roll his eyes.

“Fuck yeah, it’s tough, this sucks so much. God, I hate that guy. Last year it was you and me out there kicking ass, Coach was yelling at us to make the shots-”

“Who, me?” Spencer joked, and Brendon turned around to give him a stony look.

“Sorry, Spence, Josh will forever be the Kyrie to my LeBron.”

“Why are you LeBron?” Josh asked, glad to joke around with his friends if it meant- hopefully-carefully and subtly guiding the conversation away from his sweet baby Tyler. Josh snickered to himself. He was gonna have to call Tyler that; he was going to absolutely die at the expression on his boyfriend’s face.
“Shut up,” Brendon said and punched him on the shoulder that Spencer wasn’t still leaning on. “That’s enough out of you, big guy.”

Josh and Spencer shared a smirk once Brendon’s back was turned again. The changing room doors clanging shut punctuated the end of their conversation as several more players left for the bus, and Spencer stepped away from Josh to shoulder his own bag.

“Hey, where are you guys sitting? I don’t wanna get stuck next to Pete, he’s mad as shit right now—”

“Josh is sitting with Jenna,” Brendon announced before Josh could reply. “I’m sitting with Ryan. Sorry, Spence, looks like you’re stuck sitting in the front of the bus with the rest of the losers. I’m sure Jordan and the transfer kid wouldn’t mind you sitting with them.”

Brendon cackled good-naturedly, and Spencer side eyed Josh. Josh gave him another warning look before speaking.

“You can sit with me, Spence, I don’t care.” Josh grabbed his own bag from the benches in the middle of the room and swung it over his shoulder. “C’mon, Coach is gonna lose his shit if we don’t—”

“Wait, what about Jen? Are you guys still mad?” Brendon looked at Josh with that look in his eyes that spelled nothing but mischief. And teasing. And probably some loud, inappropriate remarks made in front of the entire bus. And in front of Jenna. And in front of Tyler. Josh stuffed down his rising concern and suppressed a sigh.

“Bren, for real, we’re not mad, okay, can you please- just don’t—”

“A ha! So you guys did have a fight! What happened, dude, c’mon, you can tell daddy—”

“God, I told you not to call yourself that,” Josh grimaced as Spencer started to snicker. Brendon looked satisfied in an annoying sort of way.

“Allright, alright, dude, don’t get your panties in a twist, I’m just saying. I mean, honestly, J, on Valentine’s? How unromantic can you get—”

“Brendon,” Josh huffed.

“Ignore him, that’s what I do.” Spencer elbowed Josh in the side, and Brendon glared at the two of them.

“Since when have you two been fucking? Oh, is that why Jen dumped you, J? I’d have thought—”

Ryan idled up to Brendon’s side just then and slipped an arm around his waist. Josh was relieved to see him. “Babe, are you bullying your friends again? We’ve talked about this.”

Josh took the opportunity to slip out of the changing rooms, Spencer close behind him. Ryan was always a sure bet at distracting Brendon. And really, Josh couldn’t blame them- it was the exact same with him and Tyler. Only not so obvious. Dammit.

Sigh, Josh loved him. He wondered what Tyler was doing right then.

They were halfway across the gym when Spencer piped from Josh’s side. “So, uh...since Bren did mention it...is it annoying if I ask what’s up with you and Jen?”

Josh had been so preoccupied wondering about Tyler, and up until then Spencer had been so quiet,
he had forgotten his friend was with him. He tried not to sound too put out about the question.

“There’s nothing up with us, man. Brendon’s just talking.”

“Right...okay...well, she did seem a little mad at you today, like during lunch...and you guys weren’t at the dance-”

“We didn’t feel like going, that’s all.”

“...because-

“I don’t wanna talk about it, Spence,” Josh cut in, worry rising in him all over again the second the words left his mouth. Great, you idiot, you may as well have just told him outright you guys broke up, or at least that there is something up with you two. What if Jenna hears you saying nothing happened, that’ll piss her off big time. I need to-

“Right...okay, buddy, sorry...so...is it, uh, annoying then if I ask about Jordan hanging out with Tyler? Are you guys like, out now or something?”

It took Josh a hot couple of seconds to realize Spencer didn’t mean out out. God, he felt jittery- he took a deep breath to calm himself down a little and glanced over his shoulder before responding.

“Nah, we’re...it sucks, but nah, we don’t want people to really know, y’know? Not yet.”

Josh wasn’t looking at him, but he could tell that Spencer was nodding.

“Yeah, that scene at lunch was pretty far out,” Spencer said, and Josh groaned.

“Yeah...Bren can be...that was pretty mean.”

“Yeah, well, what’s new. Tyler was going off pretty hard, too. Gay shit? Dude, c’mon, that was hilarious.”

Josh actually cracked a smile and peeked over at Spencer. “It was, wasn’t’ it?”

They giggled good-naturedly for a moment, dragging their feet across the empty gym, the bus horn sounding from outside, muffled.

“Y’know, I think they’d actually dig each other if they gave it half a chance. Brendon an’ Ty, y’know,” Spencer said consideringly. Josh felt his stress levels rising again.

“Look, Spence, don’t say anything, okay? Don’t let on that you...just not yet, okay? Please? With Brendon and everything, feeling the way he does about...we’re just not ready for- Tyler and I, we’ve talked about it, and, and we just don’t think that-”

“Dude, chill out. It’s fine,” Spencer interrupted, and when Josh risked a look at his friend’s face, he was mildly surprised to see a small smirk there. Josh didn’t trust it at all- not a bit.

“What?” Josh realized only too late that his tone sounded way more defensive than he had any right to sound just then.

Spencer shrugged, still smirking, saying a bit too casually in Josh’s opinion, “Nothing, dude... so... why is your brother following him around though? Does he know you guys...?”

Josh shot a quick, defensive glare at Spencer before deciding that playing it cool was probably his best option. They were just friends, that’s all that Spencer knew. That was all. He tried taking deep
breathe again. “Yeah, he knows-”

“Well, fuck, bro, if Jordan knows, you might as well just tell the entire school.”

Josh grimaced again. “Shit. I was kinda worried about that, but I was kinda hoping maybe he’d...I don’t know….”

Spencer laughed once. “What, grow up in one afternoon? Dude, do you even know your brother?”

Josh didn’t say anything, and Spencer bumped his shoulder against Josh’s. “I mean, don’t sweat it, dude, it’ll be okay. Probably.”

Josh rolled his eyes. “Thanks, Spence, that’s so great to hear.”

“What’s so great to hear?” Brendon was suddenly at Josh’s other side, slinging an arm around Josh’s shoulders. “Spence’s offering to help ya out with your girl problems? Like he could, ha, gaaaaay-”

“I am not, Brendon, shut up,” Spencer huffed.

Brendon shrugged animatedly, somehow with one arm still around Josh. “Sucks for you, you’re missing out, man. Isn’t that right, Joshie?”

Josh felt his cheeks flushing red, even though there was no way for Brendon to know about him and...well, yeah. He remembered the comments Brendon had made earlier at lunch before the Tyler incident, however, and if you asked Josh, he’d rather not have one of the most humiliating experiences of his social and private life brought up in front of people again- on the same day, no less- if you don’t mind. God, Brendon could be such a motormouth, why do I like him again?

“I don’t know, babe, maybe Spencer’s got a point,” Ryan murmured thoughtfully from beside Brendon, and Josh grinned over at him as Brendon dropped his arm and spluttered indignantly at his boyfriend. Josh listened quietly to them bickering, the both of them half joking more than anything, and he missed Tyler so much, so suddenly, that he thought his chest was going to implode.

Ryan pecked a quick kiss to Brendon’s mouth and stopped him mid-complaint, and Spencer made a “grooooss, guys” comment, and Josh wondered if maybe Tyler was thinking about him right then, too. Did he miss him? Josh hoped more than anything that Tyler missed him, too. Fuck, it had only been ten minutes; Jesus, he needed help- no, he just needed his boyfriend. His best friend.

Dallon and Patrick were waiting by the back door, discussing something about the game, when Josh and the others idled up; the six of them had no more than pushed the door open when Coach was honking the bus horn at them, and Josh let his friends shove him along in their midst towards the bus and clambered up the steep steps, nearly tripping on his sports pack.

Josh felt himself growing shy once again as he entered the bus, all the girls from the cheer team scattered in different seats before him, so many eyes able to see him. Several of the girls who hung around Josh and his friends during lunch were gathered near the back, and he felt Jenna’s absence there glaringly; he eyed her not more than a yard away from him in one of the front rows, with the same girl she had been with at lunch earlier that day. She met his eyes briefly, blankly, before turning back to her friend. Josh felt his face growing warm, and he looked the other way as he slipped past her seat, just to be safe- but that was an equally bad decision, because Tyler was in the row opposite Jenna’s, was smirking up at him and leaning confidently against the window behind him, winking at Josh and making him blush even harder. Eff that guy, what a loser, Brendon was right.... Josh had to bite his tongue to keep from smiling too largely in response, too many people would notice, but...boy, did he love that idiot.
Dallon and Spencer were ahead of Josh, leading the way to the back of the bus, and Brendon was close behind him; Josh felt something bump the back of his leg, and he turned around just as Brendon stumbled into his back. Josh was opening his mouth to ask his friend what the heck he wanted, but Brendon was glaring down at Tyler, who, Josh could now see, had just stuck his foot into the aisle, conveniently right as Brendon had tried to pass.

“Fuck off, princess,” Brendon snapped, and Tyler bristled, Josh could tell, even though he put on a smile and beamed up at them. Josh loved him, but damn it, he was nearly as bad as Brendon- like Tyler hadn’t asked for it that time around. Ugh, the idiot.

“The bus isn’t even moving yet, and you’re already tripping- maybe Jordan should play Akron tonight and you can sit on the bench. Asshole.”

Josh rolled his eyes up to the ceiling. God, these two.

“I thought cheerleaders were supposed to sit on that side of the bus,” Brendon interrupted, sounding angry and making as if he intended to step closer to Tyler, but Josh grabbed onto his sleeve just as Ryan gave him a shove from behind, and they hauled Brendon along with them to the back of the bus before either he or Tyler could make any more comments. Josh glanced over his shoulder and could see Tyler smirking at him. He shook his head at him once, hoping it conveyed his disapproval, although he was, annoyingly, unable to hide the tiny smile on his face. Tyler blew him a quick kiss. That douchebag.

Brendon was still muttering under his breath as they reached the back of the bus, about what Josh was more than one hundred percent certain, but he opted to tune it out as he shuffled to the end of the longest row in the back, flopping down in the corner against the window. He’d heard enough shit-talking of his best friend and boyfriend to last him for like, forever, thanks. He didn’t wanna hear any more, he just wanted him and Tyler and Brendon and Spencer and even stupid Pete- no, y’know what, even stupid Jordan, even him, even that annoying asshole- to get along. The “she doesn’t even go here” scene from Mean Girls flashed through his head, and Josh snickered to himself. So what if he wished they could all get along like they used to middle school? A cake made out of rainbows and smiles didn’t sound half bad, if you asked Josh. He snickered again to himself and pulled out his phone to send Tyler a text. He missed him again already, goddammit. The front of the bus was sooo faaaaaar awaaaaaaaay.

“Ugh, you and your stupid phone again, man, really?” Brendon plopped down in the cramped space next to Josh- their legs touching from hip to thigh to knee, Brendon’s ankle was linked over Josh’s, God, he has zero sense of personal space- and snatched Josh’s phone from his hands. “You are always on this thing, dude- it’s either gotta be your mom or Grindr. Well, which one is it, Joshie, c’mon, you can level with me-”

Josh made a flying, frantic dash for his phone, struggling to get it out of Brendon’s hands before he could read the screen. It was on and open to Tyler’s texts already; Josh kept catching quick flashes of pink emoji hearts next to Tyler’s name. Damn it, damndamndamn, please don’t see that, please just-fuck, this is not good, I swear to fucking God, seeing Tyler’s name of all people’s would be the absolute end, but the fucking emojis? God, my life would be over- my life fucking will be over in goddamn three seconds if he fucking sees-

“Oooo oooh, who are all these lovey-dovey emojis for- OW, fucking Christ-”

Josh had accidentally- accidentally- elbowed Brendon in the ribs hard enough to bruise, he was sure. But all Josh really cared about right then was that he had elbowed his friend hard enough for Brendon to drop his phone, and Josh wasted no time in snatchng it back off Brendon’s lap, shutting it off as he did so and stuffing it in his back pocket. Apparently he couldn’t take any chances with
Brendon was glaring at him with a deadpan expression, unblinking. Josh grinned almost sheepishly at him, mind scrambling for some sort of excuse for his self-admittedly odd behavior.

“Dude,” Brendon huffed. “What the fuck is your deal?”

“Sorry,” Josh murmured immediately, nearly genuine. “Didn’t mean to, um, y’know-”

“Didn’t mean to what, break a rib? ‘Cuz I think you did.” Brendon made a show of rubbing his side, and Josh tried laughing it off, hoping, praying- not for the first time that day- that Brendon would just let it slide. Josh should’ve known there was no such luck.

“So it’s Grindr then,” Brendon announced, way too loudly for the small space between him and Josh, in Josh’s opinion. “Dude, chill out. I got one, everyone’s got one, all God’s chillun got one, no need to go breaking bones over it.”

“Wait, what is this about Grindr?” Ryan leaned forward from Brendon’s other side to peer suspiciously at him and then Josh in turn.

“Nothin’, babe, just telling Josh here about how we met, that’s all-”

Brendon shrieked in Josh’s ear as Ryan elbowed his other side, and Josh started snickering, half out of amusement and half out of relief that Brendon was, once again, being distracted away from him and Jenna and the prom and his phone, and by extension, Tyler.

This bus ride was gonna be way too long to start it off on iffy territory; Josh knew the conversation would eventually drift back into uncomfortable, risky topics, involving him, involving Ty, but that didn’t mean that he didn’t want to postpone the inevitable as long as possible. ‘Kay, thanks.

The bus’s engine roared to life, and several kids cheered like they were still in elementary, and they lurched out of the parking lot. Josh eyed Tyler longingly up at the front end of the bus, grinning to himself when he noticed that Jordan had plopped down beside him. He thought about texting Tyler about it, picking fun- lovingly, of course- but decided not to risk it just yet. Fuck, having Brendon around was almost as bad as trying to be on his phone with his sisters in the same room. Or with his mom leaning over his shoulder. Ugh.

Josh’s apparent less-than-good luck wasn’t showing any signs of changing any time soon either. A couple of cheerleaders were at the other end of the longest back row next to Ryan, and Josh could hear them talking about the dance last night. Dallon was a row in front of them, and he turned around in his seat to join the conversation. Great. It would only be a matter of time- a matter of seconds- before Ryan and then Brendon tuned into the discussion as well, and then Josh would be toast.

“Hey, you okay? You look like you’re spacing out.” Spencer, sitting sideways in the seat in front of Josh, much in the same way Tyler had been earlier before Jordan decided he wanted to share a seat with him.

“No, yeah, I’m fine,” Josh assured his friend, keeping his voice low in the hopes that Brendon wouldn’t overhear and bring the entire bus’ attention to Josh.

“You sure? Hey, have you heard of this App? I downloaded it like a week ago but I can’t figure it out-”

Spencer shoved his phone up into Josh’s face, the screen actually bumping Josh’s nose as the bus bumped out of the school parking lot and started off down the street towards the highway. Josh
grabbed onto Spencer’s wrist to steady the phone and peered at the cracked screen, irrationally relieved to have something to do to distract himself from his worry over the whole...situation thing. The Tyler thing. No, wait, that didn’t sound right, that wasn’t fair; that made it sound like his boyfriend- that he was in love with, mind you- was some sort of burden to him (false) and that he blamed him for things (also false) and that the whole situation with Jenna and Brendon and the entire team could all be credited back to Tyler and only Tyler (so false that flat-earthers would readily believe it.)

Regardless of what he called it, Josh was glad for the distraction from it. He looked at Spencer dubiously.

“Bro, it’s just...it’s Wheel of Fortune, are you serious? My grandma watches that, I didn’t even know it had an app-”

“Shut up, Josh,” Spencer said and took his phone back, and Josh started snickering, reclining in his cramped corner in the back of the Worthington school bus next to his friends. He tried his best to put Tyler out of his mind for the time being, and he already had a sneaking suspicion that he would fail.

The last time Tyler had been on this part of the highway had been when he and his family had driven in the opposite direction towards Worthington, seven months ago, their minivan packed full to the ceiling with bags and suitcases and boxes to the point of bursting, dragging a five by eight foot U-Haul trailer behind them, rattling along in the slow lane at forty-five miles an hour (his mom wouldn’t let them go any faster, “not a single mile, Chris.”) His parents had just finalized their purchase of the New House™ (Jay had dubbed the new house that way the second they had found out they were going to move, and it had stuck; Tyler still found himself thinking of it as the New House, even after half a year) just the night before; the trailer had been rented a month prior to the move, and both it and the van had been packed and ready to go a week before the house was theirs. They had left Mansfield at eight that morning, and yet they still hadn’t reached this very stretch of highway and slowly (so slowly Tyler had almost screamed- he hated being cooped up in a cramped van with all three siblings and both parents. God, talk about tortures-) driven down the exit ramp to the city of Worthington until nearly noon. Noon! It was only fifty or so miles from Mansfield, and it had taken them four hours to finally get there. Granted, they had made several stops for the bathroom and gas and food, but- c’mon. Tyler had kind of hated Worthington on principle just for the stuffy, bored-to-death family car ride he had been put through. And his experience the first few weeks at Worthington’s high school hadn’t helped any- it had only made him hate this new place all the more.

Josh had only made him hate this new place all the more.

And now- Tyler couldn’t get the cute fucker out of his head, and he didn’t mind it at all. He was seeing hearts before his eyes, staring out at the passing blur of highway; seeing brown, seeing blue, seeing Josh. Thank God and thank fuck his family had moved here. Tyler fucking loved Worthington.

Jordan jostled into Tyler then, and Tyler turned his attention from the window back to (swoon-) Josh’s little brother. The little brother part did not make him swoon.

“-another family trip, maybe to Dayton, ‘cuz we have a couple cousins who live there, or Toledo. Oh, but Mom doesn’t like going there anymore ‘cuz it’s so far away and also our like second cousin or something lives there, and she doesn’t like him ‘cuz he’s a bad influence-”

Jordan waved air quotes in Tyler’s face. Tyler nodded at him like he would to a kid from his mom’s teaching job.
“-like, drugs or something, I guess, like what else would it be? Ashley says I’m stupid but whatever, girls always say ass shit like that.”

Ass shit…? Tyler thought incredulously, but Jordan gave him no time to question it, or even to make jokes about how Ashley was right. Jordan’s words tugged on a thread of thought Tyler had stashed away earlier that morning, his own discussion with Ashley in the Dun’s upstairs’ hallway. But Jordan was still talking.

“-over to Indianapolis once, but I was like three so it doesn’t count. ‘Sides that, I’ve never been out of Ohio! I’ve never been to Akron before either, though- oh, wait, I went to Cleveland once, so that’s cool! GO CAVS-”

“Jordan, jeez, I hear you, you don’t have to yell, dude,” Tyler interrupted as he looked around nervously. Coach was glaring at them in the rearview mirror, and a couple of girls across the aisle from them, including- oh, there’s Jenna... play it cool, Ty-guy, just look away, don’t....- were giggling at them. Tyler started to redden, though Jordan seemed annoyingly unperturbed by the ruckus he was causing.

“My dad said we might go back there during the summer actually,” Jordan continued, completely unaware of Tyler’s minor discomfort. “I love Cleveland, I wanna live there! Last time we went we just did boring stuff, like museums and shit, ‘cuz stupid Abby had a broken arm so like- like that means we have to do dumb stuff, isn’t that stupid? But this time we’re gonna do neat stuff, like- ooooh, like going to a game! Dude, that’d be sick! I wanna see the Cavs so bad-”

“That...it won’t even be basketball season,” Tyler tried to point out, but Jordan talked over him.

“Or- OOOOH, DUDE, we have to go see the house from A Christmas Story, y’know that movie? The actual house is in fricking Cleveland, bro, y’know the movie? The one with that leg lamp, haha, and the guy sets it up in the window and then at night all you can see is-”

“Yes, Jordan, I know the movie,” Tyler had to interrupt again, Jordan growing louder and louder the longer he talked. Coach was giving them the stink eye in the mirror, and Tyler was about ninety-eight point, like, five percent sure that Jenna was smirking smugly at him. God, this was embarrassing. Why Jordan, why couldn’t it have been, oh, I don’t know...Josh? I think I’d rather even talk to...to Br....no...no, that was going too far...maybe to Spencer. Maybe... if I had to....

Tyler shuddered at the thought. Never mind. He’d stick to Jordan for now. Since, apparently, he had to.

He grabbed his week old Gatorade bottle from his bag as Jordan continued rambling onto a new subject and took a swig. It wasn’t half bad, though it had a strange aftertaste that Tyler didn’t remember from fresh bottles; that slice of pizza he’d stolen off Mikey at lunch hadn’t stuck with him long at all. Tyler was starving. Maybe his mom had stuffed a bag of chips or something in his backpack....

“-but the best Christmas movie ever is Gremlins, hands down, no competition-”

Tyler choked on his sip of Gatorade. “Gremlins? What the fuck, dude-”

“Yeah, dude, what’s wrong with it? It’s great, the sequel’s great, too-”

Tyler groaned. “Please no, I can’t with you.”

“What?” Jordan exclaimed, and Tyler inadvertently shot him a quick glance; he had sounded so much like Josh.
“Look,” Tyler said, turning in his seat to face Jordan, deciding to humor him for the time being. It wasn’t like Tyler had anything better to do right then, anyways. “The best Christmas movies ever are the Nightmare Before Christmas, Home Alone, and Scrooged. Classic, classic; Bill Murray, also a classic. And then there’s the Christmas movie of all Christmas movies.”

Jordan raised his eyebrows at Tyler, looking and sounding unconvinced. “What?”

“Elf. Duh. Elf is superior.”

“Bro, shut the hell up, you can’t be for fuckin’ real-”

“Language, guys,” Coach Anderson hollered from the front of the bus, eyeing them in the mirror once again. Tyler was ninety-nine percent sure that Jenna was definitely laughing at him this time, the little snot. He had to fight himself to keep from looking across the aisle at her; he did not want to have to deal with her right now, but the sick urge to see her, to look for a minute, to see how she seemed to be handling things the day after Josh had, well. Dumped her. For him. Maybe it was just the game, or maybe- Tyler wasn’t not man enough not to admit- maybe it was just a core trait of his personality, this undeniable competitiveness. Either way, deep down in the part of him that Tyler tried to keep secret from people, he wanted to look at Jenna, he wanted to make eye contact with her, hold it for a moment- he had won. He’d won Josh, and he swore to God he’d be outright lying if he didn’t admit that, gross as it was, he wanted to gloat.

Save it for the game, Ty-guy. She’s a girl, she’s...she’s not competition, okay, you don’t need to be a dick about it- just don’t look at her, okay. Who knows, if you did she might turn out to be one of those freaky girls that’ll lose her shit if she sees you looking at her, and that would not go down well with the coach, ‘kay, just ignore her, ignore Josh right now for that matter, too, just chill ‘n’ listen to Jordan talk, it’s not that bad, dude-

Blue eyes met his- shit, shit! Shit, abort mission! She’s gonna freak out, she’s gonna tell all her friends, oh, FUCK no, why the fuck did my fucking boyfriend tell her about us, she’s gonna fucking ruin-

Jenna looked away just as quickly as Tyler had accidentally looked at her; palpable stress and tension seeped from Tyler’s shoulders. He hadn’t even realized until now that he’d been hoarding so much anxiety over this- over her- until he’d been looking her straight in the face.

Tyler didn’t even fully know what he was feeling, much less how to cope with these emotions. He felt shaky.

It was almost an hour later when Jordan’s chatter finally fell away, and he put headphones on to play on his Nintendo DS he’d brought. Tyler watched him enviously for a moment, wondering why the fuck he hadn’t remembered to bring his DS- like he needed another reason for the guys on the team to think he was a freak. A geeky freak.

Still. Tyler kinda wished he’d brought his Nintendo DS. His Nintendogs were probably starving. Probably peed all over the carpet. Maybe I’ll text Mads and ask her to let them outside-

“Hey, girlfriend,” Mikey’s voice and sudden presence in the empty seat behind Tyler was such a welcome event that an immediate smile split across Tyler’s face.

“Mikey!” he said too loudly, and even though he was now twisted so far in his seat his back was to the driver’s seat, Tyler knew Coach was giving him another face in the rearview. Whatever.

“Where have you been, I’ve been stuck here all this time with- with Jordan,” Tyler lowered his
voice as he glanced at Jordan— he didn’t wanna hurt the guy’s feelings or anything; it wasn’t his fault he was annoying— but Jordan’s headphones were doing a pretty decent job of blocking out the entire bus, apparently.

Mikey smirked at him, leaning forward in his seat so they could hear each other over the rest of the bus’ chatter. “Aw, what do you mean, stuck with, I thought you loved Dun boys.”

“Just one,” Tyler said as he rolled his eyes, tucking a leg beneath him and turning a bit more to face his friend. He realized with sudden glee that he could now see over Mikey’s shoulder to Josh in the very back of the bus, though that stupid Spencer’s big ass head kept getting in the way. Also, Tyler noted with minor disgust, Josh was leaning in close to even stupider Brendon, the two apparently just so engrossed with something on Brendon’s phone that Josh had forgotten what personal space meant. And, Tyler also noted, Josh was smiling. Tyler looked quickly back to Mikey’s face. If he kept looking at Urie Schmurie next to his boyfriend like that, he was going to vomit in his mouth a little.

Tyler was about to make an only slightly bitter joke to get his mind off of Josh when he noticed that Mikey was grinding his jaw, staring blankly at the back of Jordan’s head, and it suddenly all came back to Tyler: the incident at lunch with Gerard and Frank, and then Pete; and last night, and the texts Mikey had sent him. Tyler decided to tread carefully.

“So, uh...you mad or...nah…?” Shit, great going, you first class A-hole. How insensitive can you possibly sound?

But Mikey actually smiled a bit, looking back to Tyler and seemingly snapping out of his half daze. Tyler smiled back on instinct. Things just didn’t feel right when Mikey wasn’t okay.

“Nah, I’m not...I’m not mad,” Mikey started and then stopped, and Tyler waited patiently for him to crack.

Mikey leaned forward and rested his arms on the backrest of the row in front of him, in between Tyler and Jordan, and played with his fingers. He peeked up at Tyler before sighing.

“Well, I mean...yeah, kinda. I am kinda mad.”

“No shit,” Tyler murmured, raising his eyebrows innocently when Mikey shot him a half glare. “Just kidding, baby.”

Mikey rolled his eyes at Tyler and kept playing with his fingers. His brows were drawn like he was thinking hard about something.

“Remember when you were hanging at my place and bullied me into telling you about my crush?” Tyler prompted. Mikey shot him the other half of that glare.

“I didn’t bully you, and you didn’t tell me shit,” Mikey said.

Tyler huffed. “Don’t change the subject.”

Mikey huffed back. “I didn’t, you did.”

Tyler shrugged. “Only ‘cuz you’re not telling me what’s going on. Something is up, right?”

Mikey gave Tyler a blank look, and Tyler raised his eyebrows at him. “Well, aren’t you going to tell me? Don’t make me guess, dude. You have to tell me, I’m your best friend—”
“Okay, shut up, I’ll tell you,” Mikey said, leaning in even closer after peering over his shoulder once. “But I...you can’t get mad. Okay?”

Tyler stiffened and shifted in his seat. His knee bumped Jordan’s leg, but Jordan didn’t seem to notice. Why would he be...what could Mikey possibly tell him that he’d be worried about him getting mad over? Was this...could this all have something to do with... I mean, this can’t be about, like, Josh, right? He doesn't mean...God, what if he...his texts last night...Mikey had said, he’d said that...boys were jerks, right, and, and,...what else? Ugh, I can’t remember, I don’t even think I read all his texts, I was too busy with, with...what if...Mikey was at the dance, but he...he told me he wasn’t going, and Josh said he hadn’t gone, he didn’t go, but...but what if...does Mikey know...something... I don’t? And he was pissed at Josh this morning, too- oh, God, it is about Josh, isn’t it? It fucking is, I can tell, just after we had sex and he officially broke up with stupid Jenna and after Valentine’s day of all days, and just after I...finally, after I...after I...after I fell in stupid, fucking love with the stupid, fucking loser, oh, God, my heart’s gonna break, I’m gonna fucking die-

“Ty? For real, hon, I’m not telling you if you’re gonna be a dick about it-”

“No, no, I’m...tell me,” Tyler said, taking in a deep, slow breath. Here it was. The end. Hit him with it once and just let it be done with.

Mikey mumbled, not looking at Tyler as he fumbled with his glasses, and Tyler almost didn’t hear him. “I...I’m kind of, like... with...Pete. We’re boyfriends.”

Mikey paused before looking up and then adding in a rush, “But we’re not out to anyone and Gee hates him and Pete’s a fucking douchebag and I kind of hate him right now. Pete, not Gee. No, wait-scratch that, I hate both of them right now. And you can’t tell anybody about any of this, okay? Are you...you’re not pissed at me, are you?”

Tyler blinked once, twice, mind reeling. He took in what was meant to be a deep and calming breath, but was just embarrassingly shaky instead. He was actually sweating a little. So it wasn’t about...about...yeah. Thank fucking God.

“Tyler?”

“I...what? I thought...I didn’t think you were-”

“I knew it, you’re pissed,” Mikey interrupted.

“No, wait, Mikes, I’m not pissed, why- why would I be pissed?" Relief was slowly washing over Tyler as he fully realized that this conversation was, in fact, not out to anyone and Gee hates him and Pete’s a fucking douchebag and I kind of hate him right now. Pete, not Gee. No, wait-scratch that, I hate both of them right now. And you can’t tell anybody about any of this, okay? Are you...you’re not pissed at me, are you?”

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“Tyler?”

“I...what? I thought...I didn’t think you were-”

“I knew it, you’re pissed,” Mikey interrupted.

“No, wait, Mikes, I’m not pissed, why- why would I be pissed?” Relief was slowly washing over Tyler as he fully realized that this conversation was, in fact, not out to anyone and Gee hates him and Pete’s a fucking douchebag and I kind of hate him right now. Pete, not Gee. No, wait-scratch that, I hate both of them right now. And you can’t tell anybody about any of this, okay? Are you...you’re not pissed at me, are you?”

Tyler nodded, still a little shaky from his false alarm scare. “Yeah, he’s...I mean no, no, he’s not, not...not really, he’s just, um...just....”

Tyler ended lamely and looked at Mikey, and Mikey rolled his eyes sympathetically. “No, yeah, he is. He is to me, too. It’s okay, I know. I’m mad at him right now, remember?”

Tyler nodded. “Right...so...why are you mad again? And- you said Gerard hates him? Why? Like why is he- is that why he was so pissed at lunch today?”

Mikey nodded, too, eyebrows still drawn. “Yeah, he, uh...it’s all a bit complicated, really, I don’t
Tyler barked out a laugh loud enough for even Jordan to glance up at him. Mikey was looking at him strangely, and Tyler covered his mouth with his hands, smile on his face.

“Are you okay?” Mikey ventured.

“Yeah, it’s just...I get it, y’know? About complicated situations, I mean. I get you, bro.”

Mikey looked at Tyler curiously. “Why do I feel there’s something you’re not telling me?”

“Don’t change the subject again, I’ll tell you later. Tell me more about you and-” Tyler waggled his eyebrows, “-and Petey-wetey.”

Mikey punched him in the shoulder, and Tyler started cackling as Mikey blushed.

“Tyler, stop it. I’m mad.”

“Oh, okay.” Tyler put on a serious face, ready to listen, ready to jump in with advice for his friend, nerves apparently shot and giddy with relief. It wasn’t about Josh; they were okay. A small voice in Tyler’s head questioned why wouldn’t we be? But Tyler didn’t wanna think about that right now.

Mikey, insultingly, didn’t look satisfied with Tyler’s attempts to be serious, but after a moment he started to explain anyways. Well, he at least started in on the abridged explanation. Tyler really wasn’t surprised. He estimated Mikey probably spoke about a fourth as many words a day as he did. He was almost surprised to be getting any explanation at all, if he was being honest.

“So...y’know how I wasn’t going to the dance last night? Well, I...I was, kinda...well, I mean, I wasn’t sure if I was or not- Pete’s kinda...noncommunicative sometimes, and...well, I ended up going- with him, y’know, and...and I, I told him I didn’t want...I didn’t...Gerard was there, I didn’t think he was gonna...normally he just blows off somewhere with Bert, he doesn’t hang around the school. Not a dance sort of guy, yknow.”

“Gerard or Bert?” Tyler asked, and Mikey squinted at him like he wasn’t sure if he was joking or not.

“Neither of them. It doesn’t matter, anyways.”

Mikey didn’t say anything else, and Tyler waited almost a full minute before prodding him again. “Dude, and? You can’t stop there. I don’t get it, what went wrong?”

Mikey pushed his glasses back up his nose and sighed, but he didn’t look too annoyed to explain a bit further. “Gerard was there, and he...well, he flipped. You know Gerard. You know Pete. They hate each other, always have, since like, I don’t know. Since grade school.”

Tyler shook his head. “Well...I mean, like...dude, he’s your brother, if you like Pete then Gee should come around, for you, y’know. Eventually.”

“Yeah, well, he should,” Mikey sounded angry, but he still looked calm enough. He rubbed at his nose. “Yeah, he should, but he won’t. I mean, he probably won’t.”

Mikey left that prediction hanging mysteriously in the air for another minute before Tyler was waving a hand impatiently. “Well, why not, dude?”

Mikey made as if he wanted to look over his shoulder again, but he stopped himself. “What’s he
“Who?” Tyler whispered back.

Mikey just looked at Tyler for a minute before Tyler bopped himself gently on the forehead like the dummy he was and peered over Mikey’s shoulder, eyes scanning the small bus for Pete.

“I think he’s on his phone,” Tyler leaned in to report quietly to Mikey. “He’s just...he’s sitting in front of Patrick, he’s not talking to anyone.”

“He’s not looking?”

“Not right now.”

“Okay,” Mikey breathed and shifted in his seat before speaking again, voice lower than before. “It’s just...well, I mean, we all know Pete can be a douche, he always has been...he used to pick on me back in grade school and I guess that’s kind of how it all started with Gee hating him so much, and then- and then that only urged Pete on, y’know. I mean, nothing serious, just, y’know. Kids being a little mean.”

“Yeah, I’m familiar with that,” Tyler said. Mikey ignored him.

“And like, you know me and Gee are super close, and...well...I guess he just got pissed- like, really pissed, dude- when he found out about me and...and Pete. He was mad that I didn’t tell him, and then he was mad when I told him that I thought he’d be mad if I had told him, and then I got mad at Gee, and then Pete got mad at him, too, and then I got mad at Pete, and, well. Now we’re here.”

Tyler nodded for a moment, eyeing his friend. “You’re right, that is complicated....”

“Told you.”

“So...neither of them are talking to you?”

“Pete tried to earlier on, but I got sick of it. He’s just going around in circles.”

“Circles with...what? With last night?”

“No,” Mikey huffed and furrowed his brow like a new worry had just come over him. Poor guy. “Well, yes, but. It’s not just about last night, you know? He wants us to just be like, out, like no matter what Gerard has to say about it, or the rest of my family- and God knows what they’ll have to say about it- or anyone, and he wants us to just like...be normal. To stop hiding, you know?”

Tyler didn’t say anything for a minute. This was starting to feel uncomfortably familiar and was hitting unnervingly close to home. “O-oh?” Tyler winced at how pathetic his own voice sounded.

Mikey thankfully didn’t seem to notice the change in Tyler’s mood. “Yeah. And I’m just not. I’m not ready for that.”

Tyler’s throat felt dry. He rummaged around for his Gatorade again, but only held it in his lap as he twisted the cap around and around. “Can I ask like...like why you’re not...like why you’re not ready, I mean? Like if that’s what, what Pete wants, and you like him- you do like, like him, right?”

Mikey paused before responding. “Yeah. I’m pissed as hell, but yeah.”

Tyler nodded. “Right, so like. If you like him and he likes you, too, and he wants you guys to just be like... normal... why wouldn’t you want that...too...unless like, maybe if you didn’t like him as much
as he likes...I mean, not that you don’t, I’m just...just saying...y’know...?”

Tyler hoped his face wouldn’t give too much away; his cheeks were hot. When Mikey looked up at him, Tyler had to look back down at the bottle in his lap. God, he’d probably be an open book right now if they made eye contact.

If Mikey suspected anything else behind Tyler’s question, he didn’t mention it. He thought for a moment before responding. “I do like him, a lot. And he knows that. He also knows that I wasn’t ready to, to...to tell everyone, to...at the dance last night, he...I only agreed to go if we kept it really casual, you know? So like no one would know. But then he just...he didn’t wanna do that, he wanted us to be...fucking normal, and. And then I got mad at him because he was like, right there in the middle of the entire high school where anyone could see us, and then Gee did see us and, and he was the last person who I wanted to know, and. And it’s all Pete’s fault. I told him. I told him, and he...he didn’t care.”

Tyler looked away awkwardly, unsure of what to say. Was it possible that...did Josh feel the same as Mikey? Tyler didn’t understand this.

“He didn’t care about what I wanted. Y’know? So I...I guess he’s the one who doesn’t care enough. He wanted to get back together-”

“You broke up?” Tyler asked alarmed. He wasn’t even completely positive why he was so upset about his friend potentially breaking up with a guy he didn’t like in the first place, a relationship he hadn’t even known- or never would have expected- existed in the first place.

Well...that was a lie. Tyler did know why he felt upset.

“Well...not really, not like officially or anything, but. He’s ruined so much for me, Ty. Gee didn’t...Gee didn’t know I was...well, y’know. Not straight. He’s not mad about that or anything, but. He’s so mad at me, Ty, he thinks I’m abandoning him, like I won’t care about him anymore.”

“Well, that’s obviously not true-”

“I know, but he doesn’t trust me anymore, Tyler. I didn’t tell him about Pete, I didn’t tell him about me being...gay, I guess, I don’t know. He thinks I didn’t trust him, and so now he doesn’t trust me. And that’s why I wasn’t ready and that’s what Pete didn’t understand, and I just. Really, really hate him right now.”

Tyler didn’t say anything, was too far away in his own head to respond, and after a few quiet minutes, Mikey asked quietly. “You...do you get that? Or....” His voice trailed away, and Tyler meant to look up at Mikey, but his vision kind of blurred and focused on the background instead, the stretch of moving highway out the back window of the bus, and Josh. A tuft of messy, dark curls was all Tyler could make out right then. A flash of pale skin. Him laughing with his friends. Tyler’s heart gave a dull thud.

“Ty? Be honest, do you think I’m...do you think I’m overreacting? I mean...that doesn’t fix the Gerard problem at all, but like...with Pete, do you think I’m wrong? Be honest, for real.”

Tyler opened his mouth, but nothing came out right away. His eyes fell to the screen on Jordan’s DS, slipped across the aisle to Jenna’s bag on the floor, her ripped jeans, not her face, back to Mikey. He untwisted the cap on his Gatorade all the way and took a swig before replying.

“No. No, Mikes, I...I don’t think you’re wrong. You’re not overreacting, you’re...you can’t help how you feel, y’know? And if...if Pete can’t get with that then. Well. It’s his fault you guys break up, I
“guess.”

“What!”?

“What?”

“I don’t want to break up,” Mikey said, looking at Tyler like he was an idiot. Who knows, maybe he was.

“I...thought you wanted to-”

“No, I don’t want to,” Mikey huffed. “Just because I don’t want us to be out doesn’t mean I don’t like him.”

Tyler tried not to sigh too audibly. “Oh, good.”

“Good? I thought you didn’t like the guy.” Oh, no. Mikey sounded suspicious now.

“I- I- I mean yeah, I do, if you do then- yeah, of course, I-” Tyler stopped, unsure. “I- what do you want me to...do you want me to like him...?”

“I am mad at him,” Mikey reminded him.

“Oh.” Tyler was confused. “Then I don’t like him. Ew, gross.”

“Hey, that’s my boyfriend.”

Tyler was about to defend himself from Mikey’s impossible insanity when he noticed that his friend was smirking at him.

“Stop,” Tyler whined, smacking Mikey’s arm. Mikey laughed once.

“Sorry, you’re too easy.”

They were both silent for a while. Tyler turned a little more towards the window and watched cars race pass them as the bus continued to rattle along in the slow lane. The girls across from them started laughing about something, and Tyler inadvertently found himself glancing in their- in her direction before looking back to Mikey. Suddenly it hit him.

“Wait a minute,” Tyler broke the silence between them. “You and...and Pete? Pete Wentz?”

Mikey looked at Tyler as if he had been expecting this sooner or later. “Yes, Tyler-”

“Like, are we talking about the same Pete Wentz here? I just...I never thought...I mean, I had no idea, since when have you liked this guy? Like, since when have you even talked this guy-”

“I could have said the same thing about you and-” Mikey stopped and glanced around him, noticing for the first time that Jenna was one of the few girls across the aisle from them. He lowered his voice as he continued. “-but I didn’t. Can you please just support me on this?”

“No, yeah, totally, babe, I support you, I’m just. Surprised, that’s all,” Tyler said, mind still catching up with the whole conversation they had just had, with the full weight of his friend’s revelation. He patted Mikey’s hand when his brow still didn’t unfurrow. “I’m sorry, Mikes. I do support you in this. The whole thing really sucks. You know you could’ve told me sooner, right? You could have...I don’t know....”
“Yeah,” Mikey said. “I just...didn’t want you to be pissed, too. Like Gerard.”

Tyler nodded. “You don’t need to worry about that. I got your back.”

Mikey smiled at him, and if it wasn’t genuine, it was at least close enough; Tyler got the feeling that there were more details and emotions going on behind the scenes that Mikey wasn’t telling him about, but he guessed that his friend would open up some more in his own time if he wanted to. Tyler smiled back.

The bus careened into a pothole then, and stupid Brendon and a few of the other guys whooped loudly from the backseat. Tyler tried to take a peak in Josh’s direction without anyone knowing that he was trying to take a peak in Josh’s direction.

Mikey, however, did notice and made a face, and Tyler felt his cheeks turn pink. “Stop,” he said again, weakly, glancing once more at Jordan and ensuring he was still engrossed with his electronics. Just to be safe.

“So...” Mikey said, tone lighter than it had been during their earlier discussion. “What’s up with you guys? Have fun last night?”

Tyler reddened even more as memories from the previous night came back to him. God, that had been fun. He pushed the new information about his friend and Pete to the back of his mind, along with what Ashley had said that morning, and the fresh worry that whatever she had been hinting about maybe being linked to the possibility of his own boyfriend feeling the same as Mikey did about being a normal, not-closeted couple, topped off with the shameful opinion that Tyler just couldn’t shake, that no matter how much Mikey thought he liked Pete, Pete must like him more, if Mikey’s not willing to be with him like that- not that Tyler would say that to his friend’s face, not in a million years. As for Mikey, he seemed more than ready to change the subject to a more playful topic anyways, and Tyler was dying to jump on any excuse possible to distract himself from his paranoia over his relationship.

“Yeah, we did, actually,” Tyler said, smug smile creeping back on his face. Last night had been good, he and Josh were together, Mikey and Pete and Gerard would probably sort things out sooner or later...everything could still all work out perfectly fine. No need to freak.

Mikey raised an eyebrow expectantly. “You promised to give me the details.”

“Did I?” Tyler squirmed happily for a moment before giving in, both to Mikey and to a happier, less stressful line of thought. “So, you know he came over last night, instead of going to the dance. And he had just broke up with- he broke up last night, too.”

“How’d you get him to do that?”

“I didn’t! I didn’t say anything- well, like, not recently, I don’t think. He just did it on his own!” Tyler grinned so hard his cheeks ached, and whispered in a conspiratorial tone: “Do you think he likes me?”

“Dude, he totally likes you,” Mikey whispered back, and Tyler giggled, unable to keep quiet. He was too happy.

“So after he came over, did you guys go out or anything?”

“What?” Tyler had been distracted trying to catch another peek of Josh in the back of the bus. “No, I’m grounded, remember? We watched a movie.”
“Oh. So what about this weekend, are you guys going out somewhere or something?”

“Um, I don’t know, maybe...why? Like...for what?”

“Um, for a date. Duh. Are you serious?” Mikey sounded incredulous, eyes wide behind his glasses. “It’s Valentine’s day, dude, it’s a thing, couples do this.”

Tyler bristled, but only slightly. “Well, what about you and-”

“Really?” Mikey interrupted. “After everything I just told you, you think we’d go out anywhere? I’m not talking to that asshole.”

Tyler didn’t press it, and when Mikey continued, he sounded chiller, like he had before. “But for real, have you guys, like, y’know. Gone on an actual date? I know you guys have fucked now, but don’t you think you kind of skipped a part?”

Tyler harrumphed indignantly, picking at the strip of rubber along the window. “I don’t know.”

Mikey, in Tyler’s opinion, sounded smug and slightly annoying. As most good friends do. “Well? Have you guys ever had an official date?”

Tyler shot Mikey a glare, but it didn’t have much energy or genuine annoyance behind it. He thought for a moment. “Well... kind of...we had like, a half date a while back, I guess. Yeah...yeah, we’ve had dates.”

This time Mikey did sound super annoying. In Tyler’s opinion. “Okay. If you say so.”

Tyler gave Mikey a minute to add onto his comment, but when he didn’t, Tyler turned away from the window to face him a little more directly. “Why are you using that tone?”

“That tone, like I’m stupid.”

“You’re not stupid, Tyler, it’s just, y’know. Guys should take their boyfriends out on dates, especially around Valentine’s day, especially when you’ve just fucked for the first time. It’s just, like. The rule. It’s polite. It’s what good guys do.”

Tyler harrumphed again. “Josh is a good guy-”

“Okay, fine, sure he is...” Mikey cut Tyler off, and Tyler eyed him warily.

“So...” Mikey continued after a moment, and Tyler rolled his eyes at him. He should have known Mikey wouldn’t let the topic drop. “If you guys aren’t doing anything for V-day, then what did he give you? And don’t say an orgasm.”

Tyler perked up at the reminder. “I was gonna say a blowjob!”

Mikey looked lost for words for a moment. “He...really?”

“Yeah, really, he was really good, too. It was so hot, I didn’t expect it to be, like. That hot, bro.”

“...wow.”

Tyler beamed. “I know.”
Mikey waved a hand as he pressed the issue further. “That doesn’t count though, bro. Did he give you, like, a present or something?”

Tyler sighed loudly, letting his friend know what a gigantic bother it was for him to talk about this when he could be elaborating on that aforementioned blowjob instead. Way more fun a topic. “No...but I didn’t get him anything either, so-”

“That’s different.”

“Why!?"  

Mikey shrugged a shoulder. “It just is. Because...well, you know-”

“I am not the girl in this relationship, I hope you know,” Tyler couldn’t keep from announcing, giving into the childish urge to cross his arms as he did so.

“Did I fucking say you were?” Mikey sounded a bit exasperated.

“Well, you were fucking implying it-”

“Okay, okay, okay, whatever, forget I mentioned it,” Mikey waved his hand again, giving Tyler an are-you-effing-serious look. “It’s just, in my book, good boyfriends do sappy shit for you and me. That’s all. We’re awesome.”

Tyler rolled his eyes again moodily, though he couldn’t deny that Mikey’s words lodged themselves in his brain. Is that what good boyfriends did? Tyler wouldn’t know, he’d never had a boyfriend before. Or a girlfriend. After all, it was Valentine’s day, couples did do stuff, he knew that- his own parents had a fancy dinner planned for that Saturday night (Tyler had babysitting duty. Fucking ugh. Ideal way to spend the weekend.) But...he and Josh hadn’t even been together that long, why would...but did that matter? Should Josh have done something? Should Tyler have done something? I’m not the girl....

“No, he...he broke up with- dude, he broke up, like...that’s enough, he doesn’t have to, like...I don’t know. He doesn’t have to buy me a fucking ring, y’know?”

Tyler thought out loud before he could stop himself, and Mikey looked up from his phone. “Oh, are we still talking about that? I thought you were all butthurt-”

“I’m not butthurt, I’m just tryna figure out what you were getting at-”

“Nothing, Tyler, honest,” Mikey huffed out a laugh and reached out to ruffle Tyler’s hair. “Babe, I didn’t mean anything, I’m sorry- I guess I’m just mad at Pete, y’know, I just. I just don’t want you and you-know-who to have any stupid problems if you could avoid ‘em instead. You get me?”

“Voldemort?” Tyler said, and Mikey punched him gently on the shoulder, and Tyler laughed once in reply, and Mikey started to show Tyler a meme from Instagram on his phone; but in Tyler’s head he was still thinking, mind racing, heart beating too hard to really hear whatever it was Mikey had changed the subject to.

Chapter End Notes

real talk i love tyler n mikey, they friends!!!!! xDD OK SO next chapter is the big game
guys!!! dUN DUN DUN!!!!! a lotta ~good~ stuff is coming yall THANK YOU huge fuckin shout out to ALL of you for reading this story and hanging in there for updates <3333 I LOOOOVE YOOOOOU!!!

MANDATORY POLL (:PP) >> who's yall's fav side character????????? comment below! i'm curious!!!! <3333333333
Chapter Summary

FRIENDS, HELLO. it's been 2 months, i know, i wasn't planning on that, but i DID end up taking a sort of unofficial mini break from working on this fic at all, and let me say this: it has completely rejuvenated me and my passion for this story!!! yall i'm PUMPED omg i love these stupid basketball boys!!!! can't wait to write 50k more words of them, it's a long fic yall and i'm in it for the long haul, so if ur still interested then buckle up, we goin on a ride <333333 that being said i hope yall love this chapter omg <33 i'm already working on the next chapter and i can't wait to share it w uuuuuuu <3

chapter title from camisado by patd!!!!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Due to traffic, there was no time to check into their motel before the game; they stopped at a McDonald’s right outside of Akron for a quick dinner before Coach was urging them all back onto the bus for the last quick leg of the drive, mumbling under his breath the entire time about being late to the biggest game of the season thus far.

Maybe it was the YouTube videos he and Mikey had watched, sharing one pair of earbuds, or maybe it was the double cheeseburger, or even possibly the impending excitement of the game, but Tyler was feeling worlds better than he had only an hour earlier. Josh had smiled at him when they were in line at McDonald’s, and wasn’t that funny how a simple smile could dash so many of his worries? How silly Tyler had been. They had been on dates, official dates...they had... and they were gonna go on a lot more! Suck on that one, Mikey.

When they got to the high school, the sun was already gone from the sky, and the parking lot was already half full of cars, people streaming across the grounds to the gym doors. Tyler remembered the building- his old team at Worthington had had a game here once- ninety-five to eighty! He was anticipating a pretty good game.

And scouts, too! Jesus, Tyler had nearly forgotten. He along with most of the team were already filing down the aisle of the small bus, bags and sodas and earbuds in tow, before Coach had even found a parking space. They really were almost late to their biggest game.

Inside the changing rooms, larger than their own back at Worthington, Tyler glanced over to Josh as they were all wildly yanking off hoodies and sneakers and changing into their jerseys to the sound of the muffled crowd beyond the closed doors. Josh looked stressed. Tyler wished he could give him a hug, even a touch on the arm would do, but he didn’t dare get too close, not with Brendon so nearby. Tyler glared at him briefly, just as Josh turned around and saw his face. Tyler’s grimace switched to a smile, but not before Josh had seen his lil 'tude going on. Josh tried hiding a small smirk, and Tyler, if truth be told, didn’t mind being the brunt of Josh’s amusement if it helped elevate his mood.

A buzzer sounded outside the changing rooms, and Coach Anderson burst in to usher them all out. Tyler stuffed the end of one of his shoe laces into his sneaker as Mikey grabbed one of his arms and
hauled him out into the gym.

God, Tyler would never, ever get used to it, even if he went on to college with a sports scholarship-the noise, the people. The game, he loved; the crowd, not so much. It was easier if you were the home team, but here they were, hours away, in Akron. The student body was probably three sizes that of Worthington.

Not only that- there were the scouts, off to the side of the room at a table littered with their clipboards and notebooks, talking with the referees and the rest of the crew milling about behind. Coach Anderson kept shooting nervous glances in their direction, and Tyler felt his own agitation build. This game was a big one. They- he had to win.

It’s okay, you’re okay, you’ve played bigger before, just chill, you got this, Tyler reminded himself, turning his face away from the scouts and crew, away from the crowded bleachers, tugging on the neckline of his jersey. He’d worn a long sleeved shirt beneath it, sort of as an extra layer of emotional protection, and he was already getting flustered. He could already feel sweat pricking on his temples. They sat crowded on the bench throughout the opening remarks by Akron’s principal, both school’s cheer teams were introduced, and then they proceeded to introduce the visiting team. Tyler focused on deep breaths as he jogged onto the court behind Dallon.

They lined up, they waited- the buzzer sounded, the ball flashed into Tyler’s line of sight, and suddenly any noise that the crowd and the cheerleaders and teams and the coaches and the other players were making faded into a comforting, buzzing background of white noise in Tyler’s mind. This game was his.

A second into the game and Worthington already had the ball- Pete, more specifically. That was probably the best thing about him, in Tyler’s opinion; he was a hell of an aggressive player. There weren’t many games Tyler could remember where Worthington didn’t start off with the ball, mostly always thanks to Pete. Tyler had originally thought that with what Mikey had told him earlier on the bus, he’d despise Pete even more than he already did. But, Tyler was surprisingly relieved to find, the fact that one of his best friends kinda sorta loved this douche of a guy made it a little easier to work with him during a game.

And a good thing, too, because Pete kept glancing over at him around two Akron players who were crowding him into a corner. Tyler held up a hand, and Pete jumped, hurling the ball halfway across the court to Tyler, no Akron players within several yards of him. He was in an ideal spot.

Ideal for what? Tyler didn’t mind admitting- to himself, at least- that this position was ideal for more than just scoring a basket within the first five seconds of the game. It was ideal in that the scouts would see him. And Tyler knew that they would be impressed.

He was halfway across the court from the hoop, and even though several opposing players rushed at him- a futile attempt, Tyler snickered to himself- he had the space and the time to get closer to the hoop, to ensure they’d score. It was a risk, being as far from the basket as he was.

He took it anyways. He jumped, an Akron player bumped into his side, but the ball whipped through the net in what honestly felt as good as an orgasm to Tyler. He would never be over the feeling of making a basket like that.

The buzzer sounded, the scoreboard changed, the crowd made even more noise than they had before. Someone thumped Tyler on the back, maybe Dallon- it had to have been Dallon, Brendon wouldn’t touch him, Pete wasn’t that friendly with him yet, and Josh was gazing at him from several yards away with hearts- with stars?- in his eyes. Tyler pretended he didn’t see him.
Akron now had the ball, but that was okay; Tyler had a good feeling about this game already. Scoring the first basket and within single digit seconds of the game starting had done wonders for boosting his confidence.

Brendon had the ball, then back to Akron. There was an opening for them to take a shot, and Tyler anticipated they might try it. After all, he’d just taken a risky shot and made it. Tyler knew better than to assume he was the only player there trying to impress the scouts.

Foreseeing their next move, Tyler backed towards their own hoop and jumped to block the ball, just as the shot was attempted. Pete snatched it before the Akron team could get it again and raced towards the other end of the gym.

Pete made the next score, then Tyler again. Josh had the ball and almost made a shot, but the tallest Akron player—several inches taller than Dallon!—thrust it away midair. Even from across the room, Tyler could see the disappointment on Josh’s face. Poor guy. I love him. Tyler would have taken the time to feel properly sorry for him, too, if the ball hadn’t been coming his way just then, thoughts of Josh quickly pushed aside. He and Brendon successfully blocked the hoop while Dallon stole the ball away, and Tyler begrudgingly had to admit to himself his gratitude that at least Brendon was a team player when it boiled down to it. Selfish asshole off the basketball court or not.

By the end of the first half, Akron had managed to score twelve points while Worthington had reached thirty-five. Not too shabby, though as the cheer teams moved onto the floor and Tyler slipped between them to the bench for a quick rest, his body ached. He was fatigued, his head throbbed, his eyes were watering. He knew it was his own fault for staying up so late the previous night, and in truth, he had been slacking off the past couple of months when it came to keeping in shape. Outside of practice after school, he’d done nothing much but sit on his ass and play video games, and it was starting to show now, though not obviously enough for anyone else but himself to notice. There was a burning in his chest from running hard—Akron was starting to get the hang of their game and had made their twelve points in the last five minutes of the second period, while Worthington had scored none in that time. Despite Worthington’s large lead point-wise, that had been a discouraging and rough five minutes.

Tyler’s mind mechanically raced over these facts on repeat, eyes not seeing his surroundings as he collapsed onto the bench and took the water bottle that was offered to him. Someone was patting—no, walloping his sore back. It successfully jogged Tyler out of his brooding.

“Jordan...hey,” Tyler tried not to grumble.

“Dude, you’re doing awesome out there, like, you’re kicking legit ass!”

“I-”

“You almost got the ball that last shot they made, too, I saw it! That player is a douche, that was probably his first basket in months!”

“Well-”

“Don’t worry about their streak, you’ll crush ‘em in the next period! We’re still like, quadruple points ahead of them anyways! Losers!”

Tyler only nodded, thankful when someone tugged on his other arm. Even if it was Brendon, he’d be grateful for the interruption. No, wait, actually—

It was Mikey, thank goodness. He handed Tyler another water bottle. “Hey, man, you good?
They’re catching up.”

“Please,” Tyler groaned. “We’re fine, don’t make me worry over nothing.”

“Okay,” Mikey sounded unconvinced. “I’m playing this next quarter, by the way. Coach wants Pete to sit out.”

“What, why?”

“It’s nothing, just a nosebleed or something, but it won’t stop. Serves him right.”

“Mikey-”

“Okay, not really, it’s just...I’m glad I get to play.”

Tyler huffed out a laugh. “Same. Hey, did you see their point guard in the last quarter? I think we can get around him if you get the ball first thing, I’ll be to his left and-”

“Joseph! Over here,” Coach Anderson interrupted, waving impatiently. Tyler shot a nervous eye roll to Mikey before jogging over to the coach.

Josh was beside him. Tyler shot him a quick grin before the coach had him by the shoulder, pulling him in closer to be heard above the noise of the gymnasium, pulling him closer till he bumped into Josh.

“Alright, Joseph, I was just telling Dun here that I want you two to go hard this half, the entire half. Go hard, don’t let up, I want at least a twenty point lead on Akron.”

“Twenty points? Why-”

“Akron’s a big school, they’re gonna get a lot more games, a lot more chances with the scouts. Worthington, not so much. We’ve got to make a statement here and now if you lot want a running chance at a scholarship. If you two want a running chance. Small schools don’t get a lot, we’ve only had one full scholarship in the past five years. Two is a hell of a lot to ask.”

Tyler sneaked a glance at Josh. Josh was looking at the ground, shuffling his feet.

“I’m not saying this to discourage either of you, or to put you at odds with each other, God forbid - we need your guys’ teamwork especially. But I need you guys to realize how important this is-”

“We do, Coach,” Josh said. Tyler nodded.

“Then what was that out there with that big guy, Dun? With twelve? You had the ball, what happened?”

Tyler peeked a quick glance at Coach. Coach wasn’t even talking about him, and already Tyler could feel his blood starting to simmer.

Josh looked blushed, though that could have been from running around the gym a few moments earlier. “I- sorry, Coach, I had it for a second but then-”

“But then you lost it,” Coach finished, rounding on Tyler before he had even finished speaking. “And Joseph, how did Akron score all those points second quarter?”

“They...made a lot of baskets,” Tyler replied. Josh quickly looked away, but Tyler thought he saw a small smirk flash across his face.
Coach’s veins along his temple were definitely popping out a bit more than they had earlier. He squinted his eyes at Tyler, and Tyler looked away.

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

“Damn right, you’re sorry,” Coach continued, voice booming in comparison to Tyler’s apology. At least the gym was noisy as shit right then. Tyler didn’t want the team hearing all this.

“Josh, when twelve came at you from the left, Joseph was only a few paces behind you. You could have passed.”

Josh shuffled a shoe for a moment before briefly looking over at Tyler, then back down at his shoes.

“Joseph, three separate times—maybe more, but I only counted three— you could have called for Urie to block the ball while you slowed them down. Why didn’t you?”

“I...I guess I didn’t...I didn’t see him?”

“You didn’t see him.”

“Uh-huh....”

“That last quarter, you had the ball within shooting distance at least twice when Akron got it away—”

Tyler cut in. “But I couldn’t get the shot, you know I would’ve if I could, but they were too—”

“Dun was by the hoop. You could have passed. Why didn’t you?”

Tyler was starting to hate that question. He didn’t know.

“I didn’t...he was...I-”

“The scouts are looking for guys who take risks that pay off, but they’re looking for team players, too, you know. If you’re trying to—”

“I’m not!” Tyler didn’t like that insinuation at all. Half true though it may be.

“Okay, okay, Joseph, cool it. It’s not entirely a bad thing, I do understand where you’re coming from, believe it or not. But right now, I need you Joseph and you Dun to work together. Akron’s all warmed up now. If they play another quarter like that last one, we might as well go home right now. Get it?”

Josh murmured his reply; Tyler didn’t respond right away, too lost in thought, but Josh’s arm brushed against his, only briefly, but it jogged Tyler out of his head long enough to respond. Coach nodded curtly and marched away to discuss things with the referee.

To Tyler’s happy surprise, Josh didn’t dart off right away, despite the fact that the rest of the team was only a few yards away with a perfectly clear view of the two of them together, even after the coach had left. Being a team was a lot harder when you weren’t supposed to like each other.

“So, uh...” Josh started, and he wasn’t smiling exactly, but his eyes were bright. Tyler, however, had his back to the bench, and he didn’t try to hide his loving smirk.

“So, uh...” Tyler mimicked, and the corner of Josh’s mouth twitched. I love him, Tyler thought.

“So I guess we have Coach’s permission to hang out now.” Josh’s eyes jumped over Tyler’s
shoulder as he spoke, but Tyler decided to give him a break. Brendon put him on edge, too.

“Ooh, finally, our relationship has been approved,” Tyler sang, and Josh’s eyes widened as he jerked his attention back to Tyler, already shushing him. Tyler laughed.

“Do you think anyone can hear us in here? I can barely hear myself, I highly doubt that Brendon Schmendon.”

“Okay, but you could tone it down, babe,” Josh interrupted, and Tyler wanted so badly, so badly, to kiss him. Games got him worked up like that.

“I really wanna fucking kiss you,” Tyler told him, and the blush that colored Josh’s cheeks was totally worth the- incredibly minuscule- risk of someone overhearing them.

“Win this game and you can,” Josh replied.

“What if we lose?”

Josh thought for a minute and shrugged one shoulder. “We’re not going to.”

Tyler raised an eyebrow at him. “Well, that’s hot.”

Josh blushed even more, and Tyler’s fingers were itching to touch him. Itching to tell. I love....

The buzzer sounded before Tyler could, or before he could tell Josh that he wanted to, or before he could accidentally tell Josh something else, and the rest of the team jogged back onto the floor. Tyler followed Josh as they weaved through several cheerleaders, and he made an obvious point to step widely around Jenna as she slipped by. He could smell her perfume. He probably smelled like sweat and grime and soiled clothes. A resurgence of jealousy gurgled up in his chest, and he hoped insensibly that Josh hadn’t smelled her perfume in passing, too.

Josh fell back a step then to be side by side with Tyler, bumping his shoulder against Tyler’s. The gymnasium was even noisier than it had been during the break, and Tyler felt Josh’s breath tickle his ear as he leaned in to be heard over the commotion.

“I’ll tail you this quarter. I’m gonna watch player five, he’s the guy who kept blocking you, I think. If twelve blocks me again, I’ll pass to you, and if you get a chance, pass to me this time, you brat. ‘Kay?”

Tyler leaned back into Josh’s ear, maybe a little closer than he needed to. “I like it when you tell me what to do,” he said, tone sarcastic.

“No, you don’t,” Josh laughed, shoving Tyler away, and Tyler couldn’t hide his smile if he tried. Good thing the team was distracted-

Except that Brendon was looking at him with a strange, furrowed expression on his face. The wall came back up, and Tyler’s smile turned into a sneer. Brendon looked away.

The buzzer sounded again, and the second half of the game started. Good. Tyler didn’t want to worry about Brendon right then.

Mikey got the ball first thing and dodged between two opposing players before passing to Dallon. Akron stole the ball for less than a full second before Dallon had it back again, though he was cornered by three players. He passed over their heads to Brendon, and Brendon scored the first points of the last half. Better him scoring than Akron, Tyler supposed.
Akron had switched out three players during the break, which was annoying to Tyler because he didn’t know how they played yet. The annoyance had only just come into Tyler’s system when someone was shoving him almost off the edge of the court- again. Number five, he wouldn’t leave him alone. Tyler stepped back to get away from the player, anger growing as he continued to back into his space. Even as Tyler was annoyed as shit about this guy, it did mean one thing he was proud of: Akron had targeted him as the best player on their opposing team. And they saw him as a threat.

*Fucking good!* *They’re right.*

Akron had the ball; they must have been planning their new players thing, saving them for the last half when the rest of them were all getting tired, because they played harder and smarter than the original line up. Tyler didn’t care though. He was smarter.

Josh, not so much. The idiot- cute though he was- had had the ball, and had a chance for a shot, too, back to back with their previous basket. But did he take it? No, of course not, Akron took it away from him. God, did Tyler have to do everything himself? And Mikey thought he was the girl. Please.

*I really... love Josh....* The pesky thought filtered into Tyler’s brain, even as he jumped in front of the hoop to stop Akron scoring, bouncing the ball back to Josh. That player who was puppy guarding him stabbed him in the ribs with his elbow, and Tyler fell back as far as he could without being out of bounds. God, he wanted to take a hammer to this guy’s head.

By the last quarter, Akron had sneaked all the way up to thirty points, and Worthington only two shy of forty. So much for a twenty point lead. The last several minutes of playing time had been especially discouraging for Worthington; Akron had all but written their name on the ball, they were hogging it so much. Tyler was breathing hard, chest heaving, reveling in the moment’s rest he could grab between quarters while the coaches were discussing- loudly- something with the ref. Mikey waved at him from across the court- of course Mikey was happy right then, he alone was mostly responsible for the points that they had managed to win this past quarter. People always underestimated the bench players. Especially when they wore glasses like Mikey’s.

Brendon stalked by in front of Tyler, chewing on his mouth guard. He shot a quick glance in Tyler’s direction, and Tyler squinted at him; it almost looked as if he wanted to say something, but couldn’t quite convince himself to do it. Tyler tried not to smirk. He didn’t *not* like that he maybe had that effect on some people.

“What are you doing?” Tyler gave in after another moment had passed, and Brendon had paced in front of him a couple more times.

Brendon stopped and eyed Tyler, hands on his hips, still chewing on his mouth guard and looking just the tiniest bit intimidating. Not to *Tyler*, of course, but. Maybe intimidating to *some* people. To Jordan maybe.

“That guy puppy guarding you-” Brendon started, tone flat, nearly inaudible above the crowd’s chatter. He glanced over his shoulder and moved closer to Tyler, and Tyler fought the urge to step further away. He *didn’t* fight the grimace that had come onto his face though.

Brendon ignored his obvious distaste and continued, not too worried about disguising his own discomfort either. “That guy, number five, he’s a dick, he-”

“You should know,” Tyler couldn’t help adding.

“Shut the fuck up,” Brendon sounded undeterred. “Listen. I’m going to foul him while he’s busy pushing you off the floor. This is the last half and I’m gonna hang near their end, so you move that
“Then what?” Tyler said, still squinting, unable to keep the slight sound of contempt out of his words.

“Then I’ll punch him in the face or something.”

Tyler rolled his eyes, wishing more than anything that this was anyone other than Urie, even Pete. He’d love if this were Pete.

“Right in front of the scouts? You’re gonna punch him?”

“Why not?”

“I don’t have time for this—”

“No, okay, I’ll hit him in the stomach or something, you happy now?” Brendon huffed, glaring at Tyler. Tyler glared right back. “It’s gotta get me a foul, though. They’ve played dirty this whole time, if we don’t get a foul then we won’t get the ball in time to beat them—”

“We? If you wanna get a foul, then cool, but don’t drag me into it. The scouts don’t—”

Brendon groaned. “Shut up about the scouts. They’re looking for smart players, too, y’know, not just guys who know how to play it safe. You’re not the only one who needs a scholarship either, okay? Look, if we don’t get the ball—”

Needs?

“-might as well call it quits now. They’re gaining on us, and we had the ball for like, a total of thirty seconds, max. That’s stupid.”

Tyler stared out at the crowd for a minute, his breath finally coming evenly again. He spotted his family in one of the upper bleachers. His mom was waving at him.

“Okay? Joseph—” Brendon sounded impatient, and Tyler looked back at him, trying not to roll his eyes again.

“Yeah, sure, whatever,” Tyler said. He could see the coaches moving away from the referee. The referee was about to blow his whistle.

“You’ll bring him to me? And keep him there so I can—”

“Yeah, yeah, I will, just leave me alone,” Tyler huffed.

“Gladly,” Brendon snapped in reply, stalking off. Tyler did roll his eyes again.

The players readied themselves, the buzzer sounded, and the last fifteen minutes of the game started. Coach kept waving at Tyler and pointing at Josh, and Tyler almost felt like laughing. Brendon kept shooting him daggers, too. Tyler really did have to carry this whole team on his own, didn’t he?

Akron had the ball, as they had all expected. Five was trying to block him again, as Tyler had also expected. Josh was conveniently in the same area of the court as Brendon, so Tyler could kill two birds with one stone, then maybe both the coach and Brendon would leave him alone. He started edging his way in that direction.

Dallon had the ball after stopping a basket; a very close call, you could tell by how excited the crowd
had gotten. Tyler was pretty excited at that, too. Dallon was the tallest player out there, of both teams, and Worthington hadn’t had the ball in so long, Tyler was almost getting bored.

Unfortunately though, Dallon was cornered, and the only thing he could do was toss the ball out into the court as near to a Worthington player as he could. At least Akron hadn’t stolen it from him. Yet.

The middle of the court had been relatively empty, too many Akron players edging their way into everyone else’s space (bastards.) The ball bounced once in a yard of space between Mikey and Tyler, and they both dove for it at the same time, just as player five dove to block Tyler from getting his hands on the ball (double bastard.)

Mikey must have gotten the ball then, because all Tyler knew in the next moment was that his face was smacking into the floor, and a burning feeling was throbbing in his cheekbone and nose. He heard a whistle blow.

“Foul, that was a foul!” Coach Anderson was yelling. Tyler felt something wet on his lip as he clambered back up to his feet. The room and players around him were spinning. There was a blurry spot of red on the floor.

Both coaches moved back towards the ref and another loud discussion ensued. Mikey and Dallon were both by Tyler’s side; the offending Akron player had conveniently slipped off somewhere out of Tyler’s line of vision, foggy though it was.

Tyler wiped at his nose as Mikey bounced beside him excitedly and Dallon tried waving a hand in front of Tyler’s face. Tyler pushed them both away.

“Guys, I’m fine-”

“Yeah, but if you get a free throw you can’t be seeing double, maybe you should sit-”

“No-”

“Yeah, Dal, he’s fine, Tyler’s got this,” Mikey said for him, patting Tyler on the back, like that might help his nosebleed and impending headache. “We need the points-”

“Not if he’s hurt, we don’t-”

“Dallon, I’m fine, really,” Tyler interrupted, just as the referee verified that it was indeed a foul. Worthington got two free throws. Tyler got two free throws.

He wiped the trickle of blood still inching from his nose on one of his sleeves, glad now that he had worn long sleeves beneath his jersey, and tried not to stumble as he slipped into place in front of Akron’s hoop, the other nine players on the floor making room for him, spreading out in front of him. The ref threw him the ball, and the gym felt strangely quiet, at least in comparison to how it had sounded before. The lack of squeaking sneakers on the floor was unnerving.

Tyler steadied his breath and turned the ball over in his hands, pretending to himself that he wasn’t currently the center of attention in a room of probably a thousand people. Jesus. He took another breath, a bigger one, but it felt like even less air than his first breath. The hoop looked a little blurred. His right temple was throbbing.

A drop of sweat trickled down his forehead, and he peeked up through his eyelashes at the players around him- not at the bleachers, anywhere but at all the people surrounding him up to the ceilings- and saw Coach Anderson pacing in the background. He held a thumbs up and waved impatiently at the hoop. Mikey was watching intently, and smiled when he noticed Tyler looking. Brendon was a
few feet away from Mikey, and he was- oh, he was scowling, big time. Why is he...oh, shit...he thinks I did this on purpose? But why- this wouldn’t, this isn’t really helping us, he...he was right, we need the foul, not them. Now I’ve got this stupid free throw, and then I’ve got to hand the ball straight back to those assholes. Well, he can’t think I planned this? He can’t honestly think I’m that selfish that I’d let the whole team suffer just so I can have a free throw...can he? God, he probably does. Well, great, no big deal, he just hates me even more now, and thinks I’m a liar. And a show-off. Fuck, just as usual, everyone assumes shit without knowing, why can’t he just...I don’t know, but I didn’t....

Before Tyler could get too agitated about what Brendon may or may not have been thinking and holding against him just then, his eyes fell, without even meaning to, on Josh. Who else? Tyler hadn’t really noticed if he had been physically or visibly shaking due to nerves, but he suddenly felt a lot steadier than he had only a moment before. Josh smiled, at him, a real smile, his eyes crinkling and nose scrunching like Tyler loved, loved, and then he pursed his lips, just for a moment; and if they had been alone, Tyler would have pretended to catch that kiss. Sometimes he was corny like that. He was still a kid after all.

It felt stupid to think- and Tyler would probably never tell Josh this- but having Josh there, smiling at him and blowing him kisses and supporting him and loving him- was all Tyler needed to gather his fraying nerves and take the stupid shot.

A basket, of course. And then another. Two easy points. But then the game sprang back into action, the timer starting its last fifteen minute countdown, and Akron was handed the ball on a silver platter, damn them. Tyler wiped his sleeve across his nose again and took off across the court, still half planning on helping stupid Brendon get his foul if he could, still definitely planning on not pissing Coach off and doing his best to bounce off Josh’s strong points, and let Josh bounce off his. It would help if they could get their hands on the damn ball, though. Stupid Akron. They scored two easy baskets, and Tyler cursed out loud as the scoreboard changed from thirty to thirty-five. Three points away from Worthington. Shit, shit, shit.

And on top of it all, player five was still up his ass, even after getting a foul, the asshole. Why wasn’t he sitting out? That was so not fair. This game was rigged.

Another basket. Thirty-seven points. Another trickle of blood was running from his nose, slipping across his lips, and he could taste iron, but he didn’t feel like wiping it away. If he lifted his arm he’d probably elbow Five in the face, he was that close to him. Hey, maybe that wasn’t too bad an idea-

Just then, Mikey got the ball. How, Tyler didn’t know, he hadn’t seen, it had all happened too quickly to clearly make it out. Or maybe his vision was just still too unfocused. Either way, Mikey-Worthington- had the ball. Five minutes of game left. They had a chance yet!

Mikey swerved in Tyler’s direction to avoid an Akron player, and Five abandoned Tyler long enough to try jostling the ball away from Mikey. Tyler took the opportunity to dash away towards the opposite end of the room, towards Akron’s hoop. Their unguarded hoop.

Akron had been so preoccupied stealing basket after basket, so focused on keeping the ball completely away from Worthington, that they had left a small clearing in the prime area to shoot a basket- a bit of a stretch, but nowhere near the stretch that Tyler had already taken that night with his first shot. They had a chance for a basket- he could make the shot.

But...Tyler loved Mikey a lot, but shooting from a distance was not the guy’s strong point, not with twenty/two hundred vision and ridiculously bulky glasses slipping further down his nose than usual with the sweat. And now there were two players blocking him, and it looked like maybe
Worthington wasn’t going to score right then after all. Eight minutes left. It was going to be an even score. God forbid if they...Tyler couldn’t even think about that yet. Not yet.

The Akron players were pressing closer, and there was nowhere for Mikey to go. Tyler waved a hand, and just as Mikey saw him and aimed for a throw in his direction, the guy behind him swiped it away, making a frantic turn around for Worthington’s hoop. Tyler watched with a sinking feeling as the guy spun around, ready to dart away, when he was face to face with Josh.

Josh. Standing there with sweaty curls plastered to his shining forehead, a dark blush high on his cheekbones, his lips parted as his chest heaved up and down, visible patches of sweat on his jersey. More like shining armor. God, he was hot. And God, did Tyler love him.

He looked ferocious, and Tyler had never been so suddenly turned on in all his life. Probably the adrenaline. Yeah, and the sweat on Josh’s flexing biceps, that, too, probably. Josh had the ball before the Akron guy had even taken one step in the other direction, and then the other players were swarming around Josh, but he took off towards their hoop, towards Tyler. Tyler felt frozen to the spot, eyes glued to Josh.

Love of my life, Tyler thought, and it didn’t even occur to him to be embarrassed about it. He loved Josh, dammit!

The scoreboard behind Josh stole Tyler’s focus then for a moment, and he saw that they were down to only seconds left. Half a minute. They had to get this shot now.

Akron, however, wasn’t going to just let them make an easy basket. All their players crowded towards their end of the court, apparently giving up the fleeting chance for them to score any more points this game. Akron and Worthington were tied, after all. They just didn’t want Worthington to score now.

Josh was stuck in the middle of the court, too far to risk taking a shot, and circled by too many players to risk handing the ball off to a teammate. He tried once to pass to Mikey, but some douche elbowed Mikey out of the way, and his glasses slipped off his face. He wouldn’t be any more help this game, not unless he could find his glasses without them getting crushed first. God, where was Brendon with his fondness to play dirty? They could kinda use that right about now-

Five was back in Tyler’s space, and Tyler shot daggers into the back of the guy’s skull. He knew Tyler was in the best position to sneak an easy last hoop if Josh could only find a chance to pass to him, and he was doing his best to block Tyler’s view of the game. He was taller than him, too, dammit.

Suddenly there was excited shouting from the crowd, and sneakers shrieking on the floor, and the sound of the ball bouncing, and Tyler saw the scoreboard’s fuzzy numbering, fifteen, fourteen, thirteen, twelve....

There was more commotion on the court and a flurry of movement, and Tyler knew without seeing that Josh had broken through the wall and was close, getting closer to the hoop. Without thinking too hard about it, Tyler kneed the guy in front of him in the back of his knee, with a little more force than was necessary, and he stumbled forward; Tyler darted around him, just as the largest Akron player butted into Josh’s space. Josh was poised to jump into the air, ball already loosening from his fingers, but as the other player advanced on him, he shifted in the last half second, and the ball was flying in Tyler’s direction.

Tyler caught it, and whirled around towards the hoop. The tall Akron guy had gotten their first, and whoa, yeah, maybe he was taller than Dallon. The last ten seconds had arrived, the audience was
counting down with it, you *always* knew when it was the last ten seconds. Ball still safely in hand, but his stress building with each passing second, Tyler spun around, away from the guy blocking his direct shot, with the hopes of making a basket from the side of the court, but- douchebag player five was apparently bristling, mad, for some reason, at Tyler, and he head butted him, sending Tyler stumbling backwards. A whistle shrieked among the noise, but good luck pausing a high school game during the last ten seconds for anything.

His vision, already blurred from his previous fall, was only worse now, but Tyler had played with more severe and bothersome injuries before. Whether or not he made any baskets with those injuries, Tyler couldn’t really recall at that moment, but he figured that there were more important things to be focused on right then anyways.

With both of his only sure options blocked, and the rest of the Akron team moving in behind him to close off his route back to the middle of the floor for a longer shot, Tyler swung back around to face Josh. Four seconds flashed above Josh’s head, and as a faceless Akron player lunged towards Tyler, Tyler threw the ball back to Josh, his only option.

Akron, thankfully, had only had eyes for Tyler once he had gotten the ball, and none were guarding Josh any longer. The tallest player who was guarding the hoop stepped towards Josh again, just as Josh was jumping for the shot- Tyler knew the Akron guy would, before he had even passed the ball back to Josh; and foul or not, Tyler stuck out a leg and tripped the guy flat on his face. As he fell, he kicked out a leg at Tyler, and- okay, Tyler hadn’t been anticipating *that*. He tripped forwards towards where Josh had been standing, just as the ball flashed through the net, just as the crowd screamed *one!*, just as Josh landed back on the ground and turned, turned with enough force that he and Tyler collided, and Tyler was no longer tripping forward but stumbling *backwards*.

The buzzer sounded, and that was all that Tyler could hear as he scrambled at Josh’s arm, but he was falling anyways, legs tangling with Josh’s as his back smacked the ground, and the breath was knocked out of him, stunning him.

Josh stumbled on his leg for a brief moment, and Tyler knew he was going to fall before he did, right on top of him. He tried sitting up and out of the way, pulling his legs away from Josh’s; but Josh fell against him, cushioning the initial impact with an arm on either side of Tyler’s head, their chests connected. One of Tyler’s hands went to Josh’s wrist of its own accord, his fingers wrapping around it, and semi-embarrassed, he realized that his knees were drawn up against his chest, and Josh was sort of...in between them...and on top of him.

His cheeks were growing warm as Tyler stared up at Josh, stared into his milky brown eyes staring back down at him, and all he could hear still was the distant, muted sound of the buzzer, and suddenly all he could see was that late winter day in the gymnasium back at Worthington, when he had been shooting baskets by himself after school, lonely and dejected and in denial of his feelings for his ex best friend, and then suddenly, like the sun appearing after a rainy day, there *he* had been running towards him and then *kissing* him and all of Tyler’s hurt and all of his solitude had been wiped away, and they had tripped on each other then, too, and had fallen, *together*, lying in the shadow of a basketball hoop, just like they were now only minus all the spectators, and that moment a season ago was when he had realized, Tyler could now see, *that* was the moment when he had *known*, deep down in his gut, when Josh was looking down at him with affection and concern in his eyes, worried he had hurt him, how could Josh ever hurt him, Tyler *adored* him; palm gently, safely, *lovingly* behind his head, *that* was when Tyler had known, even though he hadn’t realized it in the moment, and stupidly, blindly, not for days and *months* after. But he had *known* then, and he knew now.

*I love you*... Tyler thought.
“I love you,” Tyler said.

The second the murmured words slipped out from Tyler’s lips, his heart stopped pumping, his brain stopped processing, his thoughts stopped flowing, the whole earth stopped spinning. At least it felt that way to Tyler, still on his back with his knees pulled up and stuck in a somewhat compromising position with potentially many, many people seeing, seeing him and Josh on top of him. Josh looking down at him. Josh...not saying anything. Not doing anything.

Tyler opened his mouth again but nothing came out. Josh wasn’t saying anything- Tyler thought that maybe he should be panicking, Josh wasn’t saying anything, Tyler had just told him- had accidentally confessed to him that he loved him...and Josh wasn’t saying anything. He hadn’t even reacted. Shouldn’t Tyler be freaking out about Josh not freaking out? Why did he feel so calm? Or maybe Tyler was freaking out, but it was like freaking out so bad that he didn’t even realize it yet, the feeling of utter and chaotic, penetrating terror was flooding through him so quick and so violently that he couldn’t even feel it yet. He would catch up with it soon enough, or it would catch up with him; it would drown him, just give him a couple of seconds for the crushing anxiety to crash in and do its job.

But...it wouldn’t, would it, if Josh would just react. If he would just say something. Anything. Tyler came to, as if he had been in a daze, and realized he had been staring directly into Josh’s eyes the entire time. It felt like they’d been on the floor for an eternity, but that was the buzzer still, wasn’t it? It couldn’t be more than three, five seconds maybe. Josh was still staring at him, too. He wasn’t blinking. He wasn’t smiling. Tyler’s mouth was dry. The blood leaking from his nose was creeping back up into his skull.

And then, just as quickly as they had fallen and the game had ended and Tyler's heart had cracked open and verbally spilled its contents, just as quickly as the altering, tell-tale words had left Tyler’s mouth, three soft words obliterating his guarded secret: Josh was gone, the comforting, familiar heat and pressure along his body gone, the warm and safe brown color he loved so much, gone, the cold air washing over him. He immediately straightened his legs and sat up, a blush coloring his face and a deep humiliation weighing down on his shoulders.

He glanced across the court. Players and cheerleaders and students were flooding the floor, music was blasting over the loudspeakers, the bleachers were emptying themselves out onto the court. People, more and more people, every which way he looked. Tyler was so, so achingly lonely. The scoreboard read: Akron, thirty-seven. Worthington, an even forty. They had won.

But what had he lost? A wet drop trailed down Tyler's face and seeped between his lips. He expected the taste of iron, but instead tasted salt.

Chapter End Notes

soon soon sooooon :"\n)) you reading this are the bomb dot com i love you, the pilot babies do too <33333 i'm a slut for any comments u got btw LOVE u buddies <3333
conflict for the thrill

Chapter Notes

a lil more ~drama~ before some more fUn StUfF :")))) ifyknowwhatimean ;)) also, time to read the new chapt to that old classic song "i love brendon so much irl there is no one sweeter i'm so sorry beebo i DO actually love u" D: (((speaking of mr urie, there's some secret plot stuff happening w him soon so :')) be patient w him <333)))

chapt title from Smithereens :")))))))) cough cough sURE TyLeR ur collected calm n chill xD <3333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had all happened so fast. One second Josh was jumping and watching the ball soar through the basket, then the sound of the buzzer and the crowd filled his ears as his chest filled with pride and satisfaction; the next second he was plummeting head first towards the hard vinyl floor and- and Tyler. Oh, God, he was going to squash him. Tyler was right, he was a lil thick, thick enough to definitely not make it feel good if he were to suddenly free fall on top of him.

And then the next second, Josh’s heart was pumping out of his chest. He could feel Tyler’s legs around him, they were shaking, and Josh was looking into the most beautiful, soulful eyes he had ever seen, the eyes he had fallen in love with, and God, did he love him.

Josh loved him so much, was thinking it so hard, was feeling it so hard, he was suddenly overcome with aching want. For Tyler to love him, too, for Tyler to feel it, for Tyler to say it. For Tyler to say it back. Josh didn’t want to be the only one. Not again.

Josh was so consumed with wanting that for a brief, sweet moment, he could actually imagine Tyler saying it, could almost hear the words leaving his lips, could picture the way the words would look leaving his red lips. Tyler’s mouth was even parted. It could be so easy for him to just....

Then, insensibly, Josh thought maybe he did hear Tyler say it. Out loud. To him. He could have sworn that he’d seen Tyler’s lips move.

But the crowd was so fucking loud. The buzzer was still blaring annoyingly, and he could hear somewhere in the distant faraway corridors of his mind Brendon and Dallon and Spencer whooping and screaming in victory. He could hear Worthington’s cheer team making a lot of racket, joining in with the rest of the sports team. He could hear the coaches start up arguing again with the referee.

And then- and then Josh noticed that he was on top of Tyler, and his sweet little boyfriend with his legs around his waist would most likely not want the near entirety of Worthington high school and their families, plus all of Akron, to know he was sweet like that. And a little subby, if Josh was being honest. The second it registered in his fogged mind just how compromising a physical position they were in right then, he felt a sudden urgency to get out of it. Here he was, just staring down at Tyler like an idiot, forcing him into this position with no way to get out, swooning to himself with how in love he was with his best friend, all while Tyler was probably hating his guts for not getting the fuck off of him, boyfriend or not.
Josh scurried away from him then, though every fiber of his body and mind and heart was screaming at him to kiss Tyler, to tell Tyler, to help him up at least, for God’s sake. The poor guy had a nosebleed and everything. But Josh was scared, and Josh was embarrassed, and he was the tiniest bit hurt, too, deep down inside, that his brain would play such cruel tricks on him, about that of all things. He could feel the stinging of hundreds of pairs of eyes on him already, probably on Tyler, too. But Josh had made the winning shot, of course people were going to be looking at him. The last thing Tyler probably wanted right then was for Josh to bring unnecessary- and kinda degrading-attention to him by being between his legs, whether Josh was having a moment or not.

Right?

Josh turned away from Tyler, still on the ground, and he shook his head, trying to clear it, trying to see straight in the gymnasium that was suddenly swarming with people, way more people than could possibly have been sitting on those bleachers. Someone grabbed Josh’s arm, and Josh was surprised that anyone could find anyone in this crowd.

It was Spencer. He was yelling something enthusiastically into Josh’s ear as he dragged him to where Coach Anderson was standing smugly a few yards away from the ref, who was still in heated discussion with the Akron coach, apparently. What else was there to discuss? They’d won.

“DUN!” Coach yelled, thwomping Josh on the back hard enough that he stumbled into Spencer. “That was one hell of a shot! I mean it wasn’t twenty points, not even close, you all really slept on this one, but- all in all it was a hell of a good save! Hell of a good jump if ever I’ve seen one! And I’ve seen hundreds, hundreds-”

“Josh ua!” Brendon hurtled into Josh before Josh could even register someone had said his name, grabbing him in a giant bear hug and shaking him like a dog with a stuffed toy. “Bro, that was insane, you saved the game, dude! Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit! Did you see the scouts? They were on their feet, dude, I heard them talking about you-”

“You did not, you were nowhere near them,” Spencer cut in, looking only a little left out, eyebrows furrowed at Brendon. “Get off, he’s my friend, too.”

They were both yelling to hear each other over the uproar, and Josh couldn’t help laughing, nerves still on edge, his skin tingling- from sweat, probably, but also from the adrenaline, also from the noise and the bodies crowding around him, also from Tyler. Also from what he couldn’t stop thinking he had almost heard him say...he could have sworn-

“And Dun!” Coach was yelling at him again, obviously beaming. Josh could see the Akron coach over his shoulder glaring in their direction, the referee walking away. “They tried to call a foul for Joseph interfering with that player trying to block you- a foul, can you get a load of that? After the way they’d been playing all night! Just trying to get even for Joseph getting that free throw earlier. Ha! And if that shot you took hadn’t been the last shot of the game, they wouldn’t’ve had a thing to say about it, and I damn well told that ref so!”

At the mention of Tyler, despite his two friends currently bickering on either side of him and Coach gabbing in front of him, Josh couldn’t stop a quick look over his shoulder, to where he had left Tyler. Tyler had helped him get that last shot, after all- if it hadn’t have been for him, Josh doubted he would’ve made the basket. Tyler should be out here getting some attention, too, he should-

“Hey, where is Joseph? Get that sonovabitch out here, where is he?” Coach was booming, and Josh felt his cheeks turning red. “That kid played dirty, ha, I like him! Knows when to play low, that’s a good player, right there-”
“I...I think he’s-” Josh, despite his friends being right there beside him, despite Bren, was turning around once more to try and spot Tyler through the thick waters of people; but before he could, Brendon was calling out to someone over his shoulder and hauling Josh along with him. Josh thought he caught a glimpse of Tyler’s fluffy brown head, a flash of the white number one on his jersey, but there were just too many people to be sure. Josh’s heart sank, despite everything, and he let himself be pulled away into the crowd.

His parents made a big deal about it, which Josh sort of hated, but what could he say, he was a good kid, okay? He could tolerate his mom blubbering over him and hugging him in front of the whole team- now that he thought about it, Josh was kind of glad he couldn’t see where Tyler was. Hopefully that meant Tyler couldn’t see him right then either. Josh tolerated his dad clapping him on the back and repeatedly announcing “that’s my boy!”, even in spite of the fact that Brendon and Spencer were snickering behind his back. He then tolerated Ashley’s lack of attention, which was surprisingly and equally annoying, and Abby’s extra attention to make up for her sister; he even let her hug him. Only once though- he was only human, after all, and who in their right minds could stand little siblings touching them?

Speaking of little siblings, Josh even tolerated his parents throwing an almost more enthusiastic (and embarrassing) fuss over Jordan, too, the little brat hadn’t even played. But then again, this was the usual response after every game, whether they won or lost, played or sat on bench, winning shot or not. Josh was, begrudgingly, used to it. Didn’t make it any less embarrassing though, and it didn’t make Josh any less relieved when Jordan escaped from their mom’s clutches and dashed off towards the safety of the changing rooms.

The crowd was thinning out. The guys from the Akron team had slinked off pretty quickly, and the commotion was starting to die down. Typical of Josh’s dad, he didn’t want to spend the motel fair and insisted the Dun family, sans Josh and Jordan, drive the two hours back to Worthington that night. Josh’s mom gave him a goodbye hug as she reminded him to brush his teeth and to not stay up half the night. Brendon snickered from somewhere behind Josh, and then Josh snickered when his mom turned to Brendon then and gave him a hug as well, reminding him of the same things and assuring him that he had played a wonderful game, too, if your parents could have been here, honey, they’d have been so proud! Brendon was bright pink, and Josh didn’t pass up the opportunity to have a quick laugh at his friend’s expense.

His family finished saying goodbye as Josh’s dad gave him another quick pat on the shoulder, urging the girls to hurry on out to the car. Josh felt like he could breathe again when they finally disappeared into the school hallway.

Brendon was still a light shade of pink. Josh looked at him for a moment without saying anything, and held his hands up in mock surrender when Brendon squinted at him, daring him to say anything.

“At least Ry’s already in the changing rooms,” Brendon muttered, apparently not embarrassed or flustered enough to stay put out at Josh.

“Yeah, same,” Josh huffed, mind automatically going to Tyler.

“What, about Ryan?” Josh’s eyes shot worriedly over to his friend, but Brendon was already smirking, already poking fun. Better than than seriously suspecting anything. “Get your eyes off my man, Dun, he’s mine.”

“Damn it,” Josh joked, relieved, and Brendon laughed. Phew...close one.
The two of them started walking towards the changing rooms, more out of habit than anything else. The rest of the team and cheer girls had the same idea, most already further along than Josh and Brendon. *They* hadn’t had to deal with doting parents and little sisters. *Lucky* *assholes.*

They were halfway to the gym when someone brushed against Josh’s shoulder, and Josh only half glanced at them when he realized it was- oh, it was Jenna. She was heading towards the girls’ changing rooms, along with several friends from the cheer team, and she had been chatting happily, laughing at something one of the girls had said, when she too looked over at Josh, and froze mid-smile.

Josh forced a small grin at her, more to be polite than anything else, and she promptly looked away.

“Oh, ouch, ice woman!” Brendon laughed from beside Josh, and Josh elbowed him in the ribs, but not before Jenna cast a quick glare over her shoulder at them, disappearing with the other girls into their changing room.

Josh huffed. “Why’d you have to go and say that?”

“Say what?” Brendon said, still laughing. “Dude, she is *pissed* at you, seriously, did you do *anything* at all for Valentine’s?”

“Bren, I-”

“And you still haven’t told me where you guys were during the dance! Did you just disappoint her *that much* in the bedroom that she-”

“Brendon, for real,” Josh cut in, definitely *not* wanting to have this discussion- again- right now. Brendon snickered quietly beside him, but thankfully left it alone.

It had only been one full day since Josh had broken up with Jenna; it kinda felt like a whole year. More accurately, Josh guessed, *last night* felt like a year ago. *Tyler* felt like a year ago. God, Josh just wanted to be near him again and forget about everything else...Jenna was pissed at him, ever since lunch earlier that day, as if her being pissed over their break-up and having to lowkey hide it wasn’t enough; Jordan wouldn’t stop hanging out with Tyler in front of everyone and who *knew* how long that would last before someone figured something out; Mikey was mad at him again, probably because of that scene at lunch- like it was *all* Josh’s fault, thanks a *lot*; Spencer was maybe or maybe not catching on to him and Tyler; and Tyler- and *Tyler..*

Josh hadn’t seen him since he had pulled away from him after making the winning shot. After he had tripped and fallen on top of the little dummy and his legs had bracketed Josh’s sides and Josh could see every drop of sweat along Tyler’s hairline and had almost drowned looking down into those eyes. After Josh had realized Tyler was probably pissed as *hell* at him for lying on top of him like that in front of all those people, affection for his boyfriend the farthest thing from Tyler’s mind right then. After Josh could have *sworn* to the God in heaven that Tyler had said to him the *one* thing that Josh wanted and *needed* to hear more than anything else in the whole world.

Josh could have *sworn*....

The guilt washed over him again, the guilt about Jenna, the guilt about Tyler, and nameless guilt he had yet to credit, and Josh sorta kinda hated himself. He felt so *careless*. If only he could see Tyler, if only he could look in his eyes again and *know* they were okay- of course we’re okay, idiot, why wouldn’t we be? You didn’t say anything, you just thought...no, you guys are okay, Jesus- then maybe Josh could be convinced that he was worrying prematurely. After all, if he and *Tyler* were okay, all of Josh’s other problems wouldn’t seem half as big.
The rooms at Akron were larger than the ones back at Worthington, and Josh, being so caught up-again, still- in his own head, wouldn’t have found his locker until probably midnight. As it was, Brendon started jogging down the row of lockers like he owned the place, and Josh followed his friend and the sound of excited chatter coming from nearby.

They rounded the corner and- and there was Tyler. Josh felt like he could breathe again! There he was! He was sitting on one of the benches in the middle of the room with his back to Josh, leaning down between his knees, and for a moment Josh forgot what had happened, and his worry skyrocketing through the roof. But then Mikey came from the other side of the room, from the connected bathrooms with a wet rag, and Josh remembered that Tyler had gotten a nosebleed during that last half.

*It’s just a nosebleed, dude, he’s okay, he’s okay, it’s okay, stop freaking out, he’s fine, Tyler’s fine….*

Josh watched Tyler out of the corner of his eye as he bodily fought himself from going immediately over to his side. Not only did he want to make sure officially that Tyler was okay, he wanted- no, he needed, he definitely needed to know that they were okay…one look, that was all he needed-

A loud commotion from behind Josh right then was more than enough to remind him that talking to Tyler was not an option, not in the same room with half the team present, the others only a room away, already hitting the showers. Brendon had slung an arm around Ryan’s waist, hollering one of the cheerleader’s songs and acting like the typical idiot he was. Ryan had his jersey half off and half on, eyes rolled up to the ceiling as Brendon jostled him, but the blush on his cheeks was obvious.

A pang of jealousy, of longing, punched Josh straight in the gut, even as he huffed out a laugh at Brendon’s antics. The whole team’s mood seemed light; even Pete didn’t look too angry just then as he bypassed them to the bathrooms.

Josh watched his friends mess around for a moment longer. Brendon looked so happy. Ryan looked so happy. Josh wondered briefly if they had ever said *I love you* to each other. *Did* they love each other? Was it not that big of a deal to them? Why couldn’t he just man up and say it, why did it always have to feel so...so scary? They were just words.

Josh heard Tyler’s voice and looked over at him and Mikey kneeling in front of him. The two of them laughed quietly at something- probably Tyler making a slightly rude comment about someone, that someone probably being Brendon- and Josh watched the tendons in the back of Tyler’s neck move as he rocked forward slightly, the patch of sweat on the back of his jersey, a silly tuft of hair sticking out further than the rest. And suddenly Josh was reminded that they weren’t just words- they were, but they were so much more, too, they were so heavy, they were so *vital*. Those words would make or break them.

In the game, out on the floor with the ball, Josh could take risks. He did. He had just that night. But with Tyler? The stakes were a lot higher with this game, and Josh didn’t know if the risk was worth the fleeting chance of reward. Not when he had already won his trophy. Why risk losing it completely? How selfish could he be?

Those words, as much as Josh was aching to say them, belonged to a game that he wasn’t sure Tyler wanted to play. And Josh wasn’t gonna force him- he *loved* him.

Josh could handle this. Josh *could.*

His ears, as if fine-tuned to hear Tyler’s voice, Tyler’s breath, Tyler’s presence, heard the second Tyler started speaking again to Mikey in a low voice, and Mikey handed him the wet towel. He said something and dashed off for the bathrooms again.
Brendon was still horsing around with Ryan, and the other guys were pretty occupied laughing with them, and Tyler was right there all alone and bleeding, and Josh’s whole entire body ached to go to him. He might have, too, consequences be damned, when Tyler must have felt his eyes drilling into his back. He turned around, towel covering half his face, and looked at him, and Josh’s entire life froze.

There he is! There’s Tyler! God, I- I love him! I really, really do- please, Tyler, I-

Tyler dropped the towel and smiled, a quick, kidsy, closed-lip grin that stretched across his face in a mischievous way, and Josh automatically smiled in response, wanting to laugh, wanting to cry he loved him so much. The trickle of blood from Tyler’s nose started again, and Josh watched it, transfixed, as it pooled in the dip above his lips. Josh wanted to kiss him, nosebleed and all.

“Joshua! You aren’t listening-”

Josh and Tyler both jumped, and Josh jerked away like he’d been caught stealing something. His eyes darted to Brendon, cheeks flushing as he tried to act calm. To act normal.

“Sorry, what...what’d I miss?” Josh ventured, smiling nervously now, and Brendon rolled his eyes as he yanked his jersey over his head. Spencer filled Josh in for him.

“Who was that guy blocking you the whole time? Five or-”

“Oh! No, it was, uh, it was twelve? I don’t know him though, I don’t think he-”

“Probably some stupid transfer,” Brendon called from beneath his shirt. He jerked it off his head and tossed it the floor. “God, he was annoying, he was legit stepping on you, dude.”

“Yeah, he was-”

“Transfer players are all like that, that’s why they’re transferred, y’know, ‘cuz they were kicked off their old teams for being first-rate A-holes and they’re too stupid to get into college with anything besides a sports scholarship.” Josh stiffened at Brendon’s words, fighting every urge in his body to look over at Tyler. In any other setting, with any other group of people, Josh wouldn’t have thought twice about Brendon’s bitching, but here... with Tyler... Brendon might as well had just used Tyler’s name.

“-that’s why they gotta transfer, ruin a different team. All transfer kids are like that. Ha, this team should know. Right, Joseph?”

Oh, shit, he did. Josh wanted to, to...to do something, to- hit something. He wasn’t a very violent guy by nature, but he could feel the blood inside him starting to boil. He thought briefly about punching a locker, but if he did that, he might as well just go grab Tyler’s face and kiss him in front of everyone instead. Which- wow, okay, that sounded a lot more satisfactory anyways, maybe he sh-

“Bren, don’t,” Ryan started before Brendon- or Tyler. God forbid - could say anything, lowering his voice to speak once he had caught Brendon’s attention. The other players stirred uneasily.

Josh turned to his locker then, a good excuse to hide the emotions playing way too openly across his face, but it also gave him a much better vantage point of keeping an eye on Tyler without looking too conspicuous. Tyler hadn’t moved from his spot, his back to the rest of the room and still leaned forward holding the towel to his nose, but Josh could tell his shoulders were a lot more tensed than they had been before. Before....

Something stirred in Josh’s chest; Ryan was arguing quietly with Brendon over his shoulder, and
every few words he could catch Brendon interrupting, some smart comment never too far away, and
something was stirring in Josh’s chest at the sound of Brendon’s voice. It was stirring, and for lack of
anything- or anyone- better to hit, Josh tugged his locker open and let it slam against the row behind
it, clanging loudly, not even caring if some of the guys looked at him. That felt a bit better.

His phone spilled from inside the locker and clattered to the floor, and Josh cursed loudly as he
scooped it back up, glad for the extra excuse to let off a little steam. Couldn’t let the whole team
know he was getting his hackles this raised by some offhanded comments by a used-to-be best friend
about his boyfriend. God, Josh had never gotten this worked up over Jenna when people had made
the occasional comments- which they had.

But I didn’t love Jenna, Josh thought, feeling the build of pressure in his chest slowly release itself as
he tuned out the team’s chatter and focused instead on working his things back into his bag. He
thought about Tyler smiling at him, Tyler laughing, the image of Tyler just moments before, all
sweaty beneath him and his lips parting just enough, the crowd just loud enough, the blood rushing
in Josh’s ears just enough, Josh stupidly hopeful just enough that for a moment he thought that he
could imagine Tyler loving him back. Josh felt the thing that had previously started to stir in his chest
subside.

He felt okay enough to face the team again. He turned around and edged a step closer to where Tyler
was, needing the opposite end of the bench to drop his bag on. He kicked off one shoe and peeled
off his jersey, the process made sticky and difficult with the drying sweat. Suddenly the thought of
his post-game shower, despite the inconvenience of the public showers, which Josh had always
hated since he had joined the team years ago, sounded heavenly.

Mikey came out of the bathrooms with another wet rag, just as Ryan apparently finished with
Brendon, throwing up his hands slightly before turning and disappearing around the corner to the
bathrooms. Brendon’s brow was furrowed as he turned back to his own locker, and it wasn’t hard to
tell that their conversation hadn’t gone exactly well. He slammed the locker door shut and turned
around and- looked immediately in Tyler’s direction. Josh felt the hair on the back of his neck rising
as he froze.

“You are such a fucking dick, you know this team was fine without you, don’t you?” Brendon spat.

Josh opened his mouth to say something, anything, he didn’t know what, and he didn’t care, but
Tyler beat him to it. He was already standing up and pushing Mikey aside as he turned around,
apparently fully aware of to whom Brendon was talking.

“Actually I wouldn’t know that, Urie, this team was already rotten before I got here.”

Josh rolled his eyes. Great. Here we go.

“Well, you’d fucking know,” Brendon replied.

“What does that even mean?” Tyler retorted.

Patrick was eyeing things worryingly, and Spencer moved a step closer to Brendon, but Brendon
shoved past him, still across the room from Tyler, but still too close in Josh’s opinion. “Why the fuck
did you let that guy get a foul? You just had to have the spotlight, didn’t you? I fucking said.”

“It wasn’t my fault, stop being an asshole.”

“You fucking said you would help me get a foul so we could.”

“I said it wasn’t my fault!”
“Yeah, sure. If you were a better player you could have stopped that.”

“Guys-” Spencer started.

Tyler scoffed, drowning out any protest Spencer might have made. “Says the guy who can’t even crossover dribble. Jordan can play better than you can, Brandon -”

“It’s Brendon, and shut the hell up, Joseph, you are so full of shit.”

“Why don’t you just leave him alone?” Mikey cut in, tugging Tyler back a step.

Just as both Brendon and Tyler were opening their mouths to continue the argument with zero regards to Mikey’s intervention, the sound of the door clanging shut echoed from around a row of lockers, and the changing rooms immediately fell silent. Coach Anderson popped his head around the corner.

“Aren’t you girls done yet? The cheer team’s already heading out for the bus, and you guys are in here dragging your feet, what are you guys doing? C’mon, we don’t have all night, you can shower back at the motel! Get your stuff and c’mon.”

Brendon glared at Tyler as he grabbed his stuff and quickly followed after the coach. The room was still silent; Josh suddenly felt too exposed with his shirt off, and even more incredibly guilty for not having intervened, but what could he have done? Both Spencer and Mikey had tried, Ryan had tried earlier, too, and no one had listened. That didn’t stop Mikey from glaring at Josh now though. Just before Josh could defend himself or get pissed or something, Pete huffed out a laugh from across the room, effectively earning Mikey’s full glare. Josh didn’t half mind.

The other guys were trailing out of the bathrooms, tugging on shirts and hoodies as the room emptied, awkwardly quiet now. Awkward to Josh, at least. Even with Brendon gone, Spencer kept casting strained glances towards Josh and then to Tyler, though Josh tried his best to ignore him right now. Pete and Mikey seemed to be having issues, about what who knew; Josh knew enough about secret relationships to roughly translate their attempted discreet glances and stiff body language, and Josh didn’t miss how Pete was quick to leave the room after Mikey had turned his attention to him. Mikey said something quietly to Tyler before grabbing his things and heading out after Pete, though now before casting Josh a half-assed glare on his way past, and Josh stepped out of his way to give him space, not meeting his gaze.

Josh stalled as long as he could, watching Tyler out of the corner of his eye as he pulled on his t-shirt from earlier, mourning the fact he couldn’t rinse the sweat off first, but he’d rather die than try to shimmy back into his drenched jersey. Tyler hadn’t really moved since the argument with Brendon had been interrupted, looking down at the splotchy red towel in his hands, letting the last of the blood drip slowly down his chin. Crazy kid. Josh wished for the other guys to hurry up and just leave already; he needed to go to Tyler.

The changing rooms filled with noise again as Jordan streaked out of the bathrooms, grabbing his bag and smacking into Patrick with it as he bypassed him on his way to the door, apparently in a rush to get to the bus. Josh nearly rolled his eyes. Dallon left with Patrick, and it was just Spencer left with Josh and Tyler. He headed for the door, too, but paused and glanced at Josh, seemingly unsure. Josh nodded at him, and thankfully Spencer didn’t ask questions, just followed the others out of the changing rooms.

Josh didn’t waste any more time. It already felt like another year had passed since the damn game had ended, and Josh hated, he hated that feeling, that absence.
Remembering that though reminded Josh of what had happened earlier- of what he had thought had happened- during that last moment of the game, and he suddenly felt shy. He suddenly didn’t know what to say.

“Dude, are you okay?” Yeah, that works. Totally something a guy would say to his boyfriend when he’s in love with him and sick to his stomach at how he let his friends treat him.

Tyler glanced up at him and finally wiped the blood from his face. It had already started to dry and left a smear behind on his tan skin.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Your friends are dicks though.”

Say something nice, say something comforting, let him know you love him- NO, wait! Don’t do that, don’t be too obvious, be caring, you guys are fucking boyfriends, but like, keep it lowkey, maybe-

“Yeah...you mean Brendon or you?”

What the fuck! That’s not what I meant to say, shit, now he’ll really hate you, way to fucking go, Joshua-

Thankfully, surprisingly, Tyler giggled- holy shit, he is cute, what the fuck!- and looked up at Josh again- is he...blushing? Why would he...- and tossed his towel at Josh’s head.

“Ew, dude, that had blood on it!” Josh exclaimed, dropping the towel to the floor.

“Oh, nooooo-” Tyler mocked.

“Exposure incident! Where’s the first aid kit-”

Josh’s heart nearly exploded out of his chest as Tyler reached over to smack at him, his fingers warm and lingering, his eyes shining. He didn’t look upset at all; he didn’t look mad about what happened during the game, or annoyed with what Brendon had said, or mad at Josh for letting him, or anything. He was smiling at Josh so openly and sweetly that it almost looked to Josh like Tyler loved him. Confusion rippled through Josh’s mind again.

He was so, so... so close to believing maybe, just maybe there was the slightest, tiniest chance that Tyler had actually said...Josh shook his head and grinned at him, and Tyler’s eyes were squinting from smiling so big. Josh couldn’t remember the last time he had smiled like that at him.

Josh almost said it then, he could taste the words, but Tyler turned to rummage through his bag, and Josh swallowed it back down. He pulled on his hoodie and grabbed his own bag from the bench, slipping it over a shoulder as he grabbed his phone and water bottle, ready to go.

Tyler started shimmying out of his jersey then, and Josh shuffled his feet nervously, unwilling to go ahead without him, despite the risk. They were the last two in the changing rooms, and Coach Anderson had told them to hurry it up like five minutes ago. He or any one of the guys from the team could come bursting in here in any minute, and then they would see the two of them just-

“Dude, chill, I can hear you stressing.” Tyler’s voice was muffled, his shirt halfway over his head.

Josh smiled and looked at Tyler- his boyfriend!- with hearts in his eyes, emotion probably a little more obvious than he would have let it be if Tyler could see him. There was a muffled humph!, and Tyler dropped his arms to his sides, jersey covering his face, long sleeved shirt beneath riding halfway up his stomach.
“Joshie.” Voice still muffled, but undeniably whiny. “Help me.”

Josh snickered and hurried to drop his things back on the bench in favor of playing along with his boyfriend. They could spare just a few more minutes.

“You don’t need help,” Josh said, stopping a pace away from Tyler, itching to touch him but wanting to joke along, too. “You’re just being a baby.”

“Help me, Joshua! Or I’m breaking up with you,” Tyler said, and Josh’s cheeks hurt from smiling. He reached out and tugged the jersey from Tyler’s head and promptly fell into giggles at the mess that was Tyler’s hair.

Tyler pouted at him. “Don’t laugh at me.”

Josh tried to stop, but the grumpy puppy look on Tyler’s face and his sticky hair and the sheer relief of the affirmation that Tyler wasn’t mad at him, that they were okay, just made Josh laugh harder, anxiety finally starting to settle back down and his nerves unwinding.

“I hate you,” Tyler told him in a baby voice, reaching out to poke him in the chest. Josh thought about tickling him, but grabbed his wrist and pulled him closer against him and kissed him instead. God, it had been seriously way too long since Josh had had his tongue in Tyler’s mouth. He felt a hand in his hair, and he tugged Tyler closer, wanting him against him, wanting to never let go, wanting to tell him if his mouth wasn’t currently busy. Wanting Tyler to say it back more than anything.

Josh tasted a slight tang of blood and pulled away, concerned, but then remembered it had only been a nosebleed. Still...that probably wasn’t very sanitary.

Tyler pouted again. “Why’d you stop-”

“Babe, we gotta go now, for real. C’mon, get your stuff-”

“I’ll be ready in a minute. Don’t push me, Joshua,” Tyler huffed, but Josh could see him hiding a smile. Tyler took his time picking up his hoodie and wriggling it over his head. Josh watched, amused.

The door clanged open around the corner again, and Josh tensed, excuses flooding his head, things to say to explain this situation away, but one of the cheer girls called into the room: “Hey, are you guys coming? Coach is getting mad!”

“Yeah, we’re almost done,” Josh called back, shoulders easing once he heard the door slam shut. Tyler peeped through the top of his hoodie at Josh with squinty eyes.

“Are we coming? I didn’t notice-”

Josh rolled his eyes and yanked Tyler’s hoodie down over his head the rest of the way and pulled the hood over his hair. “Y’know, Brendon’s right, you are a first-rate asshole.”

Tyler’s eyes widened, and he opened his mouth to make what Josh was sure would be a smart reply, but he pecked another kiss onto Tyler’s lips before he could. “But you’re cute though.”

Tyler smiled smugly at that and crossed his arms. “Duh, I know that.”

Josh laughed once more just for the hell of it, the relief still pumping happily through his system,
he slotted his fingers with Tyler’s, pulling him along behind him as they left the changing rooms. Josh’s heart ached in a bittersweet conglomeration of emotions, and he squeezed Tyler’s hand, just to feel Tyler squeeze his back. He had known he would.

“Hey, I wonder what the sleeping arrangements will be,” Tyler mused aloud once they had exited the building, the crisp night air washing over them. It was dark except for the headlights shining from the bus idling across the parking lot, puffing exhaust into the air. Josh figured it was probably too dark for any of the guys on the bus to notice him and Tyler walking so close, though he shoved his hands in his pockets and edged an extra step away, keeping his head down so no one could tell they were talking.

“Huh? What do you-”

“At the motel,” Tyler replied, tilting his head back to look up at the stars half shielded with clouds. “Four to a room, right? Maybe I’ll have to share with Beebo.”

“That’s a scary idea,” Josh laughed, though really...that was a scary idea.

“Maybe we’ll both have to share with him. Now that’d make for an interesting night, don’t you think?” Tyler side-eyed Josh as he ducked his head to hide his smirk beneath the hood of his jacket before breaking into a jog towards the bus, leaving Josh alone in the near empty parking lot.

Josh thought about the probability of what Tyler had said and groaned. This could be a long night.

Chapter End Notes

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The motel was on the other side of town, and the fighting started again while they were all still on the bus. Brendon had pulled Josh down to sit beside him the second Josh got on the bus; Josh didn’t ask why he was hiding closer to the front than his usual seat in the back. Pete was back there and so was Ryan, headphones in and eyes closed, and Josh understood clearly enough without having to ask. Or without having to pick fun, which he realized belatedly was what Brendon probably would have done had their situations been reversed.

By some unfortunate twist of fate, Mikey was only a row ahead of them and across the aisle, and he in turn had pulled Tyler down to sit next to him. They hadn’t even gotten out of the parking lot before Josh was anticipating trouble, though he was hoping, praying even, that he’d be proven wrong. Knowing Brendon and knowing Tyler, however, Josh knew better.

The bus rattled off down the road, and Brendon was slouched down in the window seat, face reflected in the black glass, arms crossed, leg bouncing restlessly. Josh eyed him carefully before risking any words, half convinced he shouldn’t say anything at all.

He settled eventually on: “You okay, man? You’re all tense.”

“I’m annoyed,” Brendon huffed in immediate response, not turning his head. The bus hit a curb-Josh sometimes doubted whether or not Coach Anderson had genuinely received his CDL or not-and Josh jostled into Brendon. Brendon didn’t seem to notice.

“I’m annoyed,” he repeated, and Josh could tell he was on the verge of spilling something. He had known him long enough to know his behavior patterns, and right now, after what had happened in the changing rooms, Josh anticipated one of two equally unsavory options: either Brendon would indulge himself and spill his guts to Josh-which Josh didn’t mind, don’t get him wrong, he wanted to listen to his friend, he wanted to be there for the guy-but Brendon always got so worked up, the discussion often felt more like he was mad and yelling at Josh than anyone else. Or two: Brendon would shut the emotional door again on what he was really feeling and level up his usual asshole behavior, sparing no one from his foul mood.

“At...who?” Josh ventured when Brendon didn’t speak, clearly waiting for Josh’s interest.

“At everyone.” Brendon huffed again. “Who shouldn’t I be annoyed with? I’m annoyed at me, too. I didn’t make any shots this game.”

“You did-”
“They weren’t good enough, though. Scouts didn’t even look my way. And Ryan’s pissed at me and probably half the team, too, Coach doesn’t care, my fam couldn’t come tonight, and you were so busy the whole game palling around with that jackass what’s-his-name-”

“Bren, I wasn’t-”

“You know I hate that guy. It’s always been you and me out there during the games, and then this stupid kid comes along and suddenly everyone’s worshiping him and Coach is calling you guys the fucking dynamic duo. What about us? That used to be us.”

So, time for his friend to spill his guts, Josh figured. That was probably better in this situation than exploding at everyone anyways. It didn’t make it any easier to listen to, though. Not when what Brendon was saying was mostly right.

“It was just one game, B,” Josh started, unsure of how best to diffuse this potential situation. “We...there’ll be other games, and Coach- you know he switched our positions around this game, he’ll switch us back and then we can go back to playing how we used to-”

“Fat fucking chance,” Brendon said loudly, laughing a bit. One of the cheer girls was playing music out loud on her phone, and there was enough general chatter throughout the rest of the bus to cover their discussion, though Josh thought that maybe he had seen Tyler tilt his head in their direction. Josh jerked his gaze back to Brendon, who was still looking out the window. Couldn’t let him see him looking at Tyler of all people right now.

Just as Josh turned his attention back to Brendon, Brendon looked up and made eye contact with the reflection of Josh’s face in the window. That had been close.

“After the way we played tonight? Coach isn’t gonna move us,” Brendon reasoned, though honestly, it didn’t sound very reasonable to Josh with the tone he was currently using. “We played better than we ever did- I fucking hate that, but we did. Any other team wouldn’t have stood a chance beating Akron, not with how they came around that second half. Coach isn’t gonna change shit.”

The way Brendon was studying Josh then put Josh’s teeth on edge. He knew that look.

Oh, great, here we-“

“You should stay away from that guy, Josh. He’s a dick. Coach might want you two to fucking play off each other, but he’s gonna throw you under the fucking bus the second he gets the chance. You haven’t talked to him, have you? During halftime I told him to help me get that guy a foul- trust me, I’d rather have choked than talk with him, much less work with him, but we were in a spot, right, and so I fucking- God, I’m so stupid, he lied straight to my face, J, and then he has the fucking nerve to go act all fucking doe-eyed and innocent. God, he’s annoying...and he doesn’t give a single shit about the team, y’know.”

Josh could feel his heart pumping hard in his chest. He was actually starting to sweat a little. “I don’t think he-”

“Well, of course you don’t, you have to play right there with him, Coach made you guys. Huh, probably wants the two of you to both get fucking scholarships and go on to the big leagues together, real Thompson and Love style. Now that’s fucking cute. Makes me fucking sick.”

Josh fidgeted. God, this was getting uncomfortable. “Bren, look, I don’t know what he said to you, but-”

“And why the fuck are you defending him? You never defend me, why are you sticking up for that
loser? He’s gonna play you, Josh. Are you that fucking blind? Why would a fucking transfer in senior year give two craps about a new school? He doesn’t care about this team, Josh, he doesn’t care about helping you out there, no matter what Coach thinks or tells him or whatever, I don’t fucking know. So much fucking noise.” Brendon looked away from Josh’s reflection again, curled and uncurled his fist, finally turned in his seat to look at Josh. “I don’t trust him, J. When it’s you and me- fuck, even when it’s Pete or some other douchebag- we know. We’ve been on this team for five years, dude. And that Joseph punk doesn’t give a shit.”

Josh had no idea what to say. He couldn’t tell Brendon, not now. Like he was going to anyways...but Tyler wasn’t even a fraction of the bad guy that Brendon thought he was, and Josh...he knew where his old friend was coming from, but his bias was ruining his judgement, of course he was gonna see the worst in Tyler...if only Josh could tell him without telling him, if only he could convince Brendon that Tyler wasn’t the selfish jerk that he thought he was, messing around and stirring the pot just for the hell of it-

“Y’know what, Urie, why don’t you talk shit to my face instead of behind my back?” Tyler turned around in his seat, and all far-fetched hopes of calming Brendon down and putting a damper on his ill feelings towards Tyler were chucked out the window. Josh glared glumly at Tyler. What a little asshole. Just had to open his mouth, didn’t he?

“Yo, Way, your fuckin’ baby’s crying, tell her to shut the hell up,” Brendon said to Mikey, though he was shooting daggers at Tyler the whole time, who was shooting them right back. Mikey’s expression mirrored Josh’s, and Josh had the crazy urge deep inside him to laugh. Why was this situation becoming the default whenever it came to social interaction with his friends?

“I’ve about had it with you,” Tyler snapped, and Brendon laughed loudly.

“You’re such a fucking girl, you talk like a fucking virgin.”

“Oh, so I talk like you?”

“Joseph, I swear-”

“Hey, hey, Brendon, stop it, okay, stop,” Josh cut in, thoroughly tired of all the bickering. Their team had just won a game, a tough one, too. Shouldn’t they all be happy like the rest of- well, like most of the other players? “T- Joseph, you too, cut it out.”

Josh suddenly felt awkward meeting Tyler’s gaze when he inevitably looked over at him. He raised his eyebrows at Josh, a silent are-you-serious and Josh looked away, his cheeks heating up. Honestly, though, like it was his fault. Not after Tyler had jumped in like he had. He honestly couldn’t blame Josh for this, could he?

“I can’t cut it out ‘cuz I’m not doing anything. He started it,” Tyler snipped, and Josh looked to Mikey, exasperated. Tyler added quietly, “Pussy.”

“What the hell did you just call me-” Brendon half yelled, and Josh threw his hands up in the air. Done, he was done, if both of his best friends in the entire world wanted to go at each other’s throats constantly with zero regard as to him and how it all made him feel, then so be it. He was too pissed at their antics to care right then at all, anyways.

Josh let out a loud sigh, hoping to convey how annoyed he was, to everyone involved. This was all Brendon’s fault, for egging Tyler on, for picking on him so much. Tyler was so strong-willed he couldn’t leave it alone and subsequently aggravated the situation, every time. He was his boyfriend, and deep down everything Bren said really did grate on Josh- like who in their right mind enjoyed
hearing the guy they love ripped apart? But then...on the other hand, Brendon didn’t know that
tough. He didn’t know Josh loved Tyler. But Tyler...Tyler did know Josh cared about Brendon,
and he didn’t seem to be in any rush to make amends for Josh’s sake. It was Tyler’s fault, he should
be trying harder. But- okay, on the other hand, Josh knew all too well how \textit{insanely} difficult
Brendon could be. He’d been on the short end of Brendon’s good nature before, several times, and
several times too many. Brendon needed to fix his clannish attitude and actually give Tyler a try;
Spencer was right, if they weren’t always going at each other they might actually like hanging out.
But on the other hand, Tyler sure wasn’t trying very hard to prove Brendon’s negative assumptions
towards him \textit{wrong}. But then again, on the other hand-

\textit{God, how many hands do I have,} Josh thought crossly, as Brendon and Tyler continued to argue,
with the occasional addition from Mikey. No good. This whole thing was \textit{no good}, Josh wasn’t
gonna stand for it any longer-

Thankfully just then the bus made a hard, quick turn into a parking lot in front of a Red Roof Inn,
and Josh was already on his feet before the bus had parked, grabbing his bag and moving away from
his fighting friends as quickly as he could. No one looked at him as he passed; they hadn’t stopped
arguing long enough to even notice. Josh sighed again. He was \textit{done} with the the two of them, \textit{done}.
If they wanted to act like little bratty kids, then let them. The stupid, snotty dicks. Josh didn’t care.
Look how much he didn’t care! Josh wasn’t even bothered. He wasn’t even mad, bro!

“Alright, gang, let’s get our stuff inside and then if you want you can-” Coach Anderson tugged the
key out of the ignition and turned around, and abruptly stopped as Brendon and Tyler’s heated
discussion became blaringly audible with the motor off.

“Um, excuse me?” Coach stepped pass Josh without half a glance, closer to the middle of the bus,
and raised his voice. “Boys! \textit{Excuse me}?”

Besides Brendon and Tyler, the bus had started to quiet down as the bus had pulled up in front of the
motel. The two of them, however, were so engrossed in their verbal fight to pay the coach any
attention, and the rest of the bus filled with anxiously excited chatter at the spectacle. Josh hid half his
face with his hand. This must be how his mom had felt every time she had tried to take him and one
of his siblings grocery shopping with her when they were kids. God, he was about to pull his hair
out.

“Hey, \textit{guys! Ex-cuse me, you- okay, y’know what-}” Josh glanced up at Coach’s words, just as he
pulled his whistle still around his neck to his mouth and blew it, loud and sharp and piercing in the
tiny bus. Josh covered his face again as the entire bus finally fell silent. Fucking \textit{finally}. Served both
those fuckers right. Whatever they got they had it coming to them.

“What the heck is going on here?” Coach demanded, sounding surprisingly intimidating. Normally
the guys would all just snicker behind his back after he had tried being stern with them, but right
now- if Josh didn’t look too hard- he didn’t really have the urge to snicker.

Brendon and Tyler started at the same time.

“Coach, he-”

“It wasn’t-”

“\textit{Wait, no, forget I asked- I don’t wanna know,}” Coach interrupted with a wave of his hand before
rubbing at his temple. “\textit{What} has gotten into you two? We’re meant to be a \textit{team}; this isn’t how kids
from Worthington behave-”
Brendon snorted loudly, and Tyler whipped around angrily, mouth opening, but Coach interrupted again before either of them could start up. “Urie, shut it. I don’t wanna hear it.”

“But Coach-”

“I don’t want to hear it. Urie, if you can’t go one solitary hour in the same space as Joseph without losing your temper, then you’re going to be suspended from this team.”

Josh looked up quickly at that. He had never dreamed that Coach would threaten anything that severe, not now, not to a guy who’d been on the team since junior high. Josh’s stare slipped from Coach to Brendon, whose initial look of shock had turned to silent outrage as he dropped his own eyes to his lap. He was grinding his teeth so hard that Josh actually winced, his face redder than Josh had ever seen it before.

“As for you, Joseph, you’ve already been suspended once, and I won’t hesitate to do it again if you keep acting out-”

“But I didn’t-”

“and permanently this time. Once is bad enough; if you get suspended a second time, you will not be playing basketball again for the rest of your time as a high school student. Do you understand?”

Tyler huffed quietly and crossed his arms, and Josh widened his eyes at him, silently willing him to get his fat head out of his ass long enough to save his own neck. To save his own future, Jesus Christ-

“Fine,” Tyler mumbled, and Josh let out a quiet breath of air as Coach looked back to Brendon, seemingly satisfied enough with Tyler’s lackluster response, in gracious spite of the attitude visible on Tyler’s face.

“Urie, you understand?”

Brendon nodded tightly, his arms crossed, and didn’t look up as he responded, voice strained.

“Yeah.”

“Good!” Coach Anderson exclaimed and clapped his hands once, as if the entire situation had been solved, cleaned up, and already forgotten, but Josh didn’t doubt that this would only divide the team even further. Despite the pleased look on Coach’s face just then, Josh just had this hunch that he couldn’t shake.

Coach wasn’t done yet either. “Alright, then, you two, let’s shake on it, a good show of sportsmanship and all that. Come on-”

The tension was painfully tangible as Tyler and Brendon eyed each other with stronger distaste and spite than they even had before. Josh was holding his breath, half conscious of the rest of the kids on the bus doing the same. It was worlds too quiet in there for any sort of comfort.

After a prolonged silence and lack of action, the seconds feeling achingly long, Coach Anderson prodded in a warning tone, “Boys....”

Brendon huffed and rolled his eyes, refusing to look at Tyler as he shoved his hand out; Tyler was scowling as he begrudgingly took it. A quick shake, hands visibly squeezed a lot harder than was called for, and Brendon yanked his back as Tyler wiped his own down the front of his hoodie. Either Coach didn’t see, or- thankfully- he chose not to mention the exaggerated latter. He turned around and made for the front of the bus again, nearly stepping on Josh’s leg extended into the aisle as he
did so, a triumphant air about him. Josh guessed they’d see how long that would last.

They followed Coach into the motel and scattered across the lobby as he verified their reservations. Tyler was sticking to himself by the edge of the counter, fingers playing with a pen laying there. Josh wanted to go over to him, soft affection warming the initial annoyance he had felt earlier at Tyler for getting so involved with Brendon. Tyler still had a heavy scowl on his face; and deep down, if Josh thought levelheaded about it, he was probably still a bit put out at Tyler- but right then all he wanted to do was hug the little fucker and kiss those lines between his eyebrows away until he was giggling high and sweet in his ear, body warm and welcoming against his. God, Josh hoped he could do that soon.

But not now. Tyler wasn’t paying him any attention right then anyways, and Josh forced himself to walk past as casually as he could. Brendon was acting equally moody, arms crossed as he leaned against the wall by the elevators. A couple of cheer girls were trying to talk to him, but he seemed too out of it to be his usual flirty self with them. Josh felt kinda bad for the guy, whether he had started it or not. At this point in the evening, Josh was so worn out from the game and hungry suddenly and sleepy that he couldn’t quite remember.

With the current distance between the two perpetrators, Josh didn’t expect there to be another show tonight. Especially not after Coach had intervened, especially not in a quiet motel lobby with the entire sports and cheer team waiting around. Then again, Josh hadn’t expected that Mikey and Pete would be going at it either.

They weren’t being as loud- or as childishly unreasonable- as Brendon and Tyler had been earlier, their voices hushed, Pete’s back to the room so that the others couldn’t quite see the full thing, but as they continued, voices started to grow louder, body language became more obviously annoyed.

Josh didn’t realize that he had been staring until he noticed Patrick and Dallon trying to intervene, several cheer girls moving in closer as well. Josh realized that none of them knew about Mikey and Pete’s relationship- he could in fact be the only one, Mikey had acted weird just that morning when Josh almost mentioned it in front of Tyler- and were probably pretty nervous for Mikey right then. Pete wasn’t particularly well-known on the team for ever having been an overly nice guy about anything, or to anyone.

Since the game, Josh also hadn’t been paying that much attention to where his younger brother was, or what he was doing. Like he ever did...but as the bickering gradually rose on one side of the room, there was another commotion near the elevators. Josh looked over just in time to see Jordan hurtle through the small gathering there, bag whacking into Brendon, who in turn lost it. To be honest, Josh didn’t really blame him.

“Jordan, fuck off, what the hell is your problem?”

Brendon hadn’t exactly shouted, but that on top of the argument getting hotter with Mikey and Pete and the kids trying to separate them, and the couple of girls trying to calm Brendon down was all enough commotion to have Coach hurrying up at the counter, nearly dropping the key cards he was just handed as he pushed past Josh like he didn’t even see him to put an end to the ruckus.

Josh stood in the middle of the lobby near the front desk, unwilling to get himself involved with the team. He noticed Tyler looking over his shoulder at him, surprised and confused, and despite the tension in the air, Josh felt himself grinning at the adorable expression on Tyler’s face. It took a moment for Tyler to realize why Josh was smiling, Josh could tell, and when he understood he gave Josh a really? look and turned away, but not quick enough to hide the smile growing on his own lips.
Tyler drifted off towards the elevators, and after a cursory glance at the others, whom Coach had called into a group to apparently give an earful to, he followed after him.

Jordan, very unfortunately, and a couple girls from the cheer team (including Jenna, Josh noted immediately) were also in the corner by the elevators, and Josh stopped in his tracks, squinting at the smug look Tyler was shooting him. The little brat probably knew that Josh had been hoping they could be alone for a minute, but no such luck. And they couldn’t share a room together, not with everyone there, that was way, way too much to hope for, and the current space was still too public for them to even talk, much less for any physical contact, and after Coach finished telling the rest of the guys off, they would all be whisked upstairs and pushed into separate rooms so fast that Josh wouldn’t even have time to smile a quick, silent goodnight to his boyfriend- Josh didn’t think he could even try to fall asleep without a quick kiss or a hug, he missed Tyler so much- and in the morning it wouldn’t be any better, and then they had the long drive back home and they’d be dropped off at school, and who knew if Josh could see Tyler then or not, Brendon or Spencer or any one of the other guys might want to hang, and Josh couldn’t fucking wait that long, he couldn’t stand it.

Tyler was smirking at him now, straight up smirking. Josh suspected he could seriously be an amateur mind reader. Or maybe Josh was just that obvious. His cheeks blushed a bit, and he looked away, suddenly feeling both too far and too close to Tyler for comfort just then. He humored the thought of just reaching out and pulling Tyler close and kissing him and not giving a single flying fuck about anyone anymore- he wasn’t gonna do it, but he thought about what it would be like if he did. Then he noticed Jenna looking at him, and he wished he had pulled up the hood of his jacket when they had come inside; he wanted something to hide behind. Thankfully, Jenna looked away as quickly as she had looked at him, and Josh let out a careful, quiet breath of air.

“Relax, baby,” Tyler’s voice was suddenly in Josh’s ear, and he jumped, eyes darting to Coach and the rest of the team.

“Tyler...they’ll see,” Josh whispered, inching a step away from him, and when he risked a look into Tyler’s face, he was still smirking at him.

Josh huffed once, put out. “Why are you smirking at me? You want them all to-”

“No,” Tyler rolled his eyes, though he was still smirking. “Not that you’re not cute when you’re stressing, ‘cause you are, but it’s annoying me. Stop it.”

Josh was opening his mouth to moodily respond to that, when Brendon came up behind him so quickly that Josh nearly jumped out of his skin, and Tyler scuttled back a step.

“My life sucks fucking ass, seriously,” Brendon was muttering, glaring at the floor, and Josh took a shaky breath, trying to calm down. He couldn’t help peeking once more over his shoulder, just to see-

Tyler raised one eyebrow at him and stuck out his tongue, and Josh promptly turned back around, thankful that Brendon seemed too preoccupied at the moment with being stressed to notice his surroundings too much.

“Alright!” Coach’s voice boomed over them, and Josh flinched, not expecting the noise. “I’ve had it with you guys- girls, you’re fine, you cheered good tonight, you’re fine, yada yada, I’m talking to the team here. I don’t know what’s going on here to make you all act like hooligans, and frankly, I don’t care. You can argue on your own time all you want, but we’re not going to let it affect the team’s morale, and you’re not going to be doing it while on a school trip, you got that?”
Josh nodded along with the rest of the team, just to stay on the coach’s good graces. It was times like this that Josh didn’t mind feeling half invisible.

Coach nodded once. “Good. I don’t want to hear another *peep* out of the lot of you. It’s late, and we head back for Worthington tomorrow *early*. I’m assigning rooms—”

A collective groan. Coach mimicked them once, sounding unamused, and started handing out key cards.

“Girls, do what you want, you have two rooms on the second floor. Don’t *you* all start fighting, too, though, I can’t handle that, you understand me? I’m knocking on your doors at seven sharp, be ready.”

Jenna slipped past Josh with the rest of the cheer team, head turned the other way, and Josh watched her disappear into the elevator, guilt still playing around the edges of his mind. He noticed Tyler studying him and quickly turned away.

“Now, as for the rest of you…” Coach fumbled with the remaining key cards in his hand, eyeing the team surrounding him. “Wentz, Urie, you’re with me—”

Josh was honestly surprised at Coach Anderson’s dexterity as he continued speaking over Brendon and Pete’s overly dramatic moans. Not that Josh blamed them; he’d be pissed, too, if he had to share with the coach—

“-Dun boys, you go together-” Josh’s turn to groan out loud. *Come on! Jordan? Ew!* “-with Smith and...Way, you go with them.”

Josh glanced uneasily at Mikey, who glared when he saw Josh looking—maybe in a couple days or so, once Mikey had calmed down and forgiven Josh again for whatever it was that he was mad about this time, Josh would thank him for glaring, because by what could *only* be holy divine intervention—Coach had noticed, too.

“C’mon- Mike, really?” Coach Anderson sighed, and in his defense, Mikey *did* look immediately apologetic. “Okay, you go in the other room, I don’t know what your beef is but I don’t want you scowling in the corner all night. You go with Weekes, Ross, and...and Stump. Does that arrangement work for you, Mr. Way?”

Mikey mumbled something unintelligible, looking sheepish, and Coach tossed a key card at him. “Alright, so who’s left...Dun boys and Smith and...oh, Joseph- you go with them, that’ll work.”

Jordan whooped stupidly and grabbed onto Tyler, and Josh had to use every inch of his willpower not to meet anyone’s eye just then, not Tyler’s, not Brendon’s, or Mikey’s, Pete’s, Coach’s. All his mind could think, all his heart could pump was *Tyler, Tyler, Tyler. Tyler!* And with *Spencer* and his brother...Josh could live with that! Hell, he could *thrive* with that! Suddenly he didn’t seem so tired after all. Sleep? Josh didn’t know her.

Coach was holding a key card out to Josh, and he shook himself out of his reverie as quickly and nonchalantly as he could, though his hand still shook as he reached out and took the card.

“Third floor,” Coach told them. “Same with your room, Weekes. I’ll be on the second floor. Be down here for breakfast at seven, you guys’ll remember that? Or do I need to come up and get you?”

“We’ll remember,” Spencer huffed and rolled his eyes for everyone, grabbing onto Josh’s arm and hauling him into the elevator. Josh was glad about that; he was still so out of it due to utter shock and
a growing excitement that he doubted he would have been able to find the elevator- directly in front of him- on his own. Not without looking like a total idiot, at least.

Jordan darted onto the elevator after them, tugging Tyler behind him, and Josh nearly burst out in laughter at the look on Tyler’s sweet, silly face. He loved that idiot! That little idiot right there, that one was his! Josh wanted to kiss him- and hopefully sooner than he had previously thought, what with the godsent room arrangements.

The guys who got the other room on the third floor crowded in as well, and Josh was cramped in the corner, unsure of where Tyler currently was, mentally scrambling to do the math to make sure that they hadn’t loaded on past the weight limit, when the doors slid shut and the elevator lurched threateningly upward.

Jordan chattered on about the game and whatever else popped into his head, to Tyler maybe, or to himself, or to whoever would listen- he did have half the team trapped in an elevator with him. Besides Jordan, it was quiet, almost awkwardly so, but Josh couldn’t be sure, it might just be him, his nerves and anxiety and anticipation all making his stomach twist. The ride up felt like ten floors, not three.

“Which way are we headed?” Spencer asked once they had all piled out into the hallway, Dallon, Patrick, and a moody Ryan and Mikey heading off to the right. Jordan was running down the hall ahead of them, in the middle of telling Patrick something, and Josh shook his head, hoping that he’d just get lost down there somewhere and leave him alone.

Someone was shuffling in his hoodie pocket, and Josh glanced down just as Tyler withdrew his hand with the key card, not even sparing Josh a second glance. Josh crossed his arms and would have huffed had it not been so effing cute, and if the fact that Tyler was so sweetly comfortable around him in such a touchy feely way that it made Josh want to cry from happiness. Tyler was standing a lot closer to him, too, now that the other guys were gone, whether subconsciously or not. Josh thought that being able to feel Tyler’s body heat through the both of their hoodies was just about the best feeling in the world. And he’d just made the game's winning shot.

Spencer scoffed loudly. “Dude, you’re holding it upside down-”

“I’m not, shut up-”

“Yes, you are! Look, what the fuck do you think-”

“Hey, give it back-”

“I just wanna see what it-”

“Coach gave it to me-”

“Guys!” Josh intervened, laughing. This was too ridiculous. “Do you know how stupid you guys sound right now? It’s a key card, Ty, give it to me-”

“Josh, no, Coach gave it to me to keep-”

“Tyler, no he did not, ” Josh half mimicked, the words rushed. “He gave it to me and you took it out of my pocket and you know it, now give it here. ”

Spencer cackled as Tyler actually stuck out his bottom lip and whined, “But Jo oooooosh, he only handed it to you ‘cause you were closest, it’s not fair- hey!”
Josh snatched the card away mid-whine as Tyler dropped his bag and lunged at him, grabbing at his hand in an attempt to get the card back. Josh squinted his eyes, trying to read the tiny numbers on the card while also struggling to keep Tyler at bay with his other arm. Feeling Tyler on him like that was almost enough to make Josh spring a boner, even with Spencer right there. Almost.

“Aw, look at you guys, fighting like an old married couple,” Spencer commented, and Josh immediately blushed, losing focus just long enough for Tyler to bounce a little higher on his toes and sneak the card back, clutching it possessively to his chest.

“Then you must have been my first husband, now divorced, Spence, ’cause we were fighting first,” Tyler mumbled distractedly as he started off down the hall. It wasn’t even a smart comment, but Josh was relieved that at least one of the two of them had something to say in response to a harmless, unknowing joke instead of just turning red and stammering something stupid and probably very telling. And, besides that, Spencer had a hilarious look of mild disgust on his face, and Josh reveled in smirking triumphantly at his friend before reaching around him to grab Tyler’s bag and dash off after his boyfriend. Huh. Old married couple. That didn’t sound too bad to Josh.

The second after he thought it, he was immediately embarrassed, but at least no one was around just then to see his blush. He ducked his head and rounded the corner after Tyler, embarrassing thoughts still racing through his brain.

“See, three hundred and six, I was not holding it upside down,” Tyler snipped cutely once Spencer had caught up to them. Spencer gave Josh a dry look as Tyler shoved the door open, and they followed him inside, Josh trying to hide his loving smirk from being too obvious.

“I call this one,” Spencer announced first thing, hurling his bag onto the closest bed. “And I’m not sharing with Jordan, Josh, for real, last time I spent the night at your house and you stuck me with your little brother, I—”

“Okay, Spence, chill out,” Josh huffed out a laugh, fumbling to find the light switch on the wall. “We can figure all that out later once we-”

“Where’s the remote?” Tyler interrupted, bumping past Josh to the TV, oblivious. Josh shook his head in lighthearted disbelief. What a cute little dummy he was in love with.

“There’s never anything good on at places like this anyways,” Spencer said. “I call the shower first.”

“Whatever,” Tyler replied, voice muffled as he dug in a drawer. Spencer shot Josh another glum look, and Josh shrugged. He was still too busy fighting his annoying grin trying to break open across his face. There were hearts in his eyes right now, he was sure.

“Ha, found it!” Tyler exclaimed, plopping down on the foot of the other bed so hard he bounced once. He quickly pulled his legs up and crossed them and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees as he flicked the TV on, eyes already trained on the picture.

The light from the screen reflected off his eyes, the overhead lighting so dim that his eyes looked nearly black, shining and sparkling every time that Tyler flipped to a new channel. The sound was muted, but there was so much sound in Josh’s ears then—must be the blood pumping through him, rushing through his ears, his own eyes focused on Tyler, sitting there so cutely. Josh’s patience was running very, very thin— he was gonna kiss that bastard in a hot second whether Spencer was there or not.

As soon as Josh remembered his other friend in the room, he glanced up, just in time to meet Spencer’s eyes as he quickly looked away, quickly reaching into his bag and rummaging for his
clothes. He stammered something as he slipped past Josh and closed the bathroom door behind him. Josh had a sneaking feeling about this, but at the current moment, he was finally, finally- fucking *finally-alone* with Tyler, and he couldn’t be bothered to give half a shit about anything else.

He dropped his and Tyler’s bags in front of the cabinet supporting the TV and plopped onto the bed next to Tyler, purposely bouncing the two of them. Tyler hummed but didn’t look over, thumb working the channel button as the screen continued to flash quietly at them. Josh pulled one leg up onto the bed and turned to face Tyler, watching at close range the TV reflecting in his eyes, his eyelashes half obstructing the dark irises.

An extremely violent flash of light played in his eyes and color splayed across his face, and Josh peeked at the television with mild interest, if any; looked like some badly made vampire film, which of course sounded like something that Tyler would love. If it was on TV, Tyler would love it.

Josh looked back to Tyler, who was sitting on this channel a little longer than the others. The room was still silent; Josh relaxed an increment when he heard the shower turn on in the adjacent room. He slipped off his one sneaker and used his hand to pull off the other and dropped it to the floor, inching a space closer to Tyler until his leg bumped into Tyler’s knee. Tyler didn’t look over, but he did lift his knee a little, and Josh scooched that much closer, feeling their body heat mingle, feeling Tyler’s leg hair scratching at his own. They were both still in hoodies and basketball shorts. Josh hoped Spencer wouldn’t be long in the shower.

But first Josh wanted a quick minute alone with Tyler- if Tyler would even *look* at him. God, Josh loved him, he loved him *so much,* but it was like the guy had never seen a movie before.

Josh leaned closer and pressed a kiss to Tyler’s shoulder, peeking up at him through his eyelashes- nothing. He pressed another kiss there, then another, then moved to the bare skin of Tyler’s neck, mouth warm and open and ghosting over Tyler’s neck. He could taste his sweat, and honestly? It was *hot,* and it was sorta kinda definitely going straight to Josh’s dick. He blamed it on the post-game adrenaline.

Tyler squirmed at Josh’s lips on his skin, finally acknowledging that *Josh* was there and not just *any* random guy. Encouraged, Josh moved closer and peppered light kisses across Tyler’s collar bone, twisting towards him on the bed. Tyler moved suddenly, and Josh started to smile, glad that he had finally gotten Tyler’s attention, when he realized that Tyler was leaning around him to aim the remote at the TV, unmuting the crappy movie and dramatically corny music filling the room.

Josh pulled back to gape at him, but Tyler’s eyes were glued ahead. Honestly, Josh couldn’t *believe* this.

Maybe it was interference, but Josh was feeling a little miffed, needed to get the ball back on his team; he moved his hand to Tyler’s leg, slipping it beneath his shorts and up to his thigh, squeezing gently, but- hopefully- with meaning.

Finally, *finally,* Tyler pulled his eyes away from the screen and looked to Josh, sitting up from his hunched forward position and- *yes! Fucking score!*- tossing the remote onto the bed beside him. The corner of his mouth twitched up, and a full smile split across Josh’s.

“You just-” Tyler started, but Josh jumped him before he could get any more words out, melding their mouths together and pressing him back against the bed, the two of them bouncing slightly with the force of it, Tyler on his back and Josh on his side beside him, leaning over him, tongue in his mouth. *This* is what Josh had wanted all night- what game? He couldn’t remember.

Josh reached blindly for Tyler’s cheek and stroked it gently with his thumb, felt his eyelashes
fluttering against his fingers, before settling his palm against Tyler’s cheek as he tilted his head, slipping his tongue further between Tyler’s lips.

There was a warm hand on the back of Josh’s neck then and tugging fingers in his curls, and Josh groaned into Tyler’s mouth, Tyler echoing immediately with a higher moan, and Josh inadvertently rutted against Tyler’s hip.

Even after all that they had done together in recent- very recent- times, Josh felt a bit of color rise on his cheeks, and it didn’t help that he could feel Tyler starting to smile against his lips, effectively breaking their kiss. As soon as Josh pulled back an inch to make a hurt face at Tyler for smirking, Tyler burst out into giggles.

“Hey,” Josh protested weakly, pulling his hand away from Tyler’s cheek as Tyler covered his face with his hands. His shoulders were shaking.

“Don’t laugh at me,” Josh pouted, and Tyler was decent enough to stifle his quiet laughter- for the time being, Josh was sure.

A loud crash came from the TV, and they both jumped as melodramatic screams ensued. Josh reached over Tyler and turned the volume down a couple of notches; when he settled back against Tyler’s side, the room a lot quieter now with the sound of the movie muffled like the shower still running in the other room.

Josh was just about to kiss Tyler again when Tyler sat up, and Josh really did pout at that, sitting up after him a moment later, hands flying around his slim waist in a tight embrace, keeping him from getting entirely off the bed.

Josh peeked over at Tyler, who was side eyeing him with the most lovely brown eyes Josh had ever seen in his whole life. God, he was never gonna get over them, was he? He was never gonna get over Tyler. He loved him-

Tyler coughed, clearing his throat in a sarcastic manner. “Like I was going to say before you tackled me-”

“Shush,” Josh murmured against Tyler’s neck, and Tyler giggled once before going still.

“You just couldn’t wait to get your hands on me, could you?”

Josh huffed in disbelief and grinned. “You are such a little bitch.”

Tyler smiled softly at him, eyelashes fluttering as he dropped his gaze, and Josh sat back, realizing belatedly that while what Tyler had said had been a confident, rhetorical question, his voice had wavered lightly as he had asked it, his tone almost hesitant, suddenly shy. Uncertain. A faux show of nonchalance. Josh’s eyebrows immediately furrowed.

“Hey, baby,” he said and moved his hand to cup Tyler’s jaw, thumb swiping gently over his cheek. “You’re right, I couldn’t. I was just joking, I’m sorry.”

Tyler peeped up at him, eyes squinted, and Josh couldn’t tell what he was feeling or thinking at that moment. He felt a hand on his waist, and yes, that’s a good sign!- but Tyler’s touch was light and shaking, fingers barely brushing against skin. Posing a careful question with his body, and Josh didn’t know what had happened to make Tyler suddenly feel that he had to ask to be close with Josh.

Josh didn’t mention out loud the apparent change in Tyler, didn’t respond with words, but instead slipped his arm back around Tyler’s waist, hand riding up beneath his shirt and feeling the heated
skin of his back beneath his fingertips, and used the hand still resting on Tyler’s jaw to tug him closer, brushing their faces together again and trying to answer any and all of Tyler’s unfounded worry and questions and doubt with the embracing of their lips.

Josh was so thankful that he almost cried as Tyler responded immediately, tangible tension easing from his muscles and going half limp in Josh’s arms. For a brief moment Josh thought that he felt a streak of wetness on Tyler’s cheek pressing against his own, but by the time he found it in him to pull away from the kiss, Tyler had already turned his face away, looking down and over his shoulder at their spilled bags on the ground. Josh reached out and rubbed his hand up and down Tyler’s arm through his long sleeved shirt, feeling the urge to comfort him despite Tyler’s lack of verbalizing the distress that Josh thought he could sense in him. Josh felt something between them but couldn’t place what it was. Had he done something? Was he mad about what had happened on the bus, about Brendon…? Surely he wasn’t mad at Josh about that, Josh had steered pretty clear of the whole situation with the coach and everything. Maybe this was about earlier, at the game? Maybe Tyler had been a little put out at him, after they had fallen. Maybe…Josh’s brow furrowed again as he looked at Tyler’s profile in what felt like a new light. Maybe… maybe… Josh’s mind flashed back to the moment that they had been lying there together on the hard gym floor, watching Tyler’s eyes, watching Tyler’s lips, wishing for him to say it, wishing so, so hard…maybe… maybe Tyler had said…-

“Hey, can I have a dollar, bro?” Tyler turned back to Josh abruptly, startling him out of his wishful thinking. Josh hesitated a second, mouth opening but nothing coming out.

“Wh...huh?”

“A dollar? Or quarters, I don’t care.” Tyler hopped off the bed, attitude seeming much more cheery, if not a little forced, and Josh turned to watch him kick off his shoes.

“A dol- yeah, sure, babe, but why do you-”

Josh watched as Tyler kicked aside his sneakers and then proceeded to yank down his shorts, and Josh would have been embarrassed at the way he tensed up at that, at the sudden, very close spectacle of Tyler’s boxer briefs hugging his tanned thighs.

Josh jerked his gaze up, but not before Tyler had noticed, grinning maliciously at him as he-intentionally, Josh just knew- turned and bent town to rummage in his bag, pulling out a pair of leggings. With emojis on them.

Whatever, Tyler already knew that he was staring, they were boyfriends, okay, and he didn’t try to hide his gaze as Tyler shimmied into the tight pants, and- fucking wow, Josh knew Tyler had a good ass, but… wow.

Tyler looked pleased as all get out at Josh’s attention, which was quite unfair, in Josh’s opinion, since he had been the one earlier who had tried so hard for Tyler to notice him, and all Tyler had to do to get what he wanted was shake his ass a little and he had Josh frothing at the mouth. Almost. This was a blatant and unjust misuse of power- Josh adored him.

“Where’s my dollar?” Tyler piped at Josh, and Josh tore his eyes away from his boyfriend to dig through his own bag, body buzzing. He wanted Tyler now.

Josh hopped off the bed with a couple bills in hand and waited as Tyler pulled off his hoodie and switched into a baggy t-shirt (Toad from Mario Kart. Josh stifled a loving sigh.)

“Don’t you wanna shower later?” Josh asked belatedly as Tyler finished changing, and Tyler shook
his head as he snatched the money from Josh’s hand.

“No, don’t feel like it, I just wanna go get some snacks. Want some?”

“Snacks? We-”

“The vending machines, I’m gonna go find them. What do you want, oreos? They probably have oreos.”

“I- I’ll come with you.”

Tyler beamed at that, and Josh’s heart skipped happily over a beat, and he wished again, even harder than before, that Tyler had said what he had hoped so desperately he would. As he looked into Tyler’s smiling, warm eyes, Josh was surprised by how easy it was to believe that Tyler had. Josh wondered…?

Tyler grabbed Josh’s hand in his and pulled him after him towards the motel room door, and Josh decided that whether Tyler had said it or not, whether he loved him or not, whether he ever would or not- this right here was pretty damn good. Tyler squeezed his hand in his as he glanced over his shoulder at him, dimples and eyes shining, and Josh squeezed right back. He loved him.

And, despite what he tried repeatedly telling himself, Josh hoped, prayed, begged to God that Tyler did, too.

Chapter End Notes

the team: *is fighting AGAIN*
coach anderson: gif

LEAVE SOME GHMSO MEMES BELOW AND BEST ONE GETS A SHOUT OUT NEXT CHAPTER SKDKKSKSKS
Caught in the way you got me

Chapter Notes

am i biased? maybe so. but this chapter? SHE GOOD YALL!!!! <33333 it's extra long bc it tOOK me so damn long to finish MY APOLOGIES, FRIENDS!!!!! you all deserve a good chapt and i hope this is that for you <33 next update will be MUCH sooner.

(i'm not here to brag but i wanna let yall kno what i been up to: i saw our boys again! since the last chapter i've been to 3 more shows yall! never in my life did i think i could do this but... it done happened!!! also i met JIM YALL!!! i pet him and told him he was a good boy!!!!! also...this week i'm gonna be at the last two shows in columbus! I CAN'T BELIEVE IT!!!!!! if ur there frens let's say hi!!! ily guys sm <33333)

title from patd girls/girls/boys

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As soon as the door had swung shut behind them, Tyler dropped Josh’s hand and took off running down the hallway, socked feet padding along the carpet till he reached the far end and turned to eye Josh triumphantly. Josh huffed in a mix of exasperated disbelief and helpless adoration as he followed quickly down the hall, not quite at a jog.

Tyler danced in place for a moment, way too energetic for a guy who had woken up before seven that morning and had just played a full, rough game. Josh called quietly from halfway down the hall to him to be quiet, people were probably sleeping in these rooms, but Tyler rolled his eyes and promptly did the Fortnite loser dance before disappearing out of sight around the corner.

Jesus fucking Christ, Josh was in love with his best friend. God, he loved thinking that! How in the world had he gone through three whole years of high school without that loser? What a fucking cute nerd. Josh loved him so much, he loved him, he-

“Jooooosh,” Tyler called from around the corner, and Josh legged it to catch up with his boyfriend. He rounded the corner and collided straight into Tyler’s chest, and they both broke down into giggles.

“Dude, you-” Josh started when they had calmed down enough to gasp for breath, but then they made eye contact and both burst into laughter again. Josh’s sides were starting to hurt. He hadn’t felt this good in a long time.

Tyler was leaning against him, shoulders shaking, nuzzling his face into Josh’s shoulder, and that stilled Josh’s laughter pretty quickly. His hands automatically wrapped themselves around Tyler, and Josh thought- believed- then that he would rather die than let Tyler out of his reach again. And Josh was only eighteen.

Tyler was the first one to pull away after he had finally stopped laughing, and Josh pouted at him, already moving towards him again when Tyler reached a hand out to Josh’s chest, stopping him a step away and grinning at him with playful mischief in his eyes.
“Hey, hey, J, piggy back? Please?”

All Josh could do at such an adorable request was nod, speechless; Tyler hadn’t even waited for a response anyways, was already scurrying around to stand behind Josh and shoving impatiently at his shoulders. Josh leaned forward, and Tyler hopped against him before slipping back off.

“Bend over,” Tyler demanded, shoving at Josh’s back now, and Josh blushed bright red at Tyler’s choice of words as he gripped Josh’s shoulders tight and jumped again. Josh caught his legs, slotting his hands beneath his knees and huffing out a laugh at the emojis staring up at him when he glanced down, trying to steady himself with the extra weight. Tyler wrapped his arms around Josh’s neck, and Josh coughed exaggeratedly. Though honestly, Tyler was squeezing kinda tight.

Tyler shifted and pressed a kiss to the top of Josh’s head on top of his curls, and it took Josh an extra couple of seconds to steady himself after that. He loved this baby so much, he loved him, he LOVED HI-

“How do I make you go?” Tyler joked, kicking his legs a little, and Josh huffed out a laugh, starting carefully off down the hall. Tyler removed one of his arms, and Josh purposefully jolted them forward a step, smirking as Tyler squeaked and scrabbled at Josh’s shoulder with his hand. Josh laughed once quietly, but Tyler still heard and bopped him gently on the cheek with his fist. Josh’s whole face hurt from smiling.

“Jesus, Ty, careful, I’m gonna fall-”

“Run, Josh, go faster,” Tyler said, kicking his legs, and Josh huffed.

“Tyler, I can’t run with you like that, you’re too heavy-”

“Are you calling me fat?”

“Now you know how it feels,” Josh reasoned, and Tyler kicked his legs again.

“Run, Josh, c’mon, pleaseeeaze-” Tyler started whining, and Josh stumbled against the wall, bumping into a fire extinguisher hanging there.

“Josh! Don’t knock it over, you- ow, fuck-” Tyler’s knee knocked against the handle of the extinguisher, and he shrieked as it swayed precariously. Josh darted out a hand to still it before it could crash to the ground, forgetting that he needed that hand to help support Tyler’s leg, and Tyler slipped half off his back dramatically, shrieking again as his grip around Josh’s neck tightened, and he broke down into giggles. Josh nearly blacked out as he stumbled the other way.

“Ty, I can’t breathe, you’re squeezing,” Josh said loudly over Tyler’s laughter, and Tyler loosened his grip as he waved a hand in front of Josh’s face.

“Over there, there’s the- I think there’s vending machines in there, with the ice machine? That door, that way, Josh.”
Josh followed Tyler’s direction, promptly careening into the side of the doorway; Tyler slipped off Josh’s back with another surprised yelp and ensuing giggles, bouncing on his feet next to Josh, and Josh slapped a hand over his mouth.

“Would you shut up, I’m honestly surprised if someone didn’t hear us— you, you’re the one making all the noise,” Josh scolded, voice light from trying to hold back his own laughter. Tyler’s eyes shone above Josh’s hand, and Josh didn’t trust him for one solitary second, but before he could say anything else, Tyler’s tongue prodded at his palm. Josh yanked his hand away as Tyler continued his laughing, oblivious to Josh’s warnings.

“Tyler! That’s gross! You little brat—”

Tyler darted forward then to kiss Josh’s lips, and Josh froze, his complaint forgotten. When Tyler pulled back, he was smirking coily at Josh as he crossed his arms over his chest, apple cheeks red and eyes still shining.

Josh laughed incredulously, so in love that it hurt. “Well, don’t you look smug.”

Tyler shrugged, still beaming. “And don’t you love it.”

“I do,” Josh sighed, before his brain could realize what Tyler had said, the words he had used. “I do love it.”

Josh tensed the second that the words left his lips, excuses already flooding his head, but Tyler blinked and looked past Josh’s shoulder, edging past him a quick moment later into the small utility room, quick enough to spare Josh from stammering out what he really meant— which wasn’t of course what he actually meant, that yes he did love Tyler, but was what he had to pretend was what he actually meant, that oh—I-didn’t mean-love-love-I-just-mean-I-like-it-and-you-a-lot—I’m-sorry-I-hope-this-doesn’t-awkward-you-out-or-anything-no-homo-bro.

That doesn’t make sense! Josh argued to himself. We’re boyfriends, what do you mean no homo? Why don’t you just grow a pair and tell him, for fuck’s sake? What’s stopping you?

Josh turned and eyed Tyler who was eyeing the vending machine, squeezed in the far corner of the room between a washing machine and the ice machine, the latter humming steadily and filling what Josh worried would otherwise be a very obviously awkward silence. He actually jumped when Tyler gasped loudly and pointed at the glass, looking back to Josh with the sweetest pair of eyes Josh had ever had the honor of looking into in his life, cheeks bursting with a kiddish grin, cheeks blushed and all dimples.

Aching with silent love and resignation, Josh remembered why he couldn’t tell Tyler. Tyler. Tyler was something that he couldn’t risk. He wouldn’t.

“Dude, no way! They have Milk Duds!” Tyler bounced in place in his socked feet as he fumbled with a dollar bill. “I love those little gooey guys... ugh, c’mon... Josh, can you— this dollar isn’t working.” He huffed, and Josh had hearts in his eyes. What an insufferable cutie-

“Josh!” Tyler demanded. “Put it in!”

Josh flushed red yet again at Tyler’s impressive choice of words, unsure whether he was doing it on purpose just to rile him up or not, but Tyler looked pretty focused on trying to insert his crumpled dollar into the machine, so Josh decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. This time.

“Jooooosh! Your dollar bill is broken,” Tyler whined as he let Josh take it from his hands.
“Babe, you- I don’t think you’re even trying,” Josh stifled his laughter as he straightened the bill and successfully inserted it into the machine, loving absolutely everything about the stink eye that Tyler was throwing him just then.

“Shut up,” Tyler said in response, tapping in the number for his Milk Duds and looking infinitely happier once the box was in his hands.

Josh was more than content to just watch Tyler, doing anything, doing nothing, but he was shoving another of Josh’s dollars at him, and Josh had to get his mind off his boyfriend long enough to pick out a snack. Then he could go back to thinking about only Tyler.

“Hey, look, it’s you,” Tyler pointed suddenly at the glass again.

“Huh? What do you-”

“There, see, a Big Hunk bar.”

Josh was blushing again- dammit- and slapped at Tyler’s arm. Tyler burst into giggles.

“Whatever, dude,” Josh murmured lovingly, ignoring Tyler’s bullying long enough to pick out a snack. He dished out a few more dollars to get extra snacks for Spencer- and Jordan, ugh. That jerk is definately paying me back!- and then a few more so that Tyler could get a couple more things.

“AirHeads, Circus Peanuts...dude, what is your diet?” Josh laughed, holding his arms out as Tyler stuffed his things in the pockets of Josh’s hoodie.

“Shut up, my diet is fine,” Tyler glared at him, and Josh leaned forward just enough to brush his nose against Tyler’s. The soft expression that visibly washed over Tyler’s face at that was priceless to Josh. Definitely worth the near ten dollars spent on stupid vending machine junk food.

Josh pulled out a bit more cash- he was down to quarters now- for drinks, and he patiently inserted coin after coin while Tyler pointed out the drinks they should get. Josh honestly didn’t know if he or Spencer- or even Jordan, and Jordan would eat anything- would like the random selection of beverages, but he humored Tyler nonetheless as the bottles piled up in the delivery slot below.

“I’m out of quarters,” Josh said, double checking his pockets- a difficult thing to do with multiple candy bars stuffed in them. “Wanna head back-”

“Hey, J, look,” Tyler interrupted from beside him, striking a pose in the reflective glass of the vending machine. “Make a face, it stretches you so it looks funny, see?”

Josh eyed Tyler for a moment to make sure that he was being serious- he did not put it past that little evil mastermind of his to not demand something of Josh to then just laugh at him for it. He looked into the glass and crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue, and Tyler started giggling happily.

Josh looked over at Tyler again- he looked so stupid- and utterly adorable- just standing there in his socks and emoji leggings and Toad shirt, Josh just wanted to squeeze him and kiss him all over and never ever let go. He was so cute, God damn it all. He was still making dumb faces in the glass when Josh stepped behind him and snaked his arms around his waist, burying his face in Tyler’s neck. A smile grew on his lips as Tyler jumped and shrieked, tilting his head and grabbing onto Josh’s arms locked around his tummy.

“Dude, no, stop, that tickles- oh my God, Josh, don’t-”

Josh blew a raspberry into Tyler’s neck, and Tyler shrieked again even louder and started giggling at
the same time. It was so insanely cute that Josh nearly fainted, like legit. Tyler was shimmying
around in his arms trying to get away, and Josh squeezed tighter as Tyler tried to slip through his
arms to the floor. The little bastard was so skinny, too, it was proving difficult to keep him from
doing so. Josh bent down as Tyler fell to his knees, and finally he let go of his grip around Tyler’s
waist- only to start tickling him instead, his stupid Mario shirt riding up and Josh’s fingers roving
over taut, bare skin. Tyler shrieked again so loudly that Josh knew that they needed to turn it down,
big time, but he was really struggling to find it in himself to give even half a shit just then. This was
just too much fun.

He dropped to his knees beside Tyler, now sprawled on his back on the ground, and continued to
tickle him. Tyler rolled onto his side facing Josh and curled in on himself, grabbing desperately at
Josh’s fingers, still making a lot of adorable (and loud) noise, and Josh leaned down to press a wet,
sloppy kiss to the side of his cheek, finally taking pity on him and pulling his hands away. Tyler was
gasping for breath, and he actually wiped at a tear on his cheek. Josh sat on his knees and stared
down at him with his heart so full of love that he felt the words coming up like literal vomit in his
throat. Gross, but...accurate.

“C’mere,” Tyler said suddenly, reaching up one hand towards Josh’s face, and seriously, did the guy
think Josh wouldn’t come immediately? Josh leaned down and smiled softly as Tyler’s fingers settled
on the back of his neck, forcing him closer to him till their noses bumped. Josh was hunched over
awkwardly, still on his knees hovering over Tyler still lounging on his back on the floor, shirt
halfway up his stomach from Josh’s earlier tickle attack, hair mussed up and eyes still bright and
damp from the subsequent struggle. His eyes... Josh still wasn’t over them.

Their faces were so close, noses still brushing, and Josh looked at Tyler looking at him, loving,
adoring every flicker in size of his pupils, every different shade of honey brown speckled in his
irises, eyes jumping from one of Josh’s to the other, fluttering back and forth. Tyler suddenly seemed
shy again, stiff beneath Josh, and Josh wondered what he had done wrong.

“Are you okay?” Josh asked hesitantly in the small space between them, not wanting to end this
moment, despite the sudden, though slight, shift in Tyler's body language. He moved his hand to
Tyler’s hair, running his fingers through the soft, longest tufts on the top of his head, tugging gently,
and Tyler let out a quiet whine, so quiet that Josh wouldn’t have even heard it had he been only a
few more inches away. Tyler’s eyes fluttered shut, and Josh leaned down to press a kiss to each of
his eyelids, unable to stop himself from the gentle show of affection.

Tyler’s knee bumped against Josh’s side then, and Josh stiffened; Tyler’s eyes opened and they
looked at each for a minute, and Josh cast about his fuzzy, in-love head for something,
something to say.

“This is like back there on the court...during the game,” he murmured, nearly a whisper, and fuck,
fuck, why would I say that!? Abort, abort mission, that's definitely not the thing to say right now,
what the hell is wrong with me, God, I'm the world’s biggest idiot-

“Yeah,” Tyler whispered in reply, eyes focused on Josh’s face, but not quite on his eyes, Josh
thought. “Yeah, it...it is....”

Josh couldn’t tell what his head was trying to tell him just then, felt it pulling him with equal force in
multiple directions at the same time, dragging his feet back while he was trying to run forward,
swallowing the words even as he opened his mouth to let them fall out, finally, finally, after
everything- and all that Josh could register clearly was the deafening beat of his heart rebelling in his
ribcage.

“I...” Josh breathed, almost unable to hear himself over the blood rushing in his ears. He tried to stop
himself, but the words were already spilling out. “Ty...did you...did you say you—”

Tyler was looking into Josh’s eyes then, and Josh froze, swallowing hard, feeling sweat starting to break out on his temple, and even though it was making him sick to his stomach, he was only a second away from just spitting it out, any and all consequences be damned, when-

A door slammed from somewhere down the hall, and there were loud footsteps jogging closer. Josh blinked, still so caught in the moment- in the possible moment- that the fact that someone was coming wasn’t registering yet.

“Bro... bro,” Tyler repeated himself when the first time only came out as a hoarse whisper. He cleared his throat once, quickly, and it sounded strained. He moved his hand from the back of Josh’s neck to his cheek, rubbed his thumb across Josh’s cheekbone before slapping at him gently. “Get off me, buttercup, someone’s coming.”

“Oh- oh, yeah, okay,” Josh moved back as Tyler sat up, pushing at Josh’s chest so he’d move back more. They clambered to their feet together, and Josh reached out to smooth down Tyler’s hair, still a mess from their earlier scuffle.

“Buttercup?” Josh asked belatedly, mind still catching up, heart still let down, blood still so loud in his veins that it almost drowned out the hurt. Almost.

Tyler smiled cutely, and that at least helped to soothe the ache in his chest; he hadn’t said it, but they were still okay. Josh wondered if they’d be okay if he had managed to choke it out.

“Buttercup,” Tyler verified, and Josh grinned in spite of himself, going in for another kiss, unable to stop himself.

Tyler stopped him though, darting comically quick away from him just as Jordan charged into the room.

“Here you guys are! What are you doing, getting ice?” Josh rolled his eyes and sighed out loud, annoyance growing when he noticed Tyler smirking at him. He also noticed a light blush high on Tyler’s cheeks, and that helped pacify him a little. Josh smirked back for the hell of it, and the minor look of surprise on Tyler’s face was more than worth it. He was almost grateful for Jordan’s presence- it helped distract him from the steadily increasing weight in his chest.

Jordan broke into a steady chatter without a second thought, and- of course, that little asshole- Tyler humored him, attention only adding fuel to Jordan’s commentary. Josh grabbed their drinks from the machine slot, and Jordan trailed him and Tyler out of the utility room, past the elevators, and back down the hallway towards their room, talking about everything and anything, as usual; non-stop, also as usual. He darted in between Josh and Tyler, yelling “Race you, guys!” but before Josh could get officially mad at his brother, Tyler was streaking off after him, the two thumping down the hallway and being loud enough that Josh knew the people a floor below them could hear them. Coach would let them have it tomorrow, Josh was sure of it.

Halfway down the hall Tyler had dropped the couple of snacks that he had been helping to carry, and Josh mumbled halfheartedly under his breath as he gathered them up, cursing his younger brother for temporarily stealing his boyfriend away. Those fuckers. What kids. Tyler was supposed to hate Jordan like he did, not play with him. The dummy.

When Josh finally caught up with them, they were waiting outside the motel room, panting and
laughing. Josh shot Tyler a for real? face, and Tyler managed to wink at him before Jordan stole his attention away again, retelling the highlights of the last Mario game that he had played.

Josh interrupted his brother, albeit a little more rudely than was called for, to ask Tyler for the key, but Tyler just looked at him.

“I don’t have it, dude.”

Josh scowled and tried the door, though he knew it would be locked. He wasn’t looking at Tyler’s face just then, but he had a very strong hunch that Tyler was about to make a big joke of the whole situa-

“Dude,” Tyler laughed, and Josh restrained a sigh. “I can’t believe you didn’t bring a key!” He shoved at Josh’s arm jokingly, and his bag of chips toppled from his hand. Still snickering, he slipped down the wall to sit next to them on the floor.

Josh rolled his eyes once as he tried the door to their motel room one more time before weighing his options and thumping loudly on it with his fist. He pressed an ear against it and could barely make out muffled screaming from that stupid vampire movie that Tyler had found earlier on the television. Jordan started to say something, and Josh shushed him loudly, straining to hear; if the shower was still running, it was too quiet for Josh to pick up, and he thumped on the door one last time, willing Spencer to hear it.

Following Tyler’s lead, Jordan too started snickering, and Josh glared at the both of them. Big fucking help they were.

“Jord, shut up. It’s not funny,” Josh huffed out, giving up for the time being and slipping down the locked door to sit pressed thigh to thigh with Tyler—still giggling. Jordan plopped down cross legged on the other side of the hall, and Josh shot him a warning look, just because, just for good measure.

Tyler’s head fell to Josh’s shoulder then, and Josh tensed—it was only Jordan with them, but still. Though...he had just pulled out his phone, fingers already tapping at the screen, and he was pretty obtuse in general, and he had no reason to suspect them of anything...Josh shoved the niggling worry in his head aside. This was fine.

Josh tilted his head to eye Tyler. He was smiling up at Josh in a devious way, and Josh half wanted to kiss him, half wanted to smack him for looking so smug.

“Don’t stress, Joshie,” Tyler whined cutely, turning his head to nibble at the shoulder of Josh’s hoodie.

Josh tried very hard to ignore how adorable Tyler was just then and instead reasoned, “What if Spence already went to bed? What if he has headphones in? We’ll be stuck out here.”

“Oh, no, stuck alone together in a motel, whatever shall we do,” Tyler quipped, blowing cool air into Josh’s ear. Josh wanted to kiss him, he wanted to kiss him, he wanted to-

“A motel hallway, that’s a whole lot different than being stuck alone in a room, dummy,” Josh said.

“That’s not what I meant. You’re so dirty minded, Josh.”

“It is too what you meant, don’t act innocent.”

Tyler ignored his last comment and tore open his bag of Doritos instead. “Want some chips? I’m willing to share.”
Josh spluttered for a moment. “You’re willing to share? I bought all this.”

Tyler chose that moment to pout over at Josh and blink innocently at him. He spoke in a quiet, overly sweet voice. “Thank you, Joshie.”

Josh’s cheeks turned red as he looked away, toeing at Tyler’s socked foot with his sneaker. “Yeah, well...whatever.” His boyfriend was making him blush. That definitely wasn’t very manly of him, God forbid if that were to get around…. Josh shot a quick look in Jordan’s direction, but his attention was glued to his phone. Maybe his little brother wasn’t so bad after all.

“You’re red,” Tyler felt the need to tell Josh, casually munching on a chip.

“Yeah, thanks, thank you for letting me know,” Josh mumbled, embarrassed, and Tyler shifted so both his legs were draped over both of Josh’s, and Josh tensed up, face and neck reddening even more.

“Tyler-” he started warningly, but Tyler was already shrugging as he tossed another chip in his mouth.

“What, dude? It’s chill, get over it. Want a chip?”

Josh mumbled under his breath a little more, just for the sake of it, taking a chip from the bag that Tyler was holding out for him. Instead of taking the bag back, Tyler settled his hand and the bag on top of Josh’s lap, right over his- Josh grit his teeth together, eyes jumping over to Jordan one more time, cursing the day for letting him continually finding himself in situations like this.

He looked pointedly over at Tyler, but Tyler was staring blankly at the carpet, other hand moving to get more chips. Josh couldn’t tell if he was aware of the position he was putting him in just then or not. Tyler still didn’t look at him, and Josh tried to relax a few increments.

He was just about relaxed- as relaxed as could be expected anyways, given his current situation- when Tyler dug deeper into the near empty Doritos bag, and Josh flinched, knee bumping up against Tyler’s leg. Tyler looked over at him questioningly, chip halfway to his mouth.

“Dude, I’m wearing basketball shorts,” Josh huffed below his breath, motioning at Tyler’s hand, and Tyler took his time evaluating the situation before smirking back up at Josh. Josh’s damn cheeks were turning red again.

“Ty, don’t-” he groaned, already resigned. He honestly didn’t know why he even bothered.

“What’s the matter, J? What’s up?” Tyler teased, elbowing him, and Josh hated him so much, he loved him with all his heart.

“Get it? Get it, Josh, what’s up-”

“Yes, Tyler, baby, I get it, I-”

The door behind Josh flew open, and Josh toppled backwards into the room, legs tangling with Tyler’s. Tyler burst into laughter again as Josh laid on his back and stared up at Spencer standing above him.

“What are you guys…” Spencer looked over the scene in front of him, doing a double take at Josh and Tyler sitting so closely, legs strewn over each other, and Josh hurriedly tugged his legs free from Tyler’s. “...doing? We have a room, y’know.”
Josh climbed to his feet as Tyler bounced to his next to him. “Josh forgot the key,” Tyler announced before Josh could say anything. He brushed past Spencer into the room without a second glance, and Spencer gave Josh a look.

“You like that guy? Be honest.”

Josh blushed so frequently as of late that it was starting to feel almost normal. “Yeah, I do, I do like him. As a friend, yeah, he, he’s- he’s my friend,” Josh stammered too quickly, avoiding Spencer’s eyes. Jordan pushed past the two of them a second later, and Josh followed him, glad for the excuse to not have to continue this certain line of conversation.

Once inside the motel room again, Josh froze in his steps as Spencer flopped down on one of the beds. Jordan was sitting next to Tyler on the other bed, the two of them equally interested in the new crappy movie that had just started playing.

“What?” Spencer questioned, and Josh hoped that he was just imagining the suspicious gleam in his eyes. “You okay?”

“Yeah, totally, I’m...it’s nothing,” Josh muttered, settling on the edge of the bed with Spencer, shooting daggers at his younger brother. He was meant to share with Tyler, not Jordan.

“Dude, you got snacks? Where’d you get those?” Spencer jogged Josh out of his moodiness enough for him to empty the snacks from his pockets and offer some to his friend. He gathered up the candies that Tyler had gotten for himself and crossed the small space to the other bed, stopping in front of Tyler so that he would have to look at him and not the TV for one second.

“Josh, get out of the w-”

“Oh, you don’t want these then?” Josh said, letting his annoyance at his brother make him more sarcastic than he would ever normally be.

“Wh- oh,” Tyler stopped trying to peer around Josh and smiled up at him sweetly. “Thank you, Joshie.”

“Yeah. Have fun with Jordan,” Josh spoke lowly enough that- he hoped- the noise from the television would keep Spencer from overhearing. He started to move away.

“Oh, you don’t want these then?” Josh said, letting his annoyance at his brother make him more sarcastic than he would ever normally be.

“Wh- oh,” Tyler stopped trying to peer around Josh and smiled up at him sweetly. “Thank you, Joshie.”

“Yeah. Have fun with Jordan,” Josh spoke lowly enough that- he hoped- the noise from the television would keep Spencer from overhearing. He started to move away.

“Okay, I w- wait, what, where are you going?” Tyler snatched Josh’s forearm before he could leave. “What do you-” he stopped when he noticed to what it was that Josh had been referring. He looked back up at Josh and whispered quietly, despite Jordan only a few spaces away on the bed. “Does he think he’s sleeping here?”


Tyler shot Josh the stink eye but ignored his comment, hand still gripping his forearm through his hoodie. “But I wanna sleep with you.”

Josh glanced over at Spencer- he was watching something on his phone with one headphone in, digging into the snack stash. Josh edged back closer to Tyler.

“Well, I don’t know what to do without making it...I don’t know, awkward.”

“Oh, well, I’m sorry it’s so awkward to be in the same space as me-”

“That is not what I meant and you know it,” Josh retorted. “Babe,” he added softly as an
afterthought.

Tyler quirked an eyebrow at him, movie forgotten. “Well, just...just make him move then.”

“Spencer won’t share with him.”

“Well, I don’t want to share with him.”

“I don’t want to either.”

“You’re his brother, if anyone has to it should be you.”

“I- you want to sleep with Spencer?”

“Ew, gag me.”

Josh huffed and crossed his arms. “You’re just being difficult on purpose.”

Tyler smirked. “That’s only ’cuz you always get so cute and mad when I’m difficult.”

Josh wanted to throw his hands up and stomp away, he wanted to kiss him, he wanted to shove his brother off the bed and just be alone with Tyler; he wanted to tell him, he wanted him to say it back, he loved him so much. Josh frowned down at Tyler instead. He didn’t know what to say.

Tyler rolled his eyes. “Fine. I’ll handle it.”

“What are you going to do?” Josh asked quickly, concern and suspicion suddenly piqued.

“Don’t worry, jeez, I know what I’m doing.”

“Ty, are you sure- don’t be obvious, okay-”

“When am I ever obvious?”

“All the time,” Josh almost laughed, though he was much more nervous than amused at the present moment.

Tyler rolled his eyes. “Babe, I got this, piss off a little, okay? Now move, you’re blocking my movie.” He pushed at Josh’s thigh. “You’re cute though.”

Josh had been opening his mouth to complain until Tyler added his last comment, then his attention was already focused back on the TV. Josh stood there for a minute aimlessly, unsure of what to do.

“Right, well...I’m going to the bathroom then.” Tyler didn’t acknowledge him, Jordan wasn’t paying any attention, Spencer was still on his phone. Josh shrugged to himself and headed for the bathroom, grabbing a pair of clean boxers from his bag as he passed and toeing off his shoes.

He took his time brushing his teeth, using his finger because someone hadn’t packed his toothbrush for him that morning, ears tuned into the noise coming from the other room. The television wasn’t playing that loudly, but the sound it was making, plus the closed door did an impressive job of muffling any other sound. At one point Josh thought that he heard someone speaking, and he hurried to turn off the faucet to eavesdrop, nerves still on edge over whatever it was that Tyler had up his sleeve, but it was a false alarm. He rinsed his mouth of toothpaste and stripped out of his hoodie and dirty shorts and boxers, seriously considered taking a shower, then decided he was too tired and would wake up early enough to do it first thing tomorrow morning, before Coach knocked their door down. He could feel the dried sweat on his body as he pulled on his clean boxers, and he grimaced,
but it wasn’t unpleasant enough to change his mind about cleaning off the next day. He tugged on the hem of the t-shirt he was wearing, slightly panicked over how tight it was. He looked in the mirror and didn’t recognize the shirt, mind drawing a complete blank for a few seconds until he finally remembered that this was Tyler’s shirt from the other night. He smiled in spite of himself, in spite of his urge to be put out that Tyler hadn’t thought to put a clean shirt in his bag. A shirt that fit him properly. He felt fat in this. At least the other night it had just been him and Tyler- alright, so Tyler’s family had been there, too, but wearing this shirt now without a hoodie or anything with Spencer and Jordan around...he felt weird. He tugged on the hem of it one more time, telling himself to get over it while at the same time wishing that his boxers were at least not briefs. Great. He was just getting all the luck tonight.

Josh grabbed his discarded clothes and took a deep breath before heading back into the main room. Nothing had changed the five minutes that he had been gone, and Josh didn’t know whether to be disappointed or relieved. He tossed his stuff in the general direction of his bag, toed at his shoes lying on the floor, dug his phone out of his hoodie pocket before dropping that to the floor as well. He rubbed at his curls and yawned and stretched as casually as he could, checked the time on his phone and looked around the room- then he couldn’t think of anything else logical to do except to crawl into a bed, and he couldn’t do that yet, not with Jordan still thinking that he was going to share with Tyler. So he just stood there by the TV, feeling like a tool. At least no one was staring at him.

The movie credits started rolling, and Tyler finally stirred from his spot on the edge of the bed, yawning. Then his eyes fell on Josh, very quickly dropping down his body before shooting back up to meet his eyes, and Josh turned pink at the smirk growing on Tyler’s face. God, he actually hated that guy. What a dick.

Jordan was moving, too, kicking off his shoes and hopping off the bed, only to go mess with one of the pillows. Josh raised his eyebrows at Tyler. Tyler nodded and winked once, and Josh was seriously doubting the foresight of letting Tyler handle this, when-

“I want to sleep with Josh,” Tyler announced loudly, loud enough to sound clearly over the movie credits still rolling.

Jordan stopped pillow-fluffing and Spencer, who was now horizontal and under the covers of the other bed, still on his phone, looked up, obviously confused. Josh closed his eyes. God. What a fucking day. So much for tact.

And here he was in his fucking boxer briefs and too tight t-shirt and his face red and flustered and he wanted to die.

“Like…” Tyler spoke again, and Josh peaked through one eye at him, willing him to shut up! Shut up, Ty, just stop talking, don’t make it worse, don’t- “Like sleep sleep, not...not sleep, like...like sex or anything, that’s not- that’s not what I meant, I don’t want to have...I don’t wanna have like-like sex with him or anything, god, no, no, of course not, I meant...I meant bed-wise, I wanna share with Josh. Share a bed. I wanna sleep in a bed with...’cuz I’m tired...and....”

Tyler trailed off, and Josh sighed and closed his eyes again. Wow. Wow. So this was his life? Fuck. What did he ever do to deserve this? Fuck, fuck, fuck.

The room was silent. The TV was still playing, still making noise, but the room was silent. Don’t ask Josh, he didn’t know, but it was. He took a shaky breath and forced himself to open his eyes. He couldn’t hide from this forever.

Spencer was still just staring, blinking slowly. He had been looking at Tyler, but after Josh moved his head, Spencer was looking at him, and Josh froze, fully aware of the darkening shade of color on
his entire face. He mentally counted the seconds until Spencer would accuse them of something—of
the truth, Josh was sure—the seconds until Spencer would protest having to sleep with Jordan, flat out
refuse—he’d already called not having to share with Jordan, no way in hell would he—

“Okay,” Spencer said simply, glancing to Tyler again, then a slightly longer look at Josh, before
back down at his phone. Josh just stared at his friend, no longer giving him even a second glance.
Was...was that...it? Josh was stunned. His thoughts were frozen. His body was frozen. He couldn’t
move, couldn’t breathe.

“Come oooooon, that’s not fair! I called this bed first, fair and square—” Jordan started, voice
whiney, and that jogged Josh from his shock enough to feel another flash of annoyance.

“Jord—” he started, but was cut off before he could even get going.

“’Mon, man, don’t make a deal.” Spencer. Spencer!? Josh could do nothing but stare open
mouthed. If Spencer had looked up at him then, Josh knew without a doubt that his friend would
know everything in Josh’s head just then, his emotions were that painstakingly obvious.

Jordan appeared equally shocked. “What!? Not fair! I don’t—”

“Dude.” There was something in Spencer’s tone that Josh thought he recognized, and suspicion
started to creep into his mind again, but before he could form any serious theories, Jordan was
sighing and moving to the other bed in a dramatic huff, flinging himself onto the bed, attitude
obvious. Tyler shot a quick beaming smile over his shoulder at Josh and bounced up the bed to
shimmy beneath the covers.

Josh was still standing by the TV, apparently frozen in place. What had just happened? How
did...how did Tyler do that? Josh thought that maybe Tyler was half magic.

“Dude, hand me the clicker,” Tyler demanded suddenly, and Josh’s brain finally started to work
again. He looked around blankly for a minute before spotting the remote on the floor, and he
scooped it up, edging around the bed on the far side of the room to clamber beneath the covers as
well, thankful to finally be safe and hidden in the blankets. With his boyfriend. With Tyler.

“How did you do that?” Josh breathed quietly, settling back against the headboard as Tyler fluffed a
pillow beneath him and collapsed on his back, cute double chin appearing as he stared down the
length of the bed to the TV, thumb working the channel button. Random commercials and clips from
movies and shows filled the otherwise quiet room, offering enough of a cover that Tyler responded
in a low voice, and Josh didn’t concern himself too much with the worry of anyone else overhearing.

“Told you I’d handle it, dude.”

Josh huffed out a laugh and glanced quickly towards the other bed. Spencer’s attention was glued to
his phone, and Josh wondered if he was just imagining the rigidness of his shoulders. Jordan caught
Josh looking and hopped off the bed to stomp to the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind him.

“You didn’t handle it, that was horrible,” Josh half joked. “Why did you—” he glanced again to
Spencer and lowered his voice even more, despite his friend now having both headphones in. “Why
did you say all that about—about...”

Tyler looked away from the TV long enough to smirk up at Josh, and Josh gave him a look.

“You are such a virgin, it’s adorable,” Tyler muttered through a grin, and he bumped his knee
against Josh’s shin beneath the covers, turning back to the TV.
Josh spluttered. “Stop calling me that, Tyler, I’m not. You’re the one who got all tongue tied about sleeping together.”

“Yeah? Well, you were the one who was too baby to even mention shit in the first place.”

Josh spluttered again. “Baby? I’m not baby. You are. You’re in leggings-”

“You’re in boxer briefs!”

“Yeah, that’s what guys wear, not leggings.”

Tyler looked back up at Josh with a scowl on his face. “I’m a guy. I’m in leggings.”

Josh huffed on a laugh again. “Yeah. And you’re baby.”

Tyler elbowed Josh in the hip before turning his attention back to the TV, wiggling further down beneath the covers with his scowl still in place. Josh leaned closer towards him and reached out a finger to brush along his cheek.

“Don’t touch me,” Tyler spoke, jerking his head away, and Josh bit his lip to keep from smiling too big. He tried again, and Tyler moved his head away again.

“Don’t,” he mumbled, not looking at Josh. Josh moved his fingers to Tyler’s double chin instead and tickled him, and Tyler squirmed away, pretended to bite at Josh’s fingers to get him to stop.

Josh finally let his hand rest beside Tyler’s head on the pillow and watched him watching the TV for a moment. As a commercial ended and a new one began—stupid infomercials that weren’t even interesting, Josh honestly didn’t know why Tyler was so intrigued all the time—Tyler’s eyelashes fluttered up as he looked up at Josh, and he almost immediately smiled, pulling the covers over his mouth so Josh couldn’t see.

Josh felt like his heart was bursting. His face certainly was from the smile stretched across it. He poked gently at Tyler’s cheek, and Tyler tilted his head towards Josh’s touch as Josh brushed a thumb across his cheekbone before leaning back against the headboard again. He turned the other way to grab his phone from the nightstand, and when he turned back, he noticed Spencer looking in his direction. A sheepish look came over Josh’s face, but Spencer probably hadn’t even seen it—he looked quickly down as soon as Josh had noticed him.

Josh tried not to think about it. Whatever. Spencer hadn’t been paying attention. They hadn’t been being that obvious anyways, just a bit of friendly touching, that was all, that was...he probably hadn’t even seen, and he hadn’t been listening either, the guy still had headphones in. Whatever. Whatever. It was nothing. Josh was just paranoid, that was all.

It was already past one when Josh turned his phone on. And on six percent battery. He sighed and considered crawling out of bed for his charger, but he was too comfortable, and too relieved to finally be with Tyler that he shut his phone off instead, opting to charge it in the morning.

Jordan came out of the bathroom then and stomped over to the other bed, shooting daggers at Josh all the while as he passed and flopping down on the bed, facing away from the room. Josh tried not to let himself smirk. He was just so relieved he couldn’t believe it. He’d been with Tyler just last night, but...that felt so long ago, too long and he just...he just needed to be with him, okay? Okay. Jordan could sit on it.

Tyler suddenly rolled onto his side and half sat up to flick the lamp off on the table between the two beds, the flashing light from the TV casting an immediately comforting and familiar glow over the
room. Josh took the cue to slip down all the way down the headboard and into a horizontal position, kicking his legs to loosen the motel sheets when he felt cold fingers poking at his shoulder.

“Josh,” Tyler whispered, loud enough that he might as well not bother whispering. Josh looked over at him with squinted eyes.

“Yeah?”

“Can you get my Airheads? I’m hungry.”

Josh chuckled quietly, in love. “It’s past midnight, dude.”

“I know what time it is, thank you, Joshua. They’re on the table over there.”

Josh let out a huff of air before he could stop himself. “Really? I just laid down.”

“I’m hungry,” Tyler pouted down at Josh in way of reasoning.

Josh stared at Tyler for a minute before giving in and crawling back out of the bed and crossing the room quickly to feel blindly around on the table, grabbing the candy and tossing it in Tyler’s direction. There was a muffled “oof,” and Josh smiled to himself in the hazy darkness, pulling his t-shirt off before slipping back beneath the covers.

Tyler was lying down again, looking at him, and Josh was already blushing again. At least Tyler couldn’t see it in the glow from the TV. Probably.

“What, are you hot or something?” Tyler teased, and Josh was half thankful, half anxious that he couldn’t see across the room anymore to what Spencer might be doing.

“Shut up,” he mumbled, lowering himself to the mattress and tugging at the covers. “I always sleep like this and you know it.”

“Hell, yeah, I know it-”

“Eat your Airheads, Tyler, shut up.”

Tyler chuckled once, and Josh glared in his direction, though Tyler couldn’t have seen and wasn’t paying attention anyways, eyes back on the television. It was muted, and Josh watched it sleepily for a moment before rolling onto his side to watch Tyler instead. He was laying on his back with his double chin again, head tilted down to see the screen, covers pulled up to his chest and fingers struggling with the candy wrapper, big brown eyes half hooded with eyelashes- he was sleepy, too, the baby- the actual square screen of the television visible in his eyes, hair fluffing against the pillow beneath his head. Josh loved him with his entire heart.

“I….” Josh cut himself off as the pestering sentence tried slipping out again. It was always there in the back of his head, always there on the tip of his tongue, always trying to sneak its way out. And God, Josh wanted to, he wanted so goddamn much, but...he was just so-

“Hm?” Tyler peeked over at him out of the corner of his eye, package finally ripping open. He stuck the end of an Airhead in his mouth and mumbled around it, “Did you say something?”

It felt so similar to back during the game when Josh had thought...he shook his head once, forcing a smile. “No, you’re just. You’re really cute,” he lowered his voice, worry over Spencer and Jordan only a bed away creeping back in.
Tyler scrunched up his nose in a little smirk, and Josh leaned closer and pressed a kiss to his lips- he tasted like a fucking Airhead- mouth closed to keep as quiet as possible. He could feel Tyler smiling against him as a sticky hand fell to the back of his neck, and Josh didn’t mind at all. He curled into Tyler’s side, hand on Tyler’s bare stomach where his shirt had ridden up beneath the covers, slowing his own breath by matching it to Tyler’s, and he fell asleep waiting for Tyler to turn off the TV.

Tyler was standing over him beside the bed and shaking him awake. Josh didn’t know why the fuck he had to do that, it was Saturday, they had the whole day to chill, why wake him up at the ass crack of dawn? Josh blinked groggily as a stupid emoji from Tyler’s stupid leggings came into focus. And why was Tyler wearing clothes already anyways? Hadn’t they just-

Then Josh remembered that yeah, it was Saturday, but that he was in a motel, in Akron, with the entire sports and cheer teams. Tyler leaned down and blew cool air into Josh’s face, and he squirmed away even as a smile grew on his lips, arm reaching out and grabbing a gentle handful of hair on the back of Tyler’s head, tugging him closer. Tyler let Josh pull him low enough for their noses to bump and then- a door banging open scared the living shit out of Josh as he immediately let go, his blood rushing; Tyler calmly pulled away, and their current situation fully registered in Josh’s head. He had clean forgotten that sharing a motel room meant sharing a motel room with other people.

Josh sat up quickly as Spencer came out of the bathroom, toweling at his hair and thankfully not looking in their direction. Josh shot a glare up and over at Tyler, who had his arms crossed and was smirking down at Josh, fully aware of the whole situation the entire time, letting Josh in his half unconscious state nearly make a complete fool out of himself. Josh hated that guy. God, he was so fucking cute.

“Hey, are you guys almost ready? Coach was already up here once,” Spencer said, pulling a shirt on over his head. “Josh, you- you’re not even up yet? Dude, c’mon.”

“That’s what I told him,” Tyler hummed through a sneaky smile, and Josh glared at him one more time as he scrambled out of the bed, checking his phone for the time. Already ten past seven.

“For real, J, you gotta hurry. Jordan already went down for breakfast, I’m gonna go grab something, too. If Coach knows you’re-”

“Okay, chill, it’s fine, I’ll only be a minute,” Josh interrupted, grabbing his bag and throwing it onto the bed, searching for any clean clothes. “I’m just gonna take a quick shower, then I’ll be ready. Hey, Ty, I call the-”

“I call the bathroom!” Tyler cut in, slamming the door behind him, and Josh huffed in mild annoyance.

Spencer raised his eyebrows at Josh. “Whatever. But you two better hurry. Meet you down there, ‘kay?”

“‘Kay,” Josh mumbled in reply as Spencer grabbed his bag and left the room. The TV was still on, still muted; Tyler had probably fallen asleep last night before he could turn it off. Josh smiled fondly in spite of himself, sitting down on the edge of the bed to blink away the sleep still in his eyes, rubbing at the mess of curls on his head, matted and tangled from the game’s dried sweat.

A door cracked open, and the sound of running water filled the room. “Hey, Josh?”

Josh turned sleepily- God, he was tired. Games always took a lot out of you- to Tyler leaning out
from behind the bathroom door, shirtless now but still wearing his socks and leggings. 

“Hey, babe. You need something?”

“Yeah,” Tyler huffed in a nasal voice.

“What? You need your bag? Your razor-”

“No,” Tyler huffed.

“Then what?” Josh said, stifling a yawn.

“You.”

That effectively ruined Josh’s yawn as he spluttered for what felt like almost a solid minute, cheeks turning every shade of embarrassing red that there was as he tried to ascertain whether or not Tyler was actually being serious about what he suspected it was that Tyler was asking. He laughed nervously.

“You serious?”

Tyler rolled his eyes. “Dude, c’mon, this is your last offer. I’m locking the door-”

“Okay, okay, geez, give me a second, I’m coming,” Josh shot off the bed and tripped on a shoe, Tyler’s smirk flashing in the corner of his eye as he disappeared back behind the half open door, and Josh glanced over his shoulder one last time at the room and closed motel door before slipping into the bathroom after Tyler, locking the door behind him.

The mirror was already steamed over, and the second Josh turned around to complain about how hot it was, Tyler was on him, shoving him back against the door and shoving his tongue between Josh’s lips and curling it with Josh’s, the sensation scattering goose bumps along Josh’s bare skin. Tyler threw both arms around Josh’s neck to keep him close, the bare skin of his stomach and chest slipping against Josh’s. Josh’s arms automatically went to Tyler’s middle, wrapping around his lower back and hauling him closer. Tyler’s skin was burning to the touch. God, Josh felt starved. He needed this.

And, to Josh’s glee and consistent surprise, Tyler did, too, apparently. He was tilting his head to find a better angle into Josh’s mouth, refusing to stop for breath, and when Josh accidentally bit down on Tyler’s bottom lip, Tyler moaned into his mouth and his hips rolled against Josh’s. That was all it took for Josh to forget anything and everything in his head that wasn’t fully and only Tyler, and his hands slipped lower to grab at Tyler’s ass instead, fingers digging into the soft flesh beneath his leggings, pulling him against him.

Tyler broke away from their kiss to pant into Josh’s mouth, tiny high whimpers escaping from his lips, their foreheads slipping against each other’s from sweat. The room was so warm that Josh could see red splotches across Tyler’s cheeks and actual droplets of sweat on his temple. Sweat gleamed on his neck, too, and Josh wasted no time in attaching his mouth to the spot beside Tyler’s Adam’s apple, sucking hard and unconcerned with any potentially visible consequences. Right now, Tyler was his and nobody else on the entire planet existed. Josh loved it like this.

Josh also loved Tyler’s ass. He’d never done this before, never- he’d always felt much too crass and animalistic to act this way with a girl, and he’d never gotten close enough in any relationships in the past to get this far anyways. Well, except for- no, not now, all Josh wanted to think about was Tyler. Which admittedly was an incredibly easy thing when Tyler kept moaning against his temple and Josh could feel the vibrations running along his skin, and Tyler was thrusting his hips forward against Josh
as much as he was pressing back into Josh’s grasp on his ass. Josh was about to fucking lose it. God, Tyler was right, wasn’t he, he was a fucking virgin, a virgin and a prude. He could come in his boxers just from their making out.

Except- Josh didn’t want to come like that. He stopped working his mouth against Tyler’s neck, pressing a kiss there instead, then a kiss behind his ear, then his cheekbone. Tyler was still gasping quietly, hands scrabbling for a hold around Josh’s neck as he rolled his hips, his arms bracketing Josh’s head and blocking out the whole world, and Josh loved him.

“Baby, let’s- stop, Ty, I don’t wanna-”

“Yeah, I know,” Tyler breathed, voice hoarse, and all Josh wanted was his mouth on Tyler’s again. “I know. Let’s...wanna get in the shower?”

“Fuck, yeah, I wanna get in the shower,” Josh replied without thinking, his libido already taking over, and Tyler giggled into Josh’s cheek as he pecked a quick kiss there before stepping back, both of their arms falling away from the other. Josh’s eyes were glued to Tyler, and Tyler smirked once at him before turning around to face the shower as he wiggled out of his leggings.

Josh groaned. “You are such a fucking tease.”

Tyler laughed. “You’re so horny.”

“It’s your fault. You started this.”

“You had a boner last night. In your sleep.”

“I-” Josh squinted his eyes at Tyler, smirking over his shoulder at Josh and looking way too smug for someone currently tripping out of emoji leggings tighter than his own skin. “...did not. You’re making that up.”

“I’m not.”

“You are, too.”

“No, I’m not. You had a boner, dude, dead-ass.”

“Shut up, Tyler, I didn’t, I would’ve woken up if I did.”

Josh stopped trying to defend himself when he saw Tyler snickering at him, and instead stepped on one of the legs of Tyler’s leggings. Tyler grabbed at Josh’s shoulders dramatically.

“Dude! I almost slipped-”

“Serves you right for being an asshole.”

“Who’s an asshole?”

“You are, and you like it. You like being a little mean, don’t you?”

“Sometimes mean is what you are, mean is easier than nice, and though mean can ta-”

“Are you seriously singing Mean Girls right now?” Josh laughed, incredulous, disbelieving, and even more in love with this total dork in front of him than he ever had been before in his life.

Tyler burst into giggles, splotches of red scattered across his chest and now bare thighs, and Josh
took him all in, body tanned and thin but toned, his eyes shining and hair waving and darkening patch of skin on his neck and- oh, shit, that really is an obvious spot, isn’t it? Jesus, it’s right fucking there, it’s not even to the side or anything, Ty’s gonna kill me when he realizes-

“Take your briefs off, Joshie, we have to hurry,” Tyler prodded, slipping closer to the shower stall, and Josh blushed again as he grew nervous, despite having done this before, despite Tyler already having seen him and touched him and- Josh took a deep breath and manned up as best he could within three seconds, and shoved his boxers down his thighs and off his legs, dropping them on top of Tyler’s discarded leggings.

“Don’t say anything,” Josh warned as Tyler was opening his mouth. Josh had to fight himself from covering up his half hard junk.

Thankfully, thankfully, why, Josh didn’t know, Tyler closed his mouth again and gave Josh a sneaky smile instead, leaning into the shower to fiddle with the knobs. He was still wearing his own boxers and his socks, and Josh just wanted him naked already, goddammit. He slipped up behind him and leaned down to press a kiss to his shoulder, easing himself closer, almost hesitant to be this close now, shy and a bit flustered in an embarrassing way. He shoved the feelings aside and feigned confidence he didn’t quite feel, pressing up against Tyler’s backside, inadvertently sighing at the friction of his boxers against his naked cock.

Tyler moaned and pressed back against him, muscles tensing in his back, and Josh nearly had a heart attack. This was so similar, so close to...they had only ever just...gotten each other off, a handjob, a blowjob, but this...but this...it did nothing but imprint dirty, delicious images and ideas in Josh’s head that he had never let himself think of till now. He had never known if Tyler had...if Tyler would be okay with it, if Tyler would ever want to, if Tyler would ever be game for...he just didn’t know. But this right here...it was a good sign.

Josh felt his confidence building. Shaky hands settled on Tyler’s hips, and he could feel Tyler shaking, too, his skin hot and damp. Josh rubbed his thumbs in circles over Tyler’s boxers, waiting, unsure if- Tyler made a quiet sound, dropped his head, and pressed back. It wasn’t a lot, just a bit, but Josh nearly lost it. He thrust against him gently, and Tyler keened forward, head bumping against the tiled wall as he let out a low groan. Josh moved a hand up Tyler’s back to rub at the space between his shoulder blades, slowly running his hand back down his back, over his side and the small pudge there, then back to his hips. He slipped his fingers beneath the cotton material, leaned forward to press another kiss to Tyler’s back as Tyler pushed back again, and Josh pulled the underwear down his legs.

It caught on his bulge, and Tyler actually huffed out a laugh as he straightened enough to help Josh get the boxers off. He stepped out of them and turned around to face Josh, crashing his lips against Josh’s before Josh could say or do anything, hands moving up Josh’s chest, their bare dicks pressed together. Josh could have died right then and there. He kissed back like his life depended on it instead.

“C’mon, get in,” Tyler pulled away and murmured against Josh’s mouth, and Josh obeyed, grimacing at the spray of hot (burning) water that hit his face.

“Your socks,” Josh laughed when Tyler made to follow him, and he laughed some more as Tyler stripped them off quickly and slipped in next to Josh, feeling happy and content and excited and so in love. He loved this. He loved Tyler.

The water was spraying down against Tyler’s back, and Josh leaned in to attach their mouths once again as he slowly backed Tyler further under the spray till they were both getting hit with the water. Tyler’s fingers were scratching at his back, and that combined with the temperature of the water was
enough to make him sore, Josh could feel it already. His skin stung, but god, Josh would be damned if he wanted this to stop.

“You’re so handsome,” Tyler mumbled when they parted, eyes focused on Josh’s face. “I love...I love your face, Joshie.”

Josh huffed and smiled, though his heart had started to speed up at Tyler’s words and it wasn’t showing any signs of slowing down. He murmured softly, “I love your face, too, Ty.”

Is this it? Is this when I say it? Do I say it now? Did we just say it? Was that it? Does he know? Like know know? Does he know what I mean when I say I love his...did he mean that when he said...or did he just mean...should I....

“I...I didn’t think this through,” Tyler said, and Josh couldn’t look at him. Oh, god, here it is, he didn’t mean that at all, he knows what I was thinking, Jesus, is this how we end? Naked in the shower together, he’s gonna break up with me? God, I didn’t even say it, this isn’t fair, maybe- he can’t mean it, I can take it back, he doesn’t know I meant- I won’t tell him, I’ll laugh it off, I’ll just-

“It’s too small in here- the floor’s too hard for me to get on my knees-”

Josh’s brain did a double take so fast his neck hurt. What Tyler said both relieved him instantly while at the same time the words get on my knees coming from Tyler’s mouth in Tyler’s voice...it went straight to Josh’s dick.

“Oh.” He almost laughed he was so relieved. And stupid. God, bro, you’re so stupid, can you chill out for five goddamn seconds? Geez. “Oh, I thought you meant....”

Tyler glanced up at him distracted, chewing on his lip, squinting to keep the water out of his eyes. Josh reached out without thinking and brushed a wet strand of hair out of Tyler's eyes. Tyler smiled over at him. Josh smiled back.

“I mean...” Tyler shrugged, looking adorable and goofy with his wet hair plastered to his face, water droplets caught in his eyelashes, skin raw and a red shade from the water, and Josh had never felt so conflicted in his life. He bit down on the words he wanted to say so badly and grinned back instead. “...you want a handjob? That’s all we got room for here.”

Josh laughed, and Tyler would probably think he was crazy, but Josh was so relieved he couldn’t stand it. At this point he probably was a little crazy, but he didn’t care. Tyler was fine and Tyler didn’t know and Josh hadn’t slipped up and Tyler hadn’t freaked out and Tyler was offering him a handjob with the sweetest little smile on his face in the entire fricking world and Josh was in paradise.

“Yeah, I mean,” Josh said, unsure of how to word his request. He didn’t want to come off as rude or anything, or- God forbid- make Tyler feel he had to comply, he didn’t wanna force the guy...he was pretty competitive, after all, that was common knowledge, and the thought of him...Josh just didn’t know. “I mean, we can...” Josh swallowed. God, he was such a pussy he should be the one to...well, yeah. “...we can, like...do what we were doing...before...?”

Tyler just looked at him with those eyes and blinked once, and Josh watched a drop of water drip off his eyelashes as he started to freak out. “I mean, I- if you’re okay with that, if you think you’d- I mean, I just...if that’s something that you want, too, if- I don’t mean- God, I don’t mean like, fully or anything, or like- not here, not- not now, not...not ever, if you don’t want to, if, if...just what we...before, that was...that was good....”
Tyler blinked again, and Josh couldn’t stop stammering. “I only mean that- it’s just, you seemed okay with it, and I...I mean, there’s room for that, if you...if you wanted to- to, um...I’m not like, y’know, trying to- to...assume anything, y’know? It doesn’t...it doesn’t mean anything, it’s just like, for right now, if you wanted to-”

“You mean frottage?”

“I-” Josh was honestly thankful to be interrupted. At least it would stop his increasingly embarrassing rambling. “What’s that?”

“You wanna slip your dick between my-

“Ty-ler, don’t say it.”

“Why not? You were trying to,” Tyler laughed.

“Yes, but I didn’t, there’s a difference. It just sounds so...I don’t know-”

Tyler coughed once and mumbled jokingly, “Virgin.”

Josh ignored him. “How do you even have a word for...for it anyways? That’s like...weird, but...slightly impressive.”

“I’m gay, I know the lingo,” Tyler said, looking pleased. “You should learn it, too, Joshie.”

“I’m not gay,” Josh reminded Tyler, and Tyler just rolled his eyes at him.

Josh was about to argue his point to Tyler when there was a hand around his dick, and all coherent thoughts flew from his mind. He grabbed at the tiled wall next to him for a bit of support, other hand flying to Tyler’s shoulder to steady himself as Tyler worked his hand slowly up and down his cock, probably on purpose just to shut Josh up, but honestly? Josh was done complaining anyways. Whatever it was that they had been discussing...it could fucking wait.

Tyler leaned forward, and Josh let his forehead fall against Tyler’s, both looking down at Tyler’s hand between their bodies. His hand looked so fucking tan in comparison to Josh’s skin, his thighs milky pale and cock pink between Tyler’s brown fingers. Josh closed his eyes. If he watched, he’d come right then and there.

“If you ask me to turn around, I will,” Tyler murmured into Josh’s temple, and Josh grit his teeth around a groan, suddenly grateful for the sound of the shower water muffling what they were doing just then.

“God, Ty, you- you can’t just up and say shit like that, you- warn me first next time, dude,” Josh panted, and Tyler chuckled against his cheek, twisting his hand as he nipped at Josh’s ear. Josh almost felt like fainting.

“Say it, Josh,” Tyler pressed a moment later when Josh still hadn’t gotten up the nerve. “I don’t mind. But you gotta say it.”

“Tyler,” Josh huffed, letting the word turn into a moan as Tyler continue to play with his dick. This was the hottest thing Josh had ever personally experienced in his life, ever; this even beat the other night, this beat everything. Josh was gonna fucking come right fucking there, and he was gonna get fucking cum on the ceiling, just watch him.

“Josh,” Tyler said, tone heavy, and Josh fucking knew who it was calling the shots.
“T-Ty...would you…” Josh choked on his own words. “Ty, I can’t say that, just-”

“Say it, Josh, or I won’t do it.” He squeezed his dick, and Josh jolted forward against Tyler’s chest.

“Fuck,” he muttered, water dripping into his eyes as he tried to gather his thoughts. “I...turn around-”

“Please.”

“Please,” Josh wheezed and suddenly Tyler was dropping his dick and forcing his tongue into Josh’s mouth, hand on his cheek as Josh kissed back, desperate. Just as suddenly, Tyler was gone, and Josh opened his eyes to protest. Tyler smiled at him as if he knew, grabbing onto Josh’s forearm as he squeezed around him, switching their places in the small stall. He turned around. Josh would be lying if he said his mouth didn’t drop open at the sight.

Tyler leaned against his forearms against the shower wall, bent forward slightly, and turned to look over his shoulder at Josh. His eyelashes fluttered to rid the water spraying into his eyes, and Josh loved each and every inch of him. He loved him, he loved him.

“C’mon, Josh,” Tyler’s voice was hoarse, and it wavered once. Josh’s ears perked up immediately. Maybe it was selfish, but he was glad that he wasn’t the only one who was nervous. Tyler put on a good show, but one small crack in his voice was all it took. Josh knew.

He stepped closer and leaned over Tyler’s back, ignoring both their dicks long enough to press a kiss to the nape of Tyler’s neck. Tyler ducked his head, and Josh reached for Tyler’s hand against the wall, pressing a few more kisses along his back, and then a few more, and then a few more. A silent admission. Tyler didn’t have to know.

Tyler turned his head again towards Josh, and Josh pressed forward even more to reach his lips, dick slipping up and against Tyler’s ass, and they both gasped into the other’s mouth, one of Tyler’s arms falling from its position holding him up to between his legs. Josh dropped an arm along with Tyler and wrapped his hand around Tyler’s around his dick as he broke their kiss. Tyler dropped his head again, and Josh pressed his forehead against Tyler’s back as he thrust again, harder this time, and he moaned out in Tyler’s ear. This was good, so, so good.

Josh hadn’t believed that it could get any better than that, but then he felt Tyler’s hand speeding up beneath his own, and then Tyler was pressing his ass back against Josh; his thrusting became more forced and the slide became more intense, and Tyler was moving, too, and Josh couldn’t stand this for much longer. He braced himself, grinding his teeth as he looked down and- he stilled long enough to keep from coming. Tyler’s ass, skin taut and so tan and so pink, and Josh’s cock right fucking there- slipping up and down between his cheeks, flesh soft and pliable...it was too fucking much, Josh couldn’t take this. He wrapped his free arm around Tyler’s middle and pulled him back further every time that Tyler pushed back, and the water was so hot and relentless on Josh’s back, he was probably getting third degree burns right then, damn it all, why the fuck does Tyler like the water so hot? But Josh couldn’t care less. His brain could only focus on the heated, quivering body beneath his and the sounds growing in volume that were coming from Tyler’s mouth, and the rise and fall of his rib cage beneath Josh’s fingers, and the somehow soft, burning friction around half his dick as he thrust against Tyler, and he nearly fucking slipped as he came on Tyler’s back, dick pulsing as he continued to rut against Tyler, not wanting it to end, not wanting to stop.

Tyler’s whine turned into a quiet giggle as Josh panted against him, his cum dripping off Tyler’s side, and Josh too started to grin, pressed a quick kiss to Tyler’s shoulder. He pulled back and turned Tyler around, taking Tyler’s hand on his dick with him, and Tyler began to protest when Josh brought Tyler’s hand to his lips and kissed his knuckles, still trying to catch his breath.
“What do you want, baby? I’ll do it for you,” Josh mumbled against Tyler’s fingers, and—what was that look that came across Tyler’s face? He almost looked proud.

Tyler’s cheeks were rosy, but he didn’t look shy or nervous, just overheated, just alive. He smiled and ducked his head an inch, eyelashes wet and tangled, and said softly, “Your mouth.”

Josh closed his eyes to keep from getting hard again. As much as he’d love to—and trust him, he’d fucking love to—they didn’t have the time. Urgency spurred him on, and without hesitation he dropped to his knees in the cramped shower stall, grimacing at the hard floor beneath his kneecaps but unwilling to stop. Tyler deserved this. Tyler deserved the world.

Josh’s hands came up to Tyler’s sides, gently grabbing hold of hips, fingers digging into soft flesh, and Tyler’s hands rested on his head. Josh could feel Tyler weaving his fingers into his curls, and he smiled as he brushed his nose along Tyler’s cock hanging in front of him, licking gently along the entire length, loving the tightening of Tyler’s grip in his hair and the visible tensing of the muscles in his thighs. Josh moved one hand to the back of Tyler’s thigh and pulled him closer as he slipped the tip into his mouth, keeping his mouth slack around him as he moved down an inch and then back up, down another inch and then back, until Tyler’s pubic hair was tickling at his nose. Tyler was struggling to be quiet, Josh could feel the noises he was trying to keep inside, but when he pulled slowly back off his dick before sliding all the way back down, Tyler arched his back against the wall and let out a high moan, tugging at Josh’s head, fingers pulling.

Josh pulled off slowly and went down quicker again, pleased with Tyler’s reaction, still surprised at the feel of his dick pulsing on his tongue. He hollowed his cheeks without warning, and Tyler keeled, back arching, fingers squeezing so tight Josh thought he was probably losing a few hairs off his head, and he hollowed his cheeks as hard as he could as Tyler thrust into his mouth and came down his throat.

Josh wasn’t any more prepared for it this time than he had been the last time they’d done this. He tried pulling back, the sensation of gooey cum shooting down his throat more unpleasant than the taste, but Tyler held him pressed against his abdomen, hair scratching against his nose and cheek. He thrust inside his mouth once, twice, and Josh tried to gag but couldn’t; Tyler thrust in once more and then held Josh there for a moment, tiny gasps escaping his lips. God, if Tyler kept making noises like that, Josh was gonna be half hard again by the time that Tyler finished.

Josh’s reflexes tried again, and Josh blinked away a few stray tears as he patted gently at Tyler’s leg. Tyler got the hint, and slowly pulled back, Josh dropping his head to his chest as he coughed once, fighting back his urge to gag. Tyler was actually petting at his head as Josh heaved for a moment, strings of spit and cum dripping from his lips to the shower floor, the moving water quickly washing it away.

“You okay?” Tyler asked after a minute, still petting at Josh’s hair, and Josh nodded, taking a deep breath to make sure he wouldn’t throw up all over the both of them. He grimaced and reached a finger into his mouth, swiped a pubic hair off his tongue. He struggled carefully to one knee, not wanting to slip, and Tyler stepped as far back as he could to help Josh stand up.

His knees screamed at him, bright red and already starting to bruise. Josh swiped another hair off his tongue. Tyler squinted at him with a hint of a smile on his face.

“You know you don’t have to do that if you don’t like it,” he reminded him, and Josh wiped the hair off onto Tyler’s arm.

“Dude, shut up, y’know I love your cock in my mouth.”
“You’re wilding for this dick.”

“Yeah, I am,” Josh agreed, and they both broke into giggles, Tyler dropping his forehead to Josh’s shoulder. Josh wrapped his arms around Tyler’s back and felt him breathe and felt him laugh against his skin, and he loved him.

“Are we actually gonna take a shower or nah?” Tyler asked after a moment, pulling away to look at Josh, and Josh reluctantly let his arms slip from around Tyler.

“I mean...we’re clean enough,” Josh mused. “Let’s just go, Coach is probably fuming at the mouth waiting for us.”

“Yeah, we’re probably the last ones. The rumors are probably starting up.”

“God, don’t joke,” Josh moaned, turning off the water. It felt too quiet without the shower running. “They probably are. Dude, after last night-”

“Are you gonna start that again? I handled it, Joshua, get over it-”

“Well, remind me not to let you handle things ever again.”

Tyler smacked out at Josh’s ass, and Josh dodged away from him, smile breaking out across his face as he stumbled out of the shower, grabbing the nearest towel. He tossed one to Tyler as he wrapped his own around his waist.

“Hey, wait for me-” Tyler started, but Josh was already hauling open the bathroom door.

“Hurry, baby, we gotta go, legit like right now. I’m changing in the room, I’ll wait for you out there, okay?” He winked at Tyler for good measure, loving the small pout on his lips as he let the door fall shut behind him. He scanned the floor for his shirt from the night before, found it by his shoes, snatched it up, turned and then-

“So, uh...Coach wanted me to tell you guys that we’re leaving without you in three minutes.”

Josh froze, eyes jumping up to Spencer standing across the room by the other bed. He had his backpack still on his shoulders, phone in hand, face definitely some shade of red. He wasn’t looking at Josh, sort of at the floor, or the TV, Josh didn’t know- Josh didn’t know anything right then, couldn’t think, couldn’t speak, didn’t know what to say, didn’t know what to do.

Josh cleared his throat, buying himself some time. He glanced at the TV, unseeing, looked back to Spencer. “Right, um...y-yeah. We’ll, uh...we’ll be right down....”

Spencer nodded once but didn’t move. Josh didn’t dare move either. He heard something clatter in the bathroom behind him, the faucet running, unaware. God, he hoped Tyler didn’t open that door. That was the only thing that could possibly make this situation any worse.

Spencer nodded again, as if prodded by the muffled noise, looking about the room like he had forgotten something. “Yeah...okay. He just...he just wanted me to let you...let you guys know, y’know.”

“Yeah,” Josh replied way too quickly, voice obviously strained, and Spencer finally looked up at him. Josh fought the urge to look away.

“Josh, I- look, man, I don’t mind,” Spencer took a step closer as he spoke, and Josh continued to stare at him, unsure of whether or not he could believe what he was hearing. “Really, dude, it’s...it’s
chill. I get you. It’s fine, like- it’s totally fine. Y’know?"

“I don’t...know what you mean.” Fucking. First rate. Idiot. Joshua. Great, good job. What in hell-

“Man, don’t be like that, you guys aren’t as sneaky as you think you are.”

“What do you mean?” Josh felt alarm growing in his chest. “Who-”

“No, I don’t mean that, I just mean- I’ve been around you two, and well- when you’re together, it’s just. I don’t know…painfully, awkwardly obvious? I’ve known for a while, dude.”

Josh laughed, though it wasn’t that funny to him. “Oh...oh....”

“Look, I just mean...I wouldn’t have said anything if I hadn’t felt like you guys were so, I don’t know...desperate to keep it secret? I don’t know, man, I just wanted to say, y’know, like...I support you and all. You’re one of my best friends, J, and like. You do you, y’know?”

Josh blinked, searching for something to say, confused as to why it seemed easier to defend himself than to accept someone’s camaraderie. “I...yeah. Thanks, Spence. Really, I mean....”

Spencer nodded, took a step towards the door like he was about to leave, then turned back once more. “So you guys like...want it secret?”

“Yes.” A part of Josh hated himself for replying so quickly. He was relieved that Tyler wasn’t there to hear him.

“Because of like...the team and all? Brendon?”

Josh grit his teeth once before nodding. “Yeah. Yeah, it’s just...for now, y’know? It’s easier for now.”

Spencer nodded again, moved towards the door. Josh closed his eyes and let out a quiet sigh of air; he guessed if anyone had to walk in on him and Tyler going at it in the other room he’d want it to be Spencer. At least the guy was pretty chill.

“For the record, he’s pretty cool. Tyler, I mean,” Spencer said, and Josh looked up at him. “I was only kidding when I said he was a dick and all.”

Despite the embarrassment of the whole situation and the initial fear he had felt, Josh felt himself almost smiling. “Yeah, I know you were. Thanks, dude, really. I...I’ll explain some time-”

“God, spare me the details, please,” Spencer joked, and Josh actually laughed out loud. “I get enough of that from Bren.”

“Yeah, same,” Josh grinned, and Spencer looked over at him and grinned, too.

“For real though, you guys’ll hurry? Coach is about to bust a hemorrhoid down there.”

“We’ll hurry,” Josh promised as Spencer slipped from the room. Josh felt like he could breathe again when the door clicked shut behind him.

The bathroom door opened, and Tyler emerged in the same outfit that he had worn as pajamas. He tossed Josh’s boxer briefs at his head and plopped down on the bed to slip on his sneakers.

“Who was that? Spencer?”
“Yeah,” Josh replied carefully, unsure of how Tyler would respond. He dropped his towel and pulled on his underwear. “He was chill.”

Tyler nodded. “I figured. You shoulda let me handle it though.” He smirked over at Josh and wiggled his eyebrows, and Josh laughed out of pure relief.

Not for the first, or second, or even third time that morning, Josh bit back the words, and distracted himself and his heart by gathering up his things. It could wait.

Chapter End Notes

Rainbow on chapt 31 gave us a meme yall and i CRIED LAUGHING here it is *Coach forcing the boys to handshake* >> gif

also i feel the need to share that ao3 user inevera13 says they see Coach Anderson as the coach from teen wolf....i’m just gonna leave that there.......... xDDDDDDD

OK AS ALWAYS pls leave ur thoughts frens <333 hope yall :) liked this :)) chapter :""))) fyi let me kno what yall L I K É and daddy will see what he can do in future chapters :""))) (ew, shut up brendon)

End Notes

my eternal thanks and gratitude to you all for reading my story! i have a tumblr tag for this fic as well so don't forget to check it out if you're interested <33333 peace and love friends!

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