Finding That Love Song
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Summary

Ronan Lynch dealt with his father’s sudden death by plunging into music. With high school coming to a close, and without any ambition to go to college, Ronan convinces his best friends to start a band. The only problem? They’re in need of a vocalist, and the young mechanic with the perfect voice is playing hard to get.

(In other words, the gang makes a band AU.)

Notes

Inspired by the Tumblr user insrgence and her super, amazing TRC band edits and headcannons.

Apologies to any bass guitar players out there, as this story will contain excessive insults to you that do not reflect author’s actual feelings toward bass players. You are talented and magical but Ronan needed something to tease Gansey about.
The Vocalist

“I think I found our new vocalist.”

Ronan Lynch didn’t hear this initial statement. He had to have Gansey repeat himself once he pulled his headphones from his ears - they were blaring so loud that even he, abuser of decibels, made a mental note to turn it down.

By this point, Noah had emerged from the kitchen with a bewildered look. “What do you mean new vocalist? I’m still alive!”

At this, Gansey pursed his lips. “Noah, you know I love your vocals. They’re first-rate. It’s just…” His eyes found Ronan, and despite the boy’s natural diplomacy, Ronan knew he was struggling to find a way to politely explain the fact that Noah was a shit singer.

Noah tapped his fingers on the counter, waiting.

“I just feel like we need someone to be a dedicated singer, that’s all,” Gansey finished. He continued his (lame, if you asked Ronan) reasoning by adding, “The keyboard is so incredibly vital, and I think it needs all your concentration. Since Ronan already plays the guitar, though, we could find a vocalist who would simply fill in as a second guitarist when needed.”

Noah hummed in approval. “That is true.”

From the couch, Ronan supplied, “Also, you’re fucking tone-deaf, man.”

“Jesus Christ, Ronan,” Gansey chided. In actuality, it was Gansey’s exclamation that sealed the truth, though, not Ronan. The elfish keyboardist dropped his head to the counter and groaned loudly.

Ronan shrugged. “He’ll get over it.”

“Still,” Gansey rolled his eyes, not amused by his nonchalance about the insult.
Thankfully, Ronan knew exactly how to diffuse the situation. Gansey had a one-track mind and was prone to obsessive tendencies. It was both a blessing and a curse. Currently, Ronan could use it to his advantage. “So, you found a vocalist?”

Gansey’s eyes widened and he slapped a fist into his open palm. “Oh, right! You won’t believe it. Local boy, our age. Quite polite. I was stranded on the road--” at this, he jabbed a finger to the parking lot and muttered, “--the Pig broke down again, of course--” at this, Noah snorted, “--and he happened to be riding past on his bike.”

“This is some really fascinating exposition you’ve got going on, Dick.”

Gansey didn’t falter at Ronan’s sarcasm. “I’m getting there. Anyhow, he offered to take a look. My mother called half-way through and I answered - which, looking back, was a bit boorish--”

“What a neanderthal!” Noah teased, his lips spreading to reveal a set of teeth just a bit too large for his mouth.

“--and the call took way longer than it should have, but you know Mother. Regardless, when I finally got off the phone he didn’t seem to notice, and he was singing while he worked. Quite the voice! It’s so hard to describe. Very soft, but kind of old-school rock, too.

“Anyway, I asked him if he could play any instruments, and he said he knows guitar. Claims he isn’t very good, but he also said he might not be able to fix the Pig, and guess what is sitting in the parking lot?” Gansey fell into the couch next to Ronan with a heavy sigh. “Unfortunately, I fear it will be difficult to convince him. He practically ran away when I asked him for his phone number. Couldn’t get it out of him.”

Ronan resisted the urge to roll his eyes. And there it was. It was a typical Richard ‘Dick’ Gansey the Third story: find a small lead over something potentially cool, obsess over it, only to have it fall through at the end.

Admittedly, there was a part of Ronan that, brief as the moment was, had become excited at the prospect of a vocalist. The three of them - friends since their early days of high school, where they attended an all-boys prep school in Henrietta, Virginia - had been toying around with the idea of a band for the past year. It wasn’t that implausible of an idea, really.

Ronan had grown up playing a variety of instruments, thanks to his father’s obsession with Irish folk
music and, okay, the benefit of money that went toward endless lessons. It was only a year into high school when Ronan realized he would never be satisfied with pursuing his education, let alone winding up at a dry, corporate job. His mother tried to explain that he was too young to know for sure, to just give it some time, but when his father died unexpectedly that summer, school was officially dead to Ronan.

Unfortunately, his mother didn’t allow him to drop out. Aurora Lynch did, however, let go of the idea that Ronan was destined for an Ivy League school like she hoped. It took a year before Ronan was able to pull himself out of bed, to conjure up any emotion other than intense anger, to stop using vodka as a way to coast through life. The fact that he was still alive was tribute only to the boys sitting in the room, as well as his music.

Because one day - after a particularly heavy night of drinking - Ronan woke up to scattered sheets of lyrics scattering the floor and a recording on his phone. (Though the latter was found almost a week later, when Gansey made the entire, hour-long trip out to his family barns just to plug the damn thing in himself.) The song wasn’t bad. It wasn’t great, and the lyrics probably contained too many F-bombs to be considered actual sentences, but he found it rather comforting.

So Ronan kept writing music as an outlet. It allowed him to heal just enough to let Gansey back into his life. The latter could hardly contain his joy once he found out Ronan had been producing music and demanded he help in any way he could. Having no musical abilities whatsoever, there was little he could do.

But, as always, when Gansey set his mind to something it got done. Ronan had a spare bass guitar laying around the house and - mostly in an attempt to get Dick to shut the fuck up - he suggested Gansey learn it. The bass had never interested Ronan, anyway, because he found it pathetically easy to master in comparison to every other instrument.

(“So, who knows, maybe even you could learn it,” Ronan had said. He earned an unexpectedly crass middle finger from Gansey in response. It was the first time Ronan could remember laughing in months.)

But Gansey did pick up the bass guitar - though he insisted it really wasn't as easy as Ronan made it out to be - and quickly joined Ronan’s band sessions. It was only a matter of time before Noah heard about it, and soon he wanted in, too. Unsurprising for a rich kid, Noah had been taking piano lessons since he was four; the switch to a keyboard and synthesizer was fairly natural.

It was only a few months ago - the boys now being in their final year of high school - that they seriously considered starting a band. It was actually Ronan’s idea. While Aurora had allowed Ronan’s grades to drop and turned a blind eye to his poor attendance, she still wanted him to have a plan for post-graduation. Music was the only thing he loved, and he sure as fuck wasn’t going to
waste money on a music degree or some bullshit.

Thus, Ronan began to subtly put the idea of a band in Gansey’s mind. Outright suggesting it was not an option; he couldn’t stand the idea of being rejected. Both Noah and Gansey were already submitting copious amounts of college applications. They clearly had a plan for life after high school, and forming a band with only six months to go was dumb. But Ronan knew that, if he could make Gansey believe it was his own idea to form a band, he would pursue it without abandon.

It worked. Gansey was hooked, Noah was dragged along with, and a band was formed. Except they were short a drummer and a vocalist - the former, a fact they could temporarily ignore, but the latter an absolute necessity. Gansey had tried to convince Ronan to be the singer for weeks, but it was no use.

It’s not that Ronan had a bad voice. Objectively, he knew it was quite pleasant.

It’s just that, when played back to him, Ronan found he couldn’t separate his voice from the memories of his father. Of long drives in the car when Niall Lynch thought Ronan was asleep and sung under his breath, or when Ronan and his brothers would watch their parents dancing in the quiet of the kitchen, Niall’s voice singing love songs into Aurora’s ear.

So he wouldn’t be the vocalist. That was that.

And apparently this Car Whisperer wouldn’t be their vocalist either. (Not that Ronan could blame the guy. Gansey tended to come on strong.)

“Well, cool story, bro,” Ronan said finally, reaching to put his headphones back on.

“I do know where he works, though?” Gansey said quickly, his hand holding the headphones in place. “He was wearing his work uniform. It said Boyd’s Auto Shop. That small place, down by the trailer parks.”

“Are you suggest we go stalk him?” Noah called, head hidden behind the door of the fridge. Then, belatedly, he added, “Gansey, you really need to keep your fridge stocked. There’s nothing here.”

“Check the pantry, I bought top ramen yesterday. And anyway, it’s not stalking,” Gansey said quickly. “I’m just saying, perhaps we take the Pig in to get it inspected. It may be running fine, now,
but we all know it’s going to break down any minute.”

Noah, tossing a packet of top ramen on the counter, heaved a dramatic sigh. “Gansey, you’re the worst rich kid I’ve ever met. How do you never have anything better to eat?”

“Because he lives alone, and his parents never taught him how to cook,” Ronan supplied.

Gansey sighed. “Are you two purposely trying to change the subject? I want to have an earnest, frank conversation about our vocalist situation. Will you come with me to the shop or not?”

Ronan stood from the couch and folded his arms to his chest. Though it rarely worked on Gansey, he tried to look as threatening as possible. “Don’t do it. You think this guy is really the shit? Then you need to leave him alone. You’re just going to scare him off.”

Gansey looked offended at this. “I would not.”

“Pretty sure you already did,” Noah muttered.

Gansey slumped into the couch, “Unbelievable.”

Ronan, knowing that he would be entering a debate if he didn’t leave soon, grabbed his keys from the counter and pulled on his jacket. “I’m out. I’ll see you guys later.”

“Where are you going?” Noah chirped. He was sprinkling seasoning onto the pad of dry noodles from the ramen, apparently too lazy to cook it. Or - Ronan idly thought - he might know less about cooking than Gansey. Either were equally realistic.

Ronan shrugged. “The barns.”

Noah nodded, then saluted him goodbye.
Ronan was most certainly *not* going to the barns. Originally he planned to fuck around in the car for a bit, maybe convince some local to race him or just pull some donuts in an abandoned parking lot, but his hands had a mind of their own. He pulled up in front of Boyd’s Auto Shop, fully intending to just peer through the window and see if he could guess Gansey’s mysterious vocalist.

Unfortunately, the employees didn’t get the memo.

“How can we help you?” said a sudden voice on his left. It spooked him, enough that his elbow accidentally honked the horn of the car, and he let out a curse so violent that he catalogued it as a future confession to his priest.

“Oh, sorry about that.” Ronan turned to the employee with a glare. Cold, blue eyes blinked back at him, waiting. Despite the apology, the boy did not seem sorry. His lips were set in a firm line, unmoving, and one eyebrow was quirked toward his temple. Nevertheless, the mechanic continued. “You need something fixed?”

Ronan’s eyes dipped to boy’s breast pocket, where the name *Ben* was stitched in blue thread. He allowed himself only a fraction of a second to examine the freckles resting on the bridge of his nose before turning back to his steering wheel.

“Just need an oil change,” Ronan said slowly. “You do that here?”

“Yes. Just pull her in there,” he said, pointing to an empty garage stall. He nodded to the waiting room, “You can wait in there. Might take an hour or so, though, that cool? I have to finish up with another car first.”

It was the perfect excuse for Ronan to back out. How easy it would have been to just say, *Sorry, I’m in a bit of a rush today. I’ll come back another time.*

Yet Ronan’s head dipped in agreement. The mechanic wrapped his knuckles on the top of the BMW twice and said, “Thanks.”

Ronan pulled his car into the garage, parked it, and tossed the keys to the mechanic. He watched the boy from the corner of his eye, inspecting him carefully. He should have asked Gansey what the vocalist looked like, or if he had gotten his name.
“Anybody else working today?” Ronan asked carefully.

The mechanic - apparently named Ben, if his uniform was correct - shook his head. “Just me, for now. Why do you ask?” He didn’t let Ronan think of an excuse before he narrowed his eyes, eyebrows pulled together tight. “Look, if you’re worried about your car, I’ve been doing this for years. And it’s just an oil change.”

Ronan leered at him, “Calm down, Princess. I’m not questioning how well you can do your job.”

At that, the mechanic shut his eyes. Ronan could tell he was reeling in his emotion - maybe counting breaths, if the way his shoulders rose mechanically was any indication. It wasn’t his intention to piss off the vocalist - if this was even him - and Ronan decided to copy the boy and deal with his anger.

“I’ll be back in a bit,” Ronan muttered.

He left the garage but stayed far from the waiting room. Instead, he settled on the sidewalk a few feet from the shop, out of eyesight, and bounced his heel anxiously. After a minute, Ronan pulled his phone from his pocket and texted Gansey.

_You get this guy’s name even?_

Within seconds he got a response. _Do my eyes deceive me, or did Ronan Lynch just text me on his own volition?_

_Shup up. You know it or not?_

This time, Gansey didn’t respond immediately. Ronan leaned onto his elbows, arching his back to peek into the garage. Ben was inspecting the hood of another car. Sometime in the past few minutes he had unzipped his coveralls so that they were tied at his waist, and Ronan could see smears of grease winding up his arms.

He wondered - if this really _was_ Gansey’s vocalist - whether he’d start singing again. Based on Gansey’s story he imagined the boy didn’t like to sing in front of people. Gansey said he only sung when he was on the phone, distracted by his mother. So Ronan stayed, out of sight, hoping it might encourage the mechanic.
Gansey still hadn’t responded. Ronan was growing restless. Briefly, he wondered whether Gansey was doing it on purpose. It would be fair, seeing as Ronan never answered any of Gansey’s calls.

A minute later Gansey finally responded, and Ronan knew it wasn’t an act of malice. Apparently Gansey was just suffering from a mental breakdown at the realization his manners were less than ideal. The text was pages long on his phone.

_Sweet Jesus, I don’t know his name. I didn’t think to ask. Why didn’t I ask his name? He fixed my car! For free! Noah was right, I am a neanderthal. That’s it, I’m definitely going to the auto shop, if only to apologize for my poor behavior. Do you think he would appreciate a fruit basket? I need to show my gratitude somehow. I, myself, enjoy a good fruit basket, but there’s also something to be said about a heartfelt apology delivered in person. What would you do, Ronan?_

_Fruit baskets suck. You suck. _Ronan hesitated, debating whether he had the guts to ask his next question. His fingers tapped the keys hesitantly. Finally, he typed, _What did he look like?_

Gansey’s response was unhelpful. _I don’t know, our age, white, brown hair?_

_Ronan peaked around the garage again, looking at Ben. To Ronan, the mechanic was very distinct looking. Surely Gansey would have noticed the freckles, the tan skin, the way his frame seemed stretched too long - or perhaps he was simply just too thin.

Then again, Ronan was a bit...biased.

Not that anyone knew that.

His phone buzzed again. Gansey had typed, _Why do you ask?_

_Ronan chose not to respond. He pocketed his phone and leaned his elbows on his knees, hanging his head. _What am I doing here? _he thought. As a nervous tick, Ronan reached his hand to the back of his neck, brushing it against the hairs that had grown in since his last buzz cut. _There are plenty of other people who can sing. I don’t even know if this guy is any good._

As if on cue, he heard the faint sound of singing trickling through the garage door. It was so quiet,
practically a hum, but the voice was there. Ronan held his breath, worried that Ben would stop singing if he knew he was outside. He just wanted to listen, just for a bit.

Ronan didn’t recognize the song Ben was singing. He could barely make out the lyrics. Still, he understood why Gansey had been attracted to his voice. There really was something about his tone.

He debated interrupting Ben, to let him know he heard him singing, but Ronan found himself content to just listen. He didn’t sing the entire time he fixed cars - once in awhile he would take a break, maybe when it required too much concentration to multitask - but he always picked back up eventually.

Then, suddenly, he stopped for good. Ronan heard the sound of a door shut. After a bit, the door opened a bit and Ben called out, “Sir?”

“I’m out here.”

Ben appeared from behind the corner. Ronan could see the faint trace of pink on his ears. He must have realized Ronan could hear him singing. Apparently this set the boy off, because his tone was sharp and quick. “I thought you were in the waiting room.”

“Am I not allowed to be outside?” Ronan asked, forcing himself to remain calm. He knew instinctively, just as Gansey had known, that this kid needed to be their vocalist. Something about his voice pulled you in, and Ronan could already imagine it singing his lyrics. There could be other voices, other singers who could work, but they were bound to be a disappointment compared to Ben.

Also, objectively, the kid was not bad looking. It’s not that Ronan had any expectations, but everyone knew that good looks got you places, especially in the industry. With a few small tweaks, the mechanic would fit the alternative, hipster vibe that attracted certain audiences. Ronan was too large, too intense to every fit that mold; Gansey would never be anything but the all-American, boy-next-door thing. And Noah--well, Noah was Noah. It was hard to explain that kid.

So it really wasn’t that he, personally, found him that attractive. Ronan was just thinking big picture.

“Sorry, it’s -- it’s fine,” Ben said finally. He ran a hand through his hair, looking suddenly very tired. “But I have to check you out in there.”
“Then lead the way.”

As Ben inputted his information into the computer, Ronan debated how to bring the issue up. Clearly Gansey’s method - which was probably a combination of flattery, awe, and intensity - would not work with the mechanic.

“So,” Ronan drawled the vowel sound out, tapping his fingers on the counter. “You’re a singer?”

Ben didn’t even look up from his computer. “No.”

“Sure sounded like it.” Blue eyes caught Ronan’s for a split second. He seemed unamused. “Hey, I’m not making fun.”

“I need a telephone number and address,” Ben recited, ignoring Ronan completely. He was busy clicking away at the machine. “You can pay with debit or cash, no checks.”

Ronan gave him the information, then tossed his debit card across the counter. Ben’s eyes trailed the movement of the card and Ronan saw his adam’s apple pulse in his throat. “Thanks. It’s going to be sixty bucks, for reference. I assumed you wanted nicer oil, considering…” The mechanic trailed off, eyes moving to the BMW.

“That’s fine,” Ronan said.

Time was quickly drawing to a close. Ronan watched as the receipt was created, thankful that the shop seemed cheap enough that it couldn’t afford a faster printer. How the fuck was he supposed to ask Ben to be in the band?

Once the receipt was placed in his hand, and Ben recited the standard, “Thanks for your business” spiel, Ronan knew he didn’t have time to be poetic. Instead, he instinctively reached for the back of his head again and sighed, “Look, I’m just going to be honest with you. I don’t see the point in bullshitting around.”

Ben blinked at him, saying nothing.
“I think you met my friend earlier. Talkative loser, drives a shitty, orange Camaro. Ring a bell?”

Ben visibly blanched. *Yep*, Ronan thought. There was no doubt anymore that the mechanic met Gansey earlier.

“What do you want?” Ben said finally, exhaling shakily.

Ronan held his hands up defensively. “Look, I don’t know what Gansey said to you. If he came on too strong, then I get why you didn’t want to hear him out. But he came back ranting about you.”

Ben looked to the sky, his ears pink again. “Sorry, I know you’re just trying to be his wingman or something, but I’m not, you know, into…” He trailed off, and Ronan hated that his stomach curled.

He wasn’t into guys, or just Gansey?

It didn’t matter either way, since the mechanic clearly misread the situation. “Idiot. Gansey wasn’t hitting on you, and I’m not his fucking wingman. We’re looking for a singer for our band.”

At that, Ben stood straight. “That wasn’t a pick-up line?”

Ronan’s laugh came out like a bark. “Jesus Christ. Cocky much? No, it’s not a fucking pick up line. We really need a singer. He said you know guitar, too.”

“Barely.”

“Well, we barely need a guitar player. We need a singer and you’re--” Ronan paused, unsure how honest he wanted to be with Ben. “You seem decent.”

To this, Ben snorted. “Decent? Contrary to what you think, I’m not a cocky bastard, but since you two seem to be stalking me, I think *you* think I’m more than decent.”

Ronan was starting to lose his patience. “Look, are you interested or not?”
The mechanic’s eyes looked over Ronan’s shoulder, to a car that was pulling in. He rounded the desk and muttered, “Sorry, I don’t really have time--”

Before he could get far, Ronan reached for him, holding Ben tight by the wrist. In response, Ben jumped, jerking his arm close to his body. The vindictive side of Ronan enjoyed the response, feeling that it was fair payback for being startled earlier.

“Look, just think about it. I can send you some of our music, if you want to hear that first. But just,” he paused, not wanting to plead. “Just think about it, would you?”

To his credit, Ben seemed to be seriously considering the offer. In a hushed tone he asked, “You got anything on CD?”

Ronan jerked his head back, ready to laugh. “CD? You know, I just gave out my last copy. I got some floppy disks if you need.”

His sarcasm clearly angered Ben. “Forget it,” he said, turning around.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Ronan reached to pull him back, but remembering the way Ben jumped, he let his fingers grasp the air. “Just give me your number and I’ll send you a link.”

Ben paused in the doorway, eyes shut. His fingers tapped against the door frame anxiously. Ronan rolled his eyes, unable to keep the bite out of his voice when he muttered, “No one is hitting on you, man.”

Ben’s eyes turned to Ronan, cold. Under his breath, he slowly drawled, “I don’t have a phone.”

“Seriously?”

His remark earned him another cold glare from the mechanic. Ronan was at a sudden loss. By now, the new customer had exited the car and was waving Ben over, wanting attention. Without a second thought, Ronan reached for his own phone and held it out to Ben.

“Here, just take this for a couple days.”
If Ronan thought Ben had been pissy before, he didn’t know how to describe the look that crossed the mechanic’s face. “I don’t need your charity.”

“I’m not giving it to you to keep, dickwad,” Ronan snapped. “Just to borrow. I keep all our songs on there. Just keep it for a couple days, listen to the songs, and text Gansey when you’ve decided. I’ll pick my phone up later.”

The conversation seemed to exhaust Ben. He dragged his hand across his eyes. “This is insane. What will you do without your phone for a few days? You’re not thinking this through.”

“I’ll be fine. I barely use the thing. Plus, it’ll give me an excuse to avoid my fucking brother for a few days.” Ronan wiggled the phone in Ben’s direction. “Seriously, just take it.”

“You don’t even know me,” Ben muttered, but to Ronan’s pleasure the boy still reached for the phone, grasping it tightly. “I could steal this, you know.”

“And then I will get you fired,” Ronan supplied.

“Touche.” Ben flipped through the phone for a second. “What’s your music under?”

Ronan pointed it out quickly. Then, he pulled open his contact list, as if to prove it would be remarkably easy to get ahold of Gansey. (It really was. Ronan only had five names in his phone - Gansey, Noah, his brothers Declan and Matthew, and his mother.)

Once they were finished, Ben said, “This is insane.”

“We’re kind of insane,” Ronan said with a shrug.

Still, Ben pocketed the phone. Suddenly, he stuck out his hand. “I forgot, my name is--”

“Ben?” Ronan nodded to his uniform. “I figured as much. You know my name from…” He trailed off, holding his receipt.
Ben looked puzzled for a moment. His tongue darted to his bottom lip, coating it with a sheen that Ronan pointedly ignored. “Right,” he said finally. “Ben.”

“Should I come back another time?” The new customer - who was using a tone that Gansey would describe as polite but indignant - was still waiting by the car.

“See you around, Ben,” Ronan said, tossing his car keys into the air. “Enjoy our music.”

Ronan, to his credit, was perfectly patient the next few days. Really, it was a testament to his maturity that he handled the situation so well. Who cared that four days had passed since he gave Ben his phone? The kid deserved to take his time and think about the situation carefully.

Ronan didn’t care. At all.

“Ronan, seriously, if I find one more broken dish I’m going to kill you,” Gansey said, sweeping up the shards of a plate that Ronan had - accidentally - knocked to the floor. “And clean up your beer cans!”

In response, Ronan dropped another empty can to the floor, crushed it with his boot, and kicked it into Gansey’s dustbin. “There. Happy?”

Gansey did not seem happy, but regardless, he swept the can up and dumped everything into the garbage. “Why don’t we just go back to the shop and check in with him? Maybe the phone died. Maybe he can’t even get ahold of us.”

“It’s an iPhone, Dick, you honestly think he couldn’t find a charger to use if that was the case?”

“You said he didn’t own a cell phone,” Gansey shrugged.

Ronan didn’t want to go crawling back to Ben. He wasn’t going to beg the guy to be in the band. Either he liked their music and was interested, or he didn’t.
“Let’s just wait a few more days,” Ronan growled.

He ignored the pointed look that Noah and Gansey shared, and definitely ignored Noah mouthing “PMS?”

Okay, so maybe Ronan was not handling the situation well. Maybe he was suffering from a bit of a bad mood. It was just the principle that bothered him, really. Ronan hadn’t said Ben could keep his phone for days, just a few days. Who didn’t know that “a few” meant two, at most?

Thankfully, the gods took pity on him because - that night - Gansey’s phone buzzed with a text from “Ronan.” It took the genius a moment to understand the implication, and the boy asked, “Ronan, why are you texting me? I’m right here.”

At that, Ronan jumped from the couch, pulling the phone from Gansey’s hand (and ignoring the squealed “Hey!” that leapt from his friend’s mouth). He had Gansey’s passcode memorized and typed it in, anxious to see what Ben had to say.

The text simply said, Your music isn’t bad.

Ronan was quick to respond. He didn’t even care if that made him look desperate. (If anything, it just made Gansey look desperate, since they were using his phone.)

Isn’t bad? It’s fucking magic.

Ben was quick to respond. This is Ronan, isn’t it? Well, his cover was blown. Whatever. Ben typed another message a second later. I’m still not sure.

What, four fucking days wasn’t enough time for you to think?

He waited patiently (“Ronan, stop punching my throw pillows!”) for Ben to respond. The typing bubble seemed to be refreshing constantly, yet no words. Then, finally --
I know I took longer than you wanted, but I don’t exactly have a lot of free time. I work three jobs, and sorry, but listening to your music is low priority on my list. Which is exactly why I don’t think I can be in your band. I don’t have time.

Ronan started to write a response, but his anger made his fingers fumble with the keys. After the fifth time auto-correct failed to understand his typing, he erased everything and simply said, *Are you at work right now?*

*No, but I got homework.***

*Meet us for dinner. Just for a bit. Homework can fucking wait.*

Ben took forever to respond again. Finally, he said, *Where?*

Ronan kicked Noah’s feet off the ottoman, where he was currently being distracted by video games, and said, “Get your stuff. We’re going to Nino’s.”

Gansey held out his hand, gesturing for his phone. “What did he say?”

Ronan ignored him, choosing instead to gather his car keys and throw on some shoes. ‘I’ll tell you in the car.”

After telling Ben where to meet him, and grumbling when he said it would take him at least a half hour to bike there from his place, (“*Bike? I would not have pegged him for a biker.*” “*I’m pretty sure he means bicycle, Dick.*” “*Oh.*”) they piled into the car. Ronan was too anxious to wait, though, so they left straight away. (“*I’m just fucking hungry, that’s all.*” “*Sure, Jan.*”)

They got to Nino’s within ten minutes. By now, the restaurant recognized them as regular customers, so the waitress directed them to their booth in the back. Ronan ordered a couple of pizzas immediately, part to keep up appearances but also because he actually was fucking hungry, and kicked his feet onto the seat next to Gansey. Noah hovered on his left, reading the text conversation with Ben over his shoulder.

Some time later, the bell chimed and Ben (finally) arrived. It felt strange to see him out of his work clothes, but only because Ronan had already begun to imagine a Ben who sang for an alternative rock band. It was a little jarring to see him in baggy jeans and a t-shirt that looked three
years old.

Ben caught his eye from the back of the restaurant and walked to them, nerves betraying themselves through his stilted gait. He stood awkwardly in front of the table before saying, “Uh, hey.”

Gansey lept into professional mode. Pushing Ronan’s feet off the bench he slid across the seat, gesturing for Ben to sit. “Please, please, sit down. We’re so honored that you decided to meet with us.”

“Simply charmed,” Noah echoed. To the untrained ear, no one would even know he was joking. Ronan shoved his hand into Noah’s face, hoping it would convey to Ben that they weren’t all dipshits. (Just Gansey.)

“Yeah,” Ben said slowly. “You must be Noah.”

The blond nodded enthusiastically, reaching out his hand to shake Ben’s wildly. “Just to warn you, I used to be the singer for our band. I’m going to be pretty picky.”

Ben licked his bottom lip. Ronan cursed the boy - why did he have to do that as his nervous tick?

“Look, I don’t know what Ronan told you, but I’m not really sure…” he trailed off as the waitress dropped off a few pizzas. His eyes lingered on the steaming food, and Ronan saw his breath hitch for a moment. Then, before Ronan could wonder whether he imagined it, Ben looked back at the group and continued. “How often do you practice, first off?”

The three exchanged a quick look. Good question. Currently, the answer was whenever-the-hell-they-felt-like-it. They had no set schedule.

Gansey took the lead. “Well, as we are currently without a vocalist, our practice has been on hold. We’re all still in school--”

“Aglionby, right?” Ben interjected, looking unimpressed.

“Oh yes, you know it?” Gansey asked happily. Sensing the suddenly tense atmosphere, he cleared
his throat. “Of course you do. I don’t imagine you go there, though.”

To this, Ben raised one eyebrow.

Sensing how this came out, Gansey sputtered, “No, no, I merely mean to say, we would have recognized you. If you went there.”

“Look,” Ronan butted in, becoming nervous as the expression on Ben’s face began to sour. “Currently we’re not practicing at all. We don’t have set expectations for how many hours. It’s just something to do for fun—” this was a bit of a lie, but Ben really didn’t have to know that Ronan dreamed this to be his career “—so any amount is better than nothing.”

“We just want the right person!” Noah chipped in, before stuffing half a piece of pizza into his mouth.

Ben seemed unconvinced. “But, seriously, I could probably only manage a few hours a week at best. And school has to come first, so there would be times where I may need to skip out on rehearsal.”

Ronan wasn’t happy with the direction of the conversation. As much as he wanted Ben to be their singer, he also wanted to have a fucking band. What if Ben really couldn’t do it?

Gansey seemed unfazed by Ben’s worries. “That’s fine. I’m sure there will be days when Noah and I have to do the same.” (This statement made Ronan chuckle under his breath; it appeared that Gansey had finally accepted that Ronan was not applying for any colleges. Good.) “We just want to have some fun. Make some new friends. That sort of thing.”

Ben’s eyes darted down to the pizza again, but only briefly. Ronan suspected he was the only one who noticed. “You can have some, if you want.”

“I’m fine,” he said, tearse. Ben let out a shaky breath. “Okay, so what’s your band called, anyhow?”

Again, the three shared a look. Slowly, Noah said, “We haven’t...gotten that far yet.”

At that, Ben raised one eyebrow. “Okay, so what do you all play?”
“Ronan is guitar, and of course, he writes our music. Noah does keyboard and synth, and I do bass,” Gansey supplied.

“No drummer?”

“To be...determined,” Noah said slyly.

At this, Ben laughed under his breath, soft enough that Ronan had to reach to hear. “So, really, you’re entire band is To Be Determined. Maybe that can be your name.”

Ronan narrowed his eyes, not amused by the joke. “Look, we have to start somewhere. We’ve got a couple songs, that’s the biggest part. Are you in or not?”

Ben didn’t answer immediately. Noah and Gansey leaned in toward the boy in excitement. Noah even had his hands braided together, as if pleading would help the situation. Ronan’s heart skittered wildly; he realized he was nervous of either answer, yes or no.

Finally, Ben just shrugged his shoulders and said, “Alright. I’ll bite. I can’t promise I’ll stick with it, but I’ll try it out.”

Noah let out a big whoop and stood up in his seat, almost knocking over his water cup. Ronan dived for it, catching it last minute. Gansey clapped Ben on his back twice and said, “You won’t regret it, Ben, I promise.”

At that, Ben shifted awkwardly in his seat. “About... that…”

Before he could continue, the bell at the restaurant chimed again and Noah’s head whipped to the door. Ronan didn’t think boy could look any happier, and yet his face broke open. With a gasp, he said, “Oh, it’s Blue!”

Every boy turned to the door, though Ronan knew who captured Noah’s attention without seeing her. The Nino’s waitress was recognizable enough by name, since it was such a fucking weird one. Plus, Ronan always felt that the entire room shifted when Blue entered. Despite her small stature, she filled the entire place with a buzzing energy.

She was Noah’s favorite waitress at Nino’s. She was Ronan’s least favorite waitress at Nino’s.
Noah and Gansey watched Blue make her way across the restaurant, toward the front counter. Ben, on the other hand, quickly turned around and sank lower in his seat. The action caught Ronan’s attention, and he instinctively quirked his head to the side. Not that it mattered - Ben’s eyes were set firmly on his hands now.

_Huh_, Ronan thought.

“Why did we have to come so early?” Noah moaned. “If we waited just a bit, I bet Blue would have been our waitress.”

“‘Waitress’ is an outdated term, Noah. I believe the proper term is ‘Waiter,’ now, for everyone,” Gansey said methodically.

Noah nodded appreciatively, looking slightly in awe of Gansey. Ronan found the remark preposterous for a variety of reasons; one, because who the fuck really cared? and two, he was definitely there the day when Gansey got his ass handed to him by Blue for the exact same error he now chided Noah with.

“I gotta’ go,” Ben said quickly. Ronan noticed his eyes dart to Blue once more, and the tell-tale sign of his embarrassment was already apparent on his ears. She was talking with the manager at front, her back to them. “I’ll, uh, I’ll contact you guys soon. I wrote down your numbers, I can call you from the shop’s phone sometime.”

“So you really don’t have a phone?” Gansey asked, completely ignoring every sign that Ben was itching to leave.

Ben’s eyes darted again to Blue, but then back to Gansey. “Nope, no phone.”

Gansey leaned his chin on his hand and looked at Ben with awe. “That’s just so fascinating to me. How do you manage it?”

Ronan had to bite back a laugh. Knowing Gansey as he did, he knew he meant no harm by the statement. He was probably genuinely curious how Ben went about his daily life without a phone. Of course, Ronan also recognized how utterly condescending it probably sounded to Ben. Seeing the fierce look in the mechanic’s eye only confirmed the interpretation.

Gansey was saved from an argument only because Blue disappeared into the kitchen. Ronan had not been blind to the way Ben’s gaze had followed Blue since her arrival, and wasn’t surprised when he
took her disappearance as an opportunity to jump from the table.

“I’ll get a hold of you soon,” Ben said sternly. Ronan was pleased to see that it was he who Ben looked at when he said this, and he relished the brief moment of eye contact.

He flew out of the restaurant just as Blue came back from the kitchen. Ronan couldn’t help but let a laugh escape from under his breath at the timing, then had to look out the window to hide his smile when Noah lifted his hand into the air and waved her over.

*Escaped just in the nick of time,* he thought. Ronan wasn’t quite sure why Ben ran from Blue, though. (Or maybe he just wasn’t ready to admit that Ben was clearly straight and Ben might like her, what the fuck ever.)

Blue walked to their table with a look of apprehension. Ronan knew she enjoyed Noah, but she made no secret of her feelings for Gansey and Ronan. To her credit, the first time she had their table Ronan was in a piss-poor mood and was rather volatile. Even *more* to her credit, the first time Gansey and her exchanged words, he had said:

“So, Blue, tell me. What made you want to be a waitress?”

Blue had stared at him, lips drawn tight together. “What do you mean by that?”

Gansey seemed perplexed by her response. Though there was no way she could know this about him, Gansey was very interested in what motivated people. Why they did what they did, why they loved what they loved. While it worked well for some people (Ronan had been a personal witness to several of these conversations with Mrs. Gansey’s fellow politicians, and watched as the bastards practically came in their pants as they described their ambitions), the question made the unfair assumption that people only worked jobs they *wanted* to do.

Case in point: Blue.

“Oh, it’s just that I don’t know many waitresses, and I’m so curious what makes you tick. What inspired you to choose waitressing.” When Blue said nothing, Gansey added, “I have no experience with the restaurant industry.”

To this, Blue had placed her hands on her hips, cocked her head to the side, and snapped, “Oh, I
don’t know. I guess the allure of waiting on people’s every wish was just too tempting to pass up. I just thought to myself, hey, what would be more fun than cleaning up vomit from a table when kids eat too much pizza and can’t make it to the bathroom? There’s also nothing like that feeling when you recite every salad dressing to your table, only to have the next person ask all over again.

“Or, wait, no, the real reason I wanted my job was that I could pick up after shitty Aglionby Boys, boys who think that - if they leave a few dollars on the table when they’re done - they can call me baby or darling.”

Gansey’s mouth had hung open midway through her rant. Once she finished, he managed to shut it, only to say, “I see.”

Ronan and Noah had tried to conceal their laughter by taking sips from their soda, but it caused Noah to choke when Blue added, “But I guess I do this job because it pays me money, money that I need. I didn’t want to be a waitress, asshat. No one wants to work a minimum wage job.”

She had refused to be their waitress for weeks after that. It didn’t matter how much Gansey apologized, and it especially didn’t help when he tried to apologize with an extra fat tip. The only reason she spoke with their table now was because her manager forced her to take their table on a particularly busy night, and Noah had succeeded in charming her.

So, Ronan couldn’t really fault her for hating them.

“Blue! Have you been working less? I feel like I never see you anymore,” Noah said, reaching out to hold her hand. Ronan was pretty sure this would be unacceptable behavior for anyone other than Noah.

Blue didn’t seem to mind, because she squeezed his hand back. “A bit. Business has been slow, here, so they’re cutting down our hours.”

“Oh! That must be a treat,” Gansey said.

Noah winced. Ronan cackled. Blue - perhaps getting used to Gansey’s bouts of verbal ignorance - just bit the inside of her cheek and said, “Well, not really. I kind of need the money.”

Gansey blanched. “Right, of course, yes.”
“Blue! We found a vocalist for our band today!” Noah was skilled at changing the subject, but even more skilled at easing tension in the air. His thumb traced a circle on Blue’s hand with care. It wasn’t meant to be forward, Ronan knew, though he couldn’t say how the girl interpreted it.

“Wait, you guys have a band?” Blue drawled, amusement on her face. “What do you call yourselves? Male Privilege?”

“Actually, we don’t have a name,” Gansey said, ignoring her taunts. “But we do welcome any suggestions you have.”

“What about *Richie Rich and the Ravens*?”

“You’re hilarious,” Ronan snapped.

“It does have nice alliteration,” Noah supplied.

“I can’t believe you guys have a band,” she said, snorting. “How did I not know this? It’s so surprising, and yet absolutely not. So none of you are the vocalist, I assume?”

“He’s new! I wonder if he goes to your school, Blue. Do you know a Ben--” Noah stopped, abruptly. “Did anyone get his last name?”

Silence filled the table. Blue muttered, “Geniuses. Well, chances are he *does* go to my school, but there are about five Ben’s I can think of off the top of my head. So, get back to me on that one.”

Their waitress appeared to her left, wringing her hands. “You’ve got three on table ten.”

Blue offered her a thin, tight-lipped smile. She turned back to the boys (or, okay, back to Noah, really) and said, “See you next time.”

Once she left, Gansey turned back to the group with a frown. “I can’t believe we didn’t get his last name. Poor Ben. He seems to bring out the worst in me.”
“He’ll live,” Ronan said, dry as the cheese on their forgotten pizza.

Gansey sat back in the booth and smiled, content. “Well, gentleman, we’re one step closer to being a band.”

Noah raised his glass in the air, “Cheers to that!”
Chapter Summary

Because - oh - did Adam not mention that other predicament he was in? The one where the entire band thought his name was Ben?

And he hadn’t really corrected them.

For a month, now.

Oops?

Chapter Notes

General warning that, as with most TRC stories that feature Adam, there will be some references to child abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Adam Parrish was in a bit of a predicament.

Well, to be fair, his entire life was a bit of a predicament. He was poor, his father was an alcoholic shit, his mother an enabler, he worked three jobs (none of which paid more than minimum wage), and was possibly about to lose his 4.0 because he couldn’t run a full mile in phys ed (which seemed like an unfair task to grade someone for when they survived on a diet of PB&J and got an average of four hours of sleep per night, but 18 years was enough time to grow weary of the American education system for many reasons).

None of these, however, were the predicament that dominated Adam’s thoughts.

No, Adam was currently cursing himself for his insane decision to join a band. Not just a band, but a band of Aglionby rich kids with no sense of their privilege.

To be fair, Noah wasn’t so bad. Adam had yet to find a problem with him, other than the fact that his constant chipper mood was a reminder to Adam how unhappy he was. The keyboardist floated through life a Disney Princess; one time, Adam legitimately saw a baby bird flutter onto his fingers, and they chirped a song together. (It was a bewildering sweet moment, though it did confirm to Adam why the group needed a new vocalist. Singing was not Noah’s gift.)

Gansey was growing on Adam, too. He reminded Adam of modern art. At times, he saw the beauty in the boy. Adam recognized that Gansey was complex, that he designed his life with careful consideration and thoughtful precision. He liked that Gansey. Unfortunately, half the time he looked at him - and Adam really, truly did try to look through Gansey - he couldn’t understand what he saw.

These moments usually accompanied one of Gansey’s (unintentional) insults toward Adam’s life.

It was Ronan Lynch who infuriated Adam the most, though. Ronan, who draped himself in leather
and acrimony, who peppered his language with “fuck” so often that Adam wondered whether his mouth was constantly full of soap as a child. Ronan, who belonged on the cover of a cliche, young adult novel about delinquent boys. Ronan, who didn’t realize how lucky he was to go to an elite school like Aglionby, skipping class so often that it made Adam’s heart hurt. And Ronan, who despite his hatred of school, was ridiculously brilliant and flaunted his intelligence in the most mundane manner.

Like with music. Adam wasn’t naive; he knew that Ronan had a gift for writing songs. When Ronan had let him borrow his cell phone last month, he had already made up his mind to refuse the offer to join the band. It wasn’t going to matter what the phone held. Adam didn’t have time to be in a band.

And yet… he joined the band. Because of Ronan’s stupid songs, songs which equally tempted Adam to dance in the cramped corners of his room, but also to simply sit, staring at his wall, listening for hours instead of using the time for much needed sleep.

Ronan didn’t even know how good he was, which was infuriating for many reasons. (Mostly because he designed himself to be cocky about everything else in his life, like his driving or his ability to cook boxed macaroni, which weren’t actually anything to brag about.) If anyone tried to compliment Ronan on his music, he deflected their words with a carefully crafted insult.

The worst thing about Ronan, though, was that he seemed to hate Adam. It seemed crazy to think that this was the same guy who wanted him to be their vocalist so bad that he tracked him down - hell, he lent him his phone for almost a week - because Ronan was constantly picking at Adam’s every move.

Why did Ronan even want Adam to be their singer, anyway?

Case in point: they were at practice (only the fourth time they’d met up, despite having agreed to be a band over a month ago; Adam hadn’t exaggerated his busy schedule) when Ronan stopped everyone in the middle of the song.

“Can you even hear the beat? Keep up!”

Adam sighed. This was a constant complaint from Ronan lately, but what was he supposed to do? “It’s hard to hear the beat without a drummer,” he said through gritted teeth.

Ronan ignored him. Instead, he twirled his finger in the air and said, “From the top.”

They were half way through the song when Ronan, in a fit, tore the chord of Adam’s mic from the amp and threw it on the ground. “Do you even know the lyrics? Why the hell would the song say, ‘paint my space with your fingertips’? It’s ‘face’!”

Adam hung his head, rubbing the back of his neck. “I did say ‘face.’”

“It didn’t fucking sound like it!”

Adam winced. From his keyboard, Noah caught his eye and stuck out his tongue, looking a bit like a human emoji. Gansey must have sensed Adam’s temper rising because, being the diplomat that he was, he set his bass down and said, “I think we should really invest in a better sound system. It’s so hard to hear anything out of these speakers.”

Neither Ronan nor Adam bought his attempt to excuse the fight. They each turned away, Ronan kicking the nearest thing to him (thankfully, just an empty trash can), and Adam, counting his breaths carefully.
He did not like to be angry.

He felt like he was always angry.

“We should take a break!” Noah chimed, though nevertheless running his hands along the keyboard to the beginning verses of what Adam assumed must be a technical, classic piece. “We could get pizza!”

Adam cursed. Noah’s obsession with pizza was becoming a problem, only because he was hellbent on getting it from the same location.

“We had pizza last time,” Adam muttered. He didn’t add what he wanted to say, which was, Also, I can’t afford to go there, for multiple reasons.

Noah pouted. “But that was weeks ago. And Nino’s is a classic.”

“You can go without me, then,” Adam said, forcing a pleasant smile on his face. They would never leave him if they thought Adam was upset. “I’ll take the opportunity to catch up on homework.”

From the corner Ronan let out a comically fake snort. It drew the attention of everyone but Adam, who painstakingly tried to ignore him.

“You need to start thinking of better excuses, man,” Ronan drawled. “They’re getting predictable.”

Adam sent him a glare from across the room. In response, Ronan folded his arms, kicked his legs onto a speaker, and waggled his eyebrows at the singer.

“Do you not like Nino’s?” Gansey asked, surprised.

Before he could think of a proper excuse, Ronan drawled, “Oh, that’s the opposite of his problem, I think.”

Adam knitted his eyebrows together, trying to decipher what Ronan meant. Briefly, he wondered whether Ronan could tell how hungry he was the last time they met up there. In an effort to resist grabbing a slice, Adam had clenched his fingers so tightly into his thigh that he left bruises in his skin. (A particularly frustrating reaction, considering the last thing he needed was more bruises.)

Instead, Ronan bit at the leather bracelet circling his wrist and said, “Blue.”

At the mention of the Nino’s waitress, Noah whipped his head toward Adam, gasping. “Do you like Blue?”

Adam blinked. That is not what he had expected Ronan to say. Blue? Ronan thought he liked Blue? Adam did not like Blue. (He didn’t dislike her either, she was quite pretty. He just didn’t know her very well.)

That being said, Ronan was not entirely incorrect in his assumption, either. The waitress was the reason he was avoiding Nino’s, but not due to a crush. He avoided her because, well, because they went to school together. And there was a good chance she would recognize him, considering the rumors that he knew swirled around the school.

Because - oh - did Adam not mention that other predicament he was in? The one where the entire band thought his name was Ben?

And he hadn’t really corrected them.
For a month, now.

Oops?

He hadn’t meant to deceive them. (Really, ‘deceive’ seemed like too strong of a word. It was just a name. Big deal.) But there were practical reasons he did it.

The first reason was, honestly, because he thought it wouldn’t matter. When Ronan had incorrectly assumed his name was Ben - but really, how could Ronan have known that Adam was so poor he had to buy his coveralls from a former employee of Boyd’s? - he didn’t see the point in correcting him. At that time he had already decided he wouldn’t join the band. He was just going to borrow his phone for a couple days, to appease Ronan, then disappear.

Then, when he made up his mind to actually join the band, he tried to tell them his real name. When they met at Nino’s, he had even started to bring it up. But then Blue came in, the boys recognized her, and Adam’s chest seized.

Raven Boys were not supposed to know people from his world, let alone his high school.

Adam didn’t personally know Blue, but everyone knew of her. Just as everyone casually knew of him. They both were popular, but not for being beloved. Well, people were accepting - and sometimes even admiring - of Blue. As the daughter of the local psychic, she interested his classmates in a mystical fashion.

Adam interested them in the way of a car crash.

With the band, he had no reputation other than having a good voice. Was it so wrong for him to enjoy that? He didn’t want to be Adam Parrish, son of trash (“I hear his dad smacks him around”) and son of dirt (“I hear he lives in a trailer”).

He wanted to be Ben Smith, perfectly normal boy with a (his heart leapt in his throat) slightly beautiful voice.

Then, as the month dragged on and the boys began to talk of performing in public, his reasons for the fake name seemed to get a bit more practical. If anyone found out he was in a band and leaked that back to his father, he would be dead. Literally. His father had very specific goals for Adam (which consisted of bringing as much money back to him as possible) and if he found out Adam spent money on a guitar (even if it was used, Good Will, twenty bucks) or asked for time-off to play a show (“Ben, do you think you could get a Saturday off next month? They’re taking applications for a contest!”), Adam knew his father would pull the gun from beneath his bed and point it at his chest.

Gansey, in his optimism, had already bought a domain name and planned to list their profiles. Adam couldn’t avoid pictures showing up, but at the least his name wouldn’t yield any results if searched online.

Instead it would say Ben Smith. And he would be one of thousands of other Ben Smiths in the world.

He had been quiet for too long, stuck in his thoughts. It seemed to seal his fate as boy-suffering-from-huge-crush, as Ronan rolled his eyes and said, “Fucker,” and Gansey and Noah were just nodding to themselves.

Gansey seemed a bit dazed. “Blue, huh? Yes, I suppose she is someone who is...apt for liking.” He began nodding his head, slow at first, before it was bobbing up and down in quick succession. “Yes. I concur. Ben, you should definitely go for it. If you like, I could talk to her for you?”
Adam didn’t even like Blue, but even so, he thought Gansey being his wingman was the worst possible idea. “That’s okay. I’m good. I don’t need any of your… help.”

Ronan snorted again. “Look, man, you’re going to have to do something about your little crush. I’m not avoiding Nino’s because you’re a pussy.”

“Then just go without me, Jesus Christ!” Adam shouted. His anger sizzled in the quiet of the room. Ronan had said harsher things, with much worse insults, but Adam’s abrupt shift in anger left everyone in the room quiet.

He cursed himself. Don’t do this, he thought. Don’t be him.

“Fine,” Ronan said finally, standing from his seat. He brushed past Adam, knocking into his shoulder, and slammed the door of Gansey’s apartment in his wake.

Noah was frowning, which made Adam feel worse. A face like Noah’s wasn’t meant to be upset. Thankfully, whether he sensed Adam’s regret, or perhaps because he didn’t have the ability to stay mad for long, Noah shook his head and was cheery once more. As he left he whispered, “I’ll bring you some leftovers, Ben.”

That just left Adam and Gansey, the latter who was looking at Adam with an expression he didn’t recognize. They were quiet, and the only sound in the room was the buzz of the amp and the breath of air Gansey sucked into his nose. Then, Ganey simply placed his hand out Adam’s shoulder, squeezed gently, and said, “It’ll be okay.”

Just like that, Gansey was a mystery to Adam once more.

Once alone, Adam picked up Ronan’s guitar (it was indescribably better than his own, and Ronan would probably never let him touch it if he were here) and picked at the strings. Despite his initial hesitancy to join the band, Adam was glad for the ability to play the guitar more often. He had picked up the skill only a year or so ago, inspired mostly because knowing an instrument seemed like the sort of extravagant skill only the happy possessed. Had his used guitar been any more expensive it would have been impossible, but God had mercy on him for once, and he even had enough money to even buy a used instruction book.

He never thought playing the guitar would be an escape from his life, but it was devilishly distracting.

So Adam played on Ronan’s guitar until his chest didn’t hurt anymore.

Ronan was in a piss-poor mood, and it was all due to a certain vocalist losing his fucking cool. Sweet Jesus, he was just teasing him about Blue. The way Ben looked at him - death behind his blues - had made Ronan’s toes curl.

Coming to Nino’s after the argument might have been a bad decision, in hindsight. Upon seeing Blue behind the counter, Ronan felt flush with anger once again. It wasn’t her fault that Ben exploded, but she was definitely the cause of the fight.

Ronan tried to look at her as Ben might. She was dressed in her uniform, a small, black apron tied round her waist. He supposed he could understand why Ben thought she was pretty, if only because
he knew that men liked thin waists and wide hips. (He compared it to what he could imagine liking: the way wide, muscled shoulders sometimes tapered into a thin waist.) Still, the scowl was a bit much. Blue never looked happy (unless she was talking to Noah, who she immediately greeted with a grin) and she stomped through her life, literally.

Thankfully, perhaps sensing his mood, Blue stayed clear of their table more than usual. She just took their order and left, depositing a water pitcher in her wake. Ronan let Gansey and Noah dictate the conversation, content to stew in silence.

“Ben had a good point, earlier,” Noah suddenly said. Just hearing the vocalist’s name made Ronan kick the stand of the table. “We really need a drummer.”

Gansey hummed in agreement. “Agreed. I put out word to the local music shop, to drum up some interest, but no one has seemed promising enough.”

They paused their conversation when Blue dropped off their order. After her back was turned, Ronan crumbled the paper sheath of his straw and flicked it toward her hair. He was pleased to see it stuck, wedged between her dark curls and one of her million clips. Thankfully, neither Noah or Gansey were watching, too distracted by the food.

“We could make a flyer,” Noah suggested. “Maybe Blue would let us put it up here?”

“Good plan! I’ll see if she has some paper we can borrow.” With that, Gansey left the table.

Ronan’s eyes trailed his friend’s movement. By the way her eyes narrowed, it appeared Blue was suspicious of Gansey’s request for paper. Still, she pulled out a piece and hunted around for a pen.

“I can’t believe Ben likes her,” Noah said suddenly, pulling Ronan’s attention away from Gansey and Blue. He seemed quite fatigued, an odd expression to see covering his features. “This may be a problem.”

Ronan was surprised by this. He knew Noah was oddly affectionate toward Blue, but he didn’t think the boy liked her in that way. He had never known Noah to actually like anyone, not like that, and was under the assumption it was not a thought that had ever crossed his mind.

“Not you, too,” Ronan muttered, looking at Blue and Gansey again. What did they all see in her?

He watched as Gansey suddenly reached his hand out to touch Blue’s hair. Blue seemed startled by the action, because she stood rigid. Within seconds Gansey pulled his hand away, fingers pinching the small crumple of paper Ronan had landed minutes ago. He offered it to Blue, placing it in her palm.

“What? No, no, not me,” Noah said, resting his chin on his hand. “I love Blue, but not like that.”

Ronan wanted to ask what he trouble Noah was referring to, but the moment had passed and Gansey was returning in a flurry. He slapped the paper on the counter and let the pen rest on his bottom lip, thinking deep.

“What should we write? We still don’t have a name to advertise. We really need to get on that,” Gansey mumbled.

“Just write this: Drummer for band needed. Must have talent. Can’t be a fuckhead.”

Gansey waved his hand in the air, ignoring Ronan’s suggestion. Noah took the pen from him and began to write on the paper; no one questioned his lack of consultation. Once he was done Ronan
eyed the paper. It read:

ARE YOU A DRUMMER LOOKING FOR A BAND?

We are an up-and-coming band, inspired by alternative rock and Irish folk, looking for a drummer. If you are interested, please contact us at the following number.

Underneath, Noah had also drawn a ridiculous sketch of a drum set, no player, and wrote, “This could be you!”

Noah had listed Gansey’s number as the point of contact, of course. While Ronan wrote the music, there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that Gansey was their unofficial leader.

“Alternative rock and Irish folk?” Ronan read, eyeing Noah warily. “Is that how you describe our music? It’s obviously Progressive.”

“I thought we were post-grunge? Regardless, it’s wonderful!” Gansey chimed. “Let’s hope Blue will let us put it up.”

“You didn’t ask her?”

“I forgot. Was distracted,” Gansey said, eyes firmly set on the paper. “I’m sure it will be fine.”

Ronan rolled his eyes. It wasn’t in Gansey’s nature to not have a plan, to wing something, so to speak, and he wondered where the sudden impulse came from. Noah did not seem to care. Instead, he just waved Blue over, holding the sign in his hand.

“Blue! Do you think we could put this up on the restaurant bulletin board?”

She took the paper, muttering, “This is what you needed paper for? You should have brought your own...” Still, her eyes scanned the paper. “Richie Rich and the Ravens doesn’t have a drummer?” She asked, surprised.

Gansey sighed. “Alas, no. As I’m sure Noah mentioned, we finally wrangled up the vocalist we wanted--”

“And now we know his name! It’s Ben Smith!” Noah chimed. “Do you know him?”

“--but we still need a drummer. It’s harder to find one than you’d think!”

Blue’s eyes darted back and forth between the two boys, trying to balance the conversation. Carefully, she dissected their words, first turning to Noah to say, “I don’t think I know him, sorry,” before turning to Gansey. She looked as if she had something to say, holding his gaze for a moment, before turning back to the flyer.

“I, uh, I could probably put it up,” she said finally.

“Thank you! We will owe you a favor.”

Blue continued to look at the flyer, eyes reading over the words again. Then, she looked back at the three of them, scrutinizing them carefully. She was an odd thing, really. (Ronan still didn’t see the appeal.)

“Can I hear your music?” She asked, voice at a surprising low tone for the normally boisterous girl.
The word “No” leapt off of Ronan’s tongue, clashing with Noah’s enthusiastic, “Sure!” Ronan did not want the girl coming anywhere near their music, but Gansey was already untangling a pair of headphones from his pocket. Without asking, his fingers placed one bud to her ear.

“Do I not get a say in this?” Ronan snapped. “It’s my music.”

Everyone ignored him. Gansey let Blue adjust the volume on his phone. They fell into silence, watching the waitress as she listened. Despite his annoyance at the situation, Ronan still found himself growing nervous, wondering what she thought. He didn’t care about her, but he maybe, sort of, possibly cared about her opinion.

After a moment, Blue sat in the seat next to Ronan, seemingly fixated on the music. When he complained she simply held up her hand, shushing him.

“I think she likes it,” Noah whispered, grinning impishly.

When the song finished, Blue played another. Ronan scoffed, muttering under his breath about how she was ignoring her job, but he felt a little pleased at her interest. Once the second song was finished she pulled the earbud from her ear, handing it back to Gansey.

“What did you think?” Gansey asked. “It’s good, right? Ronan’s quite good.”

Blue just nodded, looking a little numb. “You picked a good singer, that’s for sure. Noah does a good job, too. The keyboard in the second song is fantastic - I love the run.”

Noah beamed at the compliment.

She opened her mouth to speak, but again shut it. Just watching her anxiety made Ronan’s skin itch. He elbowed her and said, “Out with it.”

“I play the drums,” she blurted, words tumbling out of her mouth as if she had no control. As a reflex she cringed, shaking her bangs out of her eyes. “I mean, I -- ugh. Nevermind.”

Noah reached across the table and her pushed her back down by her shoulder. “Wait, wait, wait! You play drums? Since when?”

She shrugged, appearing suddenly very shy. “Since middle school or so? I chose band as my elective. Percussion, if that wasn’t obvious already.”

“Jesus, how did you manage to carry a drum around?” Ronan eyed her small frame. “You must have been three feet tall, then.”

“Har, har. They didn’t let me keep the drum, dumbass. I just borrowed the school set,” she muttered.

“You should definitely be in the band!” Noah cried, reaching for Blue’s hands. He held onto them tightly, shaking them up and down. “You should come by on your next day off, test out a few of our songs!”

“Hold on--” Ronan started. Surprisingly, it was Gansey who interrupted him, though, with a surprisingly stilted phrase. “We’ll have to think about it.”

All eyes turned toward him. It wasn’t what he said, but how he said it. Usually Gansey was all diplomacy, all charm. There was none of this in his voice. Ronan had only heard Gansey use this tone when he was talking with people he disliked tremendously, and despite whatever arguments they had in the past, Blue did not seem like someone he disliked.
The smile that Blue wore slipped from her face. “I didn’t even say I’d do it.”

“But you have to!” Noah whined.

“We’ll keep in touch,” Gansey offered with a pained smile. The look did not escape Blue, who looked away with disgust.

“Whatever.” She pushed herself from the table, grabbing the flyer without caring if it crumpled in her hand. “I’ll put this up for you.”

Then she was gone, stomping away in her typical fashion. (Actually, considering the situation, it was a much more tame response from her than Ronan guessed was possible.) Gansey watched her walk away with a wince but he shook it off quickly. Noah, on the other hand, turned toward Gansey in a comically exaggerated and slow fashion, arms spread wide, and whined, “Whyyyy?”

Ronan was, admittedly, just as curious as to why Gansey was so abrupt with Blue. Gansey patted Noah’s back affectionately and said, “I’m sure Blue is a perfectly fine drummer, but we can’t make decisions just the three of us anymore. We need to consider everyone’s feelings.”

“You mean Ben?” Noah muttered bitterly. Noah’s frustration was surprising to Ronan, if only because it betrayed how much he really liked the Nino’s waitress. He liked Ben, as Noah liked most everyone he met, but apparently Blue had solidified a very special place in his heart.

Gansey stumbled on his words. “Yes, Ben. If he really does-” a pause “-like her, then we need to discuss it with him.”

“And me,” Ronan barked. “This band doesn’t operate with by a majority-rules vote. We all agree, or it won’t happen.”

“Fine,” Noah said, slumping into the seat with arms folded against his chest. “Good luck finding another drummer in this town, though. We all know Henrietta doesn’t breed musicians.”

To this, Gansey rested his fingers on his temple and shut his eyes. “It will work out.”

No one was convinced.

They agreed to not bring up Blue’s drumming to Ben quite yet. Noah had asked how they should approach the subject and Gansey, in typical fashion, just shook his head and said, “I think today might be unwise.”

Ronan was glad. Part because he really didn’t want to get into another argument with Ben - the boy’s involvement with the band was precarious as it was - and part because he didn’t even know if he wanted Blue in the band. So what if she had played for years? That didn’t mean she was any good.

“It’s not a good idea.” He had pulled Gansey aside privately while Noah was trying to convince Ben to eat some leftovers. “Relationships are the kiss of death in bands. What if they start dating? He barely has enough time to practice as it is, we can’t afford him scheduling trips to the movies or some shit.”

“I’m sure it would be fine,” Gansey argued.
“Okay, so what happens if they do get together, but then they split up?” Ronan scoffed under his breath. “You don’t think that would be awkward?”

At that Gansey faltered, unsure what to say. His thumb brushed his bottom lip anxiously. Ronan left him to his thoughts, instead heading to the vocalist in question and cuffing him on the back of his head. “Just eat the goddamn pizza, Smith.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Then tell your stomach to shut the fuck up.”

Ben’s ears turned pink. Ronan savored the sick sense of satisfaction that came with making him embarrassed. He liked making his ears pink. (He also, genuinely, wanted the kid to eat. Last time they practiced he had worn a shirt so thin that Ronan could see the jut of his collarbones through the fabric.)

Ben finally complied. He only ate one slice, but Ronan noticed the way he kept licking his lips long after it was done, as if he were still relishing the taste an hour later.

Thankfully the rest of practice passed without any issue. Ben didn’t bring up the fight, Ronan didn’t criticize him, Noah didn’t mention Blue, and Gansey didn’t really say anything at all.

Adam took it back. Noah was quickly becoming a thorn in his side, if only because the boy wouldn’t stop bugging him about his (nonexistent) crush on Blue. Every time they met up Noah would appear by his side, seemingly harmless, but always with an agenda.

“So, how come you like Blue?”

Adam paused, looking up from his guitar. He was willing his fingers to form the F chord, but they just didn’t want to bend that way. “I don’t like Blue.”

“Then how come you don’t like Blue?”

Gansey, sitting a few feet behind them, chastised the keyboardist wearily. “Noah, that’s none of your business.”

Everyone went back to their instruments. Ronan had been given an unexpected detention at school (unexpected in the sense that he actually attended it, completely expected in the sense that he threw a cupcake in the face of a classmate, apparently) and was delaying practice. At first Adam enjoyed the quiet. It gave him the chance to practice without Ronan’s hard gaze.

But it also gave Noah time to dissect Adam’s fears.

“So you have any classes with Blue?”

“No.” (He did, actually - Spanish 3 - but they didn’t need to know that.)

“So how do you know her?”

“Noah!” Gansey said, this time sounding a bit exasperated.
Adam ran a hand through his hair in frustration. He weighed his options - was it better to deny any feelings for Blue, or was it safer to go along with the charade? He sure as hell wasn’t going to tell them the truth, and though it was embarrassing, maybe it was better to pretend that he was a shy, love-sick boy who was be unable to face his crush.

Finally, Adam settled on the half-truth. “I barely know her. I just know… of her.” He turned back to his guitar, fingers finding the right strings. “She’s... intimidating, that’s all.”

He could feel Gansey’s gaze from across the room. Adam refused to meet it. Years of dealing with his father had made him a good liar, but he was starting to realize that Gansey was skilled at it, too. Liars always recognized liars.

“That’s strange. I don’t find her intimidating at all,” Noah mused.

Gansey, as if he sensed Adam’s nerves, offered him the relief he so craved. The tension practically slid out the window when Gansey joked, “I’m inclined to agree with Ben on this one.”

Ronan’s arrival minutes later effectively cut short the conversation about Blue. For whatever reason, Noah didn’t seem comfortable bringing her up when he was around. This was a fact Adam savored for many reasons. Ronan’s countenance darkened every time the girl was brought up, and Adam could feel the glare that burned itself on the back of his head.

“Any calls yet from the flyer?” Ronan asked, looking at Gansey.

The bassist shook his head. “No, unfortunately. I did, however, receive a very generous offer from a young entrepreneur to fix my fridge, though I suspect it was a poorly executed prank call.”

“What flyer?” Adam asked.

Noah, Ronan, and Gansey exchanged a quick look. It seemed as if they were conducting an entire conversation through the movement of their eyebrows. Gansey finally said, “We put an ad out for a drummer.”

“That sounds smart,” Adam said slowly, confused at why they were acting so fidgety.

“We may have a lead,” Noah chirped. This earned him another intense look from the other boys. What the heck was going on?

“That’s great,” Adam said finally. “Keep me posted.”

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It was two weeks after their discussion with Blue when Ronan’s phone buzzed in his pocket a total of fifteen times. He knew this because, when he finally pulled it out, he saw a string of texts from Noah, each one reciting “RONAN - CALL ME.”

He debated ignoring it. Ronan was at the local music store picking out new strings for his guitar and didn’t feel like being interrupted. It was the final text - a picture of Noah’s face, lips turned into a comically low frown - that made Ronan type out his number.

“What?”

“Where are you right now?” Noah asked.

“Getting new strings. What do you want?”
“Oh, my God, that’s perfect.” He heard a low hum on the other line, then what sounded like Noah whispering to someone else. “Can you stay there for like, 10 more minutes? I can come meet you.”

“You going to tell me why?”

“No, it’s a surprise.”

Ronan huffed, hung up the phone, and went back to his shopping. It was hard to say “No” to Noah, though, and the music store was distracting enough that he hung around. It was a local shop - run by Mr. Allen, a DC transplant who somehow winded up in Henrietta, despite his tremendous talent for finding vintage guitars - and it may have been Ronan’s favorite place in the entire town. Secretly, Ronan hoped that, if he kept coming in and acting like a model citizen and shit, maybe Mr. Allen would let him test out the Gibson SG that supposedly belonged to Lennon once.

True to his word, Noah showed up only minutes later. Ronan bit down a groan when he realized he had not come alone: Blue was trailing at his heels, a fierce look on her face.

“What are you doing, man?”

Noah pulled Blue closer by the hand. “Okay, I know we said we had to discuss it, but just hear me out. I went over to Blue’s house the other day and she played the drums for me--”

“Noah, Jesus--”

“--and she’s savage, Ronan. I’ve never seen anyone drum like her.”

Ronan cast another look at Blue. She stared back, gaze unwavering and unchanging, except for one brow which tipped toward the ceiling. Ronan didn’t know if being savage was considered a good thing, but considering Noah’s excitement, he assumed it was.

“Good for you,” Ronan drawled. “But no offense, I find it hard to believe that your feet could even reach the pedals.”

Blue rolled her eyes. “Men.” Instead of commenting further, she pulled a pair of drumsticks from underneath her skirt (Ronan had to do a double take at this - how the fuck?) and walked toward a drum set on display. She rounded it, letting her finger trail the symbol, before sitting down.

“The instruments aren’t for your use,” Ronan said.

Blue’s lips turned up in a wicked grin. She began to twist one of the drumsticks between her fingers, spinning it in fast circles, before she called out, “Hey, Pops! You don’t mind if I play the drums, right?”

Mr. Allen stuck his head out from the register. Upon seeing Blue he smiled - the warm, genuine kind that Ronan wished he got - and said, “Go ahead, Blue.”

At Ronan’s disbelief, Blue winked. “We’re close. What can I say?” Then, with a pointed look to Ronan, she adjusted the seat so that it lowered her feet closer to the ground.

It was Ronan’s turn to roll his eyes. He pretended he wasn’t jealous, though it must have showed on his face, because Noah whispered, “That’s her step-dad.”

Ronan barely had time to dissect the information before Blue got to work. She started on the ride cymbal, her wrists hardly moving, and yet she produced a steady, vibrant beat. She added a slow, rhythmic thump on the bass drum for a few seconds, but then, as quick as she started, her body
lurched forward and she was off. She moved so fast that Ronan could barely keep up with her hands.

Noah was grinning beside him. “Told ya. Savage.”

Ronan got what the word meant now: Blue’s drumming took no prisoners. The sound of the drums filled the store, her use of the crash cymbal like a bolt of lightning. Ronan felt like he recognized the song, yet he couldn’t place it. He watched, admittedly amazed. Blue’s hand left the snare drum for a split second to allow her the ability to flick a piece of escaped hair behind her shoulder. (She used the drumstick to do it, too, Jesus fuck.) Somehow she never lost the beat.

Toward the end of the song it finally dawned on Ronan why it seemed so familiar. She was playing one of their songs - the first one they ever showed her - but had captured it in a way Ronan could never dream to have done with his mediocre skill on the drums.

When the song was finished she barely looked phased. Blue simply got up, stuck the drumsticks back under her skirt (this time Ronan saw a flash of bicycle pants, which was honestly a relief - he didn’t enjoy thinking about what was under her skirt), and wagged her eyebrows.

“Sounded good, yeah?”

Ronan growled a low, “God.” He really didn’t want to put into actual words how much she impressed him. Somehow, Blue didn’t seem like the humble type. “You suck, Sargent.”

“That means he loved it,” Noah whispered.

“Look, I like your music, Ronan. And despite my better judgement, for some reason I feel compelled to play with you guys.” Blue stood in front of him, arms folded tight to her chest, chin tilted defiantly upward. “I know Gansey doesn’t want me to be in the band, but I promise I’ll stop harping on him so much. He’ll get over it.”

Neither Noah or Ronan thought to correct Blue’s assumption about Gansey. It didn’t seem appropriate to throw Ben and his wildly stupid crush under the bus. Ronan deflected any guilt he felt with the argument that, realistically, Gansey would upset Blue soon enough anyway.

“Okay, okay, just let me think,” Ronan said. “I’ll need some time to talk to the other guys. But just, just don’t… join any other bands or anything.”

Blue laughed. “Yeah, because I’ve got so many offers.”

“Seriously-” Ronan pointed his finger toward her. “Don’t.”

Noah was so excited that he jumped on Ronan’s back, wringing his arms around his neck. Blue left to talk with her step-father (which was Mr. Allen? Holy hell, small towns) and Noah took the opportunity to whisper into Ronan’s ear, “So, what are we going to do about Ben?”

Ronan paused. “I’ll think of something.”

Chapter End Notes
Apologies if there are a few errors - I've yet to get the hang of Ao3’s system yet, and it likes to add spaces in random places.

Thank you all for the kind words! As always, I'm on Tumblr if you want to chat.
The Writer

Chapter Summary

“As if I’d ever experience unrequited love,” Ronan joked. “But I bet you could give me some ideas. We could call it, Blue Like Me. It’d be a pun, both a statement to your current emotional state, as well as a desperate cry to the universe.”

Ben groaned, long and low. (Fuck.) “Will this joke never end?”

“Will your crush never end?”

Chapter Notes

Warning: less subtle references to abuse this time.

The original intention for this story was skip through time rather quickly, highlighting moments throughout the band's creation, so it jumps ahead a bit.

Ronan Lynch had a brilliant plan to incorporate Blue into the band without upsetting Ben. It was perfect, nay, ingenious. There were literally no flaws in this plan, sans the occasional complaint (or three) from Gansey.

Blue sat at her drum set, which had been temporarily moved to Gansey’s apartment, spinning her drumstick in her fingers. “So, am I ever going to meet this Ben kid?”

“He’s busy a lot,” Ronan muttered, adjusting the strap of his guitar and (completely) avoiding her gaze.

Her response was to blow a comically large bubble from her gum, letting it pop in the silence of the room. After a minute she added, “It’s just, it’s been a few weeks now and I’ve never even seen the guy.”

From his corner Gansey let out a derisive laugh. He wasn’t really a fan of Ronan’s plan. Said it was flawed, dangerous, and would probably lead to Ben leaving the band as soon as he found out.

Okay, maybe his flaw wasn’t ingenious. Maybe there was potential for disaster. See, he had told
Blue she was in the band, didn’t exactly mention her addition to Ben, and was currently scheduling separate practices so that they just...never crossed paths. (He might have gotten the idea from The Parent Trap or some equally shitty 90s movie that Matthew still liked to watch.)

“What does it matter?” Ronan finally said. “You don’t need him to be around to play the drums.”

“It doesn’t, really, I guess. I don’t know, it just makes me feel like he doesn’t like me or something. Which is absurd, because I’ve never even met the guy!” Blue’s eyes flitted toward Gansey. “I don’t know if I can handle half the band hating me.”

“Blue, I like you perfectly fine,” Gansey insisted.

(Noah and Ronan had yet to dispute Blue’s original assumption that Gansey didn’t want her in the band. It made Blue treat Gansey even worse than usual. Ronan wondered if it was cruel of him to keep the charade going, but any guilt he felt was overshadowed by the sick kick he got out of watching Gansey try to win her favor and failing miserably.)

She snorted. “Every girl’s dream. To be liked perfectly fine. I’m living the dream over here.”

“That’s not what I meant--”

“Enough chit-chat, let’s start at the top,” Ronan ordered.

They were rehearsing for the fourth time that week and Ronan felt on fire. As much as he liked Ben’s voice, he couldn’t help but feel a little resentful when he compared Blue’s availability to his. This is what he had dreamed the band to be - spending each day after school in Gansey’s apartment, building calluses he never thought possible, perfecting songs so that he could start writing new ones. He didn’t know what the other guys expected out of this band, whether they dreamed of putting out records or if they would even continue it past high school, but that’s what he wanted. This was his future and he knew it.

He didn’t know yet if Ben could be part of that dream, too.

An hour later Blue said her goodbyes, leaving right on schedule for her shift at Nino’s. Ronan had strategically told Ben to show up once she had left, ensuring their paths wouldn’t cross. He supposed it was a bit of a gamble - if Blue stayed a bit too late, or Ben arrived a bit too early, there’d be chaos -
but being that both musicians had schedules firmly dependent on jobs, he had faith it wouldn’t happen.

“I’m going to drive Blue to work!” Noah said. “Be back in a bit.”

That left just Ronan and Gansey. Their friendship had always felt easy to Ronan, even when Gansey saw him at his darkest, but the past few weeks had been a little…rough. Gansey had given him the patented “I’m not angry, just disappointed” speech when Ronan showed up with Blue the first time. (He, of course, had the decency to do this after she had left. Still, his surprise was evident on his face the entire practice, and Blue was skilled enough to notice. For her, it was just another point against Gansey.)

“Is Ben coming over, then?” Gansey asked, setting his bass on his stand.

Ronan nodded. “Twenty minutes or so.”

A disappointed sigh filled the room.

“I’m working on it,” Ronan snapped. He was still riding high from the practice and didn’t want it ruined by a lecture.

“You need to talk to Ben,” Gansey said.

“I said I’m working on it.”

“Good.” Gansey stood up and grabbed a jacket from his coatrack. “As much as I enjoy his company, my fingers ache, and I need to do some errands. You should use the opportunity to speak with him.”

Ronan called him a filthy string of curses. It did not phase Gansey, having been (remarkably) called worse by Ronan before. As he left the apartment he said, “Please lock up after you leave.”

This left him alone in the apartment and his anger echoed off the walls. As the minutes crept on and Ben’s arrival became imminent, the anger burned into nerves. Aside from the elephant in the room that he had to tackle, this would be the first time he and Ben practiced alone. Sure, Noah could return
any minute, but Ronan found it unlikely based on his previous track record. (He usually gave Blue a ride to work, stayed for pizza, got distracted by some task one of his sister’s asked him to do, saved a cat from a tree, walked an old lady across the street, rinse and repeat, etcetera etcetera. Ronan stopped paying attention to his excuses long ago.)

Ronan found Ben very complicated.

He knew he wasn’t very nice to him, and he knew Ben resented him for it. He just couldn’t help it, Ben made his blood boil. His voice was so perfect and it overwhelmed Ronan. One minute he would be in the zone, nailing every note of the song, and then Ben would growl a line or sing a word with just a little bit of his Henrietta twang, and Ronan forgot what he was doing. It was easier to preemptively yell at Ben instead of owning up to the fact that Ronan could barely function around his voice.

He wasn’t going to discuss what Ben’s shoulders did to him. Jesus.

What the fuck was he supposed to do alone with him?

Ronan walked to the nearest wall and knocked his forehead to it. The cold of the concrete walls was an abrupt temperature change that helped soothe him, though they offered no ideas for support. He wished Ben had a cell phone so that he could just cancel rehearsal. Ronan knew it wouldn’t be fair to cancel when he got there, though; it took Ben thirty minutes to bike to Gansey’s place from his second job, an extremely valuable amount of time for Ronan to just throw away.

When Ben arrived not long after - still stubbornly insisting on knocking, even though they had told him to just come in a million times - Ronan decided to wing it.

“Where is everybody?” Ben asked, eyes scanning the empty room with apprehension.

Ronan shrugged, hoping he pulled off a look of nonchalance. “Change of plans. We’re just going to work on guitar today.”

Ben kept his distance from Ronan, as if he were afraid to bridge the large gap between them. Ronan could practically see the wheels turning in his head. Ben licked his bottom lip (shit) and said, “Sure.”
Ben kept his guitar at Gansey’s apartment these days, meaning he didn’t practice it unless he was with them. It bothered Ronan, but last time he tried to complain Ben sent him a look that was fifty parts contempt and fifty parts anguish, so he let it go immediately. He supposed he couldn’t complain too much anyway, now that Blue moved her drum set in. *(Though guitars were much easier to carry around, but it really wasn’t Ronan’s business so okay, he would drop it, Jesus, fine.)*

Ben took up his guitar and sat on the ground, resting the base on his thighs and leaning against the couch. He looked extra fatigued today, the dark bags under his eyes more prominent than usual. Ronan wondered if everything was alright. He thought about asking him if anything was wrong in particular, or if he could do anything to help.

Instead, Ronan kicked him. “Lazy ass.”

Ben glared up at him from his position on the floor. “Wow, I can’t wait to spend an hour alone with you. It’s exactly what I want to do with what little free time I have.”

Ronan rolled his eyes. He knew he deserved Ben’s hostility, but it felt easier to push the vocalist away. “I’m going to teach you a new song today.”

Ben moved to stand up, so Ronan made a show of collapsing to the ground opposite him. If sitting on the ground was easier for Ben, they could play on the ground. To keep up appearances, Ronan stretched his legs so that his feet knocked into Ben, forcing the boy to shuffle.

“I’ll play it first.”

Ronan readied his guitar - clamping a capo on the fourth fret - and began playing. It was a new song he was working on, one that, ideally, Ben would play along to. Ronan would handle the more complicated part, notes that needed to be quickly plucked, while Ben would play the melody with the chords.

Ronan explained this to Ben as he played. Ben said nothing in return, but nodded every few seconds to show he was still listening. He had tilted his head back onto the cushion of the couch, eyes lightly shut.

“It’s nice,” Ben said, once the song came to a close. “Is it going to be a ballad?”
“I don’t write ballads,” Ronan scoffed. “It’s more like sorrow, deconstructed into a song.”

Ben’s eyes shot open and he laughed merrily. “Holy shit, Ronan,” he said. “That’s the stupidest thing you’ve ever said.”

“You think I fucking came up with that?”

“Gansey?”

“What do you think?”

“God, Gansey.” Ben leaned his head back against the couch once more, closing his eyes again, with the whisper of a smile still on his lips. Ronan tried to ignore the curve of his neck as it arched back, but the important word there was tried, because his eyes lingered much longer than necessary.

To keep his mind off Ben’s throat, Ronan began the song again. He muttered, “It might be a ballad. I kind of like sad things.”

“That’s bleak.”

Ronan shrugged. “Fast songs are fun, and they’re easy to write. But something sad - something that hits you where you need to be smacked - it’s harder, and the payoff is better. Sometimes you need a really fucking sad song to make you feel better.”

“Catharsis,” Ben hummed in agreement. After a moment he looked up at Ronan, blue eyes calm for a change. “You sound like you speak from experience.”

Ronan held his gaze. They had yet to discuss his father and the distinct fact that Ronan didn’t have one anymore. (Even now, years past, Ronan had to swallow the breath that caught in his throat.) Ben did not know anything about him, really, and Ronan somewhat liked that.

It made things easier.
Finally, Ronan looked away. “Start with a G chord, followed by B minor.”

Ben complied. They began to play together, Ronan walking him through the different chords. At one point Ben went rogue, playing it different than how Ronan planned, and it (irritatingly) sounded even better. Ronan shook his head, muttering, “Punk ass,” under his breath. Ben grinned cheekily in response.

They practiced until Ben could play the whole song without Ronan’s instruction. It didn’t take very long - the chord progression was fairly repetitive - but Ben seemed pleased with himself for finishing a task.

“What are the lyrics?”

“To be determined,” Ronan said.

“I’m not even joking anymore, I really think that should be the name of this band.”

“Gansey wants it to be a love song,” Ronan explained, ignoring Ben’s idea. “Something tragic, about unrequited love, bullshit like that. I’m not feeling inspired.”

“No one to inspire you?”

At this, Ronan raised an eyebrow. Discussing his romantic life with Ben seemed like something they would never do. Ben looked back at him, harmless, and Ronan wondered whether this was a typical thing Ben might talk about with a guy friend. (Gansey, Noah, and Ronan almost never talked about relationships. Noah, because he wasn’t interested in people like that, Ronan, because that would involve telling his friends they had a slight difference of opinion on partners, and Gansey, probably because the other two never brought women up and he figured it was taboo.)

“As if I’d ever experience unrequited love,” Ronan joked. “But I bet you could give me some ideas. We could call it, Blue Like Me. It’d be a pun, both a statement to your current emotional state, as well as a desperate cry to the universe.”

Ben groaned, long and low. (Fuck.) “Will this joke never end?”
“Will your crush never end?”

“It never started!”

Ronan narrowed his eyes at Ben. “I’m not a big fan of liars, you know.” At this, Ben flinched. The action, clearly a confirmation, made Ronan’s stomach clench. He really did hate liars, and he didn’t want to hate Ben.

“I’m a bit of a liar,” Ben admitted, picking at a piece of rubber on his shoe that was beginning to fall off. “But I’m not lying about that.”

“Then you’d have no problem if, say, Blue joined the band?” Ben’s head jerked up. The look of frozen fear betrayed his true feelings, and against his better judgement, Ronan said. “I’m kidding, man.”

“Funny joke.”

“Liars don’t deserve kindness,” Ronan drawled.

“I give up.” Ben brought his hand to his eyes, dragging it slowly down his face. “You caught me. I have a big, fat crush on Blue Sargent.”

Ronan’s stomach lurched again. Ben didn’t sound very sincere, which was confusing as fuck. It was as if his body told one truth and his mouth told another, but all Ronan could see was a boy bathed in complication.

“Are you aware she doesn’t even know you exist?” Ronan finally asked, his words filled with bite he didn’t plan. “Your name has come up in conversation. By Noah, not me, so don’t give me that pissy look.”

“It’s fine,” Ben said, and Ronan realized he really was a liar. Who wouldn’t be bothered by that? “It’s better that way. For the song, I mean. What about this? ‘Oh, she doesn’t even know my name, my heart will never be the same. Guess I better stay in the shadows, let my tears fall into the pillow-’”
Ronan took the nearest object to him - one of Gansey’s fancy throw pillows - and chucked it at Ben’s face. “You’re disgusting.”

“We can’t all be lyrical geniuses like Ronan Lynch,” Ben said dryly. Ronan didn’t miss the compliment, though, and he let it hang in the air. A compliment hidden in banter didn’t make Ronan feel the need to pounce as one that was delivered earnestly.

Anyway, Ben also ruined the moment by adding, “Though, apparently not talented enough to write a love song. For shame.”

“I just don’t fucking care about love songs!” Ronan snapped. “So sue me.”

“Maybe we should find you some inspiration,” Ben said, though he wasn’t looking at Ronan anymore. He was looking at his guitar, teaching his fingers how to form a difficult chord.

If Ronan were a girl, he would think that Ben was flirting. But he wasn’t, and he knew Ben was speaking harmlessly. When you had nothing to look forward to, you found thrills in the most mundane things.

Instead, Ronan let himself watch Ben’s hands. They were nice hands.

They sat in silence for some time. It was the perfect opportunity to talk to Ben about Blue. Ronan knew there would be no better time, but he liked the comfortable peace that had built between the two. It was rare and he wanted to kindle it.

Not long after Ben had to leave, another job beckoning. It was only after he left that Ronan noticed the time, though, and realized Ben had pushed his luck a bit and left with little time to spare. The hope that, maybe, Ben didn’t want to leave, that he wanted to stay a bit longer with Ronan, bloomed in his chest.

Then Ronan squashed it.

Adam had a feeling the band was hiding something from him. He’d be more irritated about it if he weren’t also hiding something from them. It seemed a little hypocritical.
He didn’t have too much time to think about it. Though, at best, he could only describe his life as “mostly shitty,” the past month had been relatively calm. He had allowed himself to relax, just a bit. His father was pleased that Adam had taken up a second job - not realizing it was actually Adam’s third - and didn’t feel the need to criticize him with his fists as often.

So when it happened again, Adam felt the blow in more than his left eye. That night, as he sat in his room with an icepack to his face (and Ronan’s most recent song playing in his ear - because hell, if Ronan wanted some depressing lyrics, this was a great time for inspiration), Adam kicked himself for getting so complacent.

He understood what Ronan had meant by saying that sad songs could be cathartic. Music was quickly becoming Adam’s escape from his problems. He used to use the future as his emancipation, the idea of leaving for college and making it in a world without his father a good enough distraction to take him away from the trailer park. But lately his mind kept slipping to music, to the band, and he let that liberate him.

Ronan had only spoken briefly of his plans for the band, but Adam knew his dream was to take it somewhere far. Gansey and Noah treated it like a fun activity. Adam did not have the luxury of doing anything just for fun, and though their reasons were comically different, Adam knew Ronan functioned in the same way.

Briefly, Adam allowed himself to dream of the band being his ticket out of Henrietta, instead of college. He didn’t even know what he wanted to study if he went to college, he just knew he needed to get out.

Adam skipped school the next day, knowing the deep bruise that freckled his face would set people into a tizzy of talk. It was too late to salvage his reputation - the rumors of his abuse were well known in the halls of the school - but that didn’t mean Adam had to live in them. He would just pull his teachers aside in a couple days, explain the situation, and get an extension.

(Adam always got extensions on his work from teachers. He disliked it sometimes, because it was all pity, but he dealt with it because it made them even. It was easier to quell the rage he felt for his teachers, the supposed adults who were legally mandated to step in and protect him, who thought their jobs were done that one time they reported their suspicions to Child Services, when he could profit from their cowardice.)

This meant skipping practice, too. Adam didn’t want to face Ronan’s rage, so he called Gansey instead. He sounded genuinely upset that Adam wouldn’t be able to make practice. Instead of letting him go like usual, though, Gansey lingered on the phone.
“Ben, did Ronan talk to you the other day?”

“About the new song? He said you want it to be a love song,” Adam said. He was looking around his room for his coveralls. While he could skip out on school and practice, his job was a commitment. Plus, he’d be alone for most of his shift at Boyd’s, so there wasn’t anyone to make dumb jokes about his black eye.

“Oh, well yes. I feel like we don’t have enough love songs in our repertoire. I know they are ridiculous in a lot of ways, but they are also an important staple of any band.” Gansey cleared his throat. “But that’s not what I was referring to.”

Adam tried to remember what Ronan and he talked about at practice. It was difficult to think of anything but Ronan stating that he hated liars, and therefore, would hate Adam once he found out the truth. It hurt more than he expected. Perhaps it was just lingering attachment from a practice gone well for once, but Adam hated the idea of disappointing Ronan.

“Maybe you should just tell me,” Adam said with a sigh.

There was a pause on the other line. “We think we found a drummer.”

“Really?” Adam perked up at this. He had obviously noticed the drum set at Gansey’s apartment - Ronan had said it was his and it was meant to be used for auditions. No one had said whether there were any auditions, though, so he had assumed the worst. “Who is it?”

Another pause. “Ronan will introduce you soon, I’m sure.”

“Alright.” Adam didn’t miss the sidestep in Gansey’s voice, but he didn’t press his luck. He tried to imagine how many days it would take for his bruise to fade, counting on his fingers. “I don’t think I’ll be able to practice until next Thursday at the earliest. Will you tell Ronan that?”

“That’s cruel, Ben. You’re going to make me tell him that he has to wait a week to see you?” Gansey chuckled good-humouredly, though. “I’ll make Noah do it.”

“Sorry, got a big school project,” Adam lied.
“Oh, it’s fine. School should always come first. I must be going, though - good luck, Ben! We’ll be thinking of you.”

Adam didn’t have a chance to clarify Gansey’s last statement - good luck with what? - before the phone clicked and the bassist was gone. *Must have meant the project*, he thought.

He iced his eye one more time before he had to leave for work. It was always a little awkward coming into Boyd’s with an obvious bruise. Boyd was a good man, who was kind enough to offer Adam a position at the shop despite his young age. He also grew up in the same trailer complex as Adam and was familiar with his father. Boyd probably knew what Robert Parrish did to his kid.

Sometimes, Adam thought the hardest thing about being abused was knowing people knew and did nothing about it. When he was younger and more naive, he used to compartmentalize people into *good* and *evil*, and everyone who feigned ignorance to his situation were evil. As he got older he realized it wasn’t so easy for people to do anything about it, that there were unspoken rules or fears that ruled over common sense. Still, the fact that he felt a little bitter toward almost every person in his life was exhausting.

True to form, Boyd noticed Adam’s black eye and frowned, looking grim. He did nothing, though, except place his hand on Adam’s shoulder and give it a squeeze. *I know, and I care*, the gesture said. *But not enough to make it my problem*.

Adam was glad to see him leave the shop an hour later. The only task left for the day was to inspect a malfunctioning AC unit in an old Chevy so Adam got to work quickly, hoping to leave early.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when someone knocked twice on the side of the garage, hard, and said, “You asshole.”

Adam knew that voice, but even more so, he knew that language. He didn’t have to turn around to know it was Ronan. He also didn’t *want* to turn around. He was painfully aware of his bruised eye, and painfully aware that Ronan had never seen him bruised before.

A sickening feeling flooded his stomach when his brain argued, *He’s never seen you bruised - so he will fall for an excuse. Tell him you got elbowed on accident at school, or a baseball hit you in gym. He’ll believe it.* The voice sounded like the Adam who still didn’t understand what was happening, who thought he could fool the world.
As a compromise, Adam kept his back to Ronan and kept the excuse on standby. “I told Gansey to tell you I couldn’t make it.”

“Doesn’t make it any better that you skipped,” Ronan drawled, an edge to his voice.

Adam ordered his hands to keep operating on the car. “You’ll get over it.”

From behind him, Adam could hear Ronan move closer. He usually clipped his car keys onto his belt and they clinked as he walked, almost like a cat with a bell. Adam was grateful for it now, as it betrayed Ronan’s movement throughout the room. When the sound clinked to his left, he shifted his body away.

“Do you even want to be in this band?”

Adam’s hands stilled. Yes, he thought desperately. “I--” he began, trying to find the right thing to say but coming up short.

Words failed him, and Ronan was growing irritated. The boy spit, “Call us if you ever change your mind.”

Wait, wait, he thought desperately. Still, no words came. So Adam fell back on touch and grabbed Ronan’s wrist, holding it for the briefest of moments. “Hold on,” he said.

Ronan’s eyes trailed his touch, then up to his face. His eyebrows knitted together; Adam had forgotten about his eye.

“An accident,” he said instinctively, dropping Ronan’s wrist.

Ronan’s gaze stayed on Adam’s face. “Looks like a right hook, to me.”

“I want to be in the band,” Adam insisted, ignoring Ronan’s (correct) observation. Maybe if he plowed through, said what Ronan wanted to hear, he’d forget what he saw. “I can be in the band.”
Ronan finally looked away. His hand reached to the back of his neck, skimming the top of his hair. “Okay.”

Adam turned away. “Okay,” he agreed.

Ronan left quickly. Adam felt his heart speed in his chest. It was painful and sharp and made his breath catch. “Shit,” he said to himself, slamming his hand on the hood of the car.

Ronan knew. Which meant he would probably tell Gansey and Noah. Which meant there was no point to even being Ben Smith, no point to having lied to his friends and ensuring Ronan Lynch would hate him once he knew the truth.

Ronan couldn’t keep his emotions in check, today. When Gansey said Ben wouldn’t be at practice he nearly exploded in rage. It wasn’t like Ben hadn’t skipped practice before but--

It’s just, he thought they had a really fucking good practice the other day. And it felt like they got along for once. And he kind of wanted that feeling again.

Because bands needed to bond, to get along. That sort of thing.

“What’s got his panties in a twist?” said Blue, probably directing her question to Noah. Ronan couldn’t be sure because he refused to look at her, instead staring at the wall he was really wanting to punch.

Surprisingly it was Gansey who answered. “It’s my fault. I forgot to pick up new strings for my bass, so I’m utterly worthless today.”

“Uh, you play the bass, Gansey. You’re pretty much useless every day.”

Ronan turned toward Blue abruptly. Despite his anger at Ben, he stuck out his fist to her. She stared at it, confused, before hesitantly meeting his fistbump and asking, “Yeah?”
“Yeah,” he confirmed. “Fuck the bass.”

Gansey groaned at the gesture. “Why must you always make fun of my instrument of choice?”

Despite the fact that he wasn’t actually mad at Gansey for forgetting to buy strings - in truth, he didn’t even notice, too incensed once he found out Ben wouldn’t be attending practice - he shot Gansey a dirty look. “I don’t know, Dick, why did you forget your fucking strings? The world is a confusing place.”

“The shop is probably closed by now, Ronan, what do you expect me to do?”

Blue looked at her watch. “If you guys want, we could go see if Dean has any at the house. We have a room full of extra supplies.”

“Road trip to Blue’s house? I’m in!” Noah whooped.

Ronan shook his head. “If you come we’ll never leave. Plus, you need to stay and practice the new song.” He turned his attention to Gansey. “And you, you’re going to go get us food for delaying practice.”

“I thought I was getting strings with Blue,” Gansey said, tone wilted.

“Nope, the Maggot and I will go. You’re getting food from-” he paused, turning to look down at Blue. “What sounds good and preferably a pain in the ass to get?”

“Ronan--”

“Ohh, let’s think,” Blue said, turning to Gansey with a mischievous look. “Something smelly? Or maybe something with a lot of sauce.”

“Let’s do saucey,” Ronan confirmed. “That way it can get all over the Pig.”
Gansey stared at them, looking very petulant. “You both are tyrants. I don’t know how this band will survive with two of you.”

On cue, they both flipped him off. When Blue saw their matching gestures she lit up with glee and shouted, “Jinx! Wait, I don’t know if you can jinx a gesture. Regardless, you owe me a soda!”

They both left the apartment cackling, leaving a disappointed Gansey in their wake. The joking did a good job at elevating Ronan’s mood for a bit. Blue had grown on him tremendously in the past month. The fact that she could come to every practice and seemed as dedicated to music as he was helped.

There were times he remembered that Ben liked her and he had to push down his bitterness. It wasn’t her fault, though. He wasn’t exaggerating in his conversation to Ben at practice - Blue had no idea who Ben was. Seemed a bit petty to hold it against her.

It also helped that she enjoyed his music. As they drove, Blue allowed him to blast a heavy metal song he’d been obsessed with lately. He watched out of the corner of his eye as she mimed playing the drums on her hands, getting into it. The only time she stopped was to give directions to her house.

She said they were getting close when his eyes spotted Boyd’s Auto Shop. Without thinking, Ronan took a tight turn and spun into the parking lot. Blue screeched at the abrupt change and yelled, “What the hell?”

Ronan’s fingers were bouncing off the steering wheel, tapping restlessly. He stared at the shop for a moment, peering into the open door of the garage, wondering whether Ben was working that night. A few seconds later he recognized his form coming through the door.

Whirling on Blue, he snapped, “I just need to talk to someone for a minute. Stay in the fucking car.”

“You can’t order me around!” Blue sputtered.

“I mean it, Sargent,” he warned, lowering his voice to a level that he knew inspired fear. “Stay in. The Fucking. Car.”

He was out of the car before she could voice her complaint. As he walked to the garage he eyed the car, waiting to see if she would disobey. Apparently it did the trick, though, because Blue just
crossed her arms and slumped in her seat.

Ronan slipped into the garage, quiet. Ben was working on a car, his back to him. To get his attention he wrapped his knuckles on the metal of the door twice. “You asshole,” he spat.

Ben’s back went stiff and Ronan knew he recognized him. Instead of turning around, though, Ben began to fiddle with the car again. He said some excuse, or maybe just said something snarky - honestly, Ronan wasn’t really listening. Just seeing Ben, apparently perfectly fucking fine, was enough to make his blood boil again.

“Doesn’t make it any better that you skipped,” Ronan said finally.

Ben just said, “You’ll get over it.”

That sent Ronan over the top. He walked to Ben’s back, ready to pick up a fight, and asked, “Do you even want to be in this band?"

He regretted it the moment he said it. This was such a gamble. Ben could take him up on his offer, peace out, and they’d be fucked. Or maybe he wouldn’t realize that this is just what Ronan did, that he got angry and pissed people off, but it didn’t mean anything. Still, Ronan’s pride got in the way when Ben offered no response.

Feeling that it was a confirmation to his fears, he muttered, “Call us if you ever change your mind.” It was meant to be a lifeline, a way for Ben to still stay, but it came out harsh and sarcastic.

But then he felt a press at his wrist - rough, callused fingers circling it - and he stopped. The grip was so hesitant that he barely registered Ben’s touch, at first.

“Hold on,” Ben said.

Ronan had to look down at his wrist to ensure it was real. But there was Ben’s hand - he’d recognize them anywhere, long and bony and dotted with a few freckles - and the milky color contrasted against his skin.
His eyes moved to Ben’s face, words already forming on his lips to ask what he was doing, but he stopped. Covering the entire left side of Ben’s eye was a nasty looking bruise. At first Ronan didn’t understand. It almost looked like Ben was simply wearing eyeliner, just on his left eye, before he realized it was blood that pooled in his eyelids.

Ben caught him staring and said, “An accident.” He also dropped his wrist, but Ronan didn’t care.

It was another lie from Ben, but this time it didn’t upset Ronan. Still, his instinct to always tell the truth overwhelmed him and he said, “Looks like a right hook, to me.”

Because it did. And because Ronan knew what a punch to the eye looked like. He didn’t get along with his older brother, especially not once his dad died; he had plenty of personal experience throwing punches around and getting them in return.

Ben’s eyes searched Ronan’s, looking for something in his face. “I want to be in the band,” he finally said. Then, with a little less hesitancy, he added, “I can be in the band.”

It wasn’t a huge change in verbiage, but Ronan didn’t miss the implication of I can. It meant Ben would put in more effort. That he would try to make it work.

It made him feel a little sick. He didn’t want Ben to feel guilty - that wasn’t his intention of coming to the shop. He just wanted to yell at him, make him understand that he was upset, to just be angry for a bit.

Seeing his face, Ronan had the sinking sensation that everything wasn’t okay in Ben’s life, though. The way Ben avoided his gaze, eyes darting away every few seconds, whispered something Ronan didn’t quite understand. He reached his hand to the back of his neck, rubbing it against his hair for comfort, a desperate bid to calm himself down so that he would know what to say. Ben was still fidgeting, waiting for Ronan to make a move.

He yielded, finally, and said, “Okay.”

Ben turned away from him, giving Ronan a view of his rigid back. “Okay,” he agreed.

Ronan could think of nothing else to say so he turned on his heel and left. His hands shook - he wasn’t sure if it was anger, or the lingering sensation of Ben’s touch - and he clenched them at his
sides. Blue had not broken her promise and was still in the car, though her expression was clear of malice when Ronan returned.

“What was that about?” She asked, eyes flitting to the garage.

“None of your fucking business,” he said, though the words didn’t seem as strong as he hoped.

Blue shook her head but agreed to silence. She was still giving him directions to her house, but it was the only sound that filled the car now.

Once they were parked in front of her place, Blue turned to him with a firm expression. “Look, I don’t know what went down just now, but you need to cool it if you come in. My house is kind of crazy, and my Aunties won’t put up with you if you’re being a little shit.”

Ronan just nodded, but his mouth stayed in a tight line. Blue huffed a sigh, apparently annoyed at his reaction.

“If it makes you feel better, I hear he’s great with cars. I’m sure your precious Beemer will be okay.”

Ronan had a hard time digesting Blue’s words. He stared at her, waiting for her to explain. Blue rolled her eyes and muttered, “Your car. I’m assuming something is wrong with it if you went to an autoshop.”

“Right,” Ronan said, objectively understanding why Blue would come to that conclusion. Still, something in her words confused him. “He’s great with cars?”

“Yeah,” Blue was getting out of the car already, apparently not as stunned by the conversation as he was. “That’s what people say at school, at least.”

Ronan unbuckled his seatbelt and jumped out of the car quickly. She was already making her way up the front of her driveway when he caught up to her, pulling at her shoulder.

“You said you didn’t know him,” Ronan said.
Blue gave him a funny look. “What? When did I say that?” Before Ronan could spit, *Uh, every time Noah brings him up?* Blue quickly added, “I mean, I don’t know him know him. Everybody knows Adam.”

The name sounded foreign to Ronan. “Adam?”

Blue rolled her eyes. “Jesus, Ronan, I expected this from Gansey, but not you. Do you seriously not know your mechanic’s name? That’s harsh.”

Ronan shook his head, suddenly very confused. “No, that’s not his name. You’re confused--”

“Ronan, we’ve gone to school together since junior high. You think I don’t recognize Adam Parrish when I see him?” She heaved a sigh. “Nice guy, really smart, super pretty?”

Ronan was confused. “No--”

But then Blue added, “Freckles?”

That stopped Ronan in his tracks.

Chapter End Notes

I'm on [Tumblr](http://tumblr.com)!

Thank you to everyone who is reading! Your kudos and kind words are extremely appreciated.
The Pact

Chapter Summary

Ronan kept his gaze for a moment. He didn’t look away from Adam, even as he brought his beer to his mouth and drank. Ronan’s glare was something unworldly, a force in itself, but Adam was resolved to not look away. It always seemed like a test with Ronan, and he didn’t want to fail.

Ronan finally looked away, muttering, “Don’t shit yourself, okay?”

Chapter Notes

Please let me know if you see any errors this time around. I usually let a chapter sit overnight before I edit it, but I wanted to post it today.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Adam returned to school a few days later. The bruise covering his left side had faded to a hideous yellow color, but he didn’t want to press his luck with school. There were certain subjects that seemed impossible to catch up if missed (AP Physics, Trig, and Spanish 3 for starters). Spanish was a particularly hard class for Adam, if only because it required memorization (which required time) instead of logical reasoning (which, by some strange luck, Adam was sufficient in). He dreaded the catch up.

Thus, when a stack of notes appeared on his desk the next day, he was instantly relieved. Someone in his class had taken detailed notes for him over the past few days. The writing was easy to read, printed in tight, block letters, but the color was an obnoxiously bright orange. In the margins were funny notes that had nothing to do with the lesson. Sometimes they seemed directed at an audience (did this person plan to give him their notes?) while some were obviously meant for him or herself.

Senorita Cruz’s fly is down. I’m so embarrassed for her. Should I tell her? I feel like I would be more embarrassed for ME to have that conversation, tho.

Remind Mom to pick up Calla’s meds or we will all sufffer

Three years of Spanish and no field trip to Mama Huevos. What gives?
Don’t forget practice at 4PM on Sat

OMG I told her

PS - she gave me a hug you would have pissed yourself

Adam looked around the room, wondering who could have dropped off the notes while he was talking with his teacher (who, Adam noted, was now wearing pants that had no zipper at all) up front. Class was almost completely full, though, so it was no telling.

No one seemed to be using an orange pen, either.

Adam pushed the mystery out of his mind and focused on the actual content. If he ever figured out who did it he would thank them, but in the meantime, the new vocabulary was more important.

At lunch he used the school computer to check his email. Recently, Noah and he had begun corresponding - Noah claiming that it was absolutely vital they had a way to contact each other, since Adam was sans phone - and saw that he had a new message.

Noah liked to write in all caps, which seemed fitting as he lived his life in similar fashion. The email was not very long. It read:

BEN

I MISS YOU SO MUCH. WILL YOU COME TO PRACTICE FRIDAY THE 10TH? I HAVE CONVINCED RONAN TO GO EASY ON US & HAVE FUN FOR ONCE. DO YOU DRINK? IT CAN BE A PARTY! (IT’S OKAY IF NO.) (JUST ASKIN FOR A FRIEND.) (ME.) (I’M THE FRIEND WHO WANTS TO KNOW.)

I MISS YOUR FACE :((((( I’M SO SAD THAT I HAVE 2 DOUBLE CHINS. ROUGH HUH?

NOAH
Adam didn’t drink. Alcoholism ran in his family and it was clearly associated with violent tendencies. Not once had Adam been tempted to even try a drink, so technically he had no idea what his reaction would be, but it seemed safer to avoid it. The anger that appeared at random was already unbearable, and he wasn’t ready to find out whether alcohol could plunge that anger into chaos.

Still, he emailed Noah back and confirmed that he could come and told him that he missed him as well. (Though with less exclamations, and fewer double chins.) He did not respond to the bit about the alcohol, planning to deal with it once the issue actually arose.

The email lifted his mood once more. When he biked to school that morning he prepared himself for a horrible day. He expected stares in the hall and pitying looks. He got a bit of that, naturally, but he also received mysterious (but helpful) Spanish notes and a reminder from Noah that he sort of had real friends.

The bruise on his face told him not to do this, to not feel happy, so he kept it at an arm’s distance. Reminded himself that Noah would hate him once he found out the truth, and that notes were just notes.

Still, the hint of a smile played on his lips the rest of the day.

Spanish 3 was the first period of the day, and in an effort to prepare for the quiz, Adam had arrived especially early to school that morning. The mysterious notes he had received two days prior were quite helpful, but he wanted all the time he could get to ask his teacher questions.

His classmates didn’t often talk to him - he was friendly with most people, but it was an unsaid agreement that Adam Parrish didn’t make friends - so he didn’t register the presence of someone in front of him at first. His classmate had to tap on his paper multiple times to drag him out of his concentration.

Blue Sargent was sitting in front of him, trying to get his attention.

All the jibes at him must have gone to his head, because Adam’s first instinct was to flush in her presence. He had to remind himself that, no, he didn’t actually have a crush on her to get his heart to settle down.
Though he did take a moment to admire her lips, which were quite full. They reminded him that he hadn’t kissed anyone since he had a girlfriend several years ago. That relationship was fleeting, a neighbor girl who came from an equally shitty background. She ran away from home without telling Adam. He was sad, but not because he missed her specifically, so much as he missed the distraction she provided.

“Hey,” she said simply.

Adam nodded once and offered the same reply. “Hey.”

She looked down at his mystery notes with mild interest before turning back to look at his face. Though Adam knew his bruise had faded to almost nothing, he took in the way Blue’s eyes narrowed in concentration. He expected some comment on it, but instead she said, “I like your freckles.”

“Thank you,” Adam said, though his voice trailed up at the end like a question. The corner of Blue’s lip tilted up at this, clearly amused by his confusion.

“How is it that we’ve gone to school together all these years, and yet I can’t think of a single time we’ve actually talked?” She leaned her chin on her palm, tapping her fingers against her face. She had painted her nails each a different color of green, and Adam found he liked the color of her pointer finger best.

Adam paused, unsure how to answer. A simple answer was poised on his tongue (something shallow, like “I’m not sure, I guess the school is too big”) but something about Blue’s blank expression encouraged him to be more honest.

“I never bothered to get to know anyone here,” he admitted. “I don’t like living in a small town.”

“You mean you don’t like small town folk,” Blue clarified.

Adam didn’t deny this, despite the fact that it made him appear elitist. Instead, he added, “They also don’t tend to leave Henrietta.”

Blue understood the implication of his words, that underneath they said, *And I will*. She took in his words thoughtfully, nodding to herself slowly and brushing her bottom lip. Adam let his eyes linger
there, convincing himself that it wasn’t wrong if he was just watching her thumb.

“I like small town folk, there are a lot of good people here,” Blue said finally. “And yet, I’ve never once wanted to be friends with any of them.”

Adam wanted to ask, *Then why are you talking to me?* It seemed awfully coincidental that Blue was suddenly in his life, considering the connection she had to Ronan, Gansey, and Noah. He wondered whether anyone had figured out his secret, but if they had, Ronan would have let him know. Because, he reminded himself, Ronan did not like liars, and Ronan barely liked Adam. Their friendship (if you could even call it that) was doomed the moment Ronan found out.

Blue must have sensed his unease because her lips split into a wide grin. “Sorry, I just saw you sitting here and had a moment of introspection on my life. Call it senior panic, or whatever. I’m going to graduate from this place having no friends.”

“Everybody likes you,” Adam said, attempting to be comforting, but wincing when it came out stilted.

Blue laughed at this. “I don’t know if I would say *that*. I think people are interested in me, like they are interested in—” she stopped abruptly, and instinctively Adam knew she was going to say, *like you.* Instead, Blue said, “I just wanted to say ‘Hi,’ I guess.”

Adam nodded and once more said, “Hey.”

Instead of leaving, like he expected, Blue stayed seated at the desk in front of him. She began to drum her fingers against the chair, beating out a nervous rhythm. Adam waited, wondering whether it would be rude to get back to his studies.

“You want me to quiz you on the words?” Blue asked. Before he could respond she reached for the notes, “What’s the present-tense version of ‘borrow’?”

Adam brain was too flummoxed at the fact Blue was still hanging around to come up with the answer right away. She waited, patient for a moment, before asking, “Adam?”

He answered, fumbling on his words. Still, Blue smiled and said, “Bingo.” She continued to quiz Adam on the vocab until he was answering them in quick succession. They completed the list and
fell into an awkward silence.

Tentatively, Adam suggested, “Switch?”

She handed the paper back. He began to recite the vocabulary for her, though Blue had a much harder time with the words. Her pronunciation wasn’t very good and she mixed up several terms. Each time she made a mistake and Adam would gently correct her, he waited for a glare or an angry retort. Blue just took it in stride, though, and thanked Adam once the list was done.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said, a joking lilt in her tone. “We can’t all be Adam Parrish.”

“What’s the supposed to mean?” He genuinely didn’t understand her quip.

Blue leaned toward him. She pressed her pointer finger into the center of his forehead and pressed his head back slightly. “A brainiac.”

Adam wanted to deny her (compliment?) but she didn’t allow him time. Blue stood up from the desk, wrapped her knuckles on his desk twice, and said, “Good talking to you, Adam.”

She left him for her place at the front of the room. Adam was baffled by the encounter and he thought about it the rest of his day.

(He aced his quiz.)

Blue continued to chat with him throughout the week. The conversations never lasted long - sometimes she simply asked how he was before floating off - but other times she extended the chats to something more meaningful. Adam also noticed that she began to inch her way closer to his desk each class, until one day he walked in to see that she took the spot right in front of him again.

He expected she was just there to chat but Blue barely said anything to him. She was hunched over her desk, sketching something that looked like a logo. His eyes skimmed the paper and saw the words, *Richie Rich and the Ravens* in block letters.
Curious, Adam asked about it. Blue barely spared him a look. Instead, she crumpled the paper and threw it behind her shoulder (and onto Adam’s desk), muttering under her breath. At some point she realized she never answered his question and supplied, “Cover art. Or trying.”

She said nothing else so Adam took out his homework, content to work in silence. She never left for another seat, though, preferring to stay by Adam the rest of class. From there on, she always sat in front of him.

Time crept by slowly for Adam until it was finally the 10th. Adam had met up with Gansey a few times to discuss lyrics - Ronan had a draft for the love ballad, though Gansey warned him they were likely to change it because Ronan dubbed them, quote, *fucking shit* - but this was the first time he had seen Ronan since their fight.

It had been almost two weeks, but to Adam’s credit, it was Ronan who was putting off practice. Adam would have only been able to attend maybe once, twice tops, but every time he checked in with Noah or Gansey he was told Ronan was busy. It made Adam outrageously nervous.

His first instinct was to wonder whether he got replaced.

His second thought told him it was the bruise he sported. This was a harder pill to swallow. Was it because Ronan pitied him? Was he embarrassed for him? (Adam couldn’t decide what was worse.) Adam tried to convince himself there was no way Ronan could possibly know the truth based on one punch to the eye.

His third worry - fleeting as it was - wondered whether he came on too strong that night in the garage. He grabbed Ronan’s wrist. Holding his hand would have been too intimate, and it wasn’t-- He just--

Adam craved touch. It didn’t matter that Ronan was a boy. He never got to touch anyone and no one ever touched him; no wrist grabs, no hand holding, definitely no hugs. Aside from the occasional reassuring pat on the shoulder, Adam couldn’t remember the last time someone touched him that didn’t end in pain.

Maybe he fucked it all up.
Or maybe Ronan really was just busy. He didn’t know. He would find out at practice, he supposed.

That morning was a day where Blue was considerably chatty. She was already at her desk when he arrived to class (he was early, admittedly on purpose, because he started to enjoy his talks with Blue and thought it would increase his chances) and was writing in her notebook. In her hand was a distinctly bright pen, the color of a tangerine.

Adam stopped in front of her desk and looked at her paper. He couldn’t stop his voice from sounding accusatory. “You were the one who gave me notes.”

Blue didn’t even look up at him. “You just figured that out? Adam, tsk tsk.”

He sat behind her and took the notes out. Adam had kept them all this time - not necessarily for sentimental reasons, but because they were still detailed vocabulary terms after all - and placed them in front of him. Blue sighed, good naturedly, and looked at them.

“I thought you knew,” she said with a shrug. “Did you not notice that it was conveniently timed with our first discussion?”

Adam hadn’t, a fact that made him feel quite oblivious. “Why did you do it in the first place?”

Blue bit her bottom lip and looked away, toward the front of the classroom. He wondered if she was embarrassed by the reason or if she was trying to come up with a lie. Eventually she said, “I didn’t really plan to give you my notes, at first. I was just taking them for me. Then, I don’t know, I thought it was weird you were gone two days in a row and thought I’d be a good samaritan.”

“You noticed I was gone?” He asked, skeptical. “You didn’t notice me at all, prior.”

“That’s not true! I knew you.” A sly smile crossed her face and she said, as if it were a private joke meant just for her, “Adam Parrish: good with cars, nice, really smart, super pretty.” She paused, bringing one finger toward his face and tapping it on his cheek. “Freckles.”

“I’m not--” he began, but lost the words. He shut his eyes and told himself not to blush. Still, his body hummed at the compliment, but even more at the touch. (He liked any touch, really, even Blue’s obnoxious pokes to his face.)
Catching his breath, Adam said, “I just mean, why now? What made you notice my absence now, compared to any other time?”

She looked down and began to fiddle with a loose string on her sleeve. “Adam,” she said slowly, carefully. “I like talking to you. You aren’t like the people here, you’re… You are so much more than they are, do you know what I mean?”

He didn’t.

Blue smiled at him, a soft smile that he’d never seen cross her face. Blue was intense in everything she did. She was feisty, or cunning, or angry, but never, ever soft.

“I just want you to know you can trust me,” she finally said. “I’m not going to spill your secrets.”

Adam’s toes curled at that. Secrets? The forbidden sensation of a temper was brewing in his stomach. He suppressed it, kept it curdling in his stomach, though it threatened to fight its way out of his system. Adam did not want to breathe fire onto someone like Blue.

“I don’t have secrets,” he grit. “And I don’t recall you being a psychic, just your mom.”

The soft smile on her face dropped off and Blue returned, fierce and unapologetic. “You don’t need to be psychic to see that you’re protecting yourself, Adam.”

She turned back around in her desk and he assumed the conversation, if not their tentative friendship, was over. He had ruined it by being defensive. A moment later, though, Blue turned back to him and said, “But I mean it. You can trust me, okay?”

Adam felt a little dizzy, suddenly. The conversation seemed familiar and he didn’t understand why. Numbly, he said, “Okay.”

Blue didn’t say anything to him the rest of class. As they parted ways, Blue held up her fingers to wave and just said, “See you later, Adam.”
He nodded, but that was it.

Adam was all nerves when he arrived at Gansey’s place that night. No matter how many times he’d been to the apartment - a giant, concrete thing that would better be described as a flat due to its expansive state - Adam never had the gall to open the door himself. They made fun of him for it constantly.

It was an action reliant on friendship, and he didn’t feel comfortable abusing their ignorance.

Noah answered the door with a bottle of tequila in his hand. His eyes were gleaming in the dim of the hallway and he wavered a bit on his feet. “Ben!”

Adam reached out to steady the keyboardist; either Noah was a lightweight (definitely probable, based on his short stature) or they had started drinking long before practice was scheduled to begin. Noah led him to the main room, holding his hands in a straight line for balance. He would be no good to the band today, and Adam wondered if they were even going to practice.

Ronan was sitting on the couch, feet propped on the coffee table, a bottle of beer balancing on his stomach. Adam waited for their eyes to catch - to judge whether anything had changed from their fight - but Ronan’s gaze just slid to him in an apathetic nature.

“The golden child returns,” he drawled, taking a sip of beer.

Adam resisted the urge to respond - you’re the one who has been missing, lately - and instead fell into the couch next to Ronan. Noah was buzzing around the room, stuck in his own thoughts. Adam watched him for a bemused moment, until Ronan muttered, “Guy gets one fucking shot in him and he’s a goner. This was a terrible idea.”

“Is this a party?” Adam asked. “Where’s Gansey?”

Ronan took another sip of beer, a much longer one this time. After he had drained almost half the bottle he said, “A welcome party. For our new drummer.”
This was news to Adam. A few weeks ago Gansey had mentioned they found a drummer, but so much time had gone by with no news that Adam assumed it hadn’t worked out. It didn’t help calm his nerves. He had only recently felt comfortable with the trio, adding another person into the mix was daunting.

And it would be just another person he was lying to.

“Noah,” Ronan called, pulling Noah’s attention away from a string of Christmas lights that Gansey had recently strung. “Go call Dick, see how far they are.”

Noah floated out of the room. Adam watched him go, unable to stop a smile forming based on Noah’s inebriation. Adam knew, of course, that not everyone reacted to alcohol badly; still, it was nice to see someone drink and maintain their innocence.

Ronan wasn’t saying much. Adam watched him from the corner of his eye, still trying to find evidence that Ronan was upset. The only difference in Ronan’s normal behavior, though, was that he seemed more relaxed. (Which could easily be a side effect of drinking.)

Ronan noticed him staring and turned toward Adam, eyes narrowing. “What?”

“Nothing.”

Ronan kept his gaze for a moment. He didn’t look away from Adam, even as he brought his beer to his mouth and drank. Ronan’s glare was something unworldly, a force in itself, but Adam was resolved to not look away. It always seemed like a test with Ronan, and he didn’t want to fail.

Ronan finally looked away, muttering, “Don’t shit yourself, okay?”

Adam didn’t know what he meant by that. He was content to leave it in silence for the time being. Noah came back, saying Gansey would supposedly be there any minute. While they waited Adam asked Noah about his life, entertained by his stories mostly because they came out in a drunk haze.

“I’m just,” Noah said at one point, gasping in a breath of air, “so nervous.”

Ronan threw a pillow at Noah. “Jesus, kid. I’m never giving you alcohol again.”
There was a rustle at the door not too long after and Adam heard Gansey call from the hall that they arrived. Belatedly, Adam turned to Ronan and asked, “Wait, what’s his name?”

Ronan grimaced. “Her.”

The clarification wasn’t necessary. Gansey appeared in the room, tugging behind him a girl. At the sight of Blue, Adam’s heartbeat sped. He could hear it pounding in his ears as if it threatened to rip out of his chest.

Blue was looking directly at Adam. He didn’t know what to say, what to do. She took the lead, instead, and stuck out her hand. It took a moment to register her words. “Hey, you must be Ben.”

**Ben.**

Adam stared at her outstretched hand. Looked back at her face, which betrayed no sense of surprise. He felt a press to his shoulder; Ronan had extended his leg from the couch and was nudging Adam with his foot. Hesitantly, Adam extended his hand in greeting. He still couldn’t find words to put on his tongue.

Blue turned to look at the rest of them, wearing a smile that screamed fiction. Noah pulled her into a hug, cupping her head close so that her chin was resting on his shoulder. He whispered in her ear, “Blue!”

Adam waited, unsure what to do. Gansey seemed completely oblivious to his discomfort. The boy breezed into the room, giving Blue a quick tour by way of explanation only, and offering her a drink. Adam’s hands were beginning to shake so he forced them into fists which he placed at his sides.

Ronan must have noticed his panic because he nudged him again. “Hey. Go check if Gansey left some groceries in the car. He was supposed to get snacks.”

Adam pounced on the request, needing to get outside. His legs carried him out the apartment in a crashing speed. Instead of stopping at Gansey’s car, though, Adam found his bike and began to unchain it.
“Ben, wait--” Adam whirled around at the voice, knowing it had to be Blue. She shut the door to the apartment and held out her hand to him. “Just wait a minute.”

Adam ignored her. Unfortunately, the panic attack that was drawing ever so close caused his hands to fumble with the lock. After several failed attempts he cursed under his breath, throwing the lock away in anger.

“Ben,” Blue began, reaching for his elbow.

He shot her a dirty look. He put all his energy into it, hoping it would scare her off. “Ben? Come on, Blue, don’t rub it in.”

She paused, licking her lips. “Fine. Adam--”

Upon hearing his real name, Adam spun on his heel, determined to just walk home. Blue caught up to him quickly, pushing the palms of her hand into his chest to stop him from walking off.

“Just give me a minute to explain,” she pleaded.

Her wounded tone made Adam feel nauseous. Why did Blue need to explain? He was the liar, the fucking idiot who had to ruin everything because he was a coward.

“I told you,” Blue began, her fingers tightening on the fabric of his t-shirt. “I told you that you could trust me. This is what I meant.”

Adam let go of a wicked laugh. So this was his secret Blue had been talking about earlier in the day. He wondered whether he should feel stupid for having gotten angry before, thinking she was discussing his abuse, but there was no way he could have suspected that this is what she meant.

They stood in silence for a moment. Once she seemed sure he wasn’t going to bolt, Blue lifted her hands from his body and folded them at her chest. “Adam, I want to be in this band. Ronan’s music is--” she paused, trying to find words. “--it’s just something I need to be a part of. I’m guessing you feel the same.”

Adam said nothing.
“This was what I meant,” she continued. “This is our ‘something more.’ Something that is more than this town.”

“You can have the band, then,” Adam snapped.

Her patience for him was apparently growing thin, because Blue looked at him with contempt. “Noah showed me a video of your voice, Adam. You’re good. We can both be in the band, I’ll make it work.”

So that’s how Blue found out. Adam would kill Noah if it wasn’t such a typical thing for a teenager to do. “So you’re just going to ignore the fact that I’m a liar? I’m supposed to believe that you’re content to call me Ben, and you won’t slip up, or sell me out when we have a disagreement?”

Blue rolled her eyes. “Jesus, Adam, it’s just a name. They probably wouldn’t even care.”

He wanted to say, *It’s not just a name to me.* But Blue wouldn’t understand. She had a reputation at school, true, but people didn’t let it be her entire identity. Didn’t determine her worth based on whether or not she had a family who loved her.

“Ronan made it very clear that he hates liars,” Adam said slowly.

Blue snorted. “Ronan won’t care.” Adam didn’t know how well she knew Ronan, but she must have understood the look he sent her because she added, “He’ll do anything to have this band. He will get over it, trust me.”

Adam’s heart was beginning to settle down, but his brain was still screaming for him to run away. Blue motioned for him to come back, though, and his body instinctively followed her to Gansey’s car. He had left it unlocked so Blue rifled through it, pulling out a few groceries bags and handing them off.

“Let’s just try it,” she insisted. “Gansey said there’s a show we could play next month. If you still don’t feel comfortable after it, I’ll leave the band. Tell them performing live made me too nervous, or something.”
Adam didn’t like this plan. He didn’t feel comfortable with it now. But the way Blue was looking at him, hopeful, timid, so un-Blue-like, made him give in. He followed her back to the apartment, back to the couch next to Ronan.

“Did you get lost?” Gansey asked, his eyes shifting back and forth between Blue and Adam.

“They were probably just getting to know each other.” Noah turned to Adam and waggled his eyebrows. It took a moment for Adam to remember that, oh, they still thought he liked Blue.

Whether Blue noticed the gesture or not, she didn’t react to it. Instead, she leaned to grab Noah’s bottle of tequila and inspected it. “This looks like some classy shit. Please tell me you didn’t spend that much on it.”

Gansey shook his head. “No, no. I don’t see the point in splurging on alcohol. Not when we’re just going to mix it with sugar.”

Blue twisted the bottle in her hand and found the price tag. She flashed it to Adam - $62.99 - and rolled her eyes. “Yeah. Such a shitty bottle.”

Ronan eased the tension, surprisingly, by being a dick. He ripped the bottle from Blue’s hand, tossed it backward onto Gansey’s bed, and said, “Enough fucking chit chat. Let’s talk music.”

Noah pouted. “I thought we were going to bond tonight. You said we weren’t going to play music.”

“No,” Ronan seethed. “I said we could let them get to know each other. You two good?” He sent a pointed look to Blue and Adam.

Adam pounced at the opportunity. The less he had to talk about himself in front of Blue - or, the version the band knew him - the better. It was awkward enough as it was having Blue call him by his fake name.

“I want to practice,” Adam said, shooting a pleading look to Noah. “I haven’t in awhile.”

“Plus, he’s never seen me play,” Blue chimed. She turned to Adam with a wicked grin on her face.
“Ben, let me give you a private show.”

From behind her back Noah nudged Gansey in the rib, again making a show of waggling his eyebrows up and down. He even batted his eyelashes at Gansey. Gansey seemed unimpressed by the gestures, though, and turned toward the kitchen.

“I’ll prepare some snacks,” he muttered.

Blue took that as a confirmation to do her thing. She took her seat the drums - which, Adam noted sourly, she didn’t need to adjust to at all, so much for Ronan’s fucking drum set - and began stretching her arms. Ronan stood up from the couch to grab another beer. With his long legs he crossed the room in just a few steps and returned before Adam could notice he left.

He felt a breeze on his ear and the presence of someone near him. Ronan had leaned over the couch. Into Adam’s ear he whispered, “I told you not to shit yourself.”

Adam turned his head toward Ronan, so slight, to not bring attention to himself. “You’re a bastard,” he muttered.

From the corner of his eyes he saw Ronan’s mouth stretch into an evil grin. “Just try to control your staring.”

Adam thought he should be angrier with Ronan. Clearly they had known Blue was the drummer for some time, because it was becoming quickly obvious the more he looked that the drum set was definitely, absolutely Blue’s. Plus, Ronan gave him no warning that Blue would be descending into his life.

Instead of anger, though, Adam was overwhelmed with the desire to just push back. To return Ronan’s quips with his own banter.

So he did. “Well, it will be good inspiration.” This time he turned his head completely to the right, meeting Ronan’s gaze directly. “I’ll write you some better lyrics.”

They were caught in a staring contest once again. Ronan, once again, broke it first, looking down first before completely away. He stood up, cuffed Adam on the back of his head, and muttered, “Shitbrain.”
“Ben!” Blue knocked her sticks together three times to get his attention. “You ready for this?”

Adam relaxed into the couch cushions. He was definitely *not* ready, for whatever his situation had turned into, but he was willing to sit back and enjoy the music all the same.

Ronan tried to concentrate on Blue as she wailed on the drums. She aimed to impress, because instead of playing one of their own songs, she was playing an elaborate version of a classic 80s rock song that was far more intricate. Ben was watching her with wide eyes. Ronan didn’t know whether he was impressed with her abilities, or if did something to him to see Blue in her element.

Did he even like Blue? It had seemed like the obvious solution for why Ben avoided her all this time, but once Ronan knew the truth, he wondered if Ben wasn’t lying when he said he didn’t like the drummer. But then what the fuck was with him just a minute ago? He said Blue could still give him inspiration.

Fucking Ben.

Or whatever his name was.

Okay, it was Adam. Adam Parrish, technically. Not Ben Smith, like he had told them all this time. Ronan still had to wrap his brain around the name. When he looked at Adam (because, even pissed at him, Ronan couldn’t help sneaking glances) his gut reaction was to think *Ben*. That’s *Ben*.

He didn’t know what was smarter: to acknowledge him by Adam, because that was the truth and Ronan liked truth, or internally keep calling him Ben so that he didn’t slip up and get the names confused.

He had decided, almost immediately upon finding the truth, that he wouldn’t confront Adam about the lie. Maybe he was becoming soft. Maybe he valued the band over a lie.

Better put, Ronan just valued Adam more than a lie.
It was both a shocking truth to find out, and entirely expected at the same time. Prior, Ronan could not place into words what it was about Adam that seemed inherently wrong - that he was hiding something, that he wasn’t quite whole, wasn’t quite himself. It was why he couldn’t tell if Adam liked Blue or not, why he wasn’t sure Adam even wanted to be in the band.

He had theories about why Adam did it, but he couldn’t be certain. When Blue first told him (or, well, when Blue accidentally spilled the beans) he needed some time to take in all in. They ended up sitting in Blue’s kitchen for several hours, both in a slight daze. Blue’s mother, Maura, had offered Ronan some calming tea and one of her aunt’s, Calla, had spiked it with something when Maura wasn’t looking. It helped.

There was no hiding the truth from Blue. She watched Ronan’s face fall into confusion and pressed the truth out of him. At some point in the evening he declared she was wrong, mistaken, so she pulled out her yearbooks to prove it. (If the truth ever came out, Ronan vowed to tease Adam for his 8th grade yearbook picture, because he had yet to grow into his ears.) After, the two tried to decipher why Adam had changed his name.

“Did he introduce himself as Ben?” Blue had asked. By then they had migrated to her room and were sitting on the floor, yearbooks piled around them.

“Of course he did,” Ronan spat. Then, after a moment, he added, “Well, he didn’t dispute it. It was on his uniform.”

Blue thought carefully about this. Ronan didn’t think it made a difference, since Adam could have corrected him easily. After a minute she said, “Maybe he took advantage of an opportunity. To be a new person.”

“Why the fuck would he do that?”

Blue sent him a look that screamed, oh-you-are-a-precious-stupid-privileged-baby. “Haven’t you ever wanted a clean slate? To start fresh?”

Ronan very much wanted this. He wanted it every time Gansey would mention his father, then look at Ronan with a cringe and say, I’m sorry, I didn’t think. He wanted it every time he drank, wondering whether he wanted a beer because it sounded good or because he needed an escape.

Still. “Yeah, but there’s no point in changing his name when we wouldn’t recognize his real name
“You don’t understand,” Blue said, shaking her head. She began to collect the yearbooks into a stack and shoved them back into her closet. “It’s different for Adam and me. You, and Gansey, and Noah all live in this bubble. You don’t live in Henrietta, like we do; you live in Aglionby. You don’t have to deal with small-town talk, of stupid rumors and gossip. You live here, but you live a world apart.”

Ronan thought this was bogus, but he knew he couldn’t win this fight. Blue would always fall back on their different social classes. Instead, he asked, “So are there stupid rumors about him?” He didn’t feel ready to call Adam by name yet, not out loud.

Based on Blue’s reaction, there definitely were. She avoided his gaze, using the opportunity to straighten out the shoes in her closet. “I don’t think that’s my place to say.”

“So that’s a ‘yes’.”

She looked up at him with a pointed glare. At some point Blue’s stepfather came home and they remembered why they were there in the first place. Dean did, in fact, have some spare bass strings laying around the house and they secured them for Gansey.

On the car ride back, Blue said, “So, what are you going to do about it?”

Ronan strengthened his grip on the steering wheel. He hadn’t figured that out yet. “I don’t know. We, uh, we haven’t told him you’re in the band yet.”

“What?” Her shriek nearly popped his eardrum.

“This whole thing,” Ronan gestured his hand around, as if that conveyed the shit-show that had developed. “I knew there was something weird about Adam, I just didn’t know what. He didn’t want to be around you, and I’m pretty sure I know why.”

Blue was still irritated, and she huffed a laugh. “Jesus, Ronan. It’s been weeks.”

“I know, I know. I had a plan.” (It was a bad plan, but she didn’t have to know that.) “Now that plan
has gone to shit, though. I don’t know what to do anymore.”

Blue thought about it for a moment. She was drumming her fingers on her legs, like she was playing a song stuck in her head. “Are you going to tell Gansey and Noah?”

“No,” Ronan said immediately. “Not yet, at least. Let’s keep this between you and me.”

She agreed to the deal, though she didn’t hide her opinion on the matter. The skepticism that covered her features was obvious, even in the dark of the car. “I could… not be in the band,” she suggested.

Ronan shook his head. “It’s too late for that, now.”

“No, it’s not,” Blue countered. Upon seeing the firm look on Ronan’s face she grinned. “If this is your way of telling me you want me in the band, it’s cute.”

“Fuck you.”

She ignored his response. “Okay, well, do you still want Adam in the band? Even though he lied?”

Adam was non-negotiable. By now, he was too much a staple of the band. Ronan could not imagine a band without Adam, just like he couldn’t imagine a band without Noah or Gansey. “He stays, too.”

“Well, then you need to talk to him about this.” Ronan winced at Blue’s suggestion. He turned up the volume of his music, hoping to avoid the conversation, but Blue turned it right back down. “Okay, then give me a better idea.”

“You said you didn’t really know him. Do you think he’d believe it if you just, you know, went along with the lie? Acted like you didn’t know any better?”

She laughed. “I meant we weren’t friends. We definitely know each other. I see him every day in Spanish.”

“That fucking liar.”
Blue ignored Ronan’s shout. “Anyway, he’d know.”

They fell into silence again. When they pulled up to Gansey’s apartment, though, neither of them got out. Blue said, “I may have an idea. What if I take the opposite route, with Adam.”

“Spare me the dramatics, Sargent, and spit it out.”

“I just mean, maybe instead of pretending I don’t know him, I actually get to know him. Give me a little bit of time to talk with him. If he realizes I’m not a threat…” The implication hung in the air without official words. *Maybe he would stay.*

Ronan didn’t have a better plan. (Plus, his plan was, arguably, what got them in this mess in the first place.) He leaned against the window of the car and counted days. “We don’t have very long. Gansey is freaking out, I think he’s going to spill the fucking beans to Ben—*him*—if I don’t come clean about you soon.”

Blue waved off his concern. “I’ll talk to Gansey. It will be fine.”

“Don’t tell Gansey about Ben,” Ronan warned. “I mean it.”

Blue had kept her promise. She didn’t exactly keep Ronan up-to-date with how her friendship with Adam was going, but she agreed that the 10th would be enough time to officially introduce Blue to “Ben.” Now, as he watched Adam digest Blue’s drumming, he finally allowed himself to breathe. Whatever Blue and Adam had discussed outside did the trick, because he seemed content to stay and hangout.

Ronan almost regretted not telling Gansey and Noah the truth, mostly because Noah couldn’t keep from wagging his eyebrows at the supposed “couple.” As the night progressed he would specifically push Blue and Adam together, forcing them to sit next to each other or run errands. Maybe it was Ronan’s fault for giving him tequila, but Noah was losing his *goddamn mind* at the start of the evening. He was convinced that Adam would never forgive them for ambushing Blue’s position.

(It wasn’t an unfair worry, considering the situation. Still, Ronan found it easier to pour a shot than to deal with Noah’s panic.)
Gansey, on the other hand, was distant almost the entire night. He never seemed to relax and refused to sit with the group. Except for the few times they actually practiced music (Noah, truly, was too drunk to actually be productive), he stayed far from the group, leaning on the wall of the living room or mixing drinks.

Toward the end of the evening Gansey collected them together, finally joining the group. He cleared his throat, “We need to discuss a few practical items of business.”

After several insults about his presidential delivery, the gang settled down to hear what he had to say. Gansey pulled out his cell phone and began flipping through it. “First, I want to make sure we are all in agreement about the upcoming show. There’s a contest next month for amateur bands. January 15th. Are we in?”

Everyone turned toward Adam. He glared at them, clearly displeased at the gang up. “I’ll double check I can get a night off, but it shouldn’t be a problem. Boyd will let me off if I give him enough warning.”

“Good, then I will officially sign us up,” Gansey said, typing a note to himself in the phone. “There’s...just one other thing I wanted to discuss.” His eyes moved to Blue, though Ronan didn’t understand the implication beneath his stare.

“Ronan and I, though brief as it was, had a conversation a while back that I think pertains to our situation now more than ever. Blue, I don’t want to be presumptuous in assuming you would be interested in any of us, but now that there is a female in our midst, I feel it is worth discussing dating within the band.

“Ronan and I agreed that it would be unwise for anyone to date,” Gansey said, and perhaps only Ronan sensed the small waver in his tone that betrayed his nerves. “Blue, I’m sorry that this will mostly be your responsibility, but since you are the only female…”

The band responded each in their own violent manner. Blue, of course, let out a loud scoff and rolled her eyes. Adam’s ears lit up, bright red, especially when Noah caught his gaze and pouted, as if saying, But your romance! Ronan, though he would never admit it, had to fight back a twist in his stomach.

Though he knew it was an irrational response, it was somewhat painful to see confirmation that his sexual orientation was not acknowledged in that room. He had never told any of them, never even hinted at it, so Gansey could not have known. Still, it felt like another reinforcement that what he liked - who he liked - was not normal, for Gansey to have completely discounted the idea that two
men could be together.

“Don’t worry,” Blue muttered. “I’m not interested in any of you.”

The boys, sans Adam, exchanged a look. Ronan knew what they were thinking: *It was too late for some parties.*

Adam must have picked up on the meaning behind their pointed look because he pushed himself up from the floor, looking annoyed. “Well, glad that’s settled. I need to get home.”

Ronan followed his lead. A glance at his watch showed that it was almost midnight, and knowing Adam’s schedule, he probably had work early in the morning. He cuffed Adam on the back of the head and said, “Smith, you’re coming with me.”

Adam had an excuse already poised on his tongue. “But my bike--”

“It’ll fit in the back seat,” Ronan grumbled. His eyes landed on Blue and he wondered whether he should offer her a ride home as well. He really didn’t want to, no offense to her. This was the first time he and Adam had seen each other since the truth, and Ronan wanted just a little alone time with him. “I’d give you a ride, but there won’t be room after the bike…”

Gansey jumped at the chance to win Blue’s favor, insisting, “Oh, I can bring her home.”

Noah, feebly, offered to ride along with Blue. He was leaning against the couch, eyes shut, in an obvious state of post-alcohol-fatigue. Blue simply held up a finger to her lip and motioned to the door.

They snuck out the apartment in order to not disturb Noah. When the door was shut Adam turned to his bike and unlocked it. “I’ll just ride home. It’s fine.”

Ronan glared at him as a response. He picked up Adam’s bike, unlocked his BMW, and stuffed it into the back seat. Adam kept protesting as he did it; at one point, Adam argued that Ronan had been drinking. He knew better than to drive inebriated, though, and began to recite his ABCs backwards to prove he was fine.
Adam sighed. “That doesn’t prove anything.”

Ronan knew it didn’t, but he also knew he was fine to drive. He shoved Adam into the car, slamming the door after him. Gansey and Blue had already left at this point, so the sound of the door echoed in the empty parking lot. Thank God Gansey didn’t have any neighbors, otherwise they’d get constant noise complaints.

Ronan started the car and waited for Adam to give him directions. The other boy said nothing, choosing instead to fold his arms tight to his chest and bite his bottom lip.

“Any day now,” Ronan drawled.

Adam was debating something in his head. Ronan allowed him time to think through his thoughts, but was glad when Adam finally said, “Head toward Boyd’s. It’s nearby.”

Ronan complied without complaint. As they drove he fiddled with his stereo, trying to find something to play. He settled on something mild, assuming Adam wouldn’t be up for his usual music this late at night, and was pleased to see the singer relax into his seat.

He tried to keep his eyes on the road but would get distracted occasionally, interested in the way the street light lit up Adam’s face in hints. At some point Adam said, “You could have told me Blue was in the band.”

Now that conversation had started, he didn’t look at Adam. “You would have left.”

Adam didn’t dispute this. He leaned his head against the window, looking tired all the sudden. Ronan bit back the urge to feel guilty. He did this to himself, he argued.

“I don’t like Blue,” Adam said softly. “It’s-- She’s cool, I mean. But that’s not why I avoided her.”

Ronan could feel the weight of Adam’s stare on him, and unable to help it, he looked at him again. Indeed, Adam was staring at him, eyes barely blue in the dark of the car. At once, Ronan remembered how close Adam’s face had been to him earlier in the night, remembered being so close that he could hear the sound of Adam’s breath hitch when he whispered in his ear.
But boys were allowed to be surprised by other boys, and not because they were attracted to them. It meant nothing.

“Okay,” Ronan said, turning back to the road. “If you say so.”

Adam was still looking at him. Ronan was tempted to meet his gaze again, if only to have another opportunity just to look at Adam. He wasn’t sure why, but Adam was harder to avoid than Ben. Adam was more open, more complicated, and more interesting.

“You aren’t going to ask?”

Ronan knew what he meant. That’s not why I avoided her. He was daring Ronan to make the next move, challenging him to call him out on his lies. Ronan didn’t want to. He had thought a lot about what Blue said that first evening, that maybe Adam had his reasons for doing what he did, and he didn’t want to take that away from him.

“I’m not that interested in your life, man,” Ronan muttered. It was a very, very large lie, but a white one, and Ronan allowed himself to get away with it.

Adam didn’t say anything else the whole ride, other than to give minor directions. He stopped Ronan at the edge of a long driveway. There were no houses around, though this part of town was not privy to streetlamps, and there was no telling what existed in the dark pools at the end of the road.

“This is fine,” Adam said, stiff.

Ronan eyed the road with apprehension. “This is the scene of a horror film. I’m not fucking leaving you here.”

Adam didn’t give him a choice. He unbuckled his seatbelt and opened the door and retrieved his bicycle from the backseat. “Night, Lynch.” Ronan watched as he slipped into the darkness.

Chapter End Notes
Shit did not quite hit the fan, like everyone thought. Did I mention this would be a slow burn? It's gotten away from me, I'm sorry.

Sometimes I post scenes/quotes/ideas about this story on my Tumblr if you are curious.

You are all wonderful; every kudo and comment makes my day.
The Fight

Chapter Summary

“You owe me,” Ronan cut. “A truth for a truth.”

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter discusses suicide and abuse.

Soundtrack to writing this chapter is CHVRCHES's "Playing Dead" if you want some background music.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The band didn’t come together like magic, but they were together finally and that’s all Ronan wanted. Adam still couldn’t attend practice as much as Ronan wanted, and he took some time to act normal around Blue, but they slowly perfected a few songs until everything could be played succinctly. Ronan was pleased. (Not that he would let anyone know that.)

At the rate they were going, he didn’t think they’d have any issue playing their first concert. He wasn’t bold enough to expect that they would win - in fact, his gut told him that entering a contest this soon was a bit ridiculous - but it didn’t cost that much to enter and it was a venue. Everyone seemed content to perform and view it as practice.

And for a while, everything fell into a comfortable pace. Ronan’s days were spent ignoring school, writing songs, practicing with the band, and getting to know Blue and Adam.

Twenty-seven days before the concert the group were picking out their set list. They were only allowed three songs to play, and though they didn’t have a huge arsenal of songs to choose from, they did need to narrow it down.

“Oh, okay, so we are all in agreement that we start with Fast Night Feels Rights as our opening number, yes?” Gansey was sitting in the middle of the room, legs crossed, with a journal in his hand. He had made the switch from his cell phone, arguing that he didn’t want to leave Adam out. (Which only served to make Adam feel more awkward and, thus, singled out, but he knew Gansey meant well.)
Everyone agreed. It was, undoubtedly, the most fun song in their set. It heavily featured Noah’s synthesizer, resulting in a pop-rock/EDM vibe, and Adam often listened to the instrumental when he needed extra energy to bike home from work.

Noah and Blue were both tucked into the reclining chair, practically cuddled together. Adam watched Noah with envy. It wasn’t that he wanted to be that close to Blue, in particular, it was just that Noah had such a casual way about touching the others. Sometimes he would jump onto Ronan’s back, arms wrapped securely around his neck. It looked so easy for him, and Adam didn’t understand how he got away with it.

The other day they all squished in Gansey’s car, and when Adam’s shoulder leaned into Ronan, the boy lurched away and yelled at Adam for taking up too much room. How was it that Noah managed a piggy-back ride from Ronan without getting the cold shoulder?

“I think we should play our love song second,” Noah said. He was twirling Blue’s hair in his finger. “If we can figure out the lyrics.”

Instinctively all eyes turned to Ronan. He returned their stare with narrowed eyes, which told them everything they needed to know about its progress.

“Okay, I’ll write that down as a tentative possibility,” Gansey scribbled in his notebook. “What next?”

Adam suggested, “What about Singer’s Fall instead?” It was Adam’s favorite song that Ronan had written, a dreamy anthem that made him picture the rolling hills and cliffs of Ireland. It was one of Ronan’s slower and more mellow songs. “We haven’t practiced it yet, but we’d have time to learn it.”

Ronan’s face clouded at the suggestion. It was anger, mixed with something Adam couldn’t place. He began to regret his suggestion, wondering whether Ronan realized it was on his phone the first time Adam listened to their music. Maybe it wasn’t meant to be heard.

Despite the warning signs on his face, Ronan remained calm. He bit at the leather bands circling his wrist and said, “No. I’ll get the lyrics done.”

Gansey’s eyes lingered on Ronan, watching him carefully. Lately, Adam had started to suspect that
there was something different about Ronan, something *unsaid*. Because of the way Gansey looked at him, sometimes, or the way Ronan’s eyes would get stuck in space, Adam thought maybe he didn’t know Ronan at all. Of course, there was no way to bring something like that up, not with someone like Ronan.

“We need to end with another upbeat song,” Gansey said finally.

Blue suggested, “We could do a cover? My step-dad would flip if we played something from *The Kinks.*”

Noah scrunched his nose at the suggestion. Gansey, on the other hand, perked up. The band often made fun of him for his taste in music because he had an obsession with music created decades before his birth. Adam didn’t know anything about The Kinks, but Gansey’s reaction gave a good guess as to what style music they were.

Ronan vetoed Blue’s suggestion. “We don’t do covers.”

“Covers are fun,” she argued.

“Covers are for bands that want to trick people into liking them,” Ronan said, voice threatening that his temper was nearing. “We’re not doing any.”

She rolled her eyes, but thankfully Blue let the issue go. Adam wasn’t in the mood to hear a fight, especially not one between Blue and Ronan. Neither were skilled in letting things go, and previous disagreements had turned into canceled practices.

“How about *Make Money, Not Babies*?” Adam said. It was a ridiculous song that Ronan wrote when he was fourteen, apparently, but it was funny and made people laugh.

Everyone tentatively agreed to the final suggestion. Ronan looked to Adam, his eyes searching, and turned away when he found the answer. This was a common occurrence, Ronan’s looks. Adam never knew what he seemed to be looking for, only that Ronan was apparently satisfied with the result.

That night Ronan offered to drive Adam home again. It was starting to become a recurrence - this offer to drive - and Adam didn’t know what to do with it. A ride meant that he could stay with these
people, his friends, for twenty minutes longer. It meant he didn’t have to force his muscles to ignore
the biting cold of Virginia winters. It meant seeing Ronan, who never let his guard down, be quiet in
the still of the night.

But he didn’t want Ronan to see where he lived. The trailer was smaller than Gansey’s apartment -
much smaller - and it betrayed his poverty. They all knew he didn’t have much money, clearly, but
there was a difference between Blue’s lack of money and his lack of money. It wasn’t just the
inability to have a cell phone. It was the inability to eat sometimes.

He didn’t have a good excuse when Ronan pointed to the snow that had accumulated on the ground.
Biking home in a few inches of snow was not ideal, and they both knew it. So Adam angled his bike
into the back seat of Ronan’s car and wondered whether he could convince Ronan to just drop him
off at Boyd’s. It would only be a ten minute bike ride from there to home.

Unfortunately, Ronan passed Boyd’s without stopping, ignoring Adam’s excuse. He didn’t mean to
sigh, but it came out quick and harsh.

Ronan didn’t need to see the expression on Adam’s face to know he was upset. That sigh was
enough. “I’m not fucking dropping you off there, Smith. Get over it.”

“I’m not upset,” Adam countered. (He was.)

“Sure.” Ronan shook his head. His fingers began to tap on the steering wheel of the car rapidly.
“When did you listen to Singer’s Fall?”

Adam winced. Ever since Ronan’s odd reaction to it earlier, he wondered whether this would come
up. He didn’t think he owed Ronan an apology - it was on his cellphone, after all - but something in
Ronan’s tone told him to be careful.

“Sorry,” Adam muttered. “When you gave me your phone - I didn’t realize some songs were off
limits.”

Ronan’s hands gripped the steering wheel, knuckles turning bright. “Did you listen to any other
songs? Songs that we haven’t played, yet?”

Adam knew what he was referring to. Originally, there were about six songs on the phone. Adam
now knew how to play four of them - two of which they had just decided for their set. The last two,
however, Ronan had yet to bring up. Adam didn’t think much of it until this moment, assuming they would get around to it someday, or that Ronan didn’t like them.

Though, now that the truth was becoming clear, there was no way Ronan just didn’t like them. They were two of Adam’s favorite songs. They were breathtaking, in the way that songs could suck the soul out of you. They were both hauntingly sad, but featured Ronan’s best lyrics. They were also the only two songs in his phone that featured a singer. Adam thought maybe it was someone random who sang them, maybe one of Ronan’s brothers or a friend of Gansey’s. He wondered, hearing the dip in Ronan’s voice, the stumble in his breath, whether it was Ronan.

Knowing Ronan wanted the second song private made the lyrics curl in on themselves. By being a secret, it gave them weight. It made Ronan’s voice, which had crooned, *I am done, I am undone, I can’t do this anymore*, take on new meaning.

Adam didn’t want to lie to Ronan again, so he admitted, “Yes.”

Ronan let the answer hang in the air. He must have known what Adam was thinking, because he said, “It’s not a problem anymore.”

“Okay,” Adam agreed. Still, he watched Ronan carefully, wondering if this was true. He could not imagine a Ronan who didn’t want to be alive, but that song still burned in his memory. It was the song that Adam played on repeat in his head, especially after nights where his father hurled insults like he hurled his fists.

They were approaching the area where Adam made Ronan drop him off last time. Ronan slowed down, but not to a complete stop, and said, “I’m not dropping you here, again.”

“It’s fine--”

“You owe me,” Ronan cut. “A truth for a truth.”

Adam didn’t think that was fair, but something in Ronan’s look made him agree. Ronan was the thin ice he stood on, and he didn’t want to break him. Reluctantly, he said, “Fine.”

Ronan continued the drive, winding up the road that led to the trailer park where he lived. Adam pointed to his home, wondering whether Ronan noticed the trash on the ground or if it would go
unnoticed in the dark. Adam found everything about his so-called home to be embarrassing, from the empty cans of beer on the porch, to the broken down truck parked to the side, or the missing digits on the mailbox.

Ronan didn’t say anything. Adam almost wished he did; the silence was worse than any insult he could think of.

“So now you know,” Adam muttered.

Ronan’s eyes turned to him, slow and unknowing. “I already knew you didn’t have any money, dumbass.”

“This is different,” Adam snapped. The word *trailer-trash* burned on his tongue. He heard it enough at school, whispered by his classmates, to know it’s what people thought of him.

“You looking for pity?” Ronan asked. His eyes darted to Adam’s hands, which were shaking at his sides, balled into fists. “I take that as a ‘no.'”

“You’ll do it anyway,” Adam said, bitterness heavy on his tongue.


Adam blinked, not sure what to make of the gesture. Then, with a roll of his eyes, he felt his body release the breath he’d been holding onto the whole ride. “I hate you.”

They both knew there was no venom beneath his words, no truth. Whether Ronan realized how grateful Adam was for his response was unknown. Adam took the moment as an opportunity to leave without awkward tension, so he gathered his bike and said goodnight.

Twenty-two days before the concert the group met again for practice. Ronan was antsy, for many
reasons besides the upcoming concert, though it didn’t hurt. They’d been working on the two songs diligently, but Adam had been bugging Ronan for the lyrics to the untitled love song.

They were still shit, and he knew it. He didn’t know how to describe love - how to put it into words - and yeah, maybe it was because he had little experience. The only words that came to him were shallow observations of attraction or cliche descriptions. There was one line he liked, *You’re a truth to me even when you lie*, but he refused to write that down. It felt a little too close to home, and Ronan wasn’t ready to admit that Adam-Fucking-Parrish was more than a pretty thing to look at.

Of course, Adam-Fucking-Parrish wanted the lyrics and wouldn’t shut up about it. Ronan handed the current draft over, hoping Adam had grown stupid in the past couple days and wouldn’t recognize foolish lyrics, but knowing it was futile.

“Are you serious with this new draft? ‘You make me whole, like a sunrise?’ What does that even mean?” Adam asked, holding the new sheet of lyrics away from his face and looking at Ronan with mild discrimination.

Ronan ripped the lyrics out of his hands. “Shut up, Smith.”

“I’m just saying. How can you compare liking someone to a sunrise? All your lyrics about love are stolen from cliches. Have you actually ever liked anyone?” (Behind his quip, it almost seemed like Adam was curious.)

“Have you?” Ronan countered with a glare. (Ronan was definitely a little curious.)

“Have any of you?” Blue had her legs perched over the arm of the recliner and was thumbing through a magazine. She looked up at the boys, eyeing them slowly. “I’m serious. How is it that I’m in a room of four cute boys and none of you have a girlfriend?”

Adam shrugged, “I’ve had a girlfriend.”

(This was a complicated sentence for Ronan to digest and he didn’t know how to feel about it. *Had* a girlfriend. Good. *Had* a *girlfriend*. Bad.)

Gansey squared his shoulders and sat upright. “I, myself, have had several entanglements, though nothing serious. Sophia Miller - no - Shilling? - last year. Maria Kennedy, in the eighth grade.”
Blue looked at him in surprise, eyebrows raised. “Kennedy? As in, a Kennedy?”

“Oh, no, she couldn’t possibly have been one of those Kennedys.” Then, as if second-guessing himself, Gansey jerked his head back and furrowed his brows. “Though, actually, she was the daughter of one of my mother’s political friends. Oh, Jesus, was she a Kennedy?”

Blue’s face twisted into a complicated look. Ronan could make out obvious disdain from the way she twisted her lips into a puckered smirk, as she was most definitely judging Gansey for not truly knowing where he stuck his tongue. Something about her eyes, though, looked uneasy.

No one bothered to ask Noah about his past-prospects, but all heads turned to Ronan, waiting for his verdict. He sneered at them, “None of your business.”

“So that’s a ‘no,’” Adam said with a snicker, looking down to his guitar.

Ronan flipped him off, though the effect was unsatisfactory without Adam noticing.

“Ronan, we really need a draft that will work,” Gansey pleaded. “If not, we don’t have a song to play for the concert.”

Ronan thought Gansey deserved the middle finger, too, just for the worry in his tone. “I’ll figure it out, Dick. It’ll be fine. Ben just needs, like, a day to learn the lyrics. He knows the melody.”

Adam frowned at this. “I actually do think about the lyrics in advance, you know. I adjust my singing based on the emotion.”

“Okay, Gansey,” Ronan snorted.

“Don’t be rude,” Adam said.

“Excuse me--” Gansey pushed his wireframes up his nose. They only appeared when he was too tired to blink, and Ronan realized the night must be getting later than he thought. He sent them both a
Adam grinned at Gansey, a true smile. Ronan was struck by that look - Adam, actually happy - and he let his eyes linger on his mouth. Adam’s lips were thin, but that didn’t stop him from thinking about what they could do to him.

Ronan swallowed that thought, putting it into the overflowing box of inappropriate thoughts he had toward Adam.

This was becoming a problem.

“So what’s everyone doing for Christmas?” Noah asked suddenly. He was hovering near the fake tree Gansey kept stored in the corner. Gansey normally didn’t decorate it, but Blue must have had a hand in its current state, because there was an outrageous amount of ridiculous ornaments on it now. Based at the peculiar way Noah handled them, Ronan assumed it wasn’t from the keyboardist.

“Typical Gansey holiday in D.C.,” Gansey hummed, watching Noah at the tree. “Too much ham, an argument between Mother and Helen over her gift choices, a first edition copy of a history book I’ve had my eye on, if I’m lucky.”

Blue rolled her eyes. “Sounds truly horrible. We won’t be doing much at my place. We’ll probably watch a movie, my aunts will get drunk on eggnog, presents in the morning, that sort of thing.”

Noah wiggled his way over to Blue, sitting at her feet. “You don’t do anything spooky for Christmas? Anything--” he thought carefully, looking for the right word. “--psychic-y?”

Blue laughed. Ronan thought this was generous, considering if Gansey were to suggest this he would have received a scathing retort. “We have to be normal sometimes, Noah. I’m sure your family has something much more elaborate planned.”

“One of my sisters still believes in Santa,” Noah said with a shrug. “My parents are taking advantage while they still can.”

A silence settled in the room. It was becoming quickly apparent that neither Ronan nor Adam were offering their plans for Christmas. Ronan didn’t know why Adam would stay silent - maybe he was too embarrassed to admit there would be no presents, based on his recent admission - or maybe he
was waiting for Ronan to speak first.

Christmas was the other reason Ronan was feeling antsy. Holidays had become awkward and horrible ever since his father’s death. His mother retreated into herself even more than usual, Declan embraced the douchebag that he was, and Matthew insisted on reliving the memories of their father which - while not technically unhealthy - was not something Ronan wanted to do.

He’d skip all holidays if he could, but it would kill his mother if he didn’t participate. He wasn’t ready to be an orphan.

Once it became clear that neither Adam nor Ronan would offer their plans, Blue suggested, “Maybe we could have our own little Christmas party after. I can bring sugar cookies, egg nog, that sort of thing.”

Ronan would have preferred to focus on the upcoming concert, but Gansey was commending Blue for her “fantastic idea” and Noah was nodding enthusiastically. Adam looked perplexed by the idea, but when Ronan caught his gaze, he just shrugged helplessly.

Adam couldn’t understand the fuss over Christmas because his family never celebrated it. Christmas was a holiday reliant on either money and love. You could have Christmas without love, presents filling its void, or Christmas without money, where love distracts from material possessions. Adam’s family had neither money nor love, so Christmas just wasn’t possible.

This year, he offered to work the shift at the grocery store. It paid him time and a half, due to the holiday, and distracted him from how his friends were likely spending their day. Barely anyone came in, and those who did were especially friendly and apologetic to his situation. (“Oh, you poor thing - I can’t believe the store is even open today!”)

Once home, he found his father passed out on the couch and his mother nursing a beer in the kitchen. They did not talk. Adam went to his room, played music from an old CD player Blue gifted him days earlier, and wondered whether Christmas would ever be anything other than an opportunity to work more hours.

The day after Christmas was worse. Adam’s father woke him up the next morning by throwing a beer bottle onto him. The sting against his rib dazed him, and it took some time to realize what he was angry about. Adam had fallen asleep with the headphones still covering his ears and his father
assumed he made the purchase.

It didn’t matter that Adam got it for free. His father said something nasty to him - Adam tried to push it from his mind, pretend like that didn’t hurt more than glass against his bones - and scooped the bottle from the bed. Despite being hurled at his body, the glass did not break, and his dad was able to salvage the liquid. Adam needed a minute to recover from the blow and let his fingers rest on his rib. If he took too large of a breath it burned. Probably a bruise - nothing serious in the long run - but it still hurt like hell.

“Merry Christmas,” he said to himself.

The universe did not respond.

Eighteen days before the concert the band met up for their post-Christmas celebration. Ronan was tempted to skip out. The disaster of Christmas lingered in his blood, and it tainted everything a sour shade.

As figured, Christmas was a morbid event in the Lynch household. His mother didn’t cry, remarkably, but Ronan almost wished she had. Instead, she walked around the house in a numb haze. She napped most the day, stared at the TV the rest of it. Declan and Ronan got in at least seven fights throughout the day - two of which led to fists in stomach and feet against shins. The only thing Ronan predicted wrong was that Matthew did not mention their father once.

That factor is what disturbed Ronan the most, though. His youngest brother always looked on the bright side; Christmas should have been no exception. His silence was a damning statement to the day.

He was irritated, and he wanted to get rid of the feeling. Ronan wasn’t good at handling his emotions, though, and aside from punching walls his only outlet was to pick at his friends. It wasn’t fair, but there were a lot of unfair things in Ronan’s life.

Adam, for whatever reason, was receiving the worst of Ronan’s bad mood. After catching up and eating Christmas cookies, they decided to practice a few songs. Adam was not keeping up like usual. He became out of breath too quick, needing to take breaks too often.
It drove Ronan crazy. He knew, realistically, that it wouldn’t have bothered him on a normal day. That didn’t stop him from turning to Adam and snapping, “Fuck, why can’t you keep up!”

Adam paused at the mic. He wrapped his hands around the microphone, eyes shut. After a deep intake of breath he dragged out, “I’m trying.”

“Why don’t we take a break?” Blue suggested. She didn’t wait for Ronan to confirm. She was already up from her drum set, pulling Adam toward the kitchen.

Ronan watched in irritation as they talked in the kitchen. Their voices were too quiet to hear, but based on Adam’s intense expression, they were discussing something serious. Her hand reached to Adam’s chest, where she let her fingers barely touch, before turning away from him. She caught Ronan staring and glared at him, mouthing, What the hell?

He turned away from the two, flexing his shoulders back in a stretch. Ronan believed that Adam didn’t like Blue, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t grow to like Blue. He wouldn’t even be surprised if it did, because Ronan had practically created the perfect opportunity for it to happen. Blue and Adam shared a secret, now, and it was clearly a bonding opportunity. They seemed joined at the hip, and Ronan was increasingly jealous.

Because, fuck, he was in on the secret, too.

Anyway, if Adam was having some problem that impacted his ability to play, then he needed to say it to the whole band. Blue didn’t need to be his confidant in everything.

They entered the living room a minute later. Adam ran a hand through his curls and said, voice heavy, “I’m sorry, I need to be done for the day.”

“You’re aware we have less than three weeks until our concert, right?” Ronan snapped. “Which, in Ben Time, means we’ll be lucky if we can meet up two more times.”

“We’ll be fine, Ronan,” Blue cut in.

The look Adam sent her pleased Ronan; Adam didn’t seemed thrilled that she had jumped in to fight his battles, because he looked close to losing it. (Or maybe it had something to do with Ronan’s retort, too, whatever.)
“You got any lyrics for us, Lynch?” Adam asked, turning his attention back to Ronan. “Because unless you do, there’s little we can do today anyway. How’s that coming along?”

Ronan felt like punching him. Adam seemed to think his inability to write these lyrics were a joke, because he kept prodding at the wound. Ronan sneered at him but said nothing.

Adam was determined to push him about the subject, though, because he kept talking. “Just give it up already, Ronan. You can’t write a love song when you’ve never loved anyone. I don’t think you have an caring bone in your body.”

Gansey seemed to find his voice, now. He jumped into the battle, whether because he sensed how close Ronan was to losing control, or because he was privy to the true extent to which Ronan Lynch cared. “That’s enough, Ben.”

Ronan and Adam did not look away from one another, though. Adam’s gaze was focused, still primed for a fight.

Slowly, Ronan grit out, “Shut your fucking mouth, or I’ll shut it for you.”

Adam laughed, a cackle that sounded almost crazed. “God forbid that happen, what would I even do? I’m sick of you shitting on me constantly. What’s your problem with me?”

“Guys, chill!” Noah took his place in front of Ronan. Without Noah’s presence, Ronan was bound to lunge at Adam. “This is supposed to be a Christmas party.”

It was the wrong subject to bring up, unfortunately. Ronan flexed his fingers at his side to distract himself, but it didn’t stop his anger. “Fuck Christmas! We’re wasting valuable time practicing to celebrate this fucking joke of a holiday.”

Adam rolled his eyes at the outburst. “Oh, poor baby. Did you have a bad Christmas? Let me guess, Mommy and Daddy didn’t get you every shiny toy you wanted?”

Gansey reached for Ronan first. He held tight to his arm, knowing it would be a trigger. “The fuck did you just say to me?”
“Guys, seriously--”

Adam stared Ronan down coolly, though the dead look behind his eyes betrayed his anger. “I’m sick of him acting like his life is so hard,” Adam said. “You get to go home to your fancy house in your extravagant car, to people who love you. What the hell made you such a dick--”

Ronan’s body reacted before he was conscious of it moving. Gansey couldn’t hold him back, and Ronan lurched forward, palms slamming into Adam’s chest and shoving him back into the wall. When Adam hit the wall his body echoed forward, a ragged breath leaving his lips. He stared up at Ronan, eyes shaking, both frightened and furious.

Blue was at Adam’s side instantly, gapping at Ronan. She looked livid. “What the hell is your problem, Ronan?”

By this point Gansey had secured his arms around Ronan’s back again, holding him steady. Ronan could hear him whispering in his left ear, trying to calm him down. “Ronan, he doesn’t know.” Noah was pacing back and forth between the two boys, unsure whose side he should support.

“Practice is over,” Gansey said, voice definitive. “Noah, take Blue and Ben home.”

The strength of Gansey’s grip and the steel in his voice were like a spark in Ronan’s system. His heart skittered to a stop once he understand the full impact of his actions. Adam had his head bent to the ground, eyes shut, stewing in silence. Ronan shrugged Gansey from him and backed up to his guitar, distracting himself with the task of putting it away.

He didn’t watch Adam leave, didn’t spare him a look. He was still so angry, Adam’s words echoing in his mind. *Mommy and Daddy didn’t get you every shiny toy you wanted? What the hell made you such a dick?*

He heard the door shut and finally turned to face the room. It was only Gansey now, who was standing in the center of the scene, looking exhausted. Ronan didn’t know what to say to him.

“Don’t worry, I’ll fix this,” Gansey said at one point, voice weak.
Ronan picked up his guitar case and slung it over his shoulder. He wasn’t being fair to Gansey, and he knew it. It wasn’t his responsibility to fix anything, but Ronan didn’t have the courage to admit it. His anger was a beast he didn’t know how to control, and if Gansey knew the method to contain his madness, he would let him do it. It was cowardly but Ronan didn’t think he had any other option.

So he left Gansey in the apartment, alone, and decided he would self-medicate on whisky tonight.

There was one week until the concert and it didn’t even matter anymore. Adam hadn’t seen or spoken to Ronan since the fight, and he wasn’t sure he ever would. The fight had gotten out of control, and Adam knew he had an equal hand in it, but he didn’t know what to do.

Blue had begged him to come to Nino’s that day to discuss the band. He was sitting in an empty booth, waiting for her to take her break. He watched her as she ran around the room, fascinated enough by her actions to ignore the bile rising in his throat every time he thought about the band.

Adam hadn’t seen Noah or Gansey since the fight, either. They spoke briefly - Gansey through the phone, Noah through email - but it wasn’t the same. They were friends with Ronan first and boundaries had been established. It was unsaid but understood that they had to support Ronan, no matter what.

The only thing that saved him from total self-destruction was that, somehow, Blue was allowed to be on his side. They knew her longer than he did, but Blue knew more of Adam’s secrets. The day of the fight she had officially learned the truth, all of the truth, when Adam admitted the situation of his bruised ribs.

Blue knew enough of the rumors to guess. When Adam had said, reluctantly, “Blue, I can’t breath well-- it’s just--” she had cut in, voice quiet, and said, “Your father?”

He thought it would sting, knowing Blue knew his deepest secret. Adam only felt relief. He nodded, gesturing to his chest, and muttered, “Bruised a rib.”

She reached to touch him but changed her mind last minute. Adam wished she would have done it, just rested her hand on his chest. If she knew the truth he deserved some payoff.

Blue was furious at Ronan for shoving him. “He had no right to do that,” she had said that night,
while Noah drove them home.

“Ronan, he--” Noah paused, thinking of the words to describe Ronan’s outburst. “He does this sometimes, Ben, but it doesn’t mean anything.”

Blue had reached behind the seat of the car for Adam’s hand, squeezing it in the dark. He knew what she meant by the gesture. It said, *I know it meant something different for you.*

Adam was still struggling with the shove. At the time it had hurt like hell. The bruise on his rib ensured that Adam felt the strength of the concrete wall, and it had left him gasping for breath. It made him think of every punch to his eye, every shove to the ground that his father ever gave him. Even so, Adam understood there was a difference between Ronan’s actions and his father’s. The inspiration for the violence was different.

That didn’t mean it didn’t hurt, though, to be handled that way by Ronan. He pushed that thought away, though. This is what boys did, sometimes - shoved and hit and kicked and punched - whether you were brothers or friends. Men were supposed to handle disagreements through actions, not words.

Ronan didn’t know that Adam’s world was violence.

Adam shoved the thought from his head. It didn’t matter. The band was over, Ronan hated him, his friendships with Gansey and Noah would slowly, tentatively fade away. He would find something else to get him out of Henrietta - college, maybe, like he originally planned - and that would be that.

Blue slid into the seat across from him. “Are you doing okay?”

Adam nodded, stiff. He didn’t want to dwell on the situation. Still, he was careful with his words, careful with his reactions. He couldn’t push Blue away, not when she was all he had left.

“I’m sorry, Blue,” he said. “I ruined everything.”

She scoffed. “You mean *Ronan* ruined everything. You have nothing to be sorry about.”
Adam played with the sugar ramekin, emptying it out and sorting the fake and real sugar into two piles. “Well, I lost my temper, too.”

“He shoved you—”

Adam shrugged. “Let’s not pretend I didn’t have a hand in it, Blue. I just used words, he used actions.”

She looked uncomfortable. “Actions are a lot worse than words, Adam.”

This was not strictly true. Adam hated getting pushed around by his father, hated the physical violence, but once the wound had healed he couldn’t remember the pain. It was his father’s words that really stuck with him. They echoed in his head, worthless, stupid, pussy.

“Blue, you should still be in the band, you’re too good to quit,” Adam insisted. He willed the smile on his face to seem genuine. “I don’t mind, honestly.”

“Yeah, right,” she said, though the expression behind her eyes betrayed what she really wanted.

The bell on the door to Nino’s twinkled, and they both turned to see Ronan standing there. Blue’s face darkened and she jumped from her seat, ready to fight. Ronan, to his credit, remained calm. He was biting at the leather bands on his wrist, avoiding their gaze.

“Can we talk?”

No one had to ask who he directed his question to. Blue fixed her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes, “Did you come to apologize? Because, if not, then you don’t have anything to discuss.”

Ronan looked past her, straight at Adam. He didn’t say anything, but he did hold up his car keys. Reluctantly, Adam pushed himself up from the table and patted Blue’s shoulder, hoping it conveyed the message, It’s okay, I’ve got this.

She let Adam follow Ronan out to his car, though she didn’t seem happy about it. Ronan didn’t say anything for awhile; he just led Adam to his car and began driving.
After five minutes of continued silence Adam started to grow weary. “Lynch, I don’t have time to go on a drive.”

Ronan’s fingers clenched the steering wheel, “I need a minute.”

Adam resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Ronan Lynch was not something easily understood, and Adam knew there was something underneath him that was very dark, but that didn’t stop Adam from growing irritated when he failed to understand.

Finally, carefully, Ronan said, “My dad died.”

He did not look at Adam when he said this. Adam considered the words, trying to remember what he said to Ronan the night of the fight. He had definitely mentioned family, which, taking this news into consideration, was not great.

After a second, Ronan added, “Fairly recently.”

Ah.

“How?” It probably wasn’t the best question to ask, but Adam didn’t see the point in beating around the bush. He also had a feeling that, with Ronan, this would be the only time they discuss it.

Ronan grimaced. “Heart attack.”

Adam nodded.

“In front of me.”

Adam flinched. “Shit.”

Ronan exhaled a long breath from his nose. “I didn’t really understand what was happening, and the
farm is pretty far out of town…” He trailed off. “They couldn’t get there fast enough.”

Adam nodded, a gesture meant to show understanding, but he couldn’t even imagine what that looked like. “Were you close?”

“Yes.”

Ronan turned on the blinker, and soon they were pulling off the road to stall the car before an open field. Ronan didn’t make any motions to get out so Adam stayed, leaning into the seat of the car.

“Holidays are hard,” Ronan said, voice quiet. “My mom doesn’t really -- she isn’t handling his death well.”

They lapsed into silence again. Ronan began to fiddle with the stereo, looking for some music to fill the silence. Adam felt like this was a lot of information to process and he tried to think of how best to respond. What came to him, though, may not have been the best response. Still, he asked, “Is Singer’s Fall about your dad?”

Ronan nodded.

That song made more sense, now. The other song (I am undone, I can’t do this anymore) was clearer as well. He didn’t know what Singer’s Fall was about, originally, but it talked of loss. There was one line, in particular, that Adam saw with more clarity. (Could I have prevented it? Is this my fault?) He had assumed, maybe, it was about a failed relationship. It was why Adam was so curious about Ronan’s dating life, why he couldn’t understand his issue with writing a love song when he clearly knew how it felt for love to die.

It was just a different kind of love that died that day.

Adam sighed, guilt building in his throat. “I’m so--”

“Don’t,” Ronan interrupted. “It’s fine.”

“It doesn’t feel fine.”
Ronan shrugged. The action made him look younger, suddenly. Adam knew they were the same age - if anything, Ronan was likely younger than him - but Ronan’s intensity made him seem older. It was a sobering realization.

There was something else budding in Adam’s throat, a truth that felt necessary to tell. “I should tell you something, too. A truth for a truth, I guess.”

Ronan’s gaze slid to him, but Adam didn’t know what expression it held.

“My dad,” Adam began, fumbling with the words. He was regretting doing this already, but it seemed fair. This was how their relationship was beginning to unfold, a nightmare exchanged for another nightmare. “He isn’t…a good guy. He drinks a lot.”

Ronan blinked, mildly startled by his words. “Oh.”

The surprise was hard to see, so Adam looked away from Ronan when he shared the rest of his truth. He just tapped on his left eye, knowing Ronan would make the connection. “He gets mad a lot.”

He was glad he couldn’t see Ronan’s expression, though Adam took note of the way Ronan’s leg shifted, just barely, as if he was clenching his toes.

“Does Blue know this?”

That was not the reaction he expected. Still, Adam confirmed with a nod. “Everyone at school knows.”

Adam snuck a quick look at Ronan. He was staring into the field, expression yielding nothing. Maybe thinking, maybe digesting Adam’s words. Eventually he asked, “So, did your Christmas suck too?”

“It wasn’t great, no.” Adam thought of working at the grocery store, of his silent mom, of the beer bottle hitting his ribs. It wasn’t even his worst Christmas.
Ronan didn’t apologize for his actions, now that he knew the truth, but Adam was oddly glad for it. If Ronan didn’t allow him to apologize, he didn’t want one in return. Anyway, he didn’t need to. Adam understood that Ronan’s truth was a reparation in its own way, and he cherished it more than an apology.

Ronan started the car again and turned it back the direction they came. They didn’t say anything the rest of the way. He paused the car in front of Nino’s and finally said, “Can you come to practice tomorrow?”

“Yes.” Adam had homework, but he didn’t care. “Will you have lyrics for me, though?”

This time the words were said without malice. It eased the tension in seconds. Ronan turned away from Adam, facing the road, and just said, “Jesus. You and your one track mind.”

Adam shrugged. “Maybe you shouldn’t have written such good lyrics in the first place. I got spoiled.”

If Adam didn’t know better, he would say that Ronan blushed. “I’ll have them to you tomorrow. It’s not going to be a love song, anymore, though. I don’t care what Gansey says.”

“I’m fine with that,” Adam said.

Ronan looked at Adam one last time, gaze lingering more than seemed necessary. Then, he shifted the car into gear and took off.

Adam checked his email at lunch the next day, finding a note from Noah.

BEN,

RONAN TOLD ME TO SEND THESE TO YOU. LYRICS FOR THE SONG. I CAN’T WAIT TO SEE YOU!
Adam copied the lyrics to a new document and printed them out. As he walked to his next class he looked over them, pleased to see that they were fit for Ronan’s normal standards. He re-read them multiple times, wishing he understood where Ronan’s inspiration came from, sometimes feeling bold enough to dream he did.

We could build a world
out of our misunderstandings.
I’m not good with words
and you take them all from my tongue anyway.

You’re a truth to me even when you lie,
and I think I’m starting to like it.

Talk like you mean it
or don’t talk at all
I could care less
when it’s you at my door.
I’d rather be young and dumb
than smart and alone.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone has any ideas for their band name, you should send this girl a message, because I got nothing and I'll need to have it by next chapter. You can hit me up in the comments or on my Tumblr.

Also: the only issue I have with Ronan and Adam's relationship in the book is that, since Adam has dealt with abuse, I worry that Ronan's inability to hold his anger would be potentially triggering for Adam. And though Ronan gets better by the end of the book, I wished this would have been acknowledged. So in this story I'm deliberately making Ronan be a bit more hurtful to Adam, because I want Ronan to realize that he actually does have to learn to deal with his anger if he wants to be with Adam. Does that make sense? I hope so. Regardless, this chapter will be the worst it ever is.

Thank you, as always, for reading! You are rays of sunshine in my cloudy, overcast Seattle life.
The Contest

Chapter Summary

Ronan noticed Adam fidget in his seat. Now that Ronan knew about Adam’s father, the unexplainable eccentricities that Adam possessed became more clear. The way he avoided certain subjects, his necessity to get home at specific hours. Adam caught him staring and looked back, defiantly, as if to question whether he was being pitied.

Adam didn’t want to be pitied, so Ronan wouldn’t do it. He said, “Not like I sleep much anyway.”

Chapter Notes

Warning that this chapter features Adam's abuse again.

Thank you to everyone who suggested names for the band! If yours wasn't used, it might not be that I won't use it eventually - you'll see when you get through the chapter. But for now, thank you to Ana Blu, QuestionableDivinity, and the anonymous Tumblr person who suggested Gansey's Pansies (though I change it slightly).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ronan Lynch didn’t really know how to feel about anything. His life had become mildly manic, highs and lows that were hard to decipher. He felt mostly happy, especially with the band about to play their first show, but there was a pit forming in his stomach since the fight with Adam.

The week where they didn’t speak forced him to think. He wasn’t ready for it.

Ronan had been content to view Adam objectively, like a celebrity almost. You could think someone was attractive without liking them. Before, if he was feeling particularly bold, Ronan could even picture putting his hands on Adam’s neck, following the dip of his back, hands admiring muscles. He could think of sliding his hand to Adam’s lower back, pulling their bodies together in places that would make him burn, his lips exploring the edge of neck where Adam’s hair ended.

He’d dealt with this forbidden longing, the desire for a person with sharp edges and stubble, of strength and tendons, for too much of his life to feel guilty anymore. Maybe when he was younger did he feel bad about fantasizing, because church drilled it into him that his thoughts were sins in themselves. Back then they were just faceless bodies, the appeal more in imagining the act than imagining the person. So it didn’t feel that wrong, either, to think of Adam in that way, so long as it was strictly superficial.
But Adam was a real person. He had a face, a name, a personality. A past. After the fight, these factors became painfully apparent. Adam wasn’t just the Very-Attractive-Boy who Ronan pictured in his dreams. He was now Adam Parrish, layered, complicated, dedicated. He was the boy whose life was a constant battle, but still had fight left in him.

That week forced him to acknowledge that Adam was a presence in his life he wasn’t ready to give up. It shouldn’t have affected him as much as it did. Due to Adam’s busy schedule, it wasn’t unusual for a week to go by without actually seeing him. It felt different, though, when he knew that Adam didn’t want to see him.

He thought ending the fight - being the person who finally caved, letting Adam into the very ugly part of his world - would make the longing go away. Ronan didn’t want to tell Adam about his father, but he knew it was the only way to explain his anger. Except it went wrong, because Adam met his ugly truth with another ugly truth, and Ronan couldn’t handle it.

It wasn’t Adam’s confession that was the problem. (Though it did twist and turn at his insides, if only because he was overcome with the desire to kill Adam’s father, and he had just decided to try and deal with his emotions in a healthy way for once.) It was the fact that Adam trusted him with something, and that Adam was so very much more than Ronan thought. And he knew, instantly, that he would not allow himself to fantasize about Adam anymore, because it would be a ticket straight to hell.

Adam was, most definitely, straight. Ronan was definitely not. It wasn’t too dangerous to enjoy the looks of a pretty boy who didn’t have a soul; it was too much to fall for a complicated thing like Adam Parrish.

Plus, Ronan was certain that he did not deserve Adam now, not after what he did.

It would be a feat just to deserve Adam’s friendship, though Ronan allowed himself to accept it anyway. Liking Adam was off limits now. He would deal with it.

Gansey was clicking at his computer, looking over something in deep concentration. “The contest mailed me to ask what our band is called. It’s time to choose.”

“Now that I’m in the band, it can’t be Male Privilege, I guess,” Blue hummed to herself. “And,
shoot, *Richie Rich and the Ravens* is out, too, since Ben and I don’t go to Aglionby.”

“And we’re not rich,” Adam added.

Ronan was pleasantly surprised to see Adam be so candid about his wealth. Though he understood, now, why Adam wanted to keep his secrets, he didn’t get why he was so ashamed of his poverty. (He would never say this out loud, though, because he knew exactly what Blue or Adam would say. *Of course you’d say that, you’re rich.* It would have been a Gansey-sort-of-thing to say, and he was not in the business of being a Dick, pun intended.) He wanted Adam to feel more comfortable in the group, and this seemed like a small step.

“I’ve been thinking of some ideas,” Gansey breezed past their jokes as if he didn’t hear them. “I was reading over some old William Butler Yeats poems the other day and had a few ideas. What about *Embers of Daylight*?”

“How about *Gansey’s a Pansey*?” Ronan said.

Gansey frowned at Ronan. “Inspiring. I’ll welcome your jokes when you can back them up with actual ideas.”

Blue jumped at the chance to tease Gansey. She pointed at his hideous boat shoes and said, “What about *The Band Sperry? Or Ahoy Mateys*?”

Gansey grumbled under his breath, something about *shoes are fine* and *they’re classic*. He typed something into the computer and said, “Well, for now we’re called *TBD - To Be Determined.*”

“Don’t think you get to take credit for my idea,” Adam drawled.

Gansey threw his hands into the air, exasperated by the group. Still, his natural instinct to lead took over and he moved the band onto their next agenda. “I want to make sure everyone is on the same page for tomorrow. We’ll meet here around five, pack everything up, and aim to be out by six. That gives us an hour to get to the concert and sign up.”

“Do we know the order of the bands playing yet?” Noah asked.
“No,” Gansey grimaced. “I don’t think we’ll know until we’re there, unfortunately. Hopefully not too late, though my gut says to plan for a long night.”

Ronan noticed Adam fidget in his seat. Now that Ronan knew about Adam’s father, the unexplainable eccentricities that Adam possessed became more clear. The way he avoided certain subjects, his necessity to get home at specific hours. Adam caught him staring and looked back, defiantly, as if to question whether he was being pitied.

Adam didn’t want to be pitied, so Ronan wouldn’t do it. He said, “Not like I sleep much anyway.”

“Are we, like, dressing up?” Noah asked. Everyone inherently understand that the pause in his sentence, the *like*, implied whether they had a theme, or a look, or a style.

Blue looked at Gansey, her eyes raking over his body. “No polo shirts.”

Gansey looked back at her, amused. “You’re awfully concerned about my wardrobe these days, Blue.”

“I’m awfully considered because it’s awful.”

Ronan cut in. He was anxious to run through the songs a few more times before everyone had to leave for the night. “Just wear whatever the hell you want to wear.”

Blue leaned in to whisper something in Adam’s ear. He looked up at her, skeptical, but seconds later a bashful smile slipped onto his lips and he shrugged cheerfully. Ronan reminded himself that he wasn’t allowed to be jealous anymore. Adam was his friend, and Blue was his friend too; the envy had no place here anymore.

Blue placed her fingers on Adam’s chin, tilting it to look at him. She squinted her eyes and pulled his chin back and forth.

Well, no one said he had to get over his jealousy immediately.
Adam regretted his choice immediately. The day before the concert Blue had suggested they meet up first and prepare for the contest together. She had joked about dressing him up, of lining his eyes dark like he’d seen singers do when he was young, but he thought it was just that: a joke.

So when Blue sat him down on her bed and pulled out an eyeliner pen, he blanched.

“No.”

“Come on.”

“No.”

Blue pulled her legs onto the bed and crossed them close to her body. She leaned her chin on her hand, placing her elbow in the crook of her knee, and glowered at him. “Adam. You’re the lead singer. You’re supposed to look all mysterious and rebellious. That’s how bands work.”

He was not convinced. “I’m not wearing makeup.”

“Why?” She looked at him with challenge in her eyes. “Men can’t wear makeup? God forbid they do anything feminine, am I right?”

Adam sighed. He wasn’t dumb; Blue had backed him into a corner, because she was wiley and fierce and knew how to get what she wanted. He gestured for her do it, muttering, “I’m going to take it off if I don’t like it.”

She wiggled her hips in excitement. Uncapping the pen, she leaned close to him and said, “Keep them closed for now. Guys always flip out when they first put on eyeliner.”

Adam obeyed. He didn’t really like the sensation, even with his eyes shut. “Do you put eyeliner on men often?”

“Noah’s let me practice on him ever since I joined the band,” her reply came out a bit muffled, as if
she were holding something in her mouth. A second later he understood, because he felt a dab on his eye of something wet and soft. “Don’t make that face. It’s just a Q-tip.”

“Why is it wet? Was that your spit?”

“You’ll live.”

Adam would have rolled his eyes if they were open. He didn’t really mind, though. He was beginning to warm to the foreign feeling, enjoying the press of Blue’s cold fingertips on his cheeks, the weight of a brush on his eyelid. The pressure made his eyes feel heavy, and he wished he was leaning against something soft. He could almost fall asleep.

She finished not long after. Blue held up a mirror for him, “What do you think? It’s not that bad.”

It really wasn’t. He kind of liked it - it made him seem older, his eyes a brighter blue. She had barely lined it at all, choosing to smudge the charcoal across his bottom eyelid in the very far corner only. It drug out to a point, elongating his eyes a bit. It was much more subtle than expected.

He felt a bit silly, when his eyes caught his freckles. They instantly aged him down, and he wondered whether he looked like a child playing with his mother’s makeup. In the summer the freckles were less noticeable, fading in with the tan he usually got by working outside, but in winter they were more obvious. Still, he didn’t mind the overall picture, and people wouldn’t be able to see the freckles from far away.

“What will Ronan and Gansey say?” Adam sighed. Maybe he liked it, but that didn’t mean he had to admit it to Blue.

“They’ll be filthy jealous,” she said with a shrug. “Anyway, you don’t have to worry. You know Gansey will show up in something ridiculous. No one will pay your makeup any attention if he’s wearing something bright pink.”

“He says it’s salmon.”

She turned serious. “He says a lot of stupid things, we already knew this.”
Recently Noah had admitted that - when Blue first wanted to join the band - Gansey denied her in order to protect Adam’s crush. (Adam didn’t bother denying the crush to Noah - the boy was determined for their romance to blossom, even though Gansey and Ronan reminded him of the no-dating policy.) As far as he knew, no one ever clued Blue into the truth. Adam wondered whether Blue gave Gansey such a hard time because of this, thinking that he was her toughest critic.

“Gansey,” Adam said, wetting his lips. “You know he thinks you’re talented, right? That he wants you in the band?”

She slid off the bed, an obvious attempt to avoid the conversation. Blue pulled shirts and shorts and tights and scarves and other junk out of her dresser, holding them up against her body. “I’m sure he likes me enough.”

“He wants you in the band,” Adam repeated, this time with more strength.

She turned her body to him, holding up an old t-shirt that she must have ripped intentionally. You could barely read the logo anymore. “What do you think?”

Adam frowned. “I’m not giving you fashion advice. And don’t give me a lecture on my crumbling masculinity. But, seriously Blue, he was only hesitant because of me.”

She tugged off her current shirt - not as scandalous as it sounded, seeing that she was wearing a blank tank-top underneath - and threw the shredded t-shirt over it. From behind the muffle of the shirt she said, “Sure.”

Feeling nervous, Adam instinctively raised a hand to run it through his hair. He stopped at the last moment, remembering that Blue had put something in it to hold its shape. Instead, he picked at the loose threads on her bedding. “They kind of thought I had a crush on you,” he finally admitted. “Slash, they still might think that. Sorry.”

Blue turned to him abruptly, shocked. “What?”

“That’s how they interpreted me avoiding you,” Adam explained. “Ronan assumed I liked you. It was a good excuse to avoid Nino’s. I think Gansey was worried I would combust or something.”

Blue laughed uproariously. Apparently it was a ridiculous concept to her, the idea of Adam and Blue a couple. Adam pushed away the annoyance he felt. She didn’t mean it like that, it wasn’t such an
outrageous thought to date him. (Right?)

“No wonder Noah keeps looking at us like that!” She cried. Blue had now moved to the mirror and was applying her own eyeliner. “And Ronan. Jesus. That explains his glares. I almost thought…”

“What do you mean?” Adam was referring, of course, to Ronan. He needed no clarifications on Noah’s forthright behavior.

Blue shook her head. “Oh, nothing really. He just glares at us whenever we talk. Of course he’d be worried about us hooking up. He’s got to look out for the sanctity of his precious band.”

“Oh.” That made sense. He was the one, according to Gansey, who had outlawed dating. It had seemed like such a ridiculous rule originally.

She disappeared for a minute to change into the rest of her outfit. When she returned Blue pulled out an old, disposable camera from her bag and took a picture of Adam before he could even blink. “For memories.”

He blinked away the flash, eyes trying to adjust to the room. “Oh, God. I’m not sure I want this look immortalized in film.”

Blue waved his apprehension off. “You look great. Just a hint of punk, that’s it.”

Adam briefly thanked the universe that a punk-rock look required ripped jeans and threadbare t-shirts, because that was his wardrobe normally. Not knowing what to wear, he had simply pulled on a black shirt and hoped for the best.

Not too long after there was a series of honks outside Blue’s window, an upbeat tune that could only be Noah. Adam felt immensely better about his makeup once he saw Noah’s face. The boy had rimmed his eyes in the darkest black possible, and had even painted his fingernails. Blue laughed when she saw his face, muttering something about racoons, and promised to fix it later.

The next few hours passed by in a blur. They met at the apartment, as promised. When Gansey and Adam laid eyes on each other they seemed mutually surprised; Gansey, noticing Adam’s makeup, and Adam, never having seen Gansey look so dressed down. Even Blue was momentarily shocked be the easy nature of Gansey’s look, as she gaped at him with her mouth open. Whatever retort she
had planned to say died on her lips.

“You said no polo shirts,” he muttered, hand reaching to smooth down his tee in a self-conscious manner.

Blue nodded, still fumbling to come up with something witty to say. Finally she offered, “Still got the boat shoes, I see.”

“They’re comfy.”

Ronan barely looked at them. He was rushing about the room, pointing to the various cases of packed up instruments and muttering under his breath. Adam walked to him, unsurprised to see that he hadn’t worn anything special for the night. He couldn’t even imagine Ronan in anything but his leather jacket, as it had been a staple on him for as long as they’d known each other.

“Need any help?” Adam asked.

Ronan waved him off. “Just keep them busy while I double-check everything. I don’t want any distractions.”

Adam stuffed his hands in his pockets, resigned to go back to the group. He was only slightly disappointed that Ronan said nothing about his makeup. Though he wasn’t looking to be mocked, he craved the back-and-forth insults that Ronan usually delivered. It would make things feel more normal, less like they were about to be extremely vulnerable in front of a large crowd.

When Ronan was satisfied he had Gansey check over the material as well. When Gansey confirmed everything was in order they packed up the cars - opting to take both Ronan’s and Noah’s cars, since the Pig couldn’t be trusted to keep its shit together on such an important night - and headed to the concert hall.

Adam couldn’t remember much about the concert prior to performing. When they got there it was a rush of sign-ins, moving instruments to various rooms (the organization was a bit of a mess - no one knew where to put them), and last-minute tune-ups. Adam ran through the lyrics to the second song when they had a spare minute. Ronan’s (not) love song was still fairly romantic, and he found the words hard to form sometimes. He didn’t want to mess them up.
Soon they were ushered to the concert hall to watch the other bands. Thankfully they weren’t performing too late into the set, but there were enough bands in front of them that they could enjoy some music. Some bands were horrible, a few were fantastic, but most were simply average. It helped alleviate some of Adam’s nerves, though. At worst, they would simple fit in with most the bands. At best, maybe a few people would be impressed.

Sometime in the night Ronan had discarded his leather jacket, the packed room full enough that it felt like a Virginia summer. Adam’s eyes trailed Ronan’s bare arms, up his neck and shoulders, where he was surprised to see ink peeking out from beneath.

He couldn’t help it. Adam reached to touch the tattoo, fingers lingering on the back of Ronan’s neck. “I didn’t know you have a tattoo.”

Adam was pretty sure his voice was barely heard between the ruckus of the performances. Still, Ronan must have understood, as his shoulders stiffened and he shrugged Adam’s hand off quickly. He tried not to feel dismayed - he knew Ronan didn’t like to be touched, except perhaps by Noah - but the lingering trace of embarrassment settled into his ears.

Perhaps sensing Adam’s shame, Ronan leaned down to his ear and said, “You never noticed?”

“What is it?” Adam turned into Ronan so that his voice could be heard, arm pressing against arm in the packed crowd. For once, Ronan didn’t move away.

Ronan shrugged, gestured to the crowd, and said, “Another time.”

Soon after they were ushered to the back stage. It was quieter here, at least compared to outside, and Gansey took a minute to pull them together.

“I just wanted to say that I am really, really proud of us,” he said, tone earnest and excited. “Whatever happens tonight, I want you all to know that--”

“Jesus fuck, Dick,” Ronan cut in, rolling his eyes. “Can we do this sentimental shit when we’re done? It’s going to ruin the mood.”

Despite Ronan’s quip, the group all seemed to visibly relax. Gansey sensed this, and changing his tactic, he simply said, “Let’s break a leg.”
Ronan thought his heart might explode. He was about to play his first show, with his band, with his friends. People would be listening to his music, maybe even enjoying his music. (They were better than most the fuckers there, and people were into them.) His hands shook and his mouth was dry, but Ronan didn’t care.

Gansey wanted to be a sentimental shit, but Ronan couldn’t handle it. He couldn’t take a heartfelt speech; he was already feeling too much affection for his band as it was.

Because he had Gansey, who kept him together all this time and now kept them all together. He had Noah, who made Ronan feel calm. Blue was intense and crazy and so, so good at what she did. Then Adam took his words, words that Ronan spent hours agonizing over, words that betrayed his every secrets, and Adam turned them into magic. And Adam was his...friend. They were all his friends.

But, fuck, Adam looked good.

And Adam felt good, pressed against him, whispering in his ear. Eyes dark and broody and a lean body that Ronan wanted to bend around him.

Friends, they were just friends.

The crowd welcomed them with mild applause. They were apprehensive, wondering whether they’d be a disaster like some of the bands. Blue took her place at the drumset, spinning the sticks around her finger in preparation. Ronan, Gansey, and Adam all strapped their guitars around their bodies, testing out the amps.

Noah had been designated as the person to introduce the band. He smiled cheerily at the crowd, though Ronan guessed he couldn’t see into the crowd. The lights were too bright on stage.

“Hey everyone,” Noah said into the mic. “This is our first time playing in front of the crowd, so apologies in advance if we suck. We’re really excited to be here, though. We’ll be playing three songs tonight - Fast Night Feels Right, followed by Young and Dumb, then Make Money, Not Babies. Hope you enjoy it!”
There was a small spattering of applause. Noah didn’t let the lack of enthusiasm bother him, though. He walked back to his keyboard with a cheery grin, waving at the crowd.

Everyone stood at their post. They exchanged a meaningful look, then Ronan turned to Blue and nodded. She counted them off by knocking on her drumsticks and then, on the count of four, Ronan started the song and they were off.

It was over before he knew it. The rush from performing was exhilarating. At some point he was aware that the crowd was getting louder, the clapping more intense. He didn’t even care.

It was just fun. Unbelievably fun. Ronan felt himself even smiling, at times, unable to keep it off his face when Blue nailed her drum solo on the first song, or when Noah gestured with the crowd to clap along. Gansey was a bundle of nerves because he stood rigid on the stage, a hilarious sight in itself.

Adam seemed to come alive, too, and Ronan allowed himself this one time to enjoy it. Ronan had wondered whether the singer would look uncomfortable on stage, but Adam breathed into it. He would cup the microphone in his hands, looking straight into the crowd as if he were flirting with them. On the second song, when he had to play along with Ronan, he would move closer to him when he he wasn’t required to sing.

At one point Adam looked right at Ronan and sang to him, You’re not good with your words, let me beg them off your tongue. It was almost too much. He didn’t even care that Adam had messed up the words.

They finished the set to a much more enthusiastic crowd. Adam was grinning, a mad sort of smile that Ronan had never seen before, and he waved a hand to the crowd. “Thank you! We are - uh - TBD!”

They were cheered off the stage. Once they were away from the crowd, Blue, who was last in, ran into the guys and crushed them into a hug. They were all sweaty, hot from the lights and playing their hearts out, but no one seemed to care.

“That was amazing!” She cried. She was the shortest in the group by far, and they all looked down at her. Even Ronan couldn’t keep affection off his face.

“Do you think we have a shot at winning?” Noah asked, breathless.
Ronan shook his head. “Who the fuck cares?”

Blue giggled - which was quite the sight to see, as she almost never let her guard down enough to seem young and carefree - and she cupped her hands over her mouth to calm her smile. Gansey was still dazed but, upon seeing Blue’s face, he came back to himself with a giant exhale.

“Let’s do that again,” he said.

Someone in charge of the contest ushered them out of the room, explaining that they had to get back to the floor. Instead of staying close to the stage, they opted to hover in the back where they could talk. Ronan’s fake ID could have easily gotten them drinks but he didn’t want anything. The high from performing was enough to keep his skin buzzing.

They were interrupted occasionally from random people in the audience who congratulated them. A few of the other bands had nice things to say, and Ronan was particularly flattered when the lead guitarist of one of the best bands clapped him on his shoulder. (The gesture was especially flattering when that band won the concert later.)

The only downside to the evening arrived in the form of an unwanted guest. They had all been reliving the set, already discussing ways they could improve for next time, when someone slung their arm around Gansey’s shoulder and said, “Holy shit! It is you guys!”

Tad Carruthers, the epitome of an Aglionby disaster child, had shoved his way into their inner circle. Gansey was trying his best to seem welcoming, but Ronan could recognize his fake smiles by now.

“‘Sup Lynch? Czerny? I can’t believe you guys are in a band together!” Tad reached out to Noah, offering a fist-bump, but wisely avoided Ronan.

“It’s fairly new,” Gansey said with a shrug. “Did you like it?”

“Oh, hell yeah! You guys are the shit!” Tad turned his attention to Adam this time. “You don’t go to Aglionby, right bro?”

Adam exchanged a glance with Ronan. It screamed, Who the hell is this? Still, Adam was generous
enough to humor Tad and said, “No, I don’t.”

“Holy shit, man,” Tad punched Adam’s shoulder. “Your voice was sick. I could listen to you for hours - like, no homo though.”

Ronan thought the way Tad was looking at Adam was very yes homo, not that Adam noticed. Blue’s face had turned sour upon the offensive terminology, though. Her mouth opened, likely to chew Tad out, but Gansey wrapped his arm around her and pulled her out of the group, whispering something in her ear. Still, she turned her head back to glare at Tad as Gansey pulled her into the crowd.

“Uh, thanks,” Adam said, taken aback by the praise.

“What’s your name?”

Adam’s eyes caught Ronan’s. He looked bewildered with the exchange. Feeling the need to save Adam, Ronan used his arm to shove Tad out of the circle. “We’ll see you at school, Carruthers.”

Tad seemed disappointed to be forced away from Adam. (It was a very satisfying expression to see. Ronan didn’t like Tad prior to this evening, and he certainly didn’t like him now, despite his claims.)

“Okay, okay, I get it, chill, Lynch.” Still, Tad didn’t leave. He reached his head around Ronan and asked, “So, your band is called TBD? Isn’t that a STD?”

Adam blanched. Noah scratched the side of his head and offered, “It’s not our real name. We couldn’t think of one.”

“Oh, man, if I think of something I’ll let you know,” Tad said. He turned his attention back to Adam, offering another fistbump. “Nice meeting you, man. Seriously, good job. You guys have an album or anything yet?”

“No, but Gansey is talking with some recording studios, so maybe soon,” Noah’s eyes were trained on Ronan, watching him carefully. It was no secret that Ronan hated most all Aglionby boys, besides Noah and Gansey. Don’t pick a fight, his eyes screamed.
Ronan wasn’t going to pick a fight, not with Tad Fucking Carrethers. For one, he was relatively harmless. Annoying, but harmless. (Since Blue was being distracted by Gansey, he didn’t have to worry about Blue killing him either.) Plus, he was sort of their first fan. Though Ronan wished it was someone else - anyone else - he couldn’t really punch someone who was interested in their music.

Even though Ronan was pretty fucking sure that at least half of Tad’s interest in the band was that he was actually interested in Adam. He was trying to make conversation with Adam again, asking about his eyeliner.

“It’s uh, pretty dope,” Tad said, though he looked like he regretted the verbiage when Ronan’s eyes slid to him, annoyed. “Kind of girly, but you pull it off. Both of you.” The last part was tacked on for Noah’s sake, though Noah just scrunched his nose up at the compliment.

Adam was obviously growing weary of Tad and his attempts at flirting. (Though based on the way Adam pulled in his bottom lip, he probably thought the flirting was better described as teasing. Poor Tad, Ronan thought. Crashed and burned. ) Adam reached for Ronan’s elbow, nodding his head to the floor.

“We probably should go find Blue and Gansey,” he suggested.

Tad opened his mouth but Ronan didn’t give him room to tag alone. He cut in, tone pointed, and said, “Bye Tad.”

“Oh, yeah, chill, chill,” he stuffed his hands in his pockets and jerked his head to the ceiling. Ronan wondered if he knew how stupid he looked. “I’ll see you guys around.”

Once Tad was out of distance, Adam said, “He’s…uh. Yeah.”

“A fan’s a fan,” Ronan said, though his heart wasn’t in it.

Adam must have sensed this, or maybe it was the grim expression Ronan couldn’t keep off his face. Regardless of the reason, Adam just laughed, shook his head, and scanned the room for Blue and Gansey. They found them huddled on the far left side of the pit. Gansey had Blue on his back so that she could see the band, but once they arrived, he promptly let her down.

They enjoyed a couple more bands but were pleased when the night winded down. They didn’t
place, but Ronan didn’t care. He was sure that something horrible would happen - Gansey would puke on stage, Blue would topple over a cymbal, Adam would forget the lyrics, Noah would insist on being the singer again - that he was happy enough to have just played.

It was nearly one in the morning when they finally got back to Gansey’s place. Adam had fallen asleep on the car ride home, and so he stumbled around the apartment in a sleepy haze. Ronan had to fight the urge to offer Adam a ride home, knowing it made more sense for Noah to bring Blue and him back at the same time.

Friends gave each other rides, though. So it wasn’t out of the question to offer…

Ronan exhaled so sharp that it almost resembled a growl. It drew Adam’s attention, who had been waiting for Blue to finish up. Taking her drums out of all the boxes and setting them up was an intricate process, but Noah was insistent on helping her do it.

“Everything good?” Adam asked. His voice was a little raspy (and a little sexy Jesus) from singing all night. He was sitting on the couch with his eyes shut, though, too tired to even look at Ronan.

There was a smudge of eyeliner that had traveled across his cheek, probably from rubbing his eyes. Ronan was compelled to touch it, so he did. Tapping it with his finger, he said, “You’re a mess, man.”

That made Adam’s eyes open. His hands flew to his eyes and he muttered, “Shit. I need to take this off before I get home.”

He moved to sit up, but Ronan pressed him back down by his shoulder, trying very hard to be gentle. “Stay. I’ll get you something.”

He returned a moment later with a wet washcloth, handing it over. Adam did his best to rub at his eyes, though the eyeliner seemed determined to stick. Ronan kept pointing out spots that he missed, until Adam turned to Blue with worry and said, “Is this permanent or something?”

She found his frustration incredibly amusing. “Of course it’s not permanent. They just make it hard to get off. So we can take care of children and fight wars and still look flawless.”

Ronan took the washcloth back, got it wet again, and told Adam to shut his eyes. He stood above
him, looking down at Adam, who had his head rested on the couch cushion. Then, still very carefully, Ronan wiped at the remaining eyeliner.

It was a stupid, stupid thing to do, and Ronan felt he was being horribly transparent. But for whatever reason Adam let him do it without question. Maybe it was fatigue - he certainly seemed happy to rest his head back and shut his eyes - or maybe he was desperate for the help.

Ronan was probably the only one who felt like he was burning up, like his throat was seizing. He felt the need to break the tension and the necessity to be cutting broke through. “Why the hell did you do this, anyway? The emo look hasn’t been in for years.”

Adam just smiled. “Blame Blue. I guess I won’t do it again.”

To say that Ronan liked it would be an understatement of the highest caliber. Ronan couldn’t even look at Adam for the first hour, having to find ways to distract himself. Whatever Blue had done to his eyes was better than the look Noah sported, who looked a little like Charlie Chaplin. It made Adam’s eyes look more striking, his face sharper. Once the eyeliner was almost completely gone, though, Ronan found that he liked this Adam best. With his normal, pale eyelashes he looked softer, and Ronan could pretend his life wasn’t a constant battle, like he hadn’t yet grown to be wary.

There wasn’t really any eyeliner left, but Ronan’s hands didn’t still. “Maybe I’m a bad judge. Apparently it was *dope.*”

Adam groaned. “Don’t remind me. What is that guy’s problem?”

The way he said it convinced Ronan, officially, that Adam was oblivious to the flirting. He folded the washcloth and draped it over Adam’s eyes, his signal that the job was finished. “Just ignore him. Do whatever the fuck you want to do.”

Adam didn’t remove the washcloth, so Ronan took one last opportunity to sweep his eyes down his face, past his lips, to his throat and exposed collarbone. *This is the last time,* he promised himself.

He heard an exaggerated cooing from his right. Blue said, “Aw, look at the lovebirds.”

It would have been embarrassing to be caught if it wasn’t so obvious that Blue was joking. It was supposed to be funny because - *ha!* - it couldn’t possibly be a romantic situation because they were
two guys, and guys didn’t like each other. It was funny, in that sad, depressing sort of way, that she would almost pick a fight over something like “no homo” and cut him down in the same night. But she didn’t know any better, and if Ronan kept grudges for things like that, he wouldn’t have any friends.

So instead, Ronan embraced the joke, using it as momentum to rip himself away from wanting Adam. He patted Adam’s cheek, twice, and drawled, “You’re good, honey-buns.”

Adam used the washcloth to slap Ronan away. “Shut up.”

“No ‘thank you’ kiss?”

Adam glared at him, pushed himself up from the couch, and wiped his tired eyes. “We ready to go, then?”

They were. As they left, Blue was bold enough to give Ronan a hug goodbye. She then hugged Gansey, thanking them both for letting her be in the band. Gansey retired to his bed, though Ronan was not surprised to hear him shifting around for the next hour.

He was almost grateful for the noise, because he wasn’t ready to sleep yet. He wanted to relive the day over and over and over again.

Tad Carruthers was ungodly annoying, but even Adam had to admit, they owed the guy a lot. Somehow he had connections to a couple venues across the area, and a week after the contest, he had apparently pulled Gansey aside at school and told him about an opportunity to play. It was a small venue, nothing fancy, but they’d get paid 20% of the cover fee which was cool.

They were an opener for a different band, but no one cared. They got to play six songs this time, and the wait for the show was excruciating. It wasn’t scheduled until the end of February, and everyone was eager to play again.

Ronan wrote two new songs in the meantime, neither of which were love songs, much to Gansey’s dismay, but they were extremely fun to play. When the show finally happened, Adam let loose enough to actually dance a bit on stage. It involved a lot of head bobbing and just a hint of jumping, but mostly he had his way with the microphone stand. At some point Gansey rocked out a bit with
him, a vast improvement from his wooden performance at the contest.

He had the most phone with Ronan, though. He hadn’t realized, until the played the contest, that he hadn’t truly seen Ronan smile. He had grinned at Adam before, but it always contained a bit of malice, a lot of sarcasm. At the contest, Ronan actually smiled, and it was a little dazzling. It was easy to make Ronan do it when he was playing a show, he just had to walk up to him and challenge him to a little guitar duel. Or turn to him when he sang a line, making a face or a rude gesture.

Adam wanted to make him smile like that all time, finding it rather insatiable. He knew, realistically, it was just the fact that Ronan never did it that made it so magnetic. It was like when he was a little kid and had friends who had Nintendo. He didn’t care about video games until he played them, then it’s all he thought about. He was acutely aware, though, that this came at a heavy price. He remembered when those friendships ended, and how frustrating it was to know you had something so fun, but now you didn’t. So he tread carefully, wanting this friendship to last.

The downside to the show was that they did have to put up with Tad, who insisted on being there. He watched behind the screen of his phone, videotaping the whole thing like a freaking stage mom.

“I’ll put it online,” Tad promised, ignoring the fact that no one asked him to and no one cared if he did. “I can send you a text when it’s up. What’s your number?”

The question was directed to Adam, and he didn’t think it was very funny. Ronan said he told Tad that Adam didn’t have a phone. Why the hell did he insist on rubbing it in?

Ronan always came to his defense with Tad, thankfully. Tad seemed terrified of Ronan, and Ronan didn’t try very hard to change it. He just had to loom over Tad, shot him a daggeder look, and Tad would move to harassing Gansey or Noah. (Blue didn’t bother to hide her hatred of Tad, so he didn’t go near her. He was dead to her the first time they met. Adam tried to do the same, to give Tad looks that were patently full of dislike, but it didn’t work the same magic.)

Because of Tad, they also got a second show. And the second venue liked them enough to invite them back for a third show, and soon it felt like they had the ability to play a show every couple weeks. Unfortunately, Adam forced the group to turn down a few of these shows, as he couldn’t get that much time off from work. He tried not to feel guilty about it, but he knew his friends were disappointed.

He had to be careful about it, though. He got away with getting in so late the day of the contest because his father had started drinking early. His dad probably assumed he came home right after his shift, like always, and he just passed out before that happened. Robert Parrish was particular about his curfew, and Adam didn’t want to push his luck.
Then, in March, they were offered a show where they actually got to be the opening band. It sounded more impressive than it actual was - the opening band had to back out due to some family emergency - but Gansey still jumped at the chance. Adam had to beg another mechanic to cover his shift that day, even offering to pay him extra to do it.

Ronan stopped by the grocery store during his shift earlier in the day, running through the set-list with Adam as he stocked shelves. It wasn’t necessary, and both of them knew it, but Adam understood this was Ronan’s thing. He was incredibly worried that something would go wrong each time they played a show, and was meticulous about planning.

“Make sure you read through the lyrics again to Young and Dumb,” Ronan said.

“I know the lyrics,” Adam said, rearranging the cans of soup that customers had messed with. It happened every time.

“Then why do you keep fucking them up?” Despite the criticism, there was no bite beneath his words. It was just Ronan being particular, being careful.

Adam really did know the lyrics, and he liked them, but he equally liked to change them around. Part because it riled Ronan up, but part because, well, he just felt compelled to do it. Anyway, despite Ronan’s complaints on the matter, it was one of the things that usually made him smile. It was almost a game now.

“You’ll be at Gansey’s at five?” Ronan checked.

“Yep. I get off here at four, I’ll bike home and change, then be there at five. Five fifteen at the latest.” He’d told Ronan this three times already.

It was almost cute to see how much Ronan worried. Even then, Ronan bit at his leather bands, wondering out loud whether he should just hang out till Adam’s shift was done so he could drive him.

“Jesus, Lynch,” Adam shoved him by the shoulder, forcing him in the direction of the exit. “Just go home. Relax. It’ll be fine.”
It should have been fine.

Ronan wasn’t a worrier, but when Adam didn’t show up at five, something tugged at him. At 5:15 he stood by the window of Gansey’s apartment, watching the road carefully. At 5:30 he openly cursed Adam in front of the rest of the band, ranting about *I told him I could pick him up, why the fuck does he have to be so stubborn about everything?*

At six, he realized something was not right. By this point the band had to get going. They weren’t going to play until ten, but the venue required they be there to do a soundcheck and sign a contract by six thirty.

Ronan knew where Adam lived. Adam had allowed Ronan to drive him home completely a few more times, and he’d since memorized it.

Blue pulled him aside. “You should go to his house. See if everything is alright.” She put a pause before the word *alright,* and Ronan knew where her thoughts were. They were on the same page. “We can go ahead and check in, get set up.”

Ronan was about a half mile from Adam’s house when he slowed the car, seeing a figure sitting off to the side next to an abandoned bike. He recognized the slumped shoulders, the sharp elbows that hooked around lanky knees. Adam was just sitting on the side of the road, neck hanging low, staring at the ground.

From afar, Adam looked fine. Ronan’s eyes searched Adam’s face, looking for signs of a fight. It didn’t mean anything that his face was fine, though, so he tread up to Adam carefully. Adam did not react to him at all, eyes fixed at the ground, head swaying slightly.

“Adam?” The name slipped from Ronan’s mouth before he could stop himself. Adam didn’t seem to notice the slip. He didn’t seem to notice Ronan at all.

It wasn’t until Ronan’s feet were directly in the sight of Adam’s vision did he look up at Ronan, eyes unfocused. He said his name like a breath - *Ronan* - and his eyes fluttered up, disappearing into his eyelids.

There were multiple warning signs in the situation. The fact that Adam was late, that he was sitting
on the side of the road, that he was trembling slightly and seemed unable to hold his head up. His body kept tilting to the side, and Ronan braced him by the shoulder, dipping his head to try and catch Adam’s gaze.

“What happened?”

Adam tried to laugh, but it came out like a choked cry. “I can’t walk. Dizzy.”

“What happened?”

Adam lifted his hand, weakly, and pointed to his left ear. It was the side that Ronan had approached him on, and he noticed, finally, that it was an inflamed red. “Hit the porch. My body isn’t cooperating.” His words were slurred, almost like he was drunk, and he had to pause in-between speaking to catch his breath.

Ronan slipped his arm around Adam’s waist and pulled him up. Adam was so light for a guy, but his body slumped forward, making it rather difficult for Ronan to balance him. “I’m taking you to the hospital.”

“I’m fine,” Adam insisted. “The show—”

“Shut up.”

They made it to Ronan’s car after some effort. Adam slumped in the seat, head hitting the back of the headrest with a small thump that made Ronan’s heart lurch, but Adam barely noticed. His eyes kept rolling upward until he would blink, rapidly, and they would focus forward again.

The Henrietta Hospital was not too far. “I’ll call Gansey when we get there. Tell them to cancel the show. It’ll be fine.”

Adam’s head lulled to the side, and he looked at Ronan with eyebrows drawn tight together. “Did you say something?”

Ronan cursed under his breath. “No.”
They made it to the hospital in record time. If Ronan hadn’t been so worried he would have savored the moment, a good excuse to explain why his street racing was a valuable skill next time Gansey vocalized his complaints. Someone helped Adam into the hospital, allowing Ronan time to park his car. He almost lost his shit when he came back, five minutes later, to see Adam sitting in the waiting room.


Adam shrugged his shoulders, or at least Ronan thought that was his attempt. They raised only a fraction of an inch upward. “They told me to wait.”

Ronan released a string of curses but sat down to Adam regardless. He’d been to the hospital enough times to know this was standard unless it was an emergency. (He pushed away the memory of why he knew this - of following his father on a gurney, knowing he hadn’t moved in minutes, realizing, even then, that there was no hope his father would come back out of the swinging doors.) Instead, he pictured his last visit, sitting in the seat with an ice pack pressed to his head. Declan had hit him so hard that his body was entirely pins and needles, and his mother worried it was a concussion. They sat in the waiting room for an hour before anyone brought him to the back.

Ronan thought Adam’s condition was worrisome enough to warrant an emergency. Adam seemed as if he was fading in and out of consciousness; Ronan kept having to touch his arm to wake him back up. Adam wasn’t breathing well either, like his body kept forgetting it needed oxygen and he would gasp for breath in sickeningly quick lurches. He didn’t know if this was a side effect of the blow, or if Adam was on the verge of a panic attack.

“Try to breath,” Ronan said. He was trying hard to be gentle with Adam, but it’s was a foreign concept to him, and the words came out like an order instead of a comfort.

The nurse - or receptionist, whatever the hell she was - provided a momentary distraction by handing Adam a clipboard with information to fill out. Even after all this, Adam felt the need to push through pain, because he took the pen and made a brave attempt to get the information down.

“I’ll do it,” Ronan said, taking the pen from his fingers.

Adam just nodded, but in his dizziness, the action caused his head to lurch forward. Ronan reached out to steady him, watching worriedly as Adam’s eyes fluttered again.
He turned to the clipboard, determined to get it filled out as soon as possible so Adam would be admitted. Ronan filled out what he knew already - name, gender, a brief description of what caused the “accident” (he bit his cheek at that - this was no fucking accident).

“Birthday?” Ronan asked.

“July third.” Adam’s voice didn’t sound good. His ragged breaths were making it difficult to talk.

Ronan already knew, instinctively, that Adam had no insurance. Adam had made that pretty clear by his insistence on avoiding the hospital in the car ride over, plus, Ronan wasn’t ignorant enough to not know how fucking expensive health care was. If Adam’s family could barely afford to feed him, they couldn’t afford insurance.

So he skipped it. When he called Gansey to explain the situation - just briefly, while he parked the car - Gansey had offered to pay for any medical bills. It would be fine.

At the contact information, Ronan wrote Gansey’s telephone and home address. There was no point asking Adam for his address, because Ronan wouldn’t let him go back there ever again. Not after this.

He got what little information he needed and was about to turn it in when Adam grabbed his forearm, holding him in his seat.

“Wait--” he rasped. “I just need to fix… Give it to me first.”

Instead of handing it over, Ronan tilted the clipboard to him. He thought that Adam was being particular, perhaps worried that Ronan had fucked it up somehow. But as Adam’s gaze slid to the top of the sheet, his grip on Ronan’s arm loosened. Ronan understood now.

NAME:

Adam shut his eyes and went still. “How long have you known?”
ADAM PARRISH.

There was no point in lying. “Since Blue.”

Adam’s eyes opened, though barely, and a horrific laugh escaped his lips. His head lulled again, the shock certainly not helping his vertigo. “Of course.”

Ronan didn’t want it to happen like this. There would have been no good way for it to go down, acknowledging that both parties had been active in an ongoing lie, but it wasn’t supposed to happen in a hospital. Not with Adam so damaged that he couldn’t even defend himself.

Ronan left to hand off the clipboard. They gave him an estimate - one that was far too long - but his complaints were met with a blank stare. This wasn’t the place for a fight, though, and Ronan didn’t have the energy. Instead, he went back to his seat, watching Adam carefully.

Adam refused to look at Ronan. He kept his eyes on the doors that led to the back hospital rooms. He was taking in deep breaths now, exhaling shakily. Every once in awhile his head would bow forward and he gulped obviously. His hands were in fists at his sides, clenching every ten seconds or so.

“Do you need me to get a doctor?” Ronan asked.

“No. Just nauseous.”

“I’m getting the fucking doctor.”

Adam didn’t let him leave. He again grabbed his forearm, but this time he left his hand there. Ronan didn’t question it, understanding when Adam’s gripped tightened (and released, and tightened, and released) that he needed something to hold onto. They sat like this for so long, Ronan silently coaching Adam through his dizzy spell, until someone finally collected Adam and took him to the back. They did not allow Ronan to come.

Gansey, Blue, and Noah showed up about thirty minutes after Adam was taken to the back. He was immensely grateful to see them. It was despicable to admit, in this time, that he thought of anything but Adam, but he couldn’t help but think of his father. Having them there - Gansey in particular - instantly calmed him.
Blue had marks of makeup running down her cheeks, though her eyes were clear now. She was a ferocious sight to see as she charged to the front desk, demanding to get an update on how he was doing. It would be pointless, Ronan knew, and a minute later Blue slumped into her seat, muttering, “They don’t have any information.”

“What happened?” Noah asked.

Blue bit at her fingernail. Even now, it seemed, she wasn’t going to betray Adam’s trust. Ronan didn’t see the point anymore. This was bad - way worse than normal - and he knew it instinctively. The more people who knew the truth, the less likely it was that Adam could go back.

“His father beats the shit out of him,” Ronan said. He knew he sounded callous, but it was the only way he could keep the rage from escaping. He needed to be numb for a minute. He’d have time later to ruin Mr. Parrish.

Blue bristled. “Ronan-- you have no right--”

“I don’t fucking care, Sargent,” and then, whoops, there it was, Ronan’s anger, escaping just after he vowed to keep it in check. “You didn’t fucking see him, okay? I’m not letting Adam pretend this doesn’t happen anymore. Fuck that.”

“Adam?” Gansey looked at Ronan, confused. “Who is Adam?”

Blue shot Ronan another dirty look. Surprisingly, it was Noah who answered, “It’s Ben. His name is Adam. Adam Parrish.” Noah looked at Gansey, contemplative. “You didn’t know?”

“You did?” Ronan countered.

Noah shrugged, a little helpless. “Yeah, for awhile now.”

“How?” Blue asked. This revelation was shocking enough to curb both her and Ronan’s anger.

“I don’t know, I guess he never really struck me as a Ben. And he never responded to his name at
first, which seemed odd. I didn’t know his real name until a few months ago, though, because I stopped by his work to visit. They told me Ben didn’t work there anymore, and long story short, we figured out it was Adam.” Noah smiled sheepishly. “I thought everyone knew. Sorry Gansey.”

“I don’t understand,” Gansey said, voice faltering. “Why did he lie?”

Objectively, Ronan understood that this was probably a shock to Gansey, but he didn’t feel like putting up with it right now. Not when Adam was going through something much, much worse. “Get over it, Dick. He had his reasons.”

“You still shouldn’t have told them,” Blue snapped.

Ronan leveled his gaze at her. Blue shrunk back, just a bit, at the intensity. “Oh, shut up, Blue. He knows I know, so it was going to come out anyway. It’s the least of our worries right now.”

“Don’t you dare talk to me like that--”

“Guys!” Noah grabbed both of them, one hand on each shoulder, and gripped tightly. “Please. Not now.”

It was sobering, seeing Noah so upset. They both sat back in their seats, though Ronan’s fury was still sitting on his fingertips. Blue didn’t look very happy either, but she soon gave way to worry again, her eyes filling with tears.

Ronan didn’t voice the fear he was keeping in. Adam had struggled to hear him all night, and maybe it was just that his voice got lost in the dizziness. But there signs, little ones, that maybe this time the damage would leave a permanent mark. If Ronan didn’t allow himself to worry, though, the only emotion he could manage was rage. He passed the time thinking of what he would do to Adam’s father, if only he could get his hands on him.

“He’ll be okay,” Gansey said, finally regaining his voice. He took Blue’s hand into his own. “I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

It should have been fine.
Chapter End Notes

That should be the last of any scenes where Adam faces abuse from his father. I didn't really want to describe the actual scene, because we've all read the book and we know how it went; no need to do it again.

Tad Carruthers is a bro in this, I apologize. He will be dealt with in due time.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, as always. Feel free to hit me up on my Tumblr or visit it to see dudes in eyeliner, that sort of thing.
Adam Parrish had a very complicated relationship with his parents.

This is what he told his school counselor, the one time his teachers reported his suspected abuse. It was only partially true. It wasn’t that he was hiding from the truth - no, Adam had long passed the age where he thought he maybe deserved the abuse, and he had long since given up any hope that they actually loved him - it was just, well, he had grown used to his abuse. He didn’t like it, obviously, but it gave him some semblance of control.

No, that wasn’t quite it.

It wasn’t control, it was just expected. Certain. He knew what his parents thought of him, he knew (generally) what triggered his father’s outbursts, he knew what it felt like to be hit and how long it took to go away, and he knew that - if he could just get into college and get a scholarship - that he would eventually get away from his family.

Back when he was fourteen and the counselor called him in, he had also known what would happen to him if Child Services took him away. That he would probably be put in some system, one that - at best - might be a shitty place filled with awkward conversations with strangers - but, more likely, he would be passed around until he turned 18 and wasn't the state’s problem anymore. He didn’t think that environment would be conducive to studying, to excelling, to getting into college.

So sometimes he downplayed the abuse, like with the counselor, because he’d rather risk the known than face the unknown. It wasn’t exactly smart, but he didn’t think it was necessarily dumb either.

But that was before the damage was ever really serious.

“It’s called conductive hearing loss; when hearing loss is caused by external forces, rather than
occurring naturally. Based on the CT scan it looks like you fractured your temporal bone. It’s possible that, in time, we can repair the damage, but you need to prepare for the likelihood that this could be a life-long disability. Do you understand?”

When Adam was little, back when his grandma was alive and he got to watch television, he’d watch old reruns of Charlie Brown. Listening to the doctor talk reminded him of it, of watching an adult talk nonsense, blather about. He just stared at the doctor, unable to conjure any emotion, and wondered whether being deaf was the reason she seemed to make no sense. Maybe he just couldn’t hear her well.

Not deaf - exactly. He could still hear in one ear, his right. Was the doctor even standing on his right? He was still fighting the vertigo and his thoughts were sluggish.

“Adam?”

Adam.

Adam, how did this happen?

He shut his eyes to contain the dizziness. The doctor had asked that - Adam, how did this happen? - and he hadn’t said anything to betray his father. It was easy enough to do, because Adam could barely comprehend what happened now. He knew his father shoved him off the porch and there was a blinding pain, and he woke up with his chin pressed into the dirt. He remembered puking in the bushes, wheeling his bicycle down the road, puking again.

“I stopped by your work and Boyd said you weren’t fucking coming in tonight. You want to tell me why not?”

He was too surprised to come up with an excuse, so he went for the truth, and look where that got him. Ronan liked the truth but Adam found lying to be so much easier, so much safer. He made a home out of his lies and he would be buried beneath them someday. Here lies Adam Parrish, beloved son, devoted friend.

“Mr. Parrish?”

“Yes,” Adam said, “I understand.”
They had given him something for his dizziness an hour ago and it didn’t seem to be working. Or maybe this is just how he would feel from now on, unbalanced, uncoordinated. He could ask the doctor, he supposed, but he just wanted to get out of there.

And go where?

Adam was trying very, very hard to decide whether to go back to his house. Would his father feel remorseful once he knew what he had done? Would his mother consider standing up for him next time? Would anything be different, different in any way at all?

Could he afford to move out? He was 18, it would be possible to rent his own place. He’d thought about doing it before, but it was always the unknown that stopped him.

Was he ready to completely cut himself off from his parents? Once he moved out, that was it. He wouldn’t have parents anymore. They’d disown him. No, that would require they feel any sort of emotion for their son. They’d just let him fade away. He didn’t know if he was ready to be an orphan. Do you give up a relationship with your parents, even when they’re shitty? He thought about Ronan, who didn’t have a dad at all anymore, and wondered what he would say to that. (Is it better to have loved and lost, than to have never loved at all? It was something like that, he was sure.)

The doctor said more shit - Adam didn’t care, he really didn’t fucking care - and then someone was showing him outside. He wondered how he would get home from the hospital. It had been hours since Ronan had brought him in, he must have gone home at some point. Would the hospital allow him to leave without a ride? Maybe he could just sneak out.

Then, abruptly, Blue was in front of him. Then Noah. Then Gansey, slowly trailing behind, and Ronan, standing far back.

Oh.

“Adam.” Blue placed her hand on his cheek, cupping it, rubbing her thumb back and forth. “Adam, are you okay?”

He sort of wished they weren’t here. That was a terrible thought, wasn't it? Adam had never had friends, and it should be heartwarming that they were still around. He only survived life by pretending he was fine, so that people wouldn’t start finding holes in his story and picking out the
bullets, but this forced him to be vulnerable. Vulnerability was dangerous. It was like, when you’re trying to keep it all together and someone asks, *Are you okay?* You were fine before, you were able to push it down, but those three magic words are a trigger and you’re suddenly crying.

Vulnerability was a trigger for Adam.

So Adam looked for a distraction. “What happened to the show?”

“That’s not important,” Gansey said. “Let’s just go home. You need rest.”

This was true, Adam did need rest. And he wasn’t blind to see that his friends - who all looked rumpled and weary - could use it as well. He just didn’t know what Gansey meant by home. His home, or Adam’s home? Which begged the question, would Adam go home? He hadn’t gotten that far. He still needed time to debate it, rationalize it.

 Somehow Ronan read his thoughts. “You’re coming with me. Gansey is going to go to your parent’s place, to get your stuff.”

Adam frowned. “That’s not necessary.” Or realistic. He couldn’t imagine Gansey in his trailer, sorting through his things, while his parents sat by. They would never let someone like Gansey - who even in his show clothes still reeked of money and power - step foot in their home.

“It’s okay, Adam,” Gansey said. He placed his hand on Adam’s shoulder, but it was done so carefully, so tentatively, that Adam felt sick. “It’s already been arranged.”

“You don’t understand,” Adam said, patience growing thin. “My father won’t let you--”

“The fucker isn’t there,” Ronan interrupted. His eyes were horrible to look at, boring into Adam like that.

Adam was still feeling incredibly disoriented. How did they know his father wasn’t home? It had to be late - he’d been in the hospital for awhile, true - but there was no way it was morning. His father didn’t have to leave for work until six in the morning. Unless--
“What did you do?” Adam asked.

“I reported the assault,” Gansey was squeezing his shoulder again. He wondered if Gansey thought this was a comforting thing to do, because it didn’t work on Adam. “They took your father in a couple hours ago. You’ll be safe now.”

Adam let the words sink in. “You did what?”

Gansey seemed taken aback by the edge in Adam’s voice. Did he think Adam would be grateful? Why did no one talk to him about this first?

“Adam,” Gansey said slowly, deliberately. “Your father assaulted you. Has been, repeatedly, assaulting you.”

“Don’t talk to me like I’m a child! This is my problem--”

“Adam, the doctor told us what happened and we know--” Gansey pushed on, and their voices overlapped one another.

“--you had no right to do that--”

“Adam.” This was Blue. She had taken his hand, squeezed it once.

“You’re deaf in one ear, Adam,” Gansey finished, and it was this statement that ended the argument. There was an uneasy silence in the group. “This is serious. I understand that you are angry at me, and I’m sorry I didn’t consult you first, but I don’t regret it.”

Adam’s hands were shaking. He felt sick all over again. Gansey had made the decision for him, taken it completely from his hands. He was like a fucking damsel in distress, Gansey riding in on a white horse, and he wanted to die.

Adam did not want to look back on his life to see that someone else had saved him. He wanted it to be him. He wanted to be able to say, years from now, that he got out on his own. He couldn’t say that anymore, and he hated himself a little. He hated Gansey a lot, for doing this to him.
They took his silence as an agreement. Blue went with Gansey for whatever reason. (Adam didn’t want to think about Gansey in his home, meeting his mother. What would she think about the situation? Would she even care that Adam was deaf?)

Noah had driven himself - they had needed two cars to cart all the instruments around, even though it was of no use, in the end - and he planned to meet them at Gansey’s. The walk to Ronan’s car was done in silence. Adam was grateful for it; it gave him time to think, time to plan. Was there any way to get back to what his life was before this night? (Did he even want that?) Adam felt like he were two warring bodies, practical and naive, and neither one knew what to do.

Once they were on the road, though, Adam said, “I’m not going to Gansey’s.”

“Yes, you are.”

Adam leaned his head back, dejected. Ronan thought he could boss him around just by sounding stern. He wasn’t threatened by it. To prove this, when Ronan parked the car at Gansey’s, Adam didn’t get out. He stayed in the BMW, eyes trained out the window, fingers clenched to his seatbelt.

Ronan allowed him, at best, ten seconds before he opened the passenger door. “You are never going back there.”

Adam refused to look at him. “You don’t get to make that decision for me.”

All at once, Ronan looked exhausted. He leaned his forehead against the car frame, peering down at Adam. “What were we supposed to do?”

“Let me handle it,” Adam repeated.

“No, I mean,” he inhaled a deep breath through his nostrils, then out his lips. “Were we supposed to watch you get the shit beat out of you?”

“Didn’t seem to bother you before,” Adam spit. He didn’t know why he said it, he was being petty, trying to start an argument.
Ronan didn’t bite. “Yeah, well, Gansey’s a better friend than we were, apparently.”

At this moment, Adam didn’t agree. He spared one look at Ronan, unsurprised to find him looking back at him. Adam hated Ronan’s gaze sometimes. It was like his eyes had the power to dissect Adam and pull him apart, putting all of his flaws and secrets on display. But no matter how much Adam hated that feeling, he could never get himself to look away.

“You can’t stop me from going back,” Adam said finally.

Ronan shrugged. “You’re right. And if you do, I’ll come along, too. And I’ll beat the shit out of your disgusting excuse of a father. I’ll beat him for every time he hit you, how does that sound?”

Adam flinched just at the thought, of the image of that. There was a lump forming in his throat and he forced it down. “You wouldn’t.”

“I’d be happy to prove you wrong.”

“So that’s your answer? Solve violence with violence? Real smart, Lynch. So fucking commendable.”

This made Ronan falter, though Adam wasn’t sure why. His jaw was clenched tight and he didn’t look at Adam anymore. At once Adam felt guilty for his words, seeing Ronan like this, but at the same time, vindicated. He pressed on, wanting, desperately, for someone else to feel as shitty as he did.

“What do you think will even happen if you do that? My mom would call the cops, you’d get an assault charge. You want to be like my dad, too?”

Ronan slid his tongue across his teeth, thinking. He felt like he won, finally, but then Ronan leaned down, eyes pulling Adam apart again, and said, “Well, then I guess it’s up to you. I don’t have to be that person. Maybe I’d even prefer not to be. But if that’s what it takes, then I don’t fucking care. You are not going back to a shithead who hurts you.”

Adam tried to stare Ronan down with the same look, but it was useless. “I’m still not going to stay
“Fine.”

“I’ll find my own place.”

“Great.”

Finally, Adam unbuckled his seatbelt and got out of the car.

Ronan wasn’t an idiot, he knew they didn’t handle the situation well. When Gansey had suggested calling the cops - he was even friendly with the Chief, a family friend, of-fucking-course - Ronan had even argued with him for a bit. He thought about what Adam would want, and he knew, instinctively, that it wasn’t this.

But he didn’t fucking care. Adam wasn’t going back there, not if Ronan could help it, and Gansey offered a solution that didn’t require Ronan to use his fists. And as much as Ronan really, really wanted to kill Adam’s father, he was also distinctly aware that it was not the best way to handle his anger.

And Ronan realized, very clearly, that he did not want to be associated with violence anymore. Not in Adam’s eyes.

He didn’t expect that Adam would fight them, though, even after they reported it. He had hoped Adam would be resigned to the inevitable. But it wasn’t working, Adam still wanted to go, and fuck, if words weren’t working then how was he supposed to stop this?

So he fell back on the threat of violence. Ronan didn’t want to be associated with Adam’s father. He had already felt dirty by shoving Adam. But he figured he could protect Adam that way, at the least. Pray that Adam would cave in order to avoid creating another monster, creating another Robert Parrish. So he took the gamble and it worked, in the end, because Adam finally gave in. Adam did not go back.
And now Adam probably couldn’t look at Ronan without picturing his father. Maybe he was worrying over nothing, but he had seen Adam flinch in the car. Maybe that’s why he wouldn’t talk to him anymore.

Adam stayed at Gansey’s for two nights. Then he found a cheap hotel to stay at for a couple more nights. Then, at church, Ronan noticed a sign advertising a room for rent upstairs. It made Ronan feel a little slimy, a little like Gansey, to saddle up to Mrs. Ramirez and talk his way into securing the place for Adam. He’s a nice boy, Ronan had said. Very studious. Very proper. We’ve been friends of the Church for so long - good friends, charitable friends - and it would mean so much to us if you rented him the room?

He told Adam none of this, of course. He didn’t say anything at all, actually. Instead, he folded the advertisement for the apartment into a paper airplane and chucked it at Adam’s head. Adam was refusing to talk to all of them - except, for whatever reason, Noah - so Ronan found a different way to communicate.

Then Adam went into hibernation for awhile. Blue saw him at school, of course, and was able to update the rest of the band of his well-being. He didn’t talk much to her, but it gave them hope that he would come around.

“He just needs time,” Gansey said, patting Blue’s hand in comfort.

They were all at Nino’s, though why they came for pizza when no one seemed to have an appetite was a mystery to Ronan. The pizza sat in front of them, getting cold.

Noah was squirming awkwardly in his seat.

“Um, I have something I want to tell you. I found out last week, but it didn’t really seem the time to say it.” He offered a small smile. “I heard from Columbia already. I got in.”

No one said anything for a moment. It was as if no one was willing to be the first to seem happy, the first to break the somber tone. Then, throwing her arms around Noah, Blue said, “That’s amazing! Congratulations!”

Gansey clapped him on the back and said, “Well done!”
“Nice, man. That’s one of your top choices, yeah?” Ronan pushed down his bitterness.

Noah shrugged, looking sheepish. “Yeah. I mean, I’m still waiting to hear from the other three—” Ronan had heard Gansey and Noah discuss the top three schools enough to know he meant Harvard, Yale, and Princeton “—but, like, fat chance. Columbia’s probably the best I’m going to get.”

Blue looked a little dazed. “You say that like Columbia is some trash school.”

“Oh, no, no, I didn’t mean—”

She shook off his worry, plastering a smile on her face that seemed very forced. “No, it’s fine Noah. I’m just kidding. That’s so great.” Her eyes drifted to Gansey. “You’ll probably be hearing soon too, then?”

His eyes fluttered upward innocently. “Well, yes. I know sort of unofficially. Harvard is interested, apparently. My mother has a lot of connections...”

For whatever reason this drew out Blue’s bite. “Must be nice to have friends in high places, huh?”

Gansey looked a bit stricken by her tone. He recovered quickly, though, and said, “Yes, I’m lucky, I suppose. Nothing is for certain, though.”

Ronan felt a little sick. He had known, all along, that the band having some semblance of success did not mean they’d stay together after graduation. Still, he hadn’t denied himself that small hope. He couldn’t help it. And suddenly, with Gansey and Noah’s college prospects looming, and Adam avoiding them, that little hope was dying and taking Ronan with it.

The only solace was the look on Blue’s face. Though she made a valiant effort to hide it, he could see the look in her eyes, too. She would not be going to Harvard, or Columbia, or anywhere really, just like him. They were alike in many ways, Blue and Ronan, but most in this: they would both be left behind, and they both knew it.

Adam didn’t like his new home. It was small and crowded and the sound of the church organ and
people singing hymns bled through his thin floors. Adam didn’t want to think about God, not when God so clearly did not think about him.

Still, he was growing more glad to be out of his house. He wasn’t yet ready to let go of his resentment for Gansey and Ronan, but he couldn’t deny that living alone was much easier. He didn’t realize how exhausting it was to tip-toe through life. He thought he’d be lonelier on his own, but the quiet of an empty room was more welcoming than his mother’s silent body.

He liked getting emails from Noah. They talked about college - of course Noah had found already, while Adam would still have to wait - and they talked about ridiculous things, like whether Adam preferred hotdogs with ketchup or cream cheese, what he would name a dog if he had one, why Noah allowed his little sisters to call him Casper.

He allowed Blue to come over, just once, to see his place. (He had a hard time forgiving her for lying to him about his fake name. It was complicated and messy, though, and he shared part of the blame, so he was trying to get past it.) She decorated the walls with pictures she took from magazines, cut into lyrics from some of their songs.

He was still mad at Gansey, though mostly he felt bewildered by the situation. Out of all his friends in the band, he and Gansey were the least close. On a technical level he understood why Gansey did it. He was practical and was born to an equally intelligent family; he grew up in a household that would never, ever think of hitting a child. The only time they’d spoken was when Adam thanked him, sharply, for paying for his hospital bills. (He saw the cost - there was no point in trying to pay Gansey back.)

It was Ronan he was most angry at. He felt humiliated. Ronan, who went along with his fake name for months, despite knowing the truth. Ronan, who claimed he hated liars and knew Adam was one, but still smiled at him - smiled brilliantly - during concerts. And Adam was even more mad that Ronan was willing to throw it all the way just to make sure Adam didn’t go back.

Because didn’t Ronan realize how much potential he had? If he went and fought Robert Parrish, there would be severe consequences. First, Robert Parrish was good with his fists. Maybe Ronan knew how to fight, but Adam’s father had years of experience. Second, his father had a gun. Adam had found it, tucked underneath his parents bed, a year ago. So even if Ronan managed to have the upper hand in a fight, all Robert had to do was get his gun.

And three, Ronan could not damage his reputation. An assault charge would follow him, forever. He’d have to list it on job applications. It would haunt him if he ever became famous.
Adam didn’t even know what to say to Ronan. He couldn’t say thanks, because he wasn’t at the point yet where he could feel grateful. And he couldn’t pretend like nothing happened, because this was too big to ignore.

He also didn’t want to see Ronan because he’d have to tell him that he wasn’t going to be in the band anymore.

And he wasn’t ready for Ronan to hate him.

It wasn’t until May, fucking May, before Adam finally talked to him. Adam just showed up at Gansey’s apartment one day, completely unexpected, while they were messing around with a couple new songs.

Practice had stalled, obviously, after Adam’s “accident.” They tried to stay active, knowing it was still worthwhile to practice without Adam, but rehearsals didn’t feel right. It wasn’t as fun, knowing there was a chasm, and even Ronan had to force himself to practice sometimes.

It was the first time Adam hadn’t knocked upon arriving at Gansey’s, so it was jarring to be playing one minute, then to see Adam in front of him the next.

“Hey,” Adam greeted. It was casual. No big deal.

Ronan didn’t know what to do. He was not casual. This didn’t seem like no-big-deal.

“Adam!” Ever since Gansey found out about Adam’s real name, he insisted on using it in every sentence. Gansey set down his bass and walked to him, arms tentatively raised in a hug. “It’s good to see you, Adam.”

Adam let him hug him, even hugged Gansey back a little. (Though it could easily go down as one of the most awkward hugs Ronan had ever witnessed, though he wasn’t sure if it was due to the tense situation, or if Adam always hugged like that. He’d never witnessed him do it to anyone before.)

“Was that a new song you were playing?” Adam asked. He stayed near the hall entrance, as if he
were afraid to join the rehearsal circle.

“Yes, Ronan has a couple new songs! You will love them,” Noah chirped.

Adam smiled, though Ronan could tell it didn’t reach his eyes. He was still standing away, shifting from foot to foot. Ronan didn’t know what to say - was everyone going to pretend like it hadn’t been over a month since they last saw Adam? - but Blue finally broke.

“How are you?” She crossed the gap to take his hand. “You look good.”

Ronan didn’t really think so. Adam was still a bit too thin, still had bags under his eyes. “Oh, I’m fine. I, uh, I came here to tell you guys some good news. I heard back from some colleges.”

Blue’s hand slipped from Adam’s. Ronan didn’t think she meant it to be rude, but Adam clearly noted it. He wet his lips. “I’m going to Yale. Almost a full ride.”

“Damn!” Noah’s mouth dropped open. “I didn’t even get in there! How come you didn’t tell us you were so smart?”

Adam stuffed his hands in his pockets and shrugged. “Well, they have to take a few charity cases. Helps their rep and all, I’m sure.”

“Don’t listen to him, he’s brilliant,” Blue said, finding her voice. She tipped onto her toes to reach her arms around Adam’s neck. She said, “Congratulations.”

Ronan couldn’t help but notice that Blue said it into Adam’s left ear. Maybe Adam could still hear her - he didn’t know how far her voice could travel - or maybe he got the sentiment in the hug; either way, he didn’t point it out to Blue.

“Gansey got into Yale, too,” Noah said. “You could be roomies!”

Adam blanched visibly at this. Gansey, swooping in, swiftly said, “Well, I still haven’t decided between Harvard and Yale, Noah.”
“Oh, congratulations,” Adam said. He didn’t look remotely surprised to hear that Gansey had multiple Ivy-League options.

An awkward silence fell over the room. Adam was looking at his feet, fingers tapping the sides of his thighs. It suddenly dawned on Ronan why he was here. Why now. Why he came, seemingly just to tell them where he was going to college.

“So, you’re officially quitting the band?” Ronan couldn’t look at Adam when he asked. He kept his eyes on his guitar strings, pretending to tune it. Pretending like he didn’t care.

The room was so quiet that they could hear Adam swallow. “It doesn’t really make sense, with all of us leaving.”

“Not all of us are leaving,” Ronan bit.

“You know what I meant,” Adam countered.

“But we still have so much time before we leave,” Noah made his way to Adam, tugging on the hem of his shirt. “We could play for a little longer. Just for fun.”

“It’s just, I’ve been picking up a ton of extra shifts, to save up money for college,” Adam said, the hint of a plea in his voice. “And for rent.”

“We don’t have to do shows,” Noah said, pressing the issue. “We could just play for fun.”

“Don’t bother.” Ronan’s remark drew Adam’s gaze. By now, he finally had the courage to look Adam in the eyes. “He has his priorities, and it isn’t us.”

He wanted to say, *It isn’t me.*

“That’s not true. We’re still friends,” Adam said.
Ronan laughed. It was a cruel sort of chuckle, one that told Adam exactly how he felt. That was a lie, and they both knew it. Too much time had passed since Adam last spoke to them. Ronan had given up the hope that Adam was just feeling awkward, or was still mad at them. You didn’t just stop talking to your friends, not for that long.

“Of course,” Gansey said, shooting Ronan a pointed look. “Though, I will say I’m a bit disappointed. We had something good going on for awhile there.”

“Tad will be so disappointed,” Noah said, slumping into the couch. “He’s been asking how you’ve been, when we’re going to play our next show.”

Blue snorted. “Well, then there’s one silver lining from this. I hope he’s miserable.”

The group kept falling into silence. It was becoming painfully obvious that Adam didn’t want to be there. Finally, he said, “I’ve got to get going, though. I have to get to work. But it was good to see you.”

Blue hugged him again. “Let’s hang out soon.”

“Sure. Uh, but real fast, Lynch?” Adam was licking his bottom lip again. He jerked his head to the door. “Could I talk to you for a minute?”

Ronan did not want to talk to Adam, not after he crushed him so completely in his hand. Still, Ronan unfolded himself from the chair and followed Adam outstair. It did not slip Ronan’s notice that Adam pulled the door shut behind them.

“What?”

Adam was chewing on lip, chewing on how to phrase what he wanted to say. “I, uh, I just wanted to say that I was sorry. Because I know this was your dream.”

Ronan didn’t want to hear this. He forced himself to keep calm, to be a better person. He was probably the reason Adam was leaving the band, because he was such a fucking hot head, and it would be better to leave on a good note. But Ronan didn’t know how to be quiet, how to handle anger like a normal fucking person, so he chose cool indifference.
“I’ll be fine.”

Adam didn’t seem convinced. “So what will you do after graduation, then?”

“Beats me.” It was fine. Ronan could do this. He just had to remain detached, aloof, and the anger stayed at bay.

Adam waited for Ronan to say more, but he wouldn’t budge. He knew it came off like he was a pissed, stubborn little baby, and hell, he sort of was, but Ronan figured it was better this way.

“Well, I’ll see you around,” Adam muttered.

“Yep.”

Despite his tentative goodbye, Adam still lingered. He looked as if he were going to say something, or could be convinced to say something, if only Ronan were willing to participate. So Ronan made the decision for him by going back inside.

Adam leaned against the door of Gansey’s apartment. Ronan’s indifference was unexpected, and it hurt like hell. Adam had prepared himself for a fight, for Ronan to yell or call him names or accuse him of being a traitor, but he didn’t do any of that. He barely even looked at Adam.

Adam shut his eyes and counted down from ten. This was not how this was supposed to go. He needed to be out of the band, but he did not want to be out of Ronan’s life. He relied on Ronan’s anger because he knew it would eventually pass. Wasn’t that how Ronan operated? They just had to hash it out and then, slowly, they would circle back together and everything would be fine.

Instinctively, Adam brought a finger up to his right ear and snapped. The sound was loud and clear next to his working ear. He did the same movement but on the left; he heard nothing. It was almost like a nervous tick for him now. For over a month now he did it several times a day, hoping, under some miracle, that he would be able to hear again.
Adam didn’t want to quit the band. But he didn’t think he would be good for the band anymore, not like this.

Being a musician kind of relied on good hearing, and he didn’t have that anymore. He tried singing, when alone in his apartment, and it sounded foreign to him. Not like his normal voice. Adam thought of the shows they played, where Blue’s drums echoed in his ears and the crowd screamed and how he could barely hear himself then, when he had two good ears.

How could he handle that now, with only one ear? And what if he somehow damaged that? The doctor had been explicitly clear with him that he had to treat his right ear well. No loud music, no Q-tips, that sort of thing. He thought about not being able to listen to music, not being able to hear Ronan’s creations.

He could give up being in the band to ensure that the band would continue to be successful. They could find another singer. Adam even thought, maybe it would be good for him to leave; it would force Ronan to consider other musicians. Gansey and Noah would eventually leave, but that didn’t mean Ronan had to give up his music.

His songs were so good, and people needed to hear them.

Just not with Adam’s voice.

Adam’s departure was the unofficial end to the band. They tried to make it work for a while, to still practice for fun, like Noah hoped, but everyone slowly drifted off. Ronan didn’t even care anymore. If the band didn’t have Adam it wasn’t his band, so why bother to pretend?

He saw him still, occasionally. Blue had pushed her way back into a friendship with Adam, pestering him until he caved. Sometimes Ronan would show up at Nino’s and Adam would already be there.

“I hear you’re graduating on Saturday,” Adam had said, picking at some leftover pizza Blue must have procured for him. “Congratulations.”

Ronan shrugged off the praise. “A high school diploma. How will the world handle my success?”
“You could still apply for college. Get in during Winter quarter.”

He wanted to say *Fuck that.* Instead, Ronan muted himself. “Maybe.”

He didn’t see Adam for another month after that. Ronan spent most his days at Gansey’s apartment, trying to suck up as much time as possible with him. All this time Ronan had been focused on the band breaking up, focused on Noah, Gansey, and Adam leaving, that he didn’t think about Gansey actually being *gone.* Ronan had to picture a life without Gansey by his side. It hadn’t been like that for almost four years, and he wasn’t sure what type of person he would be without him.

When he did finally run into Adam again, it was just the two of them. Noah was supposed to meet them for coffee but was running late, as usual. Adam was in a poor mood, though Ronan didn’t know why. He looked extra tired; maybe work was getting to him.

“I can’t believe Gansey is going to Yale,” Adam muttered, wrapping his knuckles on the table. “He got into Harvard, why would he turn that down?”

Ronan didn’t know why. He and Gansey did not discuss college, did not discuss the fact that Gansey was about to leave. They were naively pretending it wasn’t happening.

“Are you still mad at him or something?”

Adam looked away. This was not a subject he was ready to talk about, apparently. “No. Maybe. I don’t know. Yale was supposed to be a fresh start.”

“Because that worked out for you so well last time, Ben.”

Adam’s hand clenched his coffee mug so tight that his knuckles turned white. “Are you fucking serious, Ronan? You’re making an issue of that now, months later?”

Seeing Adam’s anger made Ronan pull back again. He took out his phone and fiddled with it - he really should download a game or two, for instances like this - and avoided Adam’s gaze. “My brother wants to talk. I’ll be back.”
This was a lie, and a pathetic one. Adam watched him leave the coffee shop, eyes tracing his steps, and he felt them burn into him. Ronan didn’t turn back, just walked to his car and left.

He understood Adam’s obsession with starting new, obviously he did. Ronan wanted that for himself sometimes. But imagining Adam, completely alone somewhere, pretending to be someone that he wasn’t, upset Ronan. He liked this Adam the way he was, a broken down unit trying very hard to still do its job, because that was Adam’s best quality. Being so focused on succeeding that he would do anything to get what he wanted. Without his past, as hard as it was, Ronan wondered what person Adam would be.

He only saw Adam one more time before everyone left for college. Blue threw a small going away party for the college trio, complete with streamers and a giant sheet cake. She was extremely melancholy that day, more muted than he had ever seen her. She wrote all of the boys a handwritten letter and made them promise not to open it until they got to their dorms.

Gansey and Adam were not, in fact, rooming together, much to Noah’s disappointment. Ronan watched the two of them together, noting the silence. He wondered if they would even talk at Yale. Gansey’s diplomacy would ensure that there would never be any awkward tension or unfortunate incidents, but Adam was not skilled at forgiveness. Ronan couldn’t really blame him for that; until now, the people in Adam’s life did not deserve his forgiveness. If Adam started handing out mercy now, Ronan worried he would give it to the wrong people.

Noah left earlier than everyone else. He was the only one of the college trio that had family nearby, and he wanted to spend time with his sisters before he left the next morning. Gansey borrowed Blue for a private moment, something about having a goodbye gift in his car, which left Ronan alone with Adam.

They sat on Gansey’s couch, staring at the abandoned instruments that had yet to be packed up. Gansey’s apartment belonged to him, purchased as an excessive gift from his family when he turned sixteen, and he had given Ronan and Blue each a key. They took it without question, though Ronan knew neither would come to the apartment without Gansey, and it was even more unlikely that they’d play instruments in the room that held such amazing memories.

“Do you have a plan for your life yet?”

Ronan bit at the leather bands on his wrist. It was a rude question for Adam to ask, he thought, because Adam obviously knew the answer was no. Maybe Adam thought that, if he continued to pester Ronan about it, he’d be forced to come up with something.
“My mom isn’t able to keep up the farm by herself, so I’ll help out.”

Adam’s gaze was unwavering and extremely judgmental. “And?”

“And what? I’ll start with that,” Ronan said, defensive.

Adam looked angry again. “You’re such a dick.”

Ronan didn’t think that was a fair thing to say, considering he’d been trying exceedingly hard to not be an asshole lately. He could sense that Adam was looking for a fight - he’d been doing that increasingly, lately - but he refused to take it. Adam had a way of digging under Ronan’s skin, though, and he knew it. So Adam pressed on.

“You realize you’re wasting your potential here, right?” Adam’s voice was lower than usual, and his words came out fast and clipped. It was a bad sign, so Ronan stood up from the couch, looking for an escape. Adam followed suit. “You’re wasted in Henrietta. So is Blue.”

“You should tell her that. She’d love it.” Ronan turned to Adam with a sneer. It felt oddly comforting to feel his lips twist that way again, so nostalgic, but he didn’t let it linger for long. “Not everyone gets to leave Henrietta for bigger things, Parrish.”

“Then you guys should find more musicians!”

Just the thought of replacing Gansey, Noah, and Adam made Ronan feel sick. “Nah.”

Adam ran a hand through his hair. He’d cut it recently, probably in a bid to arrive at school looking well-kept, and Ronan thought it made him look too much like Gansey. He liked Adam being a little ragged, a little unkempt. A little sexy. (No, this was not the time for that.)

“Why are you doing this?” Adam asked finally. Ronan wasn’t sure what he was referring to, so Adam rephrased his statement. “Do you care about anything anymore?”

Ronan rolled his eyes. “Jesus fuck, it’s just a band.”
“I’m not talking about that. Or not just that.” Adam licked his bottom lip and Ronan savored the action, knowing distinctly that it would be the last time he’d see it. “You won’t fight me on anything, anymore. I can’t tell if you gave up or if you just don’t care.”

*Neither,* Ronan thought. He wasn’t going to correct Adam, though. He couldn’t understand that this was a reaction to Ronan caring far too much.

Adam’s eyes searched Ronan’s face carefully. “I don’t need you to treat me like a baby. I’m not some fragile thing, Ronan.”

Ronan couldn’t help but laugh. Adam thought he pitied him, even still. Ronan took two long steps toward Adam, and in return, Adam took two steps away, jumping a little when his back unexpectedly hit the wall. Ronan hovered a little closer, leaning over Adam, and watched him carefully.

“You think this is about me pitying you still?” Ronan took another step to Adam. This was the closest together they’d ever been and it was fucking with Ronan’s heart. He tried to focus on the conversation, not on Adam’s breath escaping his bitten lips or how many more freckles he had now that it was summer. “I thought I made it clear to you that I don’t give a fuck about that.”

“Could have fooled me,” Adam said.

Ronan lifted his hand up - he was just going to set it on the wall for support, because he felt a little weak suddenly - but Adam jerked at the movement. It was subtle, but it dragged Ronan out of his stupor, seeing Adam flinch again, and he dropped it at his side, defeated. He wanted to tell Adam, *This is why. This is why I won’t get mad at you.* The realization that Adam expected Ronan to hit him was the final blow to take Ronan down, so he gave up.

Ronan turned away from Adam and forced himself to be cool. “Good luck at college, man.”

Then he left Gansey’s apartment before he could be tempted to stay, before he could be tempted to pull Adam close and promise him he would never ever lay a hand on him, never hurt him, never again. But Adam didn’t need to worry about being hit, it shouldn’t even be a thought that would cross his mind anymore. And if he had to worry about Ronan doing that, then Ronan would extract himself from the picture.
Adam didn’t move from the wall. His heart was skittering, thumping painfully in his chest, and it made his fingers twitch at his sides.

*What was that?*

Adam placed his hands on the concrete wall, palms stretched out, trying to focus on the cool sensation.

*What just happened?*

He thought, for just a minute, something ridiculous. He thought he understood something about Ronan, finally, something about the way he looked at Adam. He thought, maybe, Ronan was going to touch him. He had watched Ronan’s hand raise, followed the trajectory of its path with anticipation, and he had hoped he would--

Adam leaned his head against the concrete and looked up, closing his eyes.

He didn’t know what he thought Ronan would do. It seemed stupid, now, to think *that*. Ronan was not an affectionate person, he would never offer the touch that Adam craved.

He felt like an idiot for even entertaining that hope, for being excited for the possibility. As if Ronan Lynch would want to touch Adam.

*Stupid.*

Blue and Ronan took a few days off from each other after the guys left. When they finally met up - at her stepfather’s music store - they sat in front of the wall of guitars. Blue picked the smallest one off the wall and placed it on her lap.
“Teach me something,” she said. Her voice was lilted. She was handling the absence of the boys worse than Ronan, and it was somewhat surprising. He knew she loved them all, but her reaction felt oddly familiar.

Ronan taught her the simplest chord - E minor, which just required two fingers - and she strummed the guitar without emotion. He taught her a few more, C, and G, and D, before her hands stilled and she stopped playing entirely.

“Sargent?”

Blue turned to him, a sigh already on her lips. “I was looking forward to something other than this.”

Ronan knew what she meant, but even so he said, “Sorry to disappoint. It’s just me.”

She smiled at him and it was horrible, because Blue was so obviously trying not to cry and her smile was the only thing holding her together. “What do we do now?”

Ronan wasn’t good at comforting, but he put his hand on her back, patting it it in slow thumps. Blue sighed, letting her emotions pour out with it.

About a month later Ronan checked his phone, curious about an unknown number that had texted him.

*It’s Parrish. Got a phone, finally. Just so you know.*

Ronan did not bother to respond. Adam would text him occasionally, so rarely that Ronan didn’t bother to keep tabs on his phone. He would update him about college sometimes, or ask how Ronan was, or sometimes talked about Blue.

There was, one time, that a text actually made Ronan laugh. It was months after they left, nearing Christmas break already, and maybe it happened because enough time had finally passed for Ronan...
to not think of Adam flinching. It was a string of texts, delivered so rapidly that Ronan actually checked his phone.

Ronan.

How did Tad Carruthers get my phone number?

Was it you?

F

U

C

K

K

K

I know it was you. He told me.

Tad Fucking Carruthers are you kidding me?

You’re dead to me.

Ronan did, in fact, give away Adam’s number. Tad had been bothering him about Adam for months and it seemed like the only way to get him out of Ronan’s life. So yeah, he gave him Adam’s number, and maybe he took pleasure in it. He was allowed to be a little bitter.
He wants to hang out. Ronan he is coming to Connecticut.

Tad Fucking Carruthers is going to visit us before you do.

Ronan fiddled with the keys on his phone, debating what to say back. Finally, he wrote, *Too busy. Tad will have to be my replacement.* He paused a second, then added, *Will you be back for Christmas?*

*No where to come back to.* A minute later, maybe because Ronan didn’t respond, Adam added, *I got a job here too. Can’t really leave.*

Ronan was almost relieved at the news. He didn’t know if he could stand Adam being back, not when he was finally getting the hang of being alone in Henrietta. Noah would be there, true, and Gansey would likely make the trip down from his family’s place in D.C. for at least a few days, but Adam was different.

Adam texted again. *You should come visit sometime. Seriously.*

Ronan held his phone in his hand, clenching it. Finally, he said, *I’ll try.*

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for sticking with me through this chapter because I *haaanate* it and think it's garbage. Let's never do angst again, okay? Sounds good.

This is still a band story, don't worry; I am just taking a temporary break where they go to college, because college AUs are great right?

I apologize if Adam or Gansey seem very OOC this chapter, but I really struggled with
certain aspects of how to handle Adam's abuse. Part, because I had to justify why Adam would consider staying with his family and I could really only picture it through my own experience with abuse - and then I had lots of thoughts on how (this version) of Gansey would respond. If you are curious I decided to write something about about it here.
Chapter Summary

Ronan still hadn’t visited. He thought about it, almost went a few times, but would chicken out last minute. From the way Gansey described Yale, it sounded like Ronan’s version of hell. He had grown a bit reclusive in the past year and the idea of being surrounded by hundreds of elitist assholes or stuffing himself into a cramped dorm room was horrific.

And there were still some things he wanted to sort out about himself before he saw Adam. Like how to hold a normal conversation when you’re pissed. And to not lose his chill around Adam.

He was working on it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took Ronan a very long time to figure out what to do with himself after Gansey, Noah, and Adam left for college. True to his word, he did help his mother around the farm. It was distracting enough at first, for there were endless things to fix and so much shit to pick up (literally - cows, enough said) that he kept busy. He’d invite Blue over sometimes - because he was worried about her, it had nothing to do with needing her company, because he was completely fine - and she liked to play with the chickens. Occasionally she would even help around the farm, though she drew the line at the cow dung.

But then, after months of doing this, there were less things to fix. And eventually he got so good at the routine that it took him less and less time, until he could finish every morning chore by nine.

At first, he spent much of his time still writing music, though they were less energetic than they used to be. Ronan was turning into a ballad man, much to his disdain. He still had no idea how to write lyrics to slow songs, especially ones that sounded romantic, so he paired the somber tunes with insane lyrics. Gansey found it hilarious - because even all the way in Yale, he somehow convinced Ronan to send him the recorded songs - and teased him mercilessly.

“Is there no one in Henrietta who has captured your attention enough to write something better?” Gansey asked once. A few months into college Ronan had agreed to talk on the phone with Gansey once a week, but only for ten minutes. He only agreed because Noah told him that Gansey was having a hard time at college. “I’m sure there are plenty of eligible ladies around.”

Ronan didn’t dignify that with a response. There was the obvious reason why - because, you know,
gay and all - and the other obvious reason why - because it was fucking Henrietta and no, there were no eligible ladies there - but partly because, well, he sort of had gone on a few dates.

If you were gay, and especially if you were still sort of closeted, dating in Henrietta was near impossible. There were a couple times when Ronan drove up to D.C., though, to meet up with a guy. It was always incredibly awkward and secretive, because D.C. tended to attract the sort of men whose reputations would be severely impacted if they were caught in public. It was a lot of going to someone’s house and eating in, then trying to watch a movie while analyzing how far his date wanted to take things.

Which led to the other horrible part of dating: trying to enjoy kissing someone who you barely knew. This was not Ronan’s cup of tea. Just having to sustain a conversation with a stranger was exhausting. Being intimate felt impossible.

He got better at kissing, eventually, and sometimes he enjoyed it. There was one guy, in particular, who almost turned into something. He was not one of the aforementioned political playboys who kept their desires locked up tight, so they actually went in public a couple times. (Though Ronan was not ready for public displays of affection. Not yet.) They started seeing each other toward the end of Gansey’s freshman year.

And then, somewhere around the fifth time they hung out things were actually going somewhere - the type of going somewhere that would require extensive visits to confession - because this guy had pushed him up against a wall and Ronan liked it, for whatever reason. And then his phone went off in his pocket and he was going to ignore it, like usual, but it went off again and Jesus Christ, it was Adam Parrish and one of his rare texts, and it said:

Gansey was bragging to people here that he was really cool in high school and I need to demolish him for this but I’m drawing a blank. Please advise.

After that, Ronan had tossed his phone on the couch and tried to resume things, but it was doomed. Thinking of Adam made him realize why being pushed up against a wall was a bit of a turn on.

A few hours later, once he got back to Henrietta, he decided to text Adam back. He didn’t usually respond (and it was probably part of the reason that Adam’s texts were so rare) but apparently he was masochistic.

I mean the obvious: boat shoes, plays bass, is named after genitalia. Less obvious: was obsessed with this dumb dead king and spent a year walking around with metal rods and yelling excelsior in a British accent.
What?!

_Just ask him who Glendower is in front of people and he'll demolish himself._

It wasn’t until the next day that Ronan wondered whether Adam and Gansey simply shared friends, or if they had grown close. Gansey talked about Adam occasionally, sure, but Ronan had assumed Adam was holding to his rule about starting fresh.

And then, at once, Ronan remembered that when Adam had said _come visit_ he had said _come visit us_. He wasn’t sure whether he liked the idea of them being friends again. It made him supremely jealous, both because he missed Gansey and because he missed Adam.

Ronan still hadn’t visited. He thought about it, almost went a few times, but would chicken out last minute. From the way Gansey described Yale, it sounded like Ronan’s version of hell. He had grown a bit reclusive in the past year and the idea of being surrounded by hundreds of elitist assholes or stuffing himself into a cramped dorm room was horrific.

And there were still some things he wanted to sort out about himself before he saw Adam. Like how to hold a normal conversation when you’re pissed. And to not lose his chill around Adam.

He was working on it.

Working on the farm and going on secret dates was still not enough to keep Ronan busy. Blue was suggesting hobbies to him as they fiddled around in her stepfather’s shop (“Photography.” “I’m not taking any fucking photos.” “Weed Whacking.” “And I’m not doing your fucking chores either!”) when Mr. Allen suggested, “Do you want to work here?”

Blue looked affronted. “You don’t even let me work here!”

“You don’t know anything about guitars, Blue.” Mr. Allen cupped her chin and rubbed it with affection. Ronan figured he was trying to soften the blow. “And that’s sort of my biggest selling item.”
Ronan agreed almost immediately. Mr. Allen couldn’t pay him much - not that Ronan really needed the money, not with his dad’s inheritance - but he was still desperate to get his hands on one of the rare guitars and this seemed like an easy ticket to do so. And hey, what else was he doing with his life? If he couldn’t have a band, maybe working with instruments would be a decent in-between.

He only worked about twenty hours a week but it helped his mood. Noah came home for summer, full of ridiculous stories about Columbia (“I’m a coxswain!” “A what?” “Coxswain.” “Is that like a dick?”) and convinced Blue and Ronan to play a couple times together. Gansey wasn’t home much that summer because his mother was running for Congress, but he stopped by a few times.

Blue always had a convenient excuse not to see Gansey, though. Ronan wondered if Gansey had somehow offended her while thousands of miles away, but he denied it vehemently. (“We barely talk anymore.”)

And then, toward the end of summer, the weirdest fucking thing happened. Ronan was working at the music store when this little child walked in, completely alone. For what had to be a five year old, she looked quite punk. Someone had gotten her a skull beanie and it was pulled low over her ears.

At the time Ronan had been fiddling around with a guitar while the store was empty. She just walked straight up to him and blinked, wordlessly watching.

Ronan looked around the store, hoping he could track down her parent and get her the fuck out of there. (The idea of a little kid running around a store unsupervised was bad enough, but Mr. Allen’s instruments were likely worth over a million dollars. He did not want to be responsible for that.)

When Ronan didn’t see anyone he asked, “Where did you come from?”

The little girl shrugged at him. She still didn’t say anything, but now she moved closer to Ronan and poked at his guitar. Ronan lifted it above his head, way out of her reach, and said, “Fat chance.”

They stared each other down for a long moment. The little girl looked furious that Ronan had taken her toy away, because she kept pointing to it and stamping her foot. “Where’s your mom, kid?”

The little girl actually rolled her eyes at him. Ronan was taken aback by her attitude, but almost felt a little… impressed. He slowly lowered the guitar to her level and said, “If you break it, you buy it.”
She seemed enamored by the guitar. He set it on the ground and let her pick at the strings, keeping an eye on her while he opened the door to the store and checked around for her parents. The street was almost completely deserted.

“Kid, seriously, where did you come from?”

She looked up at him, bright blue eyes blinking, and just shook her head. Then she turned back to the guitar and fiddled with the tuners, wiggling them back and forth. Not sure what to do, Ronan called Mr. Allen - who didn’t respond - then tried Blue.

“Call the police, Ronan!” was Blue’s immediate response. She grumbled something else into the phone and added, “I’ll be there in a few. But seriously, call the police in the meantime.”

Ronan did not like the police - they liked to pull him over for no good reason, and okay, sometimes because he deserved it - and didn’t feel like dealing with him. Reluctantly he called them, watching the little girl carefully. She had moved on from the guitar and was looking at a drum set curiously. True to her word, Blue appeared not long after, covering her ears as the kid hit the crash cymbal over and over again.

“Why aren’t you stopping her?” Blue yelled.

He didn’t really have a good reason. When she started banging the cymbal she had looked so pleased, turning to smile wide at Ronan, and man, how was he supposed to deny her this happiness? Plus, he was slowly realizing that maybe this little girl didn’t have the best life, taking in her thin frame, too big clothes, and refusal to talk, and if banging something loud made her feel better, then fuck, bang away.

He turned out to be fairly correct in his prediction. After a very long evening of being questioned by the police, the police trying to question the little girl, and making calls around the neighborhood, they figured out she was a foster kid in a nearby home. Her foster parents, to their credit, were frantic.

Ronan was surprisingly relieved to see her be swept into a hug, though the little girl didn’t seem to interested in hugging back. She stood in the arms of the woman and turned to look at Ronan, and if she wasn’t a child, he would swear the look said, Can you believe this shit?

The woman pulled down her beanie and said, “Opal, we were so worried. Why did you run away?”
Ronan turned away from the scene, figuring they deserved some privacy. Thankfully the police needed nothing else from him since everything cleaned up nicely, leaving Blue and Ronan to sort through music books as *Opal* (cute name but weird kid) and her foster mother left the store.

Once they were gone Blue raised her eyebrows and said, “So that was an experience.”

“It was fine.”


“I just let her bang on the drums. Any kid would like that.”

“Girl knows her shit, though.” Blue leaned toward Ronan, smile all teeth. It was *sort of* nice to see her looking happy again. “Drums are the shit.”

Ronan nodded, as if to agree, and said, “Small, crazy children sure seem to like them.”

Blue took a music book and slapped Ronan with it. “I’m going to kill you.”

Ronan laughed.

Okay, Ronan didn’t mind the crazy little girl, but things were getting excessive. This was the third time she had run away from home and found him at the music shop. (And apparently she might have come on a day he didn’t work, so really, she tried four times. *Four times.* ) Opal would just walk in like they had an agreed upon meeting, point to a various instrument, and wait for Ronan to start playing a guitar.

After the second time it happened he was smart enough to get the Foster mother’s number. Diane was incredibly apologetic each time. Apparently Opal was a wily little thing who knew how to pick locks, because she was continuously breaking out of the house.
“Opal,” Ronan said to her the third time. “We can’t keep meeting like this.”

Today she nodded to a saxophone. Ronan followed her gaze. “Yeah, not going to happen. I don’t play.”

He sort of liked the little pout that crossed her lips. It made her look her age, and in that moment he almost forgot she was a crazy child who kept running away from home. Opal’s eyes searched around the room and she pointed to a bass guitar.

“Oof, yeah, I refuse on principle.” Opal blinked at him, so Ronan clarified (the best one could to a child) and said, “Anyone could play that thing. Even you could play it.” Opal grinned, showing off a missing front tooth. “No, that wasn’t an offer to teach you.”

This seemed to upset her, because she wandered over to the drum set and began crashing the cymbal. It was definitely her go-to stress reliever, and he couldn’t really fault her for that. He wasn’t really one to judge, considering his outlets involved driving at high speeds and getting into fist-fights with homophobic assholes.

Ronan called Diane while Opal whaled away on the drumset. He didn’t bother speaking into the phone, just held it to the sound, knowing Diane would understand. Sure enough, she came rushing into the store ten minutes later. Her hair was pulled back and wet, and it wasn’t until the smell of ammonia reached his nose that he realized it was hair dye.

Ouch.

Diane was clearly growing frustrated with Opal’s escapes. Instead of using the patented you-worry-us-when-you-do-this-we-love-you-please-do-not-run-away-again speech, Diane just held her hands out in front of her face. They were shaking slightly, and he could see the strain in her face.

“Opal, please, if they think we don’t take care of you they will take you away. Do you understand?”

Opal did not seem swayed by this argument. It was the first time that Ronan had wondered what her backstory was. He wasn’t stupid, he knew what foster kids typically went through. Where were her real parents? Why did they have to give her up? Was she even treated well at Diane’s?
They were almost out the door when Ronan stopped them. Ronan was already cursing himself for what he was about to suggest but, Jesus, whatever, he was just going to do it.

“I think she wants to learn an instrument.” Ronan made a point to look at Opal. He wanted to see her expression. “If you want, I can teach her.”

It wasn’t like Opal lit up at the suggestion. She was always more reserved around her foster mother, so he wasn’t expecting a big reaction. Still, the way she turned slightly toward Ronan, eyes curious, betrayed her interest.

Diane cleared her throat and, very quietly, said, “I wish we could, but we don’t exactly have the funds.”

God, what was he doing?

“It’d be free.” He nodded to the empty store. “Not like I’m doing anything else half the time.”

Diane still looked apprehensive, and all at once Ronan realized what this might look like. Random older guy, offering to teach a small, innocent girl guitar in an empty store. “You would be here, too.”

Diane was still hesitant, but Ronan didn’t miss the way Opal’s hand twitched at her side. “I just, I don’t want to trouble you.”

“Well, it could be an experiment. I’ve never taught anyone before, and it’s sort of…intriguing.” Which wasn’t a lie. Working at a music shop was only so fulfilling, and he missed getting to play along with someone.

For the first time, Diane seemed like she was seriously considering the offer. Ronan took one of Mr. Allen’s business cards and wrote down his name and phone number. (Which he almost immediately regretted because, fuck, he’d have to keep his phone on him now.) Then, at last minute, he added his schedule.

“Take this for now.” He tried to seem nice. Like he was a normal, well-adjusted high school graduate, and not the wild-card that most people saw. “You can just stop by. If I have a customer I’ll need to help them, but she can just practice in the meantime.”
Diane took the card and held it to her chest. There was a bit of hair dye dripping down the back of her neck, and combined with her shaking hands, Ronan suddenly had a very clear picture of how tiring it must be to be a foster parent. After they left, and he began to regret his decision, he tried to remember this image of Diane.

*You are doing a good thing,* he reminded himself. *You can do good things.*

One month into teaching Opal guitar, Ronan got the nerve to text Adam. He was never the one to initiate a conversation.

*You’d be so proud,* he typed. *I have a plan.*

Adam responded quickly, but only with a question mark. It felt like he was bragging, or trying to show off how generous he was, but Ronan forced the guilt away. It wasn’t wrong to want to tell Adam that he was proud of something.

*I’m teaching a kid guitar. She totally sucks at it and can’t reach half the chords, but whatever. It’s kind of cool.*

Adam took longer to respond to this, and when he finally did, Ronan expected a more elegant response. Instead, Adam just said, *That’s awesome. Congrats.*

Ronan didn’t respond after that. Talking to Adam always felt foreign and dangerous; he didn’t want to ruin what tentative friendship they had left.

Adam tried really, really hard to be happy at Yale. He gave it a good shot for the first two months. Every time his mind found faults with his experience he pushed it away. This was his dream, he was no longer in Henrietta, he was going to an Ivy-League school for the same price that some people went to community college; Adam did not have the right to be unhappy here.
And then, somewhere in month three, he allowed himself to be unhappy.

It wasn’t Yale, specifically, that was the problem. He enjoyed his classes, and the campus was beautiful, and his scholarship came with a gratuitous meal plan that was almost too much to handle, and his roommate was perfectly fine.

But none of those things made Adam feel happy. All this time, Adam had banked on college being his savior. Maybe he built it up too much, or maybe he was picky. Either way, college was quickly becoming another place where he went through the motions. It was like being in his apartment about St. Agnes; theoretically, much better than the trailer park, but in actuality, still not a home.

He did not miss Henrietta, but he missed the small home he had built with the band. He still talked with Blue - much more, now that he had a cell phone - and Noah would come down from Columbia to visit sometimes. He and Gansey lived in the same dorm and saw each other occasionally, though Gansey kept his distance. He was grateful for it, and it slightly lessened the anger he still felt for Gansey.

A good part of Adam was still infuriated with Gansey, though. He tried to separate Gansey into two parts - Gansey’s intentions, and the actual outcome of Gansey’s actions - because he knew Gansey meant well by reporting the assault. The problem was that he handled it the Richard Campbell Gansey III way, which meant he charged in, quite ignorant to the situation, and didn’t consult anyone else on their opinion. Adam was quite sure that this was how Richard Campbell Gansey the Second handled situations, and probably how Richard Campbell Gansey the First did too. It reeked of privileged men not really knowing how the world worked.

Because the truth was, by reporting Adam’s father, the state very seriously considering putting Robert Parrish on trial for assault. And while his father deserved it, it would have required Adam to testify in court, and he very much did not feel ready to do that. He liked his original plan - to slip out after graduation to attend college - because it would have allowed him to disappear. Maybe that made him a coward, but Adam found it the more logical solution. Robert Parrish was only a threat to Adam, so by removing himself from the situation, everything would be fine.

In the end his worry didn’t matter because the state dropped the case. Robert Parrish got to walk free, but so did Adam.

It had been months and months since the accident, though, and Adam wanted to let it go. That meant forgiving Gansey, though. Adam was trying, truly, but he wasn’t good at forgiveness.

Neither was Ronan, apparently. Whatever issue he had with Adam, he was not willing to let it go.
Ronan still insisted on being cool and distant. Adam never expected him to be chatty through the phone - he’d seen how little Ronan cared for the device - but Ronan didn’t respond at all. (Well, except the one time that Adam harassed Ronan for giving his phone number to Tad, but Ronan could never resist jabbing at Tad.)

In some ways Adam missed Ronan most of all. He missed everything that Ronan encompassed - the songs that Adam grew reliant on in order to fall asleep, the band, an occasional sparring partner. And as hypocritical as it was to admit, he missed having a person know who he was. Where he came from.

Which just sent Adam into a shame spiral because, seriously, he was the one who argued that he wanted to start fresh. But that was back when he thought college would be amazing, and it clearly wasn’t, but he was surrounded by people who were loving every minute of their life and who kept asking, *Yo, Parrish, you need to get out of your dorm room once in awhile. Come party!* or *Adam, you should come out with us tonight, it’ll be fun!* and he didn’t know how to respond.

He wanted Ronan to answer his Goddamn phone so he had someone to talk to. Someone other than Blue, who was great, but she just wasn’t--

_You should come visit sometime. Seriously._

Adam pressed his palms into his eyes and tried not to think about Ronan.

______________________________

It was December before Adam really talked to Gansey. It was all a fluke, just coincidental timing. Adam was leaving their dorm as Gansey was finishing a phone call.

Adam didn’t mean to eavesdrop; Gansey was just hard to not look at. He thought back to his first impression of Gansey - like a piece of modern art - and realized even a year later, he didn’t know what the artist meant.

“Jane, I miss you,” Gansey said into the phone.

He looked nothing like the Gansey that operated in Henrietta. An outsider might point out that he still
wore the same cheesy polos, still had his beat up boat shoes, still had hair that resembled a Disney prince. But Gansey’s eyes were heavy and his shoulders were just a bit hunched, and Adam found it suddenly very hard to look at him.

Whoever Gansey was talking to did not appreciate the sentiment. Gansey pulled the phone away from his ear and held it in front of him for a moment, as if the conversation ended abruptly and he hoped it would ring again. When it didn’t, Gansey slipped the phone into his back pocket and turned to see Adam.

“Oh! Adam.” Even Gansey’s manufactured smiles didn’t seem quite themselves. “I haven’t seen you in awhile. How are things? Keeping up?”

Adam shrugged. There was no simple way to say, I hate everything about this place and I desperately want to go back to the way things were but I don’t have a home anymore, oh, and your best friend hates my guts, can you talk to him for me?

“It’s going,” Adam said. Seeing Gansey like this broke down Adam’s wall, just a bit, and he felt compelled to press at Gansey, to see if he would break character if asked. “Everything alright with you?”

Gansey caught the very pointed look Adam sent him. He played dumb for a moment and waved the moment off. “Oh, yes, I’m fine. My roommate is, how should I say, entertaining a guest right now. The weather was nice enough I thought I’d make a few calls.”

Adam peered up at the sky. It wasn’t terrible, but he wouldn’t call the grey clouds nice. “Do you want to hang out at my place for a bit?”

He expected Gansey to turn him down, so when he accepted immediately, Adam was sure something was wrong. Adam’s roommate, Jeremy, was in class, leaving them to the tiny dorm room in peace. Adam was slightly self-conscious of his room - mainly in that he had barely any possessions compared to Jeremy - but Gansey didn’t seem to notice. He walked straight to Adam’s desk and looked at the photos he’d pinned to his wall.

“I forgot she did this,” Gansey said, fingers tracing a photo of the band on the night of their contest. Blue had given Adam most of the prints from her disposable camera. He had displayed all of them, the only piece of evidence he actually had people in his life before college.
Even though he didn’t want to part with any of them, Adam offered, “You can have a few, if you want.”

Diplomatic Gansey reappeared. “Oh, I couldn’t. Blue meant them for you.”

Adam sat down on his bed, gesturing for Gansey to take the desk. Gansey was very still, as if Adam might be offended by any sharp movements. It was ridiculous, and Adam wondered where Gansey got the impression he was something to be frightened of.

“Are you liking college?” Adam offered.

Gansey’s eyes flitted upward in thought. “Oh, it’s an amazing school.”

“Sure.”

“The people are incredible. I’m not sure I’ve met a more talented group of individuals in my life.”

“True.”

Gansey leaned his head against the side of Adam’s desk. “Adam, have you ever felt like you were so close to having something special, but you ruined it at the last moment?”

This was Gansey, uncalculated. A young man who didn’t know what he was doing, and didn’t have the energy to pretend he did. Adam wished Gansey would be like this more often. It was easier to forgive a Gansey who did not have all the answers, than one who thought he did.

“Do you mean the band?” Adam asked.

Gansey looked at him in surprise. “Oh, yes. I suppose.”

There was more to that story, Adam wasn’t an idiot. He let Gansey have his secrecy, though. “I’m not sure I will ever be as happy as I was then.”
“College is not what I thought,” Gansey agreed with a grim smile. “I miss Henrietta, I miss them. I’m not sure I realized how different our friendship was until I came here. I feel unfulfilled in every interaction.”

Adam knew exactly what he meant. He didn’t believe in soulmates, but together, the band had felt a little like fate.

“You were different to me, too,” Gansey continued, meeting Adam’s eyes. “I know we didn’t know each other for very long, but you were a part of me, just like they were.”

Adam tried to breath in, but the air felt heavy. He was trying, desperately, to cling to his anger. To remember why he was so mad at Gansey. Adam was very afraid of forgiving him, because he didn’t know where that road would take him.

“I’m sorry, Adam.” Gansey didn’t look away from Adam, which must have taken courage. “I just wanted to keep you safe.”

“I know.” And Adam did know. It was never a question of that. “But you made a choice, about my life, without consulting me. I know you meant well, but you realize that you don’t always have the correct answers, right?

Gansey’s gaze finally dropped. There was a heavy look in his eye, and his reply was laced with scorn, though it seemed directed at himself. “Oh, yes. It has been made abundantly clear to me in the past few months that I do not, in fact, know what I’m doing.”

Adam thought back to Gansey’s phone call. Jane, I miss you. It seemed ridiculous to think that there was someone who - seemingly - was so important to Gansey, yet wasn’t part of the group he so clearly missed. It could be anyone, this Jane, but looking at Gansey’s countenance, she was wreaking havoc on him.

Adam felt his anger slip away. “We could... hang out sometime, if you wanted.”

“I’d like that.” Gansey’s real smile was something to behold.
Having Gansey helped Adam get through Yale, at least better than before. It wasn’t as painful going to parties with Gansey there. It wasn’t that either were particularly social butterflies, or that they introduced each other to better people. Instead, Gansey’s presence was a comfort to Adam, a reminder that, no, these were not his people, but that was okay.

Sometimes they would go to parties and stay, joking around with fellow students. Sometimes they’d go and neither could stand the obvious truth that they didn’t belong, so they would find a corner and just talk to each other.

He also liked that Gansey could fill him in on details about Ronan. They still spoke, quite frequently it sounded, and Adam liked hearing about it. Ronan worked at Mr. Allen’s shop, now, which intrigued Adam. He couldn’t imagine Ronan standing at a register, or answering benign questions, or God, trying to sell something. Adam traded these stories for updates on Blue. Gansey had admitted, a bit bitterly, that they had fallen out of touch.

“Do you think Ronan will ever replace us?” Adam asked one day. They were working on homework in the library, though Adam couldn’t concentrate on his work. Gansey had just gotten off with Ronan earlier in the day and he was desperate for stories.

“I doubt it. I know it may not seem like it, but Ronan is very loyal,” Gansey said, without looking up from his paper. Talking about Ronan did not have the same significance for Gansey as it did for Adam.

“All of his music is wasted, then,” Adam argued. “He has so much potential. Why don’t you tell him to do something about it?”

Gansey looked up at Adam over the frame of his glasses. It was a very pointed look. “Didn’t we discuss how poorly that usually works out for me?”

“This is different.”

“Is it?” Gansey’s eyebrows knitted together and he surveyed Adam curiously. Then, taking pity on him, Gansey added, “Trust me, Adam, no one is more frustrated Ronan’s lack of direction than I am. But I’ve learned, after many years of trial and error, that Ronan does things at his own pace. He’ll come around.”
Adam found his answer completely unsatisfying.

During summer break Adam received a text from Ronan. It was the first time Ronan had ever initiated a conversation.

*You’d be so proud. I have a plan.* After asking for elaboration, Ronan added, *I’m teaching a kid guitar. She totally sucks at it and can’t reach half the chords, but whatever. It’s kind of cool.*

Adam stared at the words, dumbfounded. Ronan Lynch...teaching guitar....to a child? He couldn’t even imagine it, and he was struck with the impulse to text *Receipts or it didn’t happen* because, hell, he’d love a video of that.

But once it sunk in, it occurred to Adam what a big deal this was. Gansey had said Ronan would eventually figure out a plan, and while Adam had always figured that would mean restarting the band with new musicians, this wasn’t such a bad idea. He couldn’t see Ronan working with *kids* for very long, but he was a good teacher. Adam had learned quite a bit from him.

He didn’t really know how to respond. He drafted several messages, *Holy shit, Ronan, that’s a great idea! or I’m proud of you! or I’m really glad to hear that, I think you’d be really good at it! but none felt right. He didn’t want to push Ronan away by being too over enthusiastic.*

So he wrote, *That’s awesome. Congrats.*

Adam waited a bit to see if Ronan would elaborate. He wanted more details, to know what the kid’s name was, or if Ronan thought he might teach other lessons, and he desperately wanted to ask, *Will you please come for a visit?*

He typed the words *I miss you* into the phone and stared at them. He told himself, if Ronan responded, even if it was was something stupid, he would send the text.

Ronan never responded, so Adam didn’t send it.
In November of Gansey and Adam’s sophomore year, Blue showed up at the music shop with an apprehensive look. Ronan was working with Opal (who was actually pretty good at guitar, for a six-year-old kid), playing along with her as they worked through a new song. (At first, Ronan learned a couple kids television theme songs, but it turned out Opal only responded to 70s rock songs, so they were working on *American Pie* and it was the weirdest thing he had ever experienced.) Blue sat on the ledge of the counter and watched them play.

Though Opal had warmed up to Blue considerably over the past few months, she refused to play in front of anyone but Ronan. She stopped immediately and glowered at Blue.

Ronan forced himself not to glare back at Opal. She was an intricate little thing, extremely talented but very sensitive, and he was learning how to be careful around her. The first few lessons went extremely poor. She never wanted to follow his instructions - usually jumping ahead and getting frustrated when she, naturally, couldn’t do something - and would sometimes wander off mid-lesson to mess with other instruments.

He lost his temper in the second lesson and yelled at her, just a little, and Opal burst into tears. Diane wasn’t thrilled - though she couldn’t have judged him too much, considering she allowed Opal to come back - but he was kind of glad it happened. He’d been walking on tiptoes around her, feeling that he was going to ruin the lessons any moment, but it turned out to be fine. Opal had her tantrum, Ronan had his, they both apologized, and then they’d continued on.

Despite her sensitivity, Opal encouraged some of Ronan’s rougher tendencies. She liked being called names, like *Monster* or *Midget* (though her favorite was *Kid*, for whatever reason), and responded best to Ronan when he was teasing her. Though she rarely talked, her face was expressive enough to fight battles. Sometimes, when Ronan was having a particularly rough day, she would just stand on his shoes, stare him straight in the face, and use her fingers to form goofy faces.

“You’re going to have to learn to play around people someday, Kid,” Ronan chided.

Opal looked to Blue with an expression that said, *But her?* Blue jerked her head to the drum set and told Opal, “Go play for a sec. You have my permission.”

Everyone there knew that, to Opal, “playing” the drums just meant hitting one part over and over again. They had outlawed it months ago, and the fact that Blue willingly let her do this made Ronan instantly on edge.

“What?”
“I want to visit Gansey and Adam. At Yale. Over Thanksgiving break.”

“Good for you.”

“You’re coming, too.”

Ronan tried to make his face mimic the way Opal looked at Blue earlier. He wanted her to know what a shitty idea this was. “Fuck no.”

“Ronan.” Blue slid off the counter and walked behind him, cupping her arms around his neck. She rested her chin on his head and cooed, “But you have a car.”

Blue had become a lot more handsey in the past year with him. He wasn’t sure if this was just what she did - her and Noah did cuddle, a lot - or if she thought he’d respond to a cute girl whining in his ear. (Not that he ever suspected Blue was hitting on him - he’d figured out sometime last year that Blue had a secret lover or some shit, when she got drunk and cried about the unnamed fellow for an hour.)

“You can borrow the car.”

“I don’t want to go alone.” She tightened her grip around him. “Why don’t you want to visit? Adam said he’s asked you to come multiple times, and you know Gansey misses you.”

Ronan thought of the many reasons he had avoided Yale and tried to pick which one Blue wouldn’t have an argument against. *He didn’t think he’d fit in there.* She’d tell him she didn’t either. *He had weekly lessons with Opal.* She’d say he wasn’t paid for them, and he was allowed to have a break. *I haven’t seen Adam in so long, it might be different.* That excuse was off limits because Blue would probably question why he cared so much, which led down an entirely different path.

She sighed and he felt the breath on his ear. “I’m nervous, too, Ronan. This is their world, not ours. And I don’t think I can do it without you there, too.”

Ronan hated the way her voice cracked a little. They’d gotten to know each other quite well since everyone went off to college, and he’d realized quickly on that Blue broke as much as Ronan did
when they left.

He thought about how long it had been since he’d last seen Adam. Almost a year in a half, or even more, considering he barely saw Adam at all before he left for college. They talked occasionally through text - even briefly on the phone, once, because Adam had been with Gansey during their weekly called. Ronan didn’t really think about Adam like that anymore; it’d been too long, and nothing had ever happened. He had occasionally dates to distract him.

At this point it was mostly awkward because so much time had gone by without seeing one another.

Ronan felt his composure slipping. “Where would we even stay?”

“If you drive us, I’ll pay for the hotel,” Blue promised. It was a little absurd, considering that Ronan was vastly wealthy compared to Blue, but she liked to pull her weight.

He sighed. “Fine.”

In their dorm room one night in November, Gansey’s phone lit up and a moment later he said, “Oh!”

Adam hooked his head over the edge of his top bunk and looked down at Gansey. “What?”

“Blue and Ronan are coming to visit,” Gansey said, sounding a little breathless. “Around Thanksgiving break.”

Adam sat back into his bed immediately. He didn’t want Gansey to be able to see the expression on his face, because he didn’t know what it held.

“Cool,” Adam said.
Ronan felt like puking the entire eight hour drive to Yale. Part of it was due to Blue’s driving - she fucking sucked at stick, he didn’t know why he let her have the wheel - but most was nerves. They were only going to stay a couple days - Gansey had to go to D.C. for actual Thanksgiving - but if it didn’t go well, that was still almost three days of torture.

Despite it being her idea to go, Blue didn’t look good either. She’d begged him to let her drive the BMW for a couple hours, and he wondered if she needed the distraction.

They chose a good time to visit, in some ways, because the campus was relatively empty. Gansey had said that most teachers cancelled classes the entire week of Thanksgiving, allowing kids to go home early. He’d suggested they come up this week for that very reason, and Ronan was glad, again, to have a friend so attuned to his needs.

Blue seemed floored by campus. Ronan thought it looked remarkably like Aglionby, which irked him.

They parked in front of Gansey and Adam’s dorm. Blue reached for Ronan’s hand, suddenly, and held it tight. “I need a second.”

He did, too. They sat in the car for a couple minutes. Finally, Blue nodded, pulled out her phone, and called Gansey to tell them they were downstairs. It took Gansey a few minutes to get downstairs, but when the doors to the elevator opened he descended on them in seconds.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” he said. Gansey moved like he was going to hug Blue but stopped at the last moment. He asked about the drive and exchanged oddly stilted small-talk, considering he knew them so well, then asked, “Do you want to see the dorm room first? Adam should be back from class, soon. Or if you’re hungry we can go to the dining hall. My treat.”

Ronan didn’t feel very hungry, but Blue suggested food. Gansey gave them a small tour of campus while they walked to the dining hall, and Ronan kept his eyes peeled, wondering whether Adam could be walking somewhere close. Gansey had texted him to meet up, either way, and Ronan’s skin buzzed at the thought of seeing Adam in person.

They were ten minutes into their meal when it finally happened. Ronan almost didn’t recognize Adam at first. He saw a boy walking through the tables, looking for something, and admired the hint of bicep sticking out of a t-shirt.
And then, all at once, Ronan realized it was Adam. Except this Adam looked healthy, and it made a remarkable difference. Adam had put on weight and it was not a bad thing. It’s not like Adam had suddenly beefed up by any means, but it was shocking to see any muscle definition on him.

There were parts that stayed the same - he still had the deep tan, the splatter of freckles across his nose - but he carried himself differently, and he seemed so much older all the sudden.

Blue followed Ronan’s gaze and lit up when she saw Adam. She stood up and gathered his attention, throwing her arm wildly in the air. (Ronan half expected Gansey to pull her down in embarrassment, but he just looked endeared.) Adam let Blue pull him into a hug, though his eyes stayed carefully on Ronan.

“Hey,” Adam greeted. Ronan felt Adam’s eyes all over him and he wondered, briefly, whether he looked any different to Adam.

“Parrish,” Ronan drawled, and then it happened before he could stop it. “Never thought you’d fall prey to the Freshman Fifteen.”

Miraculously, it eased the tension. Adam smiled, briefly, and then rolled his eyes. “You look good, too, Lynch.”

Blue pulled him down to the table. She had her hands all over Adam, touching his cheeks, his arms, his shoulders with wonder. Ronan wished he could do the same, for obvious reasons, and kept his hands busy by pushing food around on his plate. It was almost hard to look at Adam. He had thought he was painfully beautiful before, and seeing him healthy made Ronan wish he could kill Robert Parrish for ruining Adam all that time.

Blue and Gansey led most of the conversation, pulling Ronan and Adam in when they could. Adam was mostly quiet, though, and just watched the group talk. It was difficult to not stare, and Ronan reminded himself that he was over Adam. (Then reminded himself there wasn’t even anything to be over in the first place.)

Gansey took them on a longer, more extensive tour of the school once they were done. Occasionally, in-between Gansey’s rambles, Adam would look at Ronan and just smile at him.

This was a terrible idea. He never should have come.
They were in the Yale bookstore when Ronan was alone with Adam for the first time. He’d been scanning books - because what else would he ever want in the store? He didn’t need a Yale sweatshirt or a fucking keychain - when Adam stood next to him.

“I need to ask you something serious,” Adam said. Ronan’s hands stilled on the book he was flipping through. Before he could worry, Adam nodded past the shelves to Gansey and said, “Who is Jane?”

“What?”

“Jane.” Adam nudged him with his elbow. “Gansey’s secret girlfriend. You must know, you guys talk all the time.”

Ronan looked to Gansey then back to Adam. “No way.”

Adam hummed under his breath. “I’ll figure it out.” He was still watching Ronan, looking at him with that odd expression, and he finally said, “You have hair. I can’t believe it. I sort of thought you might be going bald, all this time.”

Ronan touched the top of his head instinctively. He didn’t intend to grow his hair back, he just got busy, that was all. It wasn’t very long - nothing like his younger days - but he could feel it curl around his fingers.

“It’s good to see you,” Adam said, voice so low that Ronan almost missed it. He wasn’t looking at Ronan anymore, instead turning his attention to a book on astronomy. “I wasn’t really sure if you’d come.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Teaching lessons?” There was an edge to Adam’s voice. When Ronan didn’t elaborate, Adam dropped his shoulders and said, “Lynch, you gotta’ give me something.”

“She’s just this little girl that stumbled into my shop. A foster kid. Opal.” Ronan wasn’t really sure what more to say. “It’s...nice.”
“I can’t imagine you around a little kid.”

“Kids are fine.” Talking to Adam still felt foreign, and he was treading carefully. A little flame of hope was blooming in his chest, for the first time in so long, and he let himself kindle it. “It’s good for me. You can’t really lose your shit around kids, especially not this one. You have to be chill and talk to them and rationalize every single thing so they don’t freak out.”

Adam seemed impressed, though his face barely betrayed it. “God, I wish I could see it. I’d pay money, you know.”

“Well, you can always come back to Henrietta.”

The suggestion pained Adam. Every break he’d always had an excuse for staying in Connecticut, but Ronan knew Adam was avoiding coming back. He couldn’t blame him - it’s not like he had a home to visit - but it was part of the reason Ronan had avoided going up to Yale. If Adam wasn’t willing to come to him, then Ronan didn’t want to go to Adam.

“There’s nothing there for me in Henrietta, not anymore,” Adam said, watching Ronan carefully as he did so. It almost felt like a challenge.

Ronan didn’t get a chance to respond. Blue appeared in the aisle, tugging Adam away.

Adam couldn’t believe it. Ronan Lynch had let his hair grow out, and he had a five o’clock shadow, and he seemed ten years older than he actually was. Adam felt woefully feeble compared to his presence. He’d always felt like that - especially when he was barely feeding himself - but with all the progress he’d made, Adam thought he’d caught up finally.

He couldn’t stop looking at Ronan, amazed at the difference. Ronan’s hair was curly. It was unexpectedly endearing.

“So what do college kids do on Monday nights?” Ronan barely fit in their tiny dorm room, and he looked ready to leave it. Both Gansey and Adam said “Study” at the same time. Ronan’s face darkened painfully.
“Actually, I was telling Blue a bit ago that I have a documentary she’d love to see. It’s a fascinating look on intersectionality within feminism. You’re welcome to join.”

Ronan looked at Gansey like he didn’t know who he was. He caught Adam’s eye and said, “Sounds like we’re going out.”

Despite it sounding like something right up her alley, Blue was shooting daggers at Gansey. He merely smiled, adjusted his glasses, and said to Adam and Ronan, “Just keep me posted.”

Adam tried desperately to think of something fun to do with Ronan, but he wasn’t really an expert. He knew Ronan had a fake ID, and there was a good chance he could sneak himself into a local bar, but Adam still avoided alcohol if he could help it. There was an open mic night nearby, but that was iffy. It could be music, or it could be terrible poetry, and he didn’t trust that Ronan could politely handle the latter.

Ronan didn’t need a plan, though. Once they left the dorm building he took off, down a path Gansey had taken them earlier, past a group of kids probably smoking pot (oh, yep, definitely smoking pot), and sat down in front of a courtyard in the middle of campus. He told Adam to get out his phone and plugged a number in. A second later Noah’s voice cheerfully rung through the speaker, “Adam!”

It took several minutes to calm Noah down once he found out they were together. Blue had mentioned she was going up but apparently left the news of Ronan out, and Noah cried, “If I had known I would have come down!”

“I’m telling Blue,” Adam teased.

“Wait-- I just meant, it’s been so long since we were all together. I should be there!”

They talked for a bit longer - well, Noah did most the talking, Adam and Ronan listened patiently - before Noah had to meet someone for dinner. For whatever reason talking to Noah put Adam at ease, and he was much more content to sit in silence then he expected. Ronan searched on his phone for something and handed it over. It was a picture of a little girl, small and blonde and holding a guitar way too big.

“Opal.”
Adam had assumed as much. “She’s cute.”

“She’s okay. She hates Blue, which is funny as all fuck.”

There was a question Adam had been wanting to ask Ronan for so long, but been putting off. He wasn’t sure this was the right time either - everything with Ronan was so tentative, and it was a risky question - but it nagged at him.

“You still write music, right?” Adam asked.

“Sometimes.”

“Ronan.” His voice came out too sharp. He shouldn’t have done this, it was too easy to get frustrated.

“It’s not as fun when there’s no one to play them.” Ronan’s eyes turned to Adam, though he couldn’t read their emotion. “Or sing them.”

“You can sing,” Adam pointed out.

Ronan grimaced. “Not like you.”

Adam’s ears grew warm at the compliment, but he told himself to ignore it. Ronan was trying to distract from the topic at hand and Adam didn’t want to fall for it. Everything exploded out of him all at once, “I can’t believe you didn’t replace us. That you didn’t even try.”

“Come on, Parrish, not now.”

“Sorry,” Adam bit his tongue, forcing himself to stay calm. But then he looked at Ronan and he felt everything all over again. “No, you know what? I’m not sorry. You were so fucking talented, Lynch, and you just gave up.”
This made Ronan angry. He sneered at Adam, “Oh, I fucking gave up? That’s real rich, coming from you.”

“Yeah, well I actually had a good reason!”

“Yeah, right,” Ronan stood up from the bench and started walking back the way they came. Adam noticed the way his hand clenched at his side.

Adam followed him. “I’m not just talking about the band, you know. You gave up on everything.”

“What are you talking about?” Ronan had stopped so abruptly that Adam knocked into him.

He took a wobbly step back. This was very dangerous territory to be walking on, and Adam regretted letting his temper get away from him. How was he supposed to say you gave up on me without sounding ridiculous and needy?

He instead said, “You know, you acted like you were so fucking worried about what happened to me, with my dad, and I thought we were actually friends. But you couldn’t be bothered to put any effort there, apparently.”

Ronan cursed under his breath. “Can we not do this now, Parrish?”

“Oh, would you look at that, you’re doing it again.”

Ronan lifted his hands to his head and pressed down in frustration. “Okay, fuck, fine. I’ve dealt with a lot temper tantrums lately, so I’m getting pretty good at handling them. You left, Parrish. You disappeared for months, then quit the band, and then left for college. It was pretty fucking clear that you wanted your space.”

“Forgive me for not handling my extremely shitty situation well,” Adam snapped.

This made Ronan bark a laugh. “You’re the one who said you didn’t want pity.”
“No, I said I didn’t want you to baby me!” Jesus. This was not what he wanted for Ronan’s first visit. “I’m not saying that I handled everything well either, but come on, Ronan, you acted like a different person around me. You just rolled over and didn’t fight me at all—”

“Excuse me for thinking you’d had enough fights in your lifetime.”

“That was different.” Adam countered, tone firm. “You can’t compare our fighting with what he did.”

Ronan didn’t look convinced. “You sure about that?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” At this, Ronan looked like he was going to avoid the situation again, so Adam grabbed hold of his arm and forced Ronan to look at him. “Ronan."

He brought a hand to cover his eyes and let it linger there for a few minutes, collecting his breath. Finally, Ronan said, “You thought I would hit you.”

“No, I didn’t.”

Ronan lifted his hand away from his eyes and glared at Adam. “You fucking flinched around me, man, multiple times. I saw you.”

Adam didn’t know what he was referring to, but he pressed on, ignoring it. “Even if I did, so what? You weren’t going to, so what did it matter?”

Ronan looked away from Adam at that, unable to hide his resentment. “Well, I’m glad it didn’t bother you, but it fucking bothered me. You think I liked seeing you afraid of me?”

That was not what he expected to hear and Adam let Ronan’s word settle for a minute. He was struggling to form a response, suddenly seeing Ronan in a different light. Ronan’s body sagged and he exhaled a deep breath from his nose.

“Look, I was mad, okay? Our band was the only good thing going in my life, except for all of you, and it made all my shit go quiet for a bit. And then you quit, and it fucking sucked, and yeah, I was
mad. So it was either get mad at you and hate myself, or stew alone for a bit, because I hadn’t figured out the middle ground yet.”

“You could have told me,” Adam argued, though by now he had lost the heat behind his words.

Ronan rolled his eyes at this. “Because I’m so great at that.”

Adam didn’t have a response. Neither were good at talking, and this was the most they’d ever discussed any issue, ever. He hadn’t realized how tense he’d been the entire fight and forced himself to complete his breathing exercises. The fight was at a simmer, it was fine.

“I need a beer,” Ronan said. “Or three.”

“Can’t help you there.”

Ronan raised one eyebrow. “It could be fun.”

It sucked the tension out of the air. Adam smiled wryly at Ronan. “Sorry, I don’t think I’ll ever be interested in drinking.”

“Why not?”

“Give it a moment.” Ronan did, and a second later it dawned on him, because he nodded begrudgingly. Adam added, “It’s intriguing, I admit, but I’m not chancing anything addicting.”

Ronan pondered this for a minute. Then, slowly, a devilish grin crossed his face. “So if it’s not addicting…?”

Adam tilted his head away in suspicion. “Ronan.”

He darted away; it was a strange sight, seeing Ronan run. Adam followed after, although slower, until he found Ronan talking to the group of students smoking pot. Oh no. Ronan talked to them for a minute then took out his wallet, passing some cash over. Adam was slightly bewildered by the
whole process - they just straight up passed over a paper bag of something, in plain sight - and was almost too shocked to be nervous.

Almost.

“Jesus, Ronan, what the hell?” Adam pulled him away from the group, looking over his shoulder wildly.

“Chill, man, it’s just pot.” Ronan waggled the paper bag. “Actually, it’s brownies. Freshly baked, apparently.”

“I didn’t say I’d do anything,” Adam said.

“Come on. Live a little.” They started heading back to the dorm. “I bet Gansey and Blue will eat some, too.”

“Gansey? You really think so?”

“Well, Blue will.”

Adam still hadn’t agreed to do it by the time they reached the dorm. Blue and Gansey weren’t there, though, and didn’t respond to texts. Ronan turned to Adam, serious, and asked, “Scale of one to ten. How likely is it that Gansey said something Dick-like and Blue murdered him?”

“Maybe they’re getting food?” Adam crumpled to the floor, stretched his legs out on the carpet, and leaned his back against Gansey’s bed.

“Well, more brownie for us.” Ronan sat next to him and pulled the desserts out.

Adam groaned. “I’m not doing this.”

“Give me one good reason why not. Seriously.” Ronan placed one of the brownies in Adam’s hand.
“It’s not addictive, it’s barely illegal - especially for rich, white kids--”

“I’m not rich.”

“Yeah, well you sure are white and you go to Yale, they won’t know you’re a scholarship kid--” Ronan waved his excuse off. “--and they said it was real mild. Seriously, Parrish, when was the last time you did anything fun?”

Adam looked at the brownie in his hand. He could think of a lot of other reasons not to do it. (He could get kicked out of school, his job could do a random drug test, also the fact that they bought it from completely random strangers.) Still, there was something a little exciting about the idea of being careless, especially with Ronan. And hell, he’d been pent up all week in preparation for Ronan’s visit, and though their fight had seemingly passed, there were parts of the discussion that Adam would prefer to not think about in an endless loop as the night progressed.

“Fuck. Fine.” He unwrapped his brownie and looked at Ronan. The boy practically cackled in glee.

Ronan tapped their brownies together. “Cheers.”

“This is so stupid… And God, it tastes horrible. Why didn’t you just get a couple joints?”

“I don’t know how to smoke,” Ronan muttered, grimacing as he took his own bite. It really was horrible.

“You don’t?” Adam cursed under his breath. “Lynch, are you, or are you not, a pro at this?”

Ronan pretended to look offended, though he could care less. “What kind of man do you take me for? I’ve never done pot.”

“Then why did you suggest it?”

He shrugged, exaggerating the movement a bit, and said, “I don’t know, you seemed like you
needed a break, and alcohol was out of the question. It’ll be fine, Parrish.”

He heard Adam mutter under his breath, “Trying to act so tough but you’re really a classic Church Boy who works with children. Sheesh.”

Ronan looked at his phone for the time. The biggest downside to edibles, so he’d heard, was that they could take awhile to kick in. He didn’t know how long exactly, but they needed something to pass the time. Being Gansey’s roommate had some obvious perks, including a television and multiple gaming systems. Adam fiddled with the T.V. and pulled up a racing game to play. Ronan’s eyes lit up.

“Fuck. Yes.”

There weren’t a lot of options for sitting in the dorm room, so they didn’t move from their position on the floor. The video game proved to be a good distraction, and Ronan was relieved that it took too much of Adam’s concentration to play. He needed time to think about what just happened.

He fought with Adam. He yelled at Adam, a bit. And Adam was fine. Adam didn’t hate him.

This was something he’d chew on for a while, he was sure.

Maybe after an hour of playing, Adam started panicking again, just a little bit. Ronan could tell by the amount of times Adam kept saying “shit” and how his gaming skills crashed and burned. (Literally. He exploded his car four times in a row.)

“Parrish, you need to chill,” Ronan repeated.

“It just occurred to me, like, what if I lost my scholarship for this?” Adam’s eyes were wide, transfixed on the screen of the television. “What the fuck would I do with my life?”

“That won’t happen, and if it does, just get Dick to bribe the Dean or some shit,” Ronan joked. His smile dropped when Adam began to chew on his bottom lip and wrap his knuckles on the ground. “Fuck, man. If I knew you’d react this way, I wouldn’t have pressed it. Why the hell did you go along with me?”
Adam sighed, sounding irritated. “I don’t know. I was just thinking, like, you were right. I never did anything fun in my entire fucking life, and I don’t know, this sounded like something crazy to do.”

“You were in a band, how is that not fun?”

Ronan wondered if the brownie was hitting Adam already, because words started tumbling out of him at an unnaturally high speed for the typical composed boy. “It was fun. It was like the only time in my life I was actually happy.” Adam tipped his head forward and touched his left ear. “And then I lost my hearing and it ruined everything.”

Ronan turned to look at him. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“It’s nothing, nevermind.” Adam swung his head back up and said. “Wait. We’re being honest tonight. I don’t know. How am I supposed to be a musician when I can’t hear?”

Ronan processed Adam’s words in his head. *Did he quit the band because of his hearing?* “Yeah, but it’s not like you’re completely deaf. It would have been fine.”

Adam found a spot on the carpet and picked at it, his eyes boring a hole into the ground. “You don’t understand. It’s not the same. I’m getting used to it now, but everything was so hard at first. And I thought I would fuck everything up for you guys. Like, maybe we’d be doing this show and it’d be loud and I couldn’t hear my own voice and I’m out of tune or something.”

“That’s…” Ronan didn’t know what to say. It was still such a mind-boggling revelation. “Stupid. That’s fucking stupid. We would have figured it out, Parrish. Worked with you.”

“You don’t understand,” Adam repeated.

Ronan wasn’t going to argue with Adam about this. It didn’t need to be an argument, for one thing - Adam was allowed to have his own worries - and for another, Adam was right, he had no idea what losing hearing was like, or what that would do to his psyche. Plus, it was too late. Their band had died the day everyone left for college.

“You should have told me,” Ronan said finally.
Adam sighed. “I know. But back then, I figured you’d find someone else, someone who would keep up. I didn’t think you’d stop playing music, Ronan.”

Since it was a time for honesty, apparently, Ronan didn’t hide his feelings. “It was you or nothing, Parrish. All of you. I didn’t want to do it without you.”

Adam leaned his head onto Gansey’s mattress and turned to look at Ronan. Despite the serious conversation, a sweet smile slipped across his face. “I’m glad you’re here. This is…the best I’ve felt in awhile.”

Ronan followed Adam’s posture and allowed himself a moment to look at Adam. It’d been so long, and he’d forgotten what those freckles did to him. Then, Ronan dragged his hand down Adam’s face and said, “You’re so high.”

Adam laughed.

Ronan rested his hand on Adam’s head; it felt heavy, like it was pressing down on him, and yet oddly comforting and really sort of nice.

“Jesus. Is this what being drunk feels like?”

The high was nice for about five minutes, just this subtle little slowness that crept over him and relaxed his limbs. Then Adam noticed the effects in his vision. One minute everything was normal, then he turned his head to the right and his vision didn’t exactly follow with. It was delayed. Then his ears felt hot and his body felt hot and he said, “Ronan, I thought you said this was mild.”

Ronan barked a laugh. “Dude, we got it from strangers. There were no guarantees.”

Adam sucked in a deep breath and exhaled very slowly. He did not expect pot to feel this strong. It was all in his head and he didn’t feel giggly at all, he just kept thinking is this okay is this too much am I overdosing no you can’t overdose on pot Jesus--

Ronan rested his hand on Adam’s head; it felt heavy, like it was pressing down on him, and yet oddly comforting and really sort of nice.

“It hasn’t hit me yet, but it looks like it has definitely gotten to you,” Ronan drawled.
“I don’t know, genius. I just told you I don’t feel anything yet.”

Adam’s brain felt fuzzy. There was a part of him that enjoyed the sensation, because it was like being out of your own body a bit, but it was a little overwhelming. He kept forgetting what he just said, or forgetting what Ronan would say. He did not feel in control, and Adam lived his life being in control.

“Can you make a pot high go away?” Adam asked.

“Beats me. It’s probably like drinking - you could drink some coffee, do some exercise, have sex - and it might help. But probably not.” Ronan leaned toward Adam, leering a bit. He seemed looser than normal, more talkative, and Adam wondered whether the effects had hit Ronan and he just didn’t realize. “You’re probably dating some politician's daughter, aren’t you? Go find her and see if it works.”

Adam groaned and pushed Ronan away. “I’m being serious.”

“So am I.”

“It’s just more intense than I thought it would be,” Adam said, taking a deep inhale again. The deep breaths seemed involuntary now, and Adam wasn’t sure if he was forgetting to breath, or if his body just liked random deep inhales. It was very confusing and he wasn’t sure he liked pot.

“Just relax, man. It can’t hurt you.” Ronan kicked his legs up and leaned his elbows on his knees. “Tell me something new, to distract yourself.” Adam thought it was a good suggestion, but in this state it was hard to think of something. Ronan prompted him, “So no girls?”

“No girls,” Adam agreed. “Though there is…oh God. I shouldn’t tell you this.”

Ronan’s eyes lit up in glee and he pounced on the potential for something juicy. “Well, don’t be a fucking tease.”

“Okay, fine. Just, don’t tell anyone. Especially not Gansey, because it’s not my place to tell.” Adam felt very serious, suddenly. He’d been suspicious of this for months and it was kind of eating at him,
and he really wanted to tell someone but like, who? It was such an awkward thing to say. And maybe Ronan wasn’t the best person to tell but he was here and Adam was feeling very pliable right now.

“I think…” he paused, making a gesture in the air with his hands that was meaningless, but felt right. “I think Tad Carruthers has a crush on me.”

Ronan’s face dropped immediately at that. He rolled his eyes and turned away, “Yeah, no duh.”

“Wait, you already knew? Did he tell you or something? How long?”

“I’ve known from day-fucking-one, man.” Ronan was laughing now, and Adam realized the brownie had definitely hit him, because Ronan Lynch didn’t just laugh. At least, not the Ronan he used to know.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“So something like this could happen!” Ronan nudged Adam with his shoulder. “You oblivious moron.”

Adam felt dazed. This was a huge secret he’d been keeping for almost a year now, and Ronan just annihilated it. Adam tried to remember if he cared this much about it before the pot, or if it just made him feel extra emotional. “It just seemed like a big deal. I’ve never had a guy like me.”

Ronan laughed again, but it wasn’t nearly as joyful. “Is it so fucking bad, Parrish?”

“No, no,” Adam said quickly. He wasn’t sure how to express himself. “It’s not that. I just, I mean, I don’t understand why anyone would like me? Especially when I was in high school, because I was so awkward and skinny--”

“You were pretty hideous,” Ronan drawled.

“Yes -- no, shut up. I just mean,” Adam blew a big burst of air out of his mouth. It lifted his bangs up, and he could see them rise and fall back over his eyes. “It just feels like a bigger deal for a guy to
like me. Because, I don’t know, this is stupid, but it means that he actually *liked* me, you know? I wasn’t just a fall-back plan for a girl. Tad is an asshole, I know he’s an asshole, but he’s brave for going after what he likes.”

Ronan was listening to his rant but not really responding. He just stared straight ahead, looking a the opening credits of the racing game loop and loop.

“And so it kind of makes me feel good, to know that someone *actually* likes me, because they wouldn’t put up with all that bigoted shit if they didn’t,” Adam finished. He placed a hand on his temple and groaned. “This makes me sound really conceited. I really hope you don’t remember this in the morning.”

“That’s alcohol, dummy.”

“Oh.”

Ronan looked at Adam now, looked at him in that patented Ronan Lynch™ way, and Adam knew he was dissecting him. He felt warm under Ronan’s gaze and wished he never ate that fucking brownie, because Ronan already made Adam feel a bit that way normally. He thought about reaching for Ronan, just dragging a finger down Ronan’s bare arm or his leg, but he was pretty sure it was the pot talking.

“Well,” Ronan said finally. “I guess if you want to experiment, you have a willing party.”

Adam reached out and shoved Ronan on the shoulder. “God. That’s not funny. It’s still Carruthers we’re talking about.”

It took Adam a second to realize he had never removed his hand from Ronan’s shoulder. His palm gripped it, lingering, and he felt like an idiot. This was a very awkward thing to be doing, especially considering their current conversation, but Adam liked the feel of Ronan’s bare skin on his palm and fingertips. He let his hand drag slowly down Ronan’s arm, shifting his wrist so that his knuckles traced the length of his muscle, until he stopped at Ronan’s elbow. Ronan was staring at the movement, looking very dazed.

“Sorry,” Adam said, his tongue feeling thick.
The other boy took in a shaky breath, but he relaxed his head back on the mattress. He hadn’t told Adam to remove his hand from his elbow yet, and Adam wanted to savor the moment a bit more.

“If I didn’t know better, Parrish, I’d think they actually gave you ecstasy,” Ronan said. His tone was oddly stern.

“I’m sorry,” Adam repeated. He retracted his hand and placed it in his lap, like it was a fortress that could keep him at bay. “I always want to touch people. All the time. My counselor says it’s a reaction to never having affection from my parents. Or something, I don’t know, she says it more elegantly.”

“It’s fine, Parrish.” Ronan had a hand on the back of his neck, rubbing it. “It’s the pot. Makes things more intense, that’s all.”

But it wasn’t the pot, Adam knew, because he’d always enjoyed touching Ronan. They were rare and he had worked hard to get to the place where Ronan would let him. Adam felt his words tumbling out of him again. “It was just really fucking bad timing when we broke up, you know? Because you finally didn’t care if I touched you and then I blew it.”

Ronan was very still. “I never cared -- it, wasn’t an issue.”

*What a lie.* Adam placed his palm on his own cheek, thinking back to the last time he saw Ronan. That’s all he had wanted from him. Just for Ronan to cup his cheek. But Ronan did not want that, apparently, because he practically bolted out of the room. Because Adam had to be such a fucking, needy--

“*Adam.*”

Adam inhaled deeply again. He was sure he was forgetting to breath now. “This stuff is really strong.”

Ronan and Adam’s phones buzzed at the same time. It was a message from Blue, asking where they were.

“Shit,” Adam hissed. “*We cannot* tell them we’re high.”
“Why the fuck not? They won’t care.” Adam’s wild expression must have told him otherwise. Ronan sighed, ruffled Adam’s hair, and said. “You paranoid fuck. You should probably not do pot. Come on, let’s go get some coffee.”

Ronan almost wished he hadn’t come to Yale. On the one hand, it seemed like he and Adam were finally friends again. They didn’t fight the rest of the trip, and though it was still a bit awkward, he felt like they were making their way back to the friendship they’d almost lost.

On the other hand, Adam was a fucking tease and Ronan couldn’t stop thinking about pushing him on the ground and kissing every new muscle on his body.

This was bad.

He didn’t even care.

Chapter End Notes

I really hope the timelines matched up on this, but apologies in advance, because they jumped all over the place.

I promise it will get back to the gang being a band next chapter. It'll skip ahead a bit in time, but not too much.

Also, FYI: if you have anxiety and you are curious about trying pot, just know that it can amplify your paranoia and/or anxiety, sometimes. I feel like Adam would struggle with that as well.

Update: I'm a jerk and forgot to thank some people specifically! Thanks to ana blue and adamganseys for talking through some things in the past chapter for me!
Still, something about Adam’s situation irked him. Ronan knew that birthdays were rather meaningless. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d really enjoyed his birthday - probably before his dad died, that’s for sure. But he didn’t like the idea of Adam alone in Connecticut, apparently feeling guilty enough about skipping Henrietta that he braved calling Ronan, celebrating yet another birthday probably alone. (Or maybe with his weird hippie girlfriend.)

So Ronan offered, “Want to meet halfway?”

Things weren’t exactly fixed after Ronan’s visit to Yale, but it was considerably better. Ronan answered, maybe, fifty percent of Adam’s texts. It was an unsatisfying amount to Adam, but being that this was Ronan Lynch, misanthrope king, he considered it a win. Plus, just knowing that they had repaired their friendship made the lack of response less frustrating. He never had to wonder whether Ronan was purposefully avoiding him, or if he just wasn’t near his phone.

With everything out in the open, Adam felt comfortable enough to prod at Ronan about songwriting. The writer was being particularly elusive.

Not my best work, he wrote.

Eventually, Adam saw his point. He took advantage of a night when Gansey drank a little too much wine to ask if he could hear some of Ronan’s songs. While Gansey moaned about his mother’s campaign for Congress (“Helen is going insane, she’s insistent that my antics will ruin Mother’s chances, but she doesn’t even have anything to be upset about! Can’t she be bothered when I’ve actually done something bad?”), Adam sampled the songs. They weren’t his best work, true, but he imagined it was hard to stay inspired in Henrietta.

There was one song that was slow and sweet, though, and Ronan only hummed along to it. It was miles better without any ridiculous lyrics to counterbalance the tender tone. On Gansey’s phone it was titled Magician. Adam gambled facing Ronan’s annoyance and texted, So does Magician not have lyrics yet?

The response was lightening quick. How the hell did you hear it?
Gansey is a lush. I took advantage.

You prick. Minutes passed by, before Ronan added another text. Only a bit. I’m thinking: One touch/I’m aflame/Little pyromancer, skin like honey/I’ll be your dreamer/if you keep up with that black magic.

Adam didn’t know if he liked the lyrics. They’re...interesting.

Ronan wrote, Inspired by you, and Adam almost choked on his breakfast bar. Then, because Ronan was a Grade A Asshole, he added, Figured I’d write a song for our number one fan. Think Tad will like it?

I hate you.

What do you think he likes about you? Is it your dreamy blue eyes? Your sun-kissed skin? The way you say one-syllable words with two syllables? Ronan added another text. Also, what do you think about the line: You’re Parrish/and I’m just garrish?

Why am I friends with you again?

Because your life is boring without me.

Adam hated that he was sort of right.

Typical of the universe, as soon as Ronan officially decided to give up on dating, he was getting requests left and right.

Giving up his occasional trips to D.C. was easy. He had hated everything about casual dating: having to use shitty dating apps, meeting someone only to find out they were incredibly boring or far
too pretentious, trying to talk with someone and knowing it was pointless. He had only started doing it because he was a bit lonely, and because he was starting to get a bit…pent up. Ronan naively thought it would help, though he quickly realized handling it himself was more satisfying anyway.

Visiting Adam at Yale definitely did not help Ronan with his sexual frustration, either, though he couldn’t blame Adam for that. Adam didn’t know what his touch did to Ronan.

But the visit to Yale did make it clear to Ronan how he felt about Adam. And though he wasn’t stupid enough to hold out any real hope that anything would happen, it was a reminder of what he could feel for someone. *Adam’s warm skin on his, knuckles trailing down his arm, lower and lower and lower. On particularly guilty nights, Ronan would imagine Adam’s hands going other places, lower and lower and lower, but these were rare, because even as a fantasy he felt like he was taking advantage of Adam.)*

He would have to deal with his lingering feelings for Adam at some point in his life, but for now, Ronan allowed himself to want Adam.

So there was no point to casual dating, thus he deleted the app. And then, almost immediately after, he was asked out multiple times.

Granted, they were all women. The first was, awkwardly, from Diane. Well, not Diane specifically - she was married, and too old for him, and his Kid’s mother, basically - but she did have a niece. (“She’s very sweet, kind of shy. She just moved to the area and doesn’t know many people. Maybe you could take her out, show her around?”) Ronan narrowly avoided it, and only because Opal pitched a fit in the middle of the store when Diane suggested it.

Later, when Diane was shopping - she had apparently decided that Ronan could be trusted alone with Opal, because she often used their lessons as time to run errands - Opal told Ronan he had to sing her a song. When he refused, she said, “My reward.”

And then he realized her tantrum was done for his benefit. And just as abruptly, he realized how attached he had grown to her. So he sang her the song he’d been working on lately, because he was so grateful to have that little, perceptive child in his life. Opal leaned her head against his leg and listened.

The second date was harder to ignore, because it came with Blue. She’d recently visited the shop with her cousin, Orla, and Ronan thought nothing of it. Orla came again and flirted a bit with him, but he got the impression that was just who she was, and still thought nothing of it. Then, of course, Blue made it abundantly clear.
“I’m supposed to be Orla’s wingman and ask you out for her,” Blue muttered. To her credit, Blue hated having to do this. “I told her it was a bad idea. Explained that you are a loser with no dating experience, but she likes bad boys. And yes, I told her you were all talk.”

“Not happening.”

Blue leaned her elbows on the counter and peered at Ronan. “Look, Ronan, the last thing I want is for Orla to get her claws into you, but I’m worried about you.”

“Why the fuck would you be worried?”

“You need to go out. Have fun, experiment a little,” Blue countered.

Ronan glared at her from above the cash register. He counted the cash exceedingly slow, as if to say to Blue, I’m busy, fuck you. She was used to his snark, by now, and just rolled her eyes.

“It was cute when you were in high school, but it’s time to get out there. Adam’s doing it!”

Ronan’s hands stilled. Back in November Adam had said, No, no girls. It’d been four months since then, which was more than enough time for him to find someone. Still, he didn’t want to think about it.

He felt the bite in his throat before it hit his tongue. “So what’s your excuse then, Sargent?”

She flushed. “I go on dates. I just don’t tell you about them.”

“Sure.”

“I do!” She insisted. “Ugh, I don’t know why I ever bother. Can’t you just go on one date? She’s just going to bite my head off until you do.”
Ronan refused, of course. And he kept refusing, even when Blue got Adam involved (“Orla’s pretty hot?” was the extent of his prodding, though it irked Ronan nonetheless), and still refused once Blue got desperate enough to offer him free Nino’s pizza for a week.

He almost, almost told her the truth because she was so fucking annoying. He wasn’t even sure why he was so insistent on keeping his sexuality a secret. He knew his friends wouldn’t care, but the longer he waited, the more awkward the secret had become. There was no way his friends wouldn’t see it as a Big! Fucking! Deal! when he came out, and he wasn’t ready for the attention.

If there was a way to just subtly slide his sexual orientation into the conversation he would.

In the end, Orla found him in the music shop and stared him down. He’d been enjoying the emptiness of the store and was instantly burdened by her presence, because she was loud in everything she did. If it wasn’t being pointed in his direction, Ronan would have admired it.

“You wanna’ go out?” Orla didn’t fuck around.

“No,” Ronan said. Then, part because he was so fed up, but also because he respected her no-nonsense approach, he said, “I’m gay.”

Orla looked only mildly surprised. She hooked her finger through the band of his tank top and pulled it down, revealing a bit of his bare shoulder. Orla looked at his tattoo wistfully and said, “All the good ones are.”

“You going to tell Blue?” He asked, shrugging her hand off his shoulder.

“Maybe.” When she smiled, he was reminded of Blue. They had the same grin, only Orla’s slithered onto her face, while Blue gifted her’s away. Ronan wasn’t sure which he preferred.

It was a completely unclimactic way to come out to someone, and Ronan loved it. Orla left a minute after and he worried, just for a minute, whether she would tell Blue or not. He never figured out for sure. Blue treated him no different the next time she saw him, only that she no longer pestered him about Orla; he wasn’t sure if this was because she finally knew the truth, or because Orla stopped bugging her about the date.

Either way, it ended the conversation and he was glad.
“Oh dear.”

Adam and Gansey were enjoying the end of sophomore Spring quarter when Gansey’s phone buzzed. It was a text from Helen that linked to a gossip article. She immediately followed up with, *Junior, please enlighten me. In all our conversations, how did you fail to mention this to me?*

The article briefly discussed Mrs. Gansey’s campaign for Congress, but it highlighted her family’s antics in particular. Helen’s blurb was short, mostly detailing that she was working on the campaign, but Gansey’s section was remarkably longer. It read:

*It appears that the youngest Gansey, Richard Campbell Gansey III, is the wild card of the family! We encountered footage of Richard the III playing with his band, who according to reports, named themselves after a sexually transmitted disease. (Yikes!) Check out a few of their songs below, though fair warning, these songs are not safe for work! Choice lyrics include “This fast night feels right/Fuck/I’ll give you a ride/Deep summer night” and “Your tongue on your bottom lip/confession time/I’m awake/thinking of your bite.” We have to admit, though, we kind of like them! (The eye candy doesn’t hurt, either. Check out the guitarist’s tattoo! Can you say yummy, ladies?) We reached out for a comment from his mother - we’ll keep you posted if the youngest Gansey is kicked out of the will!*

Then, below, were the videos of the band that Tad had posted online so long ago.

Gansey covered his face in his hands while Adam read the article. He was muttering curses under his breath. “My mother is going to kill me.”

“I don’t think they realize that *Fast Night Feels Right* was about street racing,” Adam said. “And I’m not sure what it says about America and their sex education that everyone thinks TBD is an STD.”

“This article has over a thousand views already,” Gansey groaned.

“If it makes you feel better, the comments are mostly positive so far,” Adam said, scrolling through the - shit - thirty comments. “There’s only a few that condemn your mother for her poor parenting.”
Gansey took an angry call from Helen. Meanwhile, Adam sent the link to Noah, Blue, and Ronan. Along with it, he wrote, *Ronan, you’re “yummy” - just fyi.*

Noah answered first. *Holy shit! We’re sort of internet famous!*

Blue followed with, *Oh no. Is Gansey okay? I bet Helen is furious.*

*She’s biting off his head now,* Adam confirmed. *I wouldn’t worry. It’s just a shitty gossip blog. Politicians don’t bother with them.*

Ronan didn’t respond. The rest talked for a bit longer. It was the first time that any of them had watched Tad’s videos (truthfully, no one bothered to save the original links to the videos way back when) and they relived the moments. When Gansey stumbled back to Adam ten minutes later, Adam showed him the thread. It lifted his spirits a bit, though he still looked shaken.

*“Gansey, don’t worry about it,”* Adam clapped him on the back. *“It’ll be forgotten by next week.”*

Eventually Ronan did respond, though only to Adam. All he said was, *God damn right I’m yummy.* By then, the article had fifteen hundred views and fifty comments.

At the start of July, Ronan had his first really shitty day with Opal. He put the blame on both of them, though since he was the adult of the pair, he didn’t really have an excuse to lose his temper. And he didn’t just get mad, Ronan got throw-a-book-across-the-room-mad. Inappropriately mad.

He was already upset beginning the day. He had gotten his hopes up that Adam was coming home for summer, because they’d talked about the possibility all of June, but Adam abruptly changed his mind that morning. Ronan didn’t know why. He only got a short text from Adam that said, *Sorry, I just can’t.*

Ronan tried not to be angry - he didn’t want Adam to feel uncomfortable, and he understood why he
still avoided Henrietta - and he thought he had succeeded. But then Opal was being a bit of a pill. She was complaining about the entire lesson, pitching fits and dropping the guitar on the ground, and then she told Ronan that she hated him, and it was all just a little too much to handle at once. So Ronan lost his temper, and yes, he threw a book across the room, and Opal burst into tears.

She didn’t stop crying the entire time. He had to confess to Diane what happened, and though she told him it would be fine, he saw the way her face darkened. He had fucked up, with a child that probably had a very shitty background, all because he didn’t get to see Adam.

He was stewing at the barns when Adam texted, *Do you have a minute to talk? I need to tell you something.*

Ronan didn’t want to talk to Adam - he was still feeling hurt, and disappointed, and he associated Adam with the disastrous day with Opal - but Adam added, *Please,* and so Ronan found himself speaking on the phone with him for the first time ever.

“This better be a big deal, Parrish.” Ronan fell back onto his bed and threw an arm over his eyes. He had put the phone on speaker so that it didn’t have to be stuck to his ear.

“It’s… Ugh, just give me a second, I need to work up to this.” Hearing Adam’s voice sparked something in Ronan, reminding him of their days in the band. Ever since Tad’s videos got a little Internet famous (the videos kept being passed around, for whatever reason) Ronan would rewatch them occasionally. It was hard at first - seeing how good they were and knowing how they imploded - but Tad had managed to get some of his favorite moments on video.

“Everything okay?” Ronan asked.

“No, not really,” Adam admitted. “Persephone told me I should talk to you about it, though, because I have a problem with being vulnerable and apparently I need to work on it. Or something.”

*Persephone.* Ronan had heard this name, a few times, and knew nothing about her. She was probably his girlfriend or something, though, because she was apparently very supportive and they talked all the time and Adam “didn’t know where he would be without her” or some shit. Ronan sort of hated her, but he tried not to. If she made Adam happy, then his jealousy had to take a back seat.

Ronan didn’t speak, allowing time for Adam to work up to whatever he was going to say. Eventually, Adam admitted, “Ronan, I’m afraid to go home. I know it’s stupid and irrational, but I
keep wondering what would happen if I ran into my dad. Or, God, my mom.”

“We could just stay at the barns,” Ronan said slowly. “You’d be safe there.”

“Yeah, well that’s why I said I’m being irrational. I know all this. I know that, even if I saw them, we wouldn’t have to talk. I could just pretend I didn’t know them.”

Though he didn’t want to say it, Ronan told Adam, “If you don’t want to come back, you never have to. You know that, right?”

“I know.” Adam sighed into the phone. “But that’s where you are. And Blue. I can’t expect you guys to always come to me. That’s not fair.”

“Don’t worry about that, Parrish,” Ronan said. He curled his body onto his side, the phone placed in front of him. He wasn’t sure why he avoided talking on the phone with Adam for so long. Like this, he felt miles closer. “So what will you do for your birthday, then?”

Part of the reason Adam was coming down to Henrietta was to celebrate his 21st birthday. (Well, the emphasis was more on the birthday part than the 21st part for Adam.) Gansey was already in the area to help his mother with the campaign (the more popular the videos got online, the more he was guilted into assisting), and since Noah always came home over summer break, it was going to be the first time everyone was together again.

“I don’t know. Persephone said I should do something spiritual, or self-medicating. But I’ll probably work overtime and go to bed early, because I’m really good at celebrating my birthday like that.”

“You two aren’t going to do something together?” Ronan couldn’t help but ask.

“I mean, I guess if I’m feeling especially crappy I might see if she’s available.”

Ronan didn’t understand their relationship, and he wasn’t about to ask questions. He didn’t like to think of Adam dating, because he was selfish and shitty.

Still, something about Adam’s situation irked him. Ronan knew that birthdays were rather
meaningless. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d really enjoyed his birthday - probably before his dad died, that’s for sure. But he didn’t like the idea of Adam alone in Connecticut, apparently feeling guilty enough about skipping Henrietta that he braved calling Ronan, celebrating yet another birthday probably alone. (Or maybe with his weird hippie girlfriend.)

So Ronan offered, “Want to meet halfway?”

He swore he heard Adam’s breath hitch, but Ronan could have just been hoping for that reaction. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know, Philly or something.” Ronan instinctively shut his eyes, as if it would hide him from the embarrassment of the moment. “Not sure if the rest of them would be able to come, but it’s not like I have anything to do.”

Ronan expected Adam to turn him down - it would be in his nature to refuse any sort of favor, and definitely any gift - but his voice sounds hopeful over the phone. “Okay. Sure.”

“Seriously?”

“Why not?” Adam’s voice paused on the other end, and Ronan heard the faint sounds of clicking. “I could take a bus down, wouldn’t take too long.”

“Gansey won’t be able to come,” Ronan reminded him.

Adam’s voice paused, briefly. “We could just go. The two of us.”

Ronan sat straight up in bed, grabbing the phone quickly. The conversation had taken a strangely intimate turn, and he felt wrong keeping Adam on speakerphone. “You sure about that, Parrish? We’ll probably get into an argument every hour.”

“So what else is new?”

Ronan hated his heart for leaping like it did. He would do anything Adam wanted, even, apparently, prolonging the inevitable crash and burn that was crushing on a straight boy.
“Say when, Parrish.”

If asked, Adam would describe his twenty-first birthday with the following memories:

An excruciatingly long bus ride to Philly. In retrospect, the three and a half hour commute was not that long, it was just the knowledge of what was waiting for him that made it unbearable. In preparation of seeing Ronan after six months, Adam watched videos of the band on his phone.

Being able to find Ronan in a crowd of people, instantly. Ronan must have shaved his head recently, because his curls were absent, but the five o’clock shadow decided to make the visit. His head loomed over the crowd, an easy point to see, but it was the tattoo that did it. Ronan had his back to Adam, shoulders barely covered with a thin tank top due to the sweltering heat, and Adam traced the lines. He let himself touch Ronan there, briefly, as a way of greeting.

Ronan’s shoulder brushing his as they walked the streets. And also Ronan’s knee resting on his on the bus. Ronan’s fingers touching his as he grabbed the water bottle from Adam’s hand. Ronan slinging his arm around Adam’s neck and tugging him toward the ground. Ronan touching him, over and over and over again, but only slightly, only lightly. Each time it happened Adam’s skin swept in warmth. He wondered whether it was intentional, if Ronan remembered Adam’s desperate admission back at Yale (“I always want to touch people. All the time.”) and was gifting touches away.

Realizing it was definitely intentional. Ronan had planned a surprise for Adam, a “birthday present” apparently. He took Adam to the Please Touch Museum, a Philly top attraction, and grinned like a maniac the whole time. (“You get to touch all the shit you want, Parrish.”) (“That’s not what I meant--God. Ugh. Nevermind.”) The exhibit was meant for kids, but that didn’t stop them from going through it anyway. Every time an employee would look their way, probably wondering what two adults were doing at a children’s museum, Ronan would shout, “Becky! Little Becky, where’d you go? Oh God, we’ve lost her, honey!” and they’d skitter off to the next exhibit.

Getting stopped by two girls in the park. They were teenagers, clearly, and both men blanched when they approached them. Surprisingly, they only wanted a picture. Adam’s mouth hung open when they said they’d watched their videos online and recognized them. Neither knew what to do - it had felt almost disingenuous to accept, especially since they weren’t even a band anymore - but both still posed awkwardly with the girls all the same. (“You guys are really cute together!”’ one girl giggled. Adam laughed uproariously at Ronan’s flushed face once they left.)
Realizing how large Ronan’s tattoo was. Adam had never seen the whole thing until that night. They shared a cheap hotel room, neither willing to make the long commute back that night, and Adam couldn’t help but stare when Ronan peeled his shirt off. The tattoo was massive, spanning the entirety of his back. Adam refused to take his shirt off after that, feeling suddenly very inadequate next to Ronan, though he snuck looks at Ronan when he could.

Nearly choking from laughter when he realized Ronan thought Persephone was his girlfriend. Neither were able to fall asleep very easily, and Ronan had taken to making fun of Adam in the still of the night. (“I can’t believe you didn’t spend your birthday with your girlfriend. I knew you were shit with girls, but you should know better.”) (“I don’t have a girlfriend.”) (“Not official yet? Your whatever then. The Hippie-Dippie.”) (…) Ronan had to throw a pillow in Adam’s face to stop him from laughing. (“Oh, my God, Ronan, she’s my counselor.”)

Not wanting to say goodbye. He preferred not to relive this memory.

If asked, Ronan would describe Adam’s twenty-first birthday with the following memories:

Adam’s fingers pressed to his wrist.

Adam’s smile, over and over and over throughout the day.

Knowing, distinctly, what it sounded like for Adam to fall asleep.

Allowing himself, just for one day, to like Adam Parrish.

It was a month into Gansey’s and Adam’s junior year when they realized that their band videos had officially gone viral. They’d been steadily growing in popularity all year, but then a famous popstar Tweeted a link to their video and all hell broke loose.
Gansey was contacted about it first. It made sense, seeing that he was the easiest to track down. By now, his mother’s campaign was almost secured, and the Gansey name was familiar over the United States. He was in their dorm room when he got the call. Adam didn’t pay it any attention at first - Gansey was always getting calls - until he realized that Gansey was uncharacteristically awkward. Without knowing who was on the other end, Adam couldn’t tell what filled the long spaces between Gansey’s stuttering.

“Uhh, yes, sorry, I’m Richard Gansey. Beg pardon? Oh, wow. Um… I’ll have to talk--yes. Yes. I will. Goodbye. Oh, and thank you!”

The phone slipped from Gansey’s hand and clattered onto the floor. Adam watched its decent with a vacant stare.

“Everything okay?”

Gansey was trying to form words. “That was, uh, an entertainment company. God, I don’t even remember which one--the same company as Tarryn Smith, that singer who Tweeted our video?”

“And?”

“They want to talk with us,” Gansey finished. “Us, the band ‘us,’ I mean.”

Adam didn’t comprehend the implication at first. Or maybe he didn’t dare voice his hopes. “Why?”

“I don’t know. He just said, ‘We really like your music.’ Jesus Christ, Adam, do you think--”

Adam shushed Gansey with his hand. He slid down from the bunk bed and said, “Call Blue, see if you can get her on the phone. Maybe she can find Ronan for us. I’ll text Noah.”

It was a flurry of action after that. Blue answered, of course, and happened to be at the music store. Adam didn’t get to hear their whole reaction, but Blue’s screech was so loud it echoed throughout the dorm room. Noah didn’t respond right away, probably in class, but it didn’t really matter. His reaction was almost a given.
“Put them on speakerphone,” Adam said, nudging Gansey with his elbow.

Gansey hit a button, and suddenly all Adam could hear was Blue stringing together words so fast that he hardly understood her. “Wait, I don’t understand, what do you mean they want to talk to us? Are they interested in us as a band? They realize we haven’t played together in a while, right?”

“They just said they wanted to talk,” Gansey repeated.

Adam kept waiting for Ronan to say something. Considering the band was always his dream, it seemed odd that he was so silent. Was he in shock?

“Well what did you tell them?” Blue asked.

“I said I would talk to you all.”

Finally, Ronan spoke. “It’s probably nothing. That pop star wants permission to do a cover, if we’re lucky. I need to go back to my lesson with Opal, she’s getting pissed.”

Adam had learned enough about Opal to know her moods were often dictated by her usage of the drum set, and he could already hear the faint signs of pounding in the background. Still, something about Ronan’s tone sounded upset. Adam tried to remain positive. “Well, we should talk to them either way.”

“They have an office in New York,” Gansey said. “It would be easy enough for Adam and I to visit. Noah as well, I’m sure. So it’s up to you two, Blue…”

“Oh, we’re going,” Blue said. Ronan had clearly disappeared from the conversation, as did the sound of drumming. “I’ll drag him if I have to. Gansey, I think he’s having a mild panic attack right now.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“Jesus Christ--” Blue cursed softly. “Look, I better go. I’m not sure Ronan is--oh, God, call you later.”
Then she hung up. Noah contacted Adam not long after, sending a long text that just said, “SHUT UP OMG NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO THIS IS AMAZING ??? !!! ???” Gansey talked to him on the phone for a bit, while Adam pestered Blue through text to update him on Ronan’s condition. She didn’t get back to him until over an hour later, though, and her text just said, “It’ll be okay. He’ll be fine.”

Adam tried to imagine what Ronan was thinking. Was he just freaking out? Was he shocked? Adam had expected him to be thrilled by the turn of events - even if it really was just the pop star wanting permission to cover their song - and it was jarring to see Ronan cut himself off from the conversation so quick.

Unable to get him off his mind, Adam sent Ronan a text. *Call me if you have a minute.*

Ronan did not call. In fact, no one heard from him for the next few days, sans Blue of course, who reported only that he was “going to work” but still “being a dick” about everything. Despite Ronan’s noncommittal, the rest of the band agreed it would be best to meet with the entertainment company, so Gansey scheduled an appointment in New York for the following week.

Two nights before the meeting, Adam finally got Ronan on the phone. Surprisingly, it was Ronan who called him - at three in the morning, of-fucking-course - but Adam still took the call. Gansey was still awake, tinkering with a small model at his desk, and hardly spared Adam a look as he walked out the room.

“Ronan?”

“Were you sleeping?” Ronan asked, incredulous rather than apologetic.

“I will never understand you and Gansey,” Adam muttered into the phone. He regretted not pulling on a shirt, because even this late at night, there were a few students walking through the halls of his dorm. “How you function without sleep is beyond me.”

“You’ll be fine.”

Adam paused. Should he just come out with it? Let Ronan be the first one to say something, since he called? He settled on, “Do I get to see you Friday?”
He heard the faint sounds of a guitar over the phone, as if Ronan was plucking notes while he spoke on the phone. “Haven’t decided yet.”

“What are you thinking?” Adam thought it sounded better than asking, What’s wrong? because that always sounded so condescending. Or like your emotions were getting called into question. It was one of the tricks he’d picked up from Persephone. Whenever he had a bad day, she’d focus on what he was thinking. (“Why do you think you’re being irrational, Adam? You cannot control your reactions; what you feel is valid.”)

“I’m trying not to.”

“You’re a man of many words tonight.”

“Sorry, I’m--” Ronan exhaled, slow and steady. “Blue says I’m worried that I’ll get my hopes up, but it’s not that. I just don’t seem an outcome that will work, no matter what they say.”

Adam yawned, nothing to do with the conversation - with Ronan, he always felt alert - but due to the time. He tried to cover it from the mouth of the phone. “Why not?”

“Another time, Parrish. When you’re not sleepy.”

He would talk to Ronan for another hour if he could, but Adam recognized it was a conversation Ronan wasn’t ready to have. Bed was a convenient excuse, and Adam allowed Ronan to take it.

“Come to New York, Ronan,” Adam said. He hoped he didn’t sound desperate, but if pleading with Ronan would make the boy come, Adam was willing to do it. “At the very least, we get to hang out.”

“You make a compelling argument,” Ronan said. Adam knew it was a joke, though Ronan’s tone almost convinced him otherwise. “I’ll be there.”

“Good.”
“Night, Adam.”

Adam pressed the phone closer to his ear and shut his eyes. Like this, he could almost pretend they were back in Philadelphia, laying in the dark of the hotel room, Ronan’s pinky touching his. He remembered that feeling, how just the passing of a finger over his skin could make Adam feel so comforted, and tried to picture it in his head vividly. “Goodnight, Ronan.”

Ronan had been to New York as a kid, just once, back when his father was still alive. The whole family had gone, and they spent the entire time doing God-awful tourist attractions. Thankfully, the Lynch family were skilled in making the most mundane, boring activities something fun, simply by being together.

It was part of the reason he was so hesitant to go to New York. Since his only other memory of it involved his father, it was impossible not to compare the two. It had been years since his father passed away, and Ronan had finally stopped thinking about it on a regular basis. Thrusting himself back to that mindset was not appealing.

But he wasn’t lying to Adam either: Ronan wasn’t sure what this trip would accomplish. Say it was what he figured, that the bland, pop singer wanted to do a cover of their song. Ronan didn’t want anyone but Adam singing his songs. End of discussion.

And, okay, say this meeting was something bigger, something fantastic, like say they were interested in signing them as a band. What then? Adam, Gansey, and Noah were almost halfway done with their college careers. Unless they could somehow do both - which, yeah right - It would be stupid to drop out of school.

Adam wanted college. It was his dream. Maybe being in the band was also a dream of Adam’s, but he was nothing if not determined, and even Ronan understood how determinantal to Adam’s success a break would be. Plus, Ronan realized how hard Adam worked. He appreciated it - hell, it was part of the reason he had a ridiculously, fat, unrequited crush on Adam - and he didn’t want Adam’s work to go to waste. If, in a couple years when everyone was done with college, a situation like this presented itself again, then maybe Ronan would be willing to accept it.

He and Blue drove up together, of course. Adam and Gansey down from Yale to meet them in New York, and Noah, the lucky fuck, just had to ride the subway a few stops. Ronan couldn’t complain
too much about Noah, though, because he no longer lived in the dorms and was allowing them to stay in his apartment for free. (Realistically it would be way more comfortable to just rent a hotel room, and Gansey and Ronan had more than enough money to do so. Neither boy ever suggested this, though, both seemingly content to pile in one room with the friend they hadn’t seen in ages.)

The entertainment office - Cabeswater Inc. - was held at the top of a skyscraper a little outside of Central Park. Because of this, the group met there first, opting to have their initial reunion privately. It involved a lot of hugging (from Noah), ample fist bumps (from Gansey), much eye-rolling (from Ronan), plenty of face-cupping (from Blue), and several exasperated smiles (from Adam).

As what had become normal for the two, Ronan also took his place next to Adam. He stood close enough that their shoulders pressed together. As expected, Adam looked briefly at him but otherwise did not respond to the gesture. This is how they worked, now. Back in Philadelphia, Ronan hadn’t exactly made the conscious decision to offer Adam endless touches, it had just happened. But Adam never moved away from those touches, and Ronan took it as a silent deal. Adam needed affection, so Ronan would give it to him.

It was both easy to do, and awfully complicated. Ronan (obviously) had no issue with touching Adam. If he could, he would press every inch of Adam’s body to himself, or if Adam allowed him to, Ronan would take his fingers and trace every curve on his body. The complicated part was that Ronan had to think very carefully about what an acceptable touch would be. They had to be subtle, especially when around the group, and they had to pass as platonic.

He had set up rules for the touches. Barriers were best; a bare arm against a bare arm was dangerous, but if the arm was clothed, the touch was fine. Touching Adam with his bare hands was almost always off-limits, unless it could be passed off as inevitable. Did he need to get Adam’s attention? A lingering finger on Adam’s arm was fine. Passing something? It was necessary for their hands to knock together; unavoidable, really.

Adam didn’t follow the rules always, which was both infuriating and wonderful. Adam was allowed to do whatever he wanted: grab Ronan’s wrist, touch his pinky, trace his tattoo. Adam left a trail of searing skin in his wake, and Ronan could think of many ways he’d like his burns soothed.

Ronan shoved those thoughts out of his mind. He had decided, after the Philadelphia trip, that he would be content with just this. He could live with being just Adam’s friend, so long as got to keep these small touches. It wasn’t everything he wanted, but it was also more than he ever expected.

They all walked together to Cabeswater Inc. By now, their conversations had stilled, and the eery silence betrayed the about of anxiety spinning through everyone’s head. Somewhat unsurprisingly their meeting was delayed a half hour. The receptionist didn’t bother apologizing; it was clear, from her tone, that they should be grateful for having any meeting at all.
It didn’t really matter. Ronan was in a daze the moment he stepped foot into the building. Time became blurred, conversations were forgotten. He almost didn’t register Adam’s breath on his ear, the whispered, Ronan?

The receptionist took them to a large, windowed room. Ronan could see Central Park below, stretched out in full view, and briefly wondered how much a building like this would cost. He wasn’t one to be impressed by money, having been surrounded by it himself, but even this was a bit overwhelming. He could only imagine what was going through Blue and Adam’s minds.

As it turned out, this wasn’t even the office of anyone that special to the company. The owner of the company was a big-shot celebrity from the 80s - whose name Ronan, realistically, should have recognized but, honestly, did not - but he was far too important to meet with them. Instead, they were seated in front of Barrington Whelk, who had an official title that Ronan did not bother to listen to, but obviously had to do with recruitment.

“Welcome to Cabeswater, gentleman. And lady, of course.” Whelk held up his hand in an apology to Blue. “I’m very grateful you chose to meet with us. We were very impressed with your music, especially Ms. Smith.”

It had been mutually agreed by the band that Gansey, the diplomat that he was, would take the lead in the discussion. He was politician smooth, dealing with Whelk, and wore a smile fit to charm anyone.

“Oh, no, thank you, Mr. Whelk. We were thrilled to receive your call.” Gansey turned toward the rest of the band, as if confirming they all shared the same sentiments. “Though, I must admit, none of us have the faintest idea why you called this meeting.”

Whelk laughed. “Oh, my apologies. I assumed it was implied, though I must admit, this is the first time I’ve reached out to anyone not actively pursuing the music industry. It’s part of your charm, honestly.”

Gansey chose not to respond, so Whelk continued. “Here at Cabeswater, we’re always looking to sign new talent. As you realize, your band has gone a bit viral, recently. Combined with Ms. Smith’s recent affection for you, we thought it wise to capitalize on the attention.”

Ronan’s stomach lurched. He wasn’t the only one shocked; Adam’s body went stiff next to his, while Blue and Noah grasped each other’s hand beneath their chairs. Gansey, the pro that he was
took it in stride. Whelk outlined his general plan for the band: if they were interested, the company was willing to sign a contract - just a small one, at first, to test the waters - but it would include making official recordings of the viral songs. Whelk did not have a copy of said contract - something that made Ronan instantly suspicious - though no one else seemed perturbed.

Gansey led the conversation again. “Mr. Whelk, while we are incredibly grateful for your interest, it would be remiss of me to not mention that we have, unfortunately, not been a band in several years. We are, of course, still friends, but you deserve to know that we are a bit...out of practice.”

Whelk’s eyebrow raised. “How out of practice?”

Blue jumped in, shooting Gansey a dangerous look, and said, “Barely out of practice, Mr. Whelk. I think Gansey is worrying over nothing.”

“No,” Gansey countered, and Ronan saw his eyes flick to Adam briefly. He realized, at once, that Adam must have told Gansey the real reason he quit the band. “Please do not misunderstand me, Mr. Whelk. I believe I speak for the group as a whole - though, please, correct me if I am wrong - that we would be very interested in furthering this discussion with you. However, there are factors that would need to be discussed.”

Whelk leaned his elbows on his desk, tapping his fingers together as he pointed them at the sky. “You, my boy, are a piece of work. I mean that in the most admirable way possible.”

“My mother is a politician. I have seen the perks of dishonesty, but I’d rather not take that route,” Gansey said, smile painfully stretched across his features.

“Then what do you suggest?” Whelk leaned back in his chair and folded his hands behind his head. “I’m all ears.”

Gansey looked at the rest of them, though no one moved. “Well, I think we need to discuss this as a band, first and foremost. We’d need to review the contract, of course. And then, if we are still interested, I believe it would be in everyone’s best interest if we were given some time to practice again prior to signing the contract.”

Whelk nodded appreciatively. “I must say, Mr. Gansey, I’ve never had a conversation like this with a potential client. It’s a bit bold, but I think I like you.” He turned to his computer and began clicking the keys rapidly, making some sort of note for himself. “Unfortunately, time is of the essence, here. If
we want to capitalize on your viral success then we need to do it soon. We can draft an official contract within a day, but I’m afraid we cannot offer you much time for practice. I’ve been instructed to get word out on you by the next mid-week at latest. I’ll need a response come Monday, so I can get Henry to draft a press-release by Wednesday.”

Noah gaped. “So we have to decide over the weekend, basically?”

“Will that be a problem?”

Ronan said “Yes” at the same time that Adam said “No.” He turned to Adam, frowning, and they had a brief war with their eyes.

“We can make a decision by Monday,” Gansey confirmed. “Though I cannot promise it will be the decision you want.”

Whelk just shrugged. “I’m not worried.”

Ronan didn’t know the intention of Whelk’s statement. It was said with such nonchalance that Whelk was either incredibly confident they’d sign, or cared so little about them that either option would barely cost him a blink.

No one spoke about what just transpired the entire way out of the building, nor down the streets of New York. It wasn’t until they were all cramped in Noah’s apartment that Gansey finally said, “Well.”

Blue exploded first. “Gansey, what the hell? You almost blew it for us!”

“I’m sorry, but it’s true: we have some things to seriously consider--”

“Like what?” Blue spat. She turned to the entire group, looking incredulous. “This is the chance of a lifetime. Why on earth would we pass it up?”

Gansey placed his fingers on his temples, suddenly looking very exhausted. “Blue, it’s not that simple.”
Ronan pulled Blue down to sitting position, keeping his hand grounded on her shoulder as a warning. “They have college to consider, Sargent.”

“Gansey hates Yale,” Blue argued. Gansey didn’t bother denying the statement. This was surprising to Ronan, both that Gansey was unhappy at Yale still, since he hadn’t said anything about it since he and Adam reconnected, and that Blue knew this but he didn’t. She pressed on, turning to Adam and Noah. “I mean, I don’t want to speak for you guys, but come on. You can always go back to college later--”

Noah shrugged. “I don’t mind.”

Adam was still quiet so Ronan spoke for him. He wasn’t going to let Adam’s hard work be uprooted because Blue was so single-minded. “Parrish has a scholarship. I doubt Yale will keep that promise if he leaves.”

His words frustrated Blue, but Ronan knew it was due to their truth. Gansey and Noah, the product of privilege and money, would suffer no great consequence to leave school for a year or two. Adam, on the other hand, would be taking a great risk by leaving.

“We need to consider this carefully, Blue.” Gansey’s voice was stern and slow, which only made Blue bristle more. “And like I said, we don’t even know if we’d still be able to play.”

“Well, Ronan and I are fine. And let’s be real, Gansey, you can pick the bass up again in like, a day.” Blue countered. She looked at Adam and Noah. “Do you two never play your instruments anymore? If so, that’s sad.”

“The piano is in my blood,” Noah said, wagging his eyebrows.

Adam still hadn’t found his words. His hand was touching his deaf ear, and Ronan realized, at once, what he was thinking. Knowing that Adam needed support, Ronan broke his code and let fingers touch bare skin. He stole one of Adam’s moves and linked his fingers around Adam’s wrist, using his thumb to brush the vein on its underside.

It did the trick. Adam came back to himself, abruptly, and sucked in a quick breath. “I can do it. I think.”
“You think?” Blue asked.

“Jesus, Sargent,” Ronan cast her a dirty look.

Adam looked at Ronan, quick and pointed, and he understood it meant, *Don’t fight my battles.* Then, to Blue, he said, “Yes, I think. I don’t know for certain, because the last time we played I had hearing in both my ears. So you’ll forgive me for being cautious.”

This shut Blue up. She looked ashamed, instantly, and folded her legs to her body. “Sorry.”

“Enough,” Gansey said. The sternness in his voice was impactful in the room, and everyone leaned back to listen. “We should sleep on this. Discuss it tomorrow morning. Noah, given the circumstances, I hope you don’t mind if we stay here over the weekend?”

“You can stay forever!”

“I have a job to get back to,” Ronan muttered.

“My dad will cover you,” Blue waved his worry off.

Only Adam seemed to understand his train of thought, though, because he said, “I’m sure Opal will understand.”

Ronan snorted. Six-year-old children, in general, were not the most understanding people. Still, she would have to live. He only hoped that he wouldn’t come back to a broken drum set.

“So we take the night to think about it,” Adam repeated. “What should we do in the meantime?”

Noah jumped from the ground. “You guys have never visited me before. Trust me, I have so much to show you. Get ready to party, boys and girls.”
Chapter End Notes

Next time: Henry! Fucking! Cheng! Also: Adam tries to figure out why touching Ronan makes him feel so good. It will be lots of thinking about touching! That's also the new name of this story, go figure.

This chapter feels disjointed, I apologize.

Thank you as always. You are the wind beneath my feet.
The Contract

Chapter Summary

Adam, on the other hand, had began to realize, months and months ago, that it didn’t matter to him. That hands were hands and lips were lips, and he liked them all equally. It wasn’t a thought that came to him in full clarity one day; it crept in slowly.

Chapter Notes

Slight warning in this chapter: there are references to homophobia, though I’m going to keep it mild. Essentially, know that they are going into a business that contains shitty people, but know that I'm also not interested in lingering on it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After several years in New York City, Noah was knowledgeable about what to do for fun; unfortunately, the group had differing ideas on what “fun” entailed. After allowing Noah some time to brainstorm, he listed out his ideas on a piece of lined paper, and the group sat around it. Blue took the lead in crossing off any items that were absolutely outlawed. Luckily, a quick look down the list alleviated Ronan’s worries; there were no tourist attractions, thus the likelihood of running into his father’s memory lessened considerably.

“No Broadway,” Blue snapped, dragging a large line through *The Lion King.*

Gansey frowned. “It’s a classic recounting of a Shakespearean masterpiece, but with stilts! Who doesn’t like *The Lion King?*”

“Me,” Ronan, Adam, and Blue all said in unison.

“You’re monsters. Every one of you,” Gansey muttered. He turned back to the list. “Noah, is this a serious suggestion? Visit Roosevelt Island Smallpox Hospital Ruins and talk to the ghosts?”

“Yeah. What’s wrong with it?”

“I think he’s questioning your belief in ghosts,” Adam explained.
“Actually, it’s the fact that you think it’d be a fun activity,” Gansey clarified. He was eyeing Noah warily, as if he didn’t know the boy after all this time. “Blue, please cross it off the list.”

“Done and done.”

Ronan was growing irritated with all the back and forth. He grabbed the list from Blue’s hands and scanned it quickly, looking for anything with music. “Enough. We’re trying to decide if we want to be a band again, so we’re going to listen to some fucking music.”

“Let’s go to Bowery Ballroom, then. Or Cake Shop!” Noah jumped on his phone to see if he could find any info on the bands that were playing. “Oh! Spiders Eat Babies is playing at the Ballroom tonight, they’re great!”

“Then it’s settled.” Ronan crumpled up the paper, so that there were no doubts.

Blue looked irritated that Ronan had settled the choice for the group, but Gansey leaned over and whispered something in her ear, and the frown fell away. Blue still rolled her eyes at Gansey, but the very corners of her lips tweaked up, betraying her amusement. It was a strangely intimate moment, and Ronan noted the peculiarity. Adam picked up on it as well, he could tell, because once Noah pulled Blue and Gansey into the kitchen with him, he nudged Ronan with his elbow and whispered, “You ever figure out who Jane is?”

“Is she still a thing?”

Adam nodded. “Gansey left his phone open the other day. Jane texts him frequently. Uh, pretty dirty things, actually, so I wouldn’t recommend sneaking a peak unless you want to view Gansey in an incredibly different light.”

Ronan blanched; it was not a mental image he liked to think about. “And you bring this up now, because…?”

Adam’s grin was a wicked thing. It was foreign on his face - didn’t quite match the innocence of Adam’s bright blue eyes and freckles - though Ronan found it distinctly attractive.

“I’ve been thinking, for awhile now, whether Jane is a code name. Like, when was the last time you met someone under the age of sixty with that name?” Adam asked. “It’s got to be a fake name.”
Ronan nodded in appreciation. He saw where Adam’s mind was going instantly. “And, being that old Dick is a 60-year-old man himself, a name like Jane might actually get him hot and bothered.”

Adam looked actually pained. “God, Lynch, don’t use language like that when we’re discussing Gansey. Seeing the texts were enough.”

“And you think it’s…” Ronan jerked his head to the kitchen, signaling Blue. He couldn’t wrap his head around that image. For one thing, according to Adam, this Jane thing had been going on for a couple years now. He spoke with Gansey on a weekly basis, and being stuck in Henrietta had made Ronan and Blue practically joined at the hip. They weren’t that good at keeping secrets, were they?

“I’m not totally convinced, but I’m highly suspicious.” The evil grin worked its way back to Adam’s face. “Either way, I’m finding out this weekend for sure, because I have a plan.”

“A devious one, apparently,” Ronan said.

Adam waggled his eyebrows. It was, perhaps, the most ridiculous he had ever looked. Adam wasn’t prone to goofing off, and whether it was a reaction to the intensity of the earlier meeting, or perhaps a way to distract himself from the huge-fucking-decision he had to make about his future, Ronan felt like it was his duty to encourage this behavior.

“Let’s just say I’m going to take advantage of that stupid rumor you started about Blue and me back in the day. You think Gansey gets jealous?”

Ronan swore under his breath appreciatively. “You wily bastard. I am all for this plan - anything to make Gansey squirm - but you realize we could probably just ask Noah. Kid knows everything.”

“That would be less fun,” Adam argued. “Fifty bucks says I’m right, and Blue is Jane.”

“You don’t have fifty bucks.”

“I’m feeling confident.”
“Still not making a bet without guaranteed pay,” Ronan drawled.

Adam thought on it for a moment. “Alright, better deal. I win, and you can’t argue the decision I make about the band. You have to let me do what I want. You win, and it’s your choice.”

“That’s a sucky bet,” Ronan scoffed. “I don’t get shit out of that either way. I’m not going to force you into dropping out of college, Parrish.”

“I know that.” Adam leaned back into the couch and grimaced. “You’re going to argue with me because I already made up my mind to drop out. I’m signing that contract.”

“Oh, fuck no, that’s—”

Adam didn’t allow Ronan to even begin his argument. He just turned, eyes blazing, and kept his mouth in a tight line. “Looks like you better take the bet, then, Lynch.”

Ronan ran his hand over his hair in frustration. This was, apparently, not a battle Adam was willing to discuss. Ronan didn’t see the point in having an argument in the middle of a cramped living room, with tensions already high, so he just shook his head and cursed under his breath. The other boy was clearly pleased with Ronan backing down, because Adam folded his arms to his chest and grinned smugly.

Ronan quelled his temper by sneaking another look at Blue and Gansey. True, they had some moments of intimacy, and a secret relationship would explain the little details that Blue seemed to know about Gansey’s life. Still… He watched as Gansey said something that was, apparently, offensive enough for Blue to spin a sharp knife on its edge and look up at him through murder-tinted lashes.

“Fine. You’re on, Parrish.”

Adam found New York City to be quite overwhelming, and he was desperate for any distraction. The bet he made was practically designed for this purpose.
The plan was simple. Throughout the evening - or perhaps the weekend, or however long it took for Gansey and Blue to cave, really - he was going to hit on Blue. Mercilessly. He had to do it carefully, though. Gansey was too smart to believe that Adam would suddenly start spouting cheesy pickup lines. (Plus, he’d been around the few times Adam went on dates at Yale. Those women had usually led the flirtation; Adam wasn’t skilled with words, he had survived the dates by appearing like a ridiculously good listener.)

If they were to believe he was actually interested in Blue - if Gansey needed to see Adam as a threat - then it had to be believable.

So Adam embraced his relationship with Blue in high school. Back then, everyone thought they were an item because of all the touching. (Well, that, and because Ronan was an idiot.) Blue was the only one willing to touch him back then, so he had embraced it fully. Over the past few years, though, he had stopped reaching out for her. Part of this was due to the distance, true, but even when she visited they hardly touched. Adam hoped that, for Blue, enough time had passed for these touches to seem foreign.

It would be easy for Adam to recreate this dynamic, and hell, he wasn’t going to complain about additional touches, especially with a pretty girl. He wasn’t stupid. Plus, with the intensity of New York City surrounding him, Adam welcomed any additional support.

So as the night progressed, he thought of high school. When getting food, Adam sat next to Blue, their bodies tight when crammed into a booth. Gansey hardly spared them a look, though, so Adam leaned into her space to take bites of her burger, or dipped fries into ketchup and fed them to her. As they walked to the venue, Adam placed his hand on her lower back. (Still nothing from Gansey.) When they were standing in line for tickets, he tucked a strand of hair behind Blue’s ear. (Gansey, actually, looked mildly irritated at this, for whatever reason. It felt like one of the least intimate moments he pulled.)

It was all subtle, Adam knew, but it was also his MO when it came to flirting. Adam would only pursue someone quietly. If Gansey knew him at all, and he definitely did, he should recognize that the touches were significant. That they were, in fact, quite loud.

He had worried, initially, that touching Blue so much might be a little confusing. Maybe he never truly liked Blue back then, not like everyone thought, but she was still attractive and feisty and it would have been easy enough to indulge on the touches, if he wasn’t careful. Luckily, just knowing that Gansey - most likely - had a crush on her negated this possibility instantly. Adam was relieved once this became apparent.

Blue was clearly confused by all the sudden affection, and misinterpreted it, suddenly concerned. As they stood next to each other in the crowded pit, arms pressed together, music blasting, she motioned
for him to put his good ear to her and said, “Everything alright?”

It was a ridiculous question to ask, at that very moment. Adam knew Blue was referring to his general behavior over the entire night, but it was conveniently timed with the fact that, suddenly, he was not doing alright. Adam hadn’t been anywhere this loud since he had lost part of his hearing. He didn’t expect it to be an issue - not when he was just listening to music - but it threw him off. He couldn’t hear anything, nothing but the music, and it felt eerily similar to when he first lost his hearing.

Because he could still hear, of course, but not everything. The music made him oblivious to any other sound, and it threw him off. It didn’t help that there were people everywhere, pushing each other in waves, and he got a few elbows to his side and that, in itself, proved to be quite triggering.

So Adam reached down for Blue’s hand, grasping it tightly. It wasn’t part of the game; this time he really, truly needed touch. But even with Blue’s hand curled into his, Adam’s heart wouldn’t stop aching. He shut his eyes, forcing himself to concentrate on how soft her hand felt in his, the way she squeezed his hand in comfort, but Adam was distinctly aware that it wasn’t working.

He slipped his hand from her grasp and leaned down to shout, “I need some air!”

Adam didn’t feel right leaving Blue in the middle of the mosh pit, so he searched for his friends. Gansey, Ronan, and Noah were just a few rows back, so Adam waved until he caught their attention. Noah was first to notice, and thankfully understood Adam’s awkward hand gestures. They switched spots, and once he was free of his duty Adam made a beeline to the back of the venue.

Ronan’s eyes followed him, questioning Adam’s exit. There was no way to say, Don’t mind me, just having a mild panic attack in gestures, so he just shook his head and pointed to the exit.

The doorman stopped him on his way out, warning, “Once you leave you can’t come back in, that chill?”

Adam tried to weigh his options, but his heart skipped painfully in his chest, making it hard to think. Then, he felt a small weight on the lower of his back, and a voice said, “Come on, Parrish.”

He was directed outside by the press on his back, and he allowed it, trusting the echo of Ronan in his ear. Adam sucked in a deep breath once the cold air of autumn hit him. It was still loud out here - New York City was always loud - but it was infinitely better. Ronan’s hand was on his back still, now rubbing a small circle near his shoulder blades, and Adam was grateful that it worked again.
Maybe, in the crowded venue, Blue’s touch wasn’t enough, but out here Ronan’s did the trick.

“Sorry,” Adam rasped. “It was too much.”

“The band sucked anyway,” Ronan said.

His hand was still lingering on Adam’s back, but Ronan trailed it down, painfully slow, until Adam realized he was pulling away. Not ready, Adam reached for the hem of Ronan’s shirt and fisted it, hoping Ronan would understand when he said, “Just.”

Just a little longer.

Ronan paused, perhaps unsure of what Adam wanted, but he understood eventually. He left his hand on the small of Adam’s back. Ronan’s hands were huge things, Adam had noticed this before, used to curse Ronan for them when it was so much easier for him to bend his fingers around guitar strings, but he was grateful for it now. Adam felt the warmth spread from every finger on Ronan’s hand through his shirt. New York was cold, and that heat brought some breath back to Adam’s lungs.

Finally, Adam let go of Ronan’s shirt, and the other boy understood he could reclaim his hand. He did so immediately, snapping it quickly into his pocket, and Adam noted it. It was a fair reaction, he supposed. True, Ronan had been the one to offer touches all this time, but Adam often pushed them into intimate territory. It wasn’t fair to do that to Ronan, not when he probably saved intimacy for someone very much different than Adam. Much more like Blue or – no, not Blue -- more Orla. Someone strong and beautiful and cunning and so much more.

Adam, on the other hand, had began to realize, months and months ago, that it didn’t matter to him. That hands were hands and lips were lips, and he liked them all equally. It wasn’t a thought that came to him in full clarity one day; it crept in slowly. First it was just a hypothetical - would I ever be with a man? - and he didn’t think much of it, other than to note it wasn’t unthinkable. And then one day it became a little more - like realizing that his respect for the muscles defining a man’s bare back could also be interpreted as being attracted to them - until, eventually, he realized his sexuality really was more a scale. Some days it tipped more in Blue’s direction, and other days it tipped more in--

Ronan cut through his thoughts with a sharply delivered statement. “Was it the noise?”

“Among other things.”
Ronan exhaled, worry exposing itself in his breath. “You need to think about this seriously. I’m not saying-- it’s not that I don’t want you in the band, Parrish. You know I would never go through with it if you weren’t with us--”

“I know.” Adam didn’t look at Ronan when he said this, didn’t want him to realize how very much he knew this. It was part of the reason Adam had made the decision to sign the contract so easily. Ronan would give up his dream for Adam to stay at Yale, and it wasn’t right, especially not when Yale was just another hoop Adam needed to jump through. Yale wasn’t important to Adam, not in the way that Ronan’s dream was important to him.

Ronan wasn’t stupid, though, and he seemed to predict Adam’s train of thought. Surprisingly, he just leaned against the wall of the building and rubbed at the back of his neck. “So are you unhappy at Yale, too?”

“I can’t speak for Gansey,” Adam said. “But it’s just not as fulfilling as I thought it would be. People always made college seem like you’d meet amazing people and do amazing things, and it’s supposed to be the time of your life. I just feel like, every day, I’m going through the motions.”

“This band thing could be a bust, though. You could drop out and it would be a waste.”

“I get to play with you again,” Adam argued, grinning slowly. “Wouldn’t be a waste.”

“This isn’t a joke.”

“Who said I’m joking?”

Ronan kept Adam’s gaze for a long moment. Then, seeming suddenly very fatigued, Ronan turned around from the wall so that he pressed his forehead to it. “So, how is your plan going? Gansey doesn’t seem very threatened.”

“It’ll take time,” Adam muttered, kicking his heel against the pavement. “But I’ll get him there. He was giving me a dirty look at one point.”

“We have to decide on the band soon, though,” Ronan pointed out. “You can’t hold up your end of the bet if we have to make a decision tomorrow.”
“That’s true. I guess you’ll have to let me make my own decision, then, huh?” Ronan did not look happy with this. Adam rolled his eyes. “Okay, how about this. If it turns out I’m wrong - or, if I can’t get Gansey to break within the week - then you can choose a favor. Anything you want.”

One of Ronan’s eyebrows tilted up. “Anything?”

“Sure.” Adam sent Ronan his best smile. “I’m not going to lose.”

Noah, Blue, and Gansey found them not much later. Adam had more apologies settled on his tongue - he really didn’t mean to cut their evening short - but everyone shrugged him off. They settled in for the rest of the evening, piling in a big heap of pillows and blankets on Noah’s floor, and Adam found he preferred being with them far more than exploring New York City anyway.

As promised, the official contract was delivered to Gansey’s email the following day. They each took turns reading it, though Ronan wasn’t as careful as he should have been. It was just so many words, pages and pages of text, and his eyes crossed just looking at it. Gansey had the family lawyer look over it, thankfully, who summarized it over the phone a couple hours later.

“Here’s your basics,” the lawyer began over the speakerphone. “It’s a guaranteed, one-album contract, though there’s the stipulation that they are allowed to get two more albums out of you if they choose. So basically, if you do well, they’ll keep you for two additional albums. If they don’t like you, they aren’t obligated to record more than one.

“It’s unclear how much creative power you get to keep over this album, so we will want to negotiate that. At least, I’m assuming you want creative control over your album, correct?”

Ronan and Gansey exchanged a brief look. Ronan’s said, Abso-fucking-lutely while Gansey’s said We’re willing to collaborate a bit. Ronan won, because Gansey muttered, “Yes, we do.”

“Don’t get your hopes up for complete control,” the lawyer warned. “I’m not specialized in this field, so you can’t take my word for it, but most businesses don’t allow any newcomer total control. Anyway, we can all hash that out with Cabeswater later. You’re also obligated to work under their PR Manager, stylist, and other team; there is a social media clause, required interviews, etc.
“Honestly, it’s a pretty solid contract for a new band. The pay is pretty shit, but that’s typical of short contracts. They’ll pay you more once they know you can deliver.”

“Thank you, Pam. I’ll let you know when we schedule the official signing.”

They ended the phone call shortly after. Pam - or one of the many other Gansey lawyers - would supervise the signing. Despite his hatred for all things Legit™, Ronan was grateful that Pam would be there. If they were to go through with this, he needed to know that Adam wasn’t getting a shit deal.

With the contract still in front of them, Gansey sat back and surveyed the group. “It’s time to make a vote.”

Blue and Noah agreed instantly, which was no surprise to Ronan. Blue’s eyes shifted to Gansey’s questioningly, and he nodded his confirmation.

“You know my answer,” Ronan muttered.

That just left Adam. He was avoiding Ronan’s gaze, for obvious reasons, and said with certainty, “I’m in, too.”

Blue launched herself into Adam’s arms. Ronan couldn’t resist rolling his eyes when he saw Adam’s hands trail down to her waist, obviously taking advantage of the situation to make Gansey jealous. Ronan watched Gansey carefully, looking for any sign of cracking. The same smile stayed plastered on his face, as if nothing unusual had happened at all. To Ronan, this was almost more of an indication that Gansey actually did care, though.

Shit. He was definitely going to lose this bet. And he really wanted that favor.

“Okay, so we’re in agreement, then,” Gansey said. “We’re going to be a band.”

“Holy shit,” Noah breathed. “I never thought this would happen again.”
“I’ll contact Mr. Whelk. I’m guessing they’ll want us to sign the contract come Monday - oh! We’ll have to miss class,” Gansey muttered, frowning. Blue patted his shoulder slowly, pointedly, and he clued in. “I guess that doesn’t matter anymore.”

“If you can still go to class, you should finish the quarter. You might be able to do both, for now,” Ronan argued. He sent Adam a pointed look so that he knew, *Yes, I am talking to you, too.*

“What should we do the rest of the weekend, then?” Blue asked.

Before anyone could suggest more hijinks, Ronan said, “Find instruments. Practice, if we can. We don’t even know if we can still play.”

Blue rolled her eyes. “You worry too much, Ronan. We’ll be fine.”

“Practice wouldn’t hurt,” Adam agreed. “Maybe the company would have a practice room we could borrow? If they’re going to sign us, I imagine they’d let us use it.”

Gansey nodded as he typed something into his phone. “We’ll see what he says.”

Cabeswater Inc. did, in fact, have a practice room for them to mess around with. They were given access on Sunday, and told they could have it again Monday before the official contract signing. Noah briefly put up a fight - wanting to show them around his new home - but he was overruled quickly. Adam was glad for the extra practice time before the official signing. If he sucked - something that, honestly, he was worried about - it gave him time to officially back out.

Playing together after almost three years was...an interesting experience. It wasn’t *horrible*, but it certainly wasn’t great. Gansey and Adam had both lost their calluses, so neither was able to play for very long. Noah had forgotten how to play most of their songs, so while his piano skills were fine, he was constantly having to look at the sheet music that they hastily printed out from an old email. It was an outdated version, and Noah kept cringing and muttering, “Oh right, we changed that” every other minute.

Blue and Ronan were practically perfect, of course. Neither had given up their instrument, or the
band’s songs, apparently, and they only seemed better. Blue had apparently learned how to spin her drumstick on her left hand, even, and she threaded it between her fingers and back and forth between hands and threw it in the air over and over and over again. Adam got dizzy just watching her hands.

Singing was...not easy, either. Adam had never given it up - in his freshman year he would sing in the dorm, when his roommate was gone, and took advantage of Gansey’s busy schedule once they lived together - so it wasn’t like he’d stopped. But being in front of a microphone, struggling to hear his voice over the sound of the instruments, was nerve wracking. He kept looking to Ronan to confirm he wasn’t singing off key. Ronan would simply stare back at Adam, gaze void of an answer.

Halfway through practice, when everyone needed a break, Ronan stood in front of Adam and said, “Parrish, I know it’s been a couple years, but I’ll tell you if you fuck up. Always have, always will.”

“I’m so touched,” Adam drawled.

Ronan stuffed his hands in his pockets and shrugged. “Do what I can.” He then turned to Gansey. “Speaking of fucking up, Dick, my seven-year-old Kid can play better than you--”

Adam had to duck his head into his knees to hide his smile. Playing music again after all that time was proving to be a challenge, but at least some things never changed.

On Monday, they had started to get in a better routine. Adam still felt a little useless without his callused fingers, but they would come back in time. Pamela Gibson, the Gansey lawyer, met them in the practice room in the afternoon and summoned them upstairs. Whelk was waiting in his office, this time nursing what looked to be straight whisky, and welcomed them with an indecipherable smile.

“Welcome back, welcome back,” he motioned for them to sit. “Has the practice room been helpful?”

“Oh yes,” Gansey said, returning a smile that was equal parts smooth and nebulous. “I don’t think we’ll have any trouble picking up where we left off.”

Pam placed her hand on Gansey’s forearm, a subtle sign that she was to take over. Adam was tempted to tune out the entire conversation. He knew how important it was to pay attention - especially when his future was on the line - but this was the part he cared about least. He just wanted to be back with the band, playing Ronan’s music, being together again. The past few days had reminded him of the temporary happiness he achieved back at eighteen. He had made it his diet, back then, and had been trying to survive on bites ever since. This weekend had proven, though, that he
was slowly starving the entire time.

The band agreed to most everything in the contract. The only real debate occurred between Whelk and Ronan, when it came down to discussing creative control.

“We play our songs, not yours,” Ronan said.

Whelk grimaced. “That, simply, will not be possible. We will require that you work with our team. You’ll still be part of the process, of course, but we need a professional--”

“So we’re just fucking amateurs?” Gansey cleared his throat, turned to Ronan, and whispered something into his ear. Whatever Gansey said seemed to calm Ronan, briefly at least, because he just gripped the arms of his seat and spit, “Sorry. But you wanted to sign us because we went viral, or whatever, and that was our music.”

“This is true.” Whelk attempted a smile that Adam thought was meant to be comforting, though it fooled no one. “Look, it will be a partnership. You’ll work with our team. If it helps, we’re willing to negotiate greater control on later albums if the first is successful.”

“So basically, if Ronan can prove his music will make you money, then you’ll trust him?” Adam asked.

“Oh, it’s not about making a profit--”

Adam didn’t bother listening to the rest of Whelk’s excuse. He just looked away, his sign that the conversation was over, and focused his attention on Ronan. Ronan still looked mildly furious, though now Pam was talking to him quietly, and Adam could pick up “…typical deal…unlikely…go for it…”

Eventually, Ronan conceded to the argument, though he said, “I want to choose who we work with, from your team. I don’t want to work with someone who isn’t on the same page with our music style.”

Whelk made a show of this, as if Ronan was asking something completely ridiculous, but he eventually caved. The rest of the meeting was spent discussing very specific details, which Pam handled, thankfully, and Adam allowed himself to trust that Gansey’s lawyer knew best. According
to Gansey, she was paid an incredible sum of money to ensure that no Gansey was taken advantage of.

Toward the end of the meeting, Whelk asked his assistant to “bring Cheng in,” though he didn’t explain what this meant. Adam figured out it was a person about ten minutes later, when an impeccably dressed man slid into the room, with a smile dressed from ear to ear. He perched himself on the edge of Whelk’s desk and said nothing, at first.

Whelk finally introduced him. “As mentioned in the contract, you’ll be working with our team. This is Henry Cheng, he’ll be your PR lead. Mr. Cheng will be in charge of your image, your presence, that sort of thing.”

Henry shook hands with everyone first. “Call me Henry. I’ve been following your popularity the past few months - I like your music.” His eyes trailed to each of the individual band members. “Though, we’ll need to hook you up with a stylist, soon.”

Adam looked down at his outfit, then back at Henry. Prior to Henry, Adam didn’t feel particularly underdressed. He’d worn his best suit - which, yes, it was the same thing he wore a few days ago - but he had paid good money for it last year. Now, though, he felt like a slob.

Everything about Henry was just, frankly, quite pretty. Adam was slowly starting to realize that everyone in New York looked pristine, but Henry was a cut above. His suit seemed molded to his body, clearly tailored to a perfect fit, and his hair was twisted up in a fashion that was somehow elaborate, and yet effortless.

Henry caught him staring and grinned. “I’ll hook you up, don’t worry.”

Whelk walked around his desk and clapped Henry on the shoulder. “Gentleman, and lady, I’m going to leave you with Cheng for a bit. We need a press release out in a few days, so he’s going to ask you a few questions, get to know you. Once done, you’re free to go. My assistant will send you a schedule in the next few days.”

Gansey thanked Whelk for his time, polite as can be, and the rest of them echoed with half-hearted *Oh, yeah, thanks* as he left. Pam turned to Gansey and said, “Will you be okay? I need to take a few calls.”

Henry shook off her concerns with a wave. “Oh, don’t worry. It’ll be quick, and painless. I
Once alone with just the band, Henry reached to adjust his tie, loosening it. “Now that Whelk’s gone, we can relax a bit. Don’t worry, friends, I think you’ll find me much easier to work with.”

“Oh, Whelk is perfectly--” Gansey began, a compliment posed on his lips.

Henry finished for him. “--is perfectly poised, I know. He’s an industry man, Ganseyboy - I can call you that, right? - and don’t you forget it. Cabeswater is a great company, don’t get me wrong, but let’s not pretend we aren’t in the business, okay boys?”

Blue scoffed. “Am I invisible or something? This is getting old.”

“So sorry. Your band is the first I’ve encountered with any ladies, it’s a force of habit, you see.” Henry, to his credit, managed a better apologetic smile than Whelk could muster. Still, something about the look didn’t touch his eyes, and Adam was acutely aware that, while Henry tried to act like he wasn’t part of the industry, he clearly was. “Anyway, I digress. Let’s just chat. Tell me a bit about yourselves.”

He was met with five blank stairs. No one knew what to say.

Henry sighed. “Okay, how about I ask you some questions. First off, tell me your story. How did you become a band, that sort of thing.”

This time four heads swiveled to Gansey. Gansey, actually looking a bit irritated that he had to be the speaker, for once, summarized the story. (He left out, of course, the “Ben” fiasco.)

“Why’d you break up?” Henry asked.

Gansey’s eyes flitted to Adam, just briefly. Instead of forcing Gansey to make the awkward decision of what to say, Adam supplied, “I had to quit. And college happened. Nothing huge.”

Henry stared at Adam, as if he were trying to pull the lie out of him. Adam forced himself to be unknowable, not wanting to give up his past quite yet. (Though, it was the first time it had occurred
to Adam that, oh, what if people found out? Would his parents suddenly claim him if he got famous? Could his high school reputation follow him all the way here? He didn’t want to think about this, not now, with Henry looking at him like that.)

“We’ll come back to that later,” Henry finally said. “So, let’s talk your band’s name. TBD? Are you...attached to that?”

Noah actually laughed at this. “Oh, God no. That was never our name. We just couldn’t come up with one.”

“I echo your sentiments, Mr. Czerny. That’ll be your first agenda item - come up with a better name. I’m going to need it by end of day tomorrow. Might I suggest something that sounds less sexual, however?”

Gansey winced. “We’ll work on it.”

He continued to ask them questions, getting a feel for their personal lives. It was somewhat enlightening for Adam. He thought he knew everyone, but occasionally Henry would ask a question and the answer was surprising. Adam had learned that: Noah was actually a year older than them, as he was held back when he was nine; Blue had no information on her real father, and she winced when Henry warned her the likelihood that he’d pop up if she got famous; Gansey was horrifically allergic to bees and almost died from a sting when he was younger. He learned nothing about Ronan, because he refused to talk to Henry.

Henry seemed satisfied with most of their answers, though it was hard to read him. It was different than Whelk - who was certainly always fake, no matter what expression he wore or the compliments he delivered - because Henry only bothered to wear a mask about half the time. It was a little disorienting for Adam. He wondered whether Henry wasn’t skilled enough to keep up the facade, if maybe he didn’t have Whelk’s years of practice, or if he liked the band enough to let his guard down.

The mask went on again. “Forgive me for this, but we do need to have a frank discussion. If you have any dirty secrets I’d rather know them now, so that we can be proactive about it.”

“Dirty secrets?” Blue echoed. She was judging Henry, hard, and it was obvious on her face.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that. Everyone has at least one, and trust me, the Internet will find out if
you become famous.” Henry began ticking scandals off his fingers. “Have you said racist shit on Twitter? Bullied anyone when you were younger? Bribed your way into college? Secret baby?”

“No one has any secret babies, I promise you,” Gansey said.

“Ronan basically has a child,” Blue argued. “I mean, he’s like a Foster big-brother.”

“Don’t talk about Opal,” Ronan muttered.

Henry perked up at the potential scandal. Blue rolled her eyes, “It’s nothing bad. He just teaches lessons to a young girl, but lately he’s practically her babysitter. She’s at the store half the time.”

“Ho-ly shit,” Henry breathed. “This will be amazing PR.”

“No,” Ronan snapped. “Opal is off the table.”

Henry’s response was to hum long and low. Adam noted that this wasn’t actually an answer to Ronan’s demand, and made a note to discuss this with Henry later. Henry was already rolling onto a new topic, though, and Adam struggled to follow.

“Alright, well do I have to be worried about any of you? Just tell me that.”

“Honestly, we’re all pretty boring,” Noah said.

Henry snorted. “Sure. Any relationships I have to worry about? Girls or boys who would have naked pictures saved on their phones, who might want to wage revenge once you get too famous and dump them?”

“All my previous girlfriends are from fellow political families,” Gansey said, and everyone understood, implicitly, that this meant those secrets are going to the grave.

“I’m single, not looking to mingle,” Noah said. Henry winked at him.
“What about you, Blue?” Adam leaned forward, batting his eyes innocently at her. Just because Henry was around didn’t mean he wasn’t willing to take advantage of the situation. “Any men in your life?”


Blue narrowed her eyes at Adam. He hadn’t been quite so bold about hitting on Blue, but he was starting to feel a little desperate. It had been two days of constant touching and Gansey barely reacted. Now that he had offered Ronan that deal - any favor Ronan wanted, Jesus, what was he thinking - he wanted didn’t want to lose.

Blue was chewing on her inner cheek, and she did not look amused. “No, Adam, not currently.”

“Such a shame.”

“I’m fine with it.”

Henry watched the transaction with an appreciative gaze. “What about you, Mr. Parrish?”

“None of my dirty secrets have to do with ladies, no,” Adam said. He hoped that Henry understood the look he was shooting him. Not now. I don’t want to talk about it yet.

Henry either didn’t care, or didn’t get the silent request, because he started to ask Adam to expand. Thankfully, Ronan cut in, with a sly, “Not going to ask me?”

It worked. Henry diverted his attention to Ronan instead, ecstatic that he was finally willing to talk. “I got the impression you weren’t going to talk to me much. You have something juicy to tell me, Mr. Lynch?”

Ronan kicked his feet onto Whelk’s desk. Gansey swore under his breath, still amazed by Ronan’s bravado after all these years. Though he steeled his face to remain neutral, Adam, admittedly, was curious to hear. Last he heard about Ronan’s dating life was from Blue, who complained to him for weeks that he wouldn’t go out with Orla. The complaining had stopped, though, and Adam figured he had finally caved.
“I have a really complex dating life,” Ronan drawled. “I’m extremely popular, as you might imagine.”

“Just ignore him,” Gansey said. “He’s too picky to date.”

Ronan snorted. Adam didn’t know why Ronan had a relatively empty dating history, and it wasn’t unthinkable that Ronan Lynch would be extremely picky. Still, something about Ronan’s reaction said otherwise.

“I see,” Henry said. The mask was back on his face. “Well, I don’t want to exhaust you all. I’m sure this has been a very taxing weekend.”

“Will we see the press release before it goes out?” Gansey asked. He cleared his throat, politely. “In case we have a disagreement with anything.”

“Oh, Ganseyboy, you don’t need to worry. I’ve already received a very explicit warning from your family on what to discuss.”

“God, I’m so sorry--”

“It’s fine, typical even. Alright, everybody out for now. But you--” Henry pointed straight at Ronan. “Stay.”

A hush befell the room.

Ronan stared at Henry’s outstretched finger. Gansey looked from Ronan to Henry warily, and Ronan wasn’t sure who made him more nervous. Ronan waved him off, as if to say, *I’ll play nice, don’t worry,* and was pleased to see the look of apprehension still grace Gansey’s face. So Gansey was worried what Henry was going to do to him, not vice versa.

Henry waited until everyone cleared the room before he leaned back on Whelk’s desk and rested his
thumb on his chin. He was examining the whisky glass Whelk had left behind, running his finger around the rim.

“So, do they know you’re gay?”

The statement cut through Ronan like a bullet. He tried not to react - to betray how shocked he was by Henry’s observation - but his legs slipped from Whelk’s desk and his voice came out garbled. “Excuse me?”

“So that’s a no,” Henry confirmed. He rounded Whelk’s desk and fell back to his chair, kicking his feet on the desk, as if to replace Ronan’s earlier movement. “Sorry, a couple years into the business and I’ve lost all my subtlety. I don’t exactly have time to coddle it out of you.”

Ronan could only managed, “Well, fuck you, too.”

Henry waggled his eyebrows. “Hey, maybe I’ll take you up on it someday. No, I digress again. The point is, you’re still closeted and that’s good for Cabeswater. They’re going to want you to stay that way, you feel me?”

It took Ronan a minute to register Henry’s words. At once, he felt a burning under his skin. They’re going to want you to stay that way? What the fuck did that mean?

“So, what? Did I just sign my life to a bunch of homophobic assholes?”

Henry grimaced, although it came across more comical than serious. “Best not to think of it like that, or you’ll never survive the business. I mean, yes, you’ll find that the majority of people who run the business are old, rich, white shits who think they live in the 50s still, but most don’t have a problem with what you do, so long as it’s behind private doors. Understand?”

“Not really.”

“When you’re new to the business, you’re just an investment.” Henry shrugged his shoulders apologetically. “If, in a few years, you’ve proven your worth to the company, they probably won’t care what you do. Celebrities who make money get to do whatever the fuck they want, you see?”
This obsession with money and profits was becoming cliche, almost. Ronan ran his tongue over the bottom of teeth and shook his head, disgusted. “I don’t remember seeing any of this in the contract.”

Henry turned serious, fast. He leaned forward and tapped his finger onto the desk three times, each a pointed attack at Ronan. “You’ll do yourself - and your friends - a big favor if you don’t create waves. You don’t want to mess with Whelk, Ronan Lynch.”

Threatening his friends did the trick. Ronan backed down, slumping into his seat and tightening his hands into fists to control his temper. “It’ll be fine. I’m not... doing anything... about it anyway.”

Suddenly Henry was back to being a merry man. It gave Ronan whiplash. “Oh, don’t worry about that. I think you’ll find that there will be plenty of men jumping at you once the album drops, all happy to keep it secret.”

Ronan shot him a dirty look. “I hate you.”

“You hate the game,” Henry clarified, settling back into his seat and shaking his body at Ronan, as if to taunt him. “Don’t hate the player. I’m just doing my job.”

“Can I go?”

Henry gestured to the door. “Sure. You might want to warn Blue and Ganseyboy that we’ll have to have a discussion, just the three of us, sometime soon.” Ronan must have looked suspicious, because Henry just waved him off. “Don’t worry, I’m not telling them anything about you. We just need to have a chat about their relationship, too.”

This made Ronan gape. “Relationship?”

Henry laughed. “Jesus, you guys don’t tell each other anything, do you? Trust me on this one.”

“How the fuck do you know all this?”

Henry barely blinked. “It’s my job.”
That didn’t seem like an answer to Ronan, but he was starting to realize that this was how Henry Cheng worked. Maybe this was part of his job, or maybe Henry was just a diabolical fuck. Either reason, Ronan hated it. He wanted to know exactly who Henry was, so that he knew exactly who he was dealing with.

Still, that bit of knowledge did not get past Ronan. Knowing that Henry so acutely pinpointed Ronan’s orientation made it easy to believe that he was right about Blue and Gansey as well. Did that count as losing the bet?

“Don’t tell Adam,” Ronan said. “It’s just-- we have a bet going on.”

Henry raised an eyebrow. “Is that right?”

“Something like that.”

“Alright, secret is safe with me,” Henry said. Then his grin turned almost lecherous. “All of them, Mr. Lynch.”

Ronan exited the room before Henry could do any more damage. The rest of the band were waiting for him, each with a look of worry. Ronan hoped he had wiped the shaken look off his face, and he forced himself to breathe.

“What did he want?” Blue asked, voice low.

Ronan didn’t want to lie, so he settled with, “Nothing important. It’s fine.”

No one looked convinced, but Henry interrupted them once more. He stuck his head out of the office door, wagging his fingers, and said, “Also! If any of you have social media counts, **shut them down** for now. We’ll talk about that next time.”

“Wait, does that mean I have to shut down my YouTube account?” Noah pouted. “My followers are going to be so upset.”

“You have a **YouTube** account?” Gansey asked.
“You guys don’t watch my videos? Are you serious? I send you links constantly!”

“What do you even do on YouTube?”

Ronan tuned them out. He was still fighting the urge to puke, and he could feel bile in his throat. He didn’t know what was worse - that Henry had guessed his orientation so quickly, or that the company would force him to stay in the closet - or if the entire situation was just so fucking shitty. Both, he thought. Definitely both.

Adam must have noticed his silence, because he turned his back toward the group and leaned into Ronan, voice low. “Are you okay?”

Ronan focused on Adam’s cheeks, counting his freckles to steady himself. It was fine. This was fine. He would be fine.

“It’s too late to back out now,” Ronan muttered.

Adam’s eyes fell to the side, where Henry was watching them carefully. It was unnerving, Henry’s all-knowing expression. Ronan had to remind himself that there was no way Adam knew the secrets Henry held.

Still, he wanted to knock that knowing smirk off Henry’s mug.

Chapter End Notes

Henry might suck a bit for awhile, both because I have no idea how to write him, but also because I'm purposefully making him a dick before he really bonds with the gang. My interpretation of him - based on the books - is someone who is incredibly suspicious of people. He keeps people at a distance until he can trust them, at which point he lets down his guard. So he's supposed to be a bit of an asshole, at first, because he assumes the worst of people until they prove him otherwise.
Anyway, as mentioned in the note at the start, I really don't intend to drag Ronan's sexual orientation out to be a huge thing, or this whole "dirty secret" by any means. I don't like using sexual orientation as a hurdle or plot device, if that makes sense. So the shitty behavior regarding one's sexuality will never be anything worse than this chapter. (And also, should lead to a gratifying "Fuck you" scene from Ronan.)
The Producer

Chapter Summary

Ronan thought it was unfair that Adam chose to use his southern accent only when it benefited him. It made it so that his accent was an unexpected surprise, and Ronan heard it so rarely. If Adam would just embrace the goddamn thing, maybe Ronan would have a chance to get used to it, a chance to become apathetic toward it. For now, the word awfully rung in his ears.

Adam Parrish was awfully cute, too. Jesus Christ.

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter contains mild references to drugs. You know what that means?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The press release went out that Wednesday. Ronan expected a noticeable reaction - that his life would dramatically shift once the world knew about the band - but it passed without much notice. Apparently Cabeswater, Inc. was satisfied with the response, though, as multiple companies expressed interest in sponsorship and advertising or something like that. (Ronan chose to ignore most of Henry’s talking. It was probably bad for his career, but good for Ronan’s sense of satisfaction.)

As it turned out, the schedule for the next few months was demanding mostly for Ronan. Nothing much could be done until the album was officially recorded, and at the moment of signing the contract, they were missing a good chunk of songs. It didn’t help, either, that Cabeswater straight up refused to record several of the songs in their set list. Apparently they weren’t fond of the more fun ones (Henry’s words) and did not take kindly to the insistence that the tracks were ingenious layers of metaphor and meta, and if they didn’t get that then they were fucking morons (Ronan’s words).

Still, he didn’t argue the case much, because it meant that Adam and Gansey got to finish the rest of the quarter. Maybe it was going to be pointless, in the end, but Ronan wanted Adam to finish as much school as possible.

The entire group stayed the remaining week in New York, though. Adam claimed his professors allowed him to skip, but as the week wore on, Ronan was increasingly suspicious that Adam just didn’t want to lose the bet. What started as just small advances toward Blue became more desperate as the week went on.
Monday night, when everyone sat down to officially choose their band name, Adam perched on the arm of the sofa, right next to Blue. As they talked, he ran his fingers through her hair. The first time it happened, Blue reached back to smack him, thinking it was a bug. Once she realized it was Adam, Blue slunk toward Noah.

“Your hair is so soft,” Adam said. “What do you use in it?”

Blue frowned. “Uh, conditioner?”

Later, when everyone was getting ready for bed, Ronan called him out for his shitty move. Adam just shrugged and muttered, “I stole it from Tad.”

“And so you thought it was a good idea?”

The tips of Adam’s ears turned red. As he gathered his toothbrush to use the bathroom, he said, “I don’t know. I didn’t... hate it.”

He left Ronan a little speechless in his wake.

On Thursday, Blue and Gansey suspiciously needed to both run to the store for toothpaste. Adam perked up at this, and as soon as the door shut behind them, he pounced on Ronan.

“They’re going on a secret date--” Adam began to gather up his shoes and jacket, and Ronan wondered whether he knew he still had on pajama pants. “If I catch them in the act, then that counts!”

Ronan shook his head at Adam’s enthusiasm but followed him regardless. They were terrible private detectives, apparently, because they lost Blue and Gansey almost immediately. It happened only two blocks in, when Ronan had to pull Adam into an ally as Blue began to turn around. He probably should have thought it through, just grabbing Adam like that, because it clearly startled him. (Ronan cursed Robert Parrish for the hundredth time.) It took Adam about thirty seconds to recover, looking like Ronan had knocked the wind out of him. Finally, Adam pushed himself off the wall, muttering something indistinguishable under his breath, and peeked out to the street.
Blue and Gansey had vanished, though, and there were three different drugstores on the next block they could have disappeared into.

“This is your fault,” Adam muttered. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were trying to sabotage me.”

“I do want that favor.”

Adam shot Ronan a glare. “You don’t have to resort to dirty tricks, though.”

Ronan could never get him to explain exactly what he meant by that. By the time they got back to Noah’s apartment Blue and Gansey had already returned, looking completely normal.

On the final day of the visit, Cabeswater had arranged for a quick photoshoot. They wanted pictures of the band to put on their official website, and so Henry could attach it to any news article he sent out. Ronan dreaded the endeavor, but the majority of the band shared his thoughts, so at least they were grumpy together. (Noah, however, nearly lost his mind when he heard the news. He kept singing the theme song from *America’s Next Top Model* in preparation.)

It was the last day of Adam’s week-long bet. If he couldn’t prove they were a couple by the end of the day, Ronan would win his favor. He supposed it was a bit unfair - holding back the information Henry had told him about Blue and Gansey - but Ronan eased his guilt by thinking of various favors he could ask Adam.

Adam was growing agitated with Blue and Gansey, though. He no longer had time for subtlety. They were hanging out in a back room, prepping for the shoot, when Adam seemed to crack under the pressure. Blue was the first to get her makeup done, and as the makeup artist did something with her hair (it was all very boring, Ronan didn’t care) Adam sat down in the seat across from her.

“You look awfully pretty, Blue.”

Ronan thought it was unfair that Adam chose to use his southern accent only when it benefited him. It made it so that his accent was an unexpected surprise, and Ronan heard it so rarely. If Adam would just embrace the goddamn thing, maybe Ronan would have a chance to get used to it, a chance to become apathetic toward it. For now, the word *awfully* rung in his ears.
Adam Parrish was *awfully* cute, too. Jesus Christ.

By this point, Blue must have suspected Adam was messing with her. She just turned to Adam, purple lips stretched into a devilish grin. Blue had the ability to pull an accent out from nowhere as well, and she cooed back, “Thank you, Adam. I bet you boys will look mighty fine once they’ve dressed you up.”

Adam’s fingers tapped on the edge of his chair seat. “Blue, would you let me take you out on a date?”

Ronan had to take a chug of water to hide his reaction. Well *this* was a bold choice. Adam just went for it, in front of everyone. The request had gathered the attention of the entire band. Noah’s eyes were wild, staring at the two in manic glee. Gansey watched them with practiced indifference. After the beat had passed, though, he went back to his book.

Blue licked her lips, which earned her a chiding from the makeup artist. “I’m sorry, Adam, but I’m not interested.”

“Why not?” Adam cocked his head to the side, eyes narrow. “Do you have a boyfriend?”

Ronan found it interesting that Gansey, who had been making a solid pace through his book, hadn’t turned the page in quite some time. He still had his gaze fixed to the words, but it was quite obvious he paid them no attention.

Blue narrowed her eyes. “I’m just not interested. I’m allowed to not want to go out with you, regardless of my relationship status, Adam.”

Adam hummed under his breath. Ronan could see the wheels turning in his head. Blue was good at this - must have realized it was a game of some sort - and fought back admirably. The makeup artist effectively ended the conversation by summoning Ronan to the chair. As Blue traded him spots, she sent Adam a heatless glare.

Adam stayed in the seat opposite Ronan while the makeup artist dabbed at him, watching the progress being made. He was biting the edge of his thumb almost the whole time, deep in thought, but his eyes would glance Ronan’s way occasionally.
“Is this really necessary?” Ronan asked the artist, finding the process horrific. How many times was she going to poke at his face? And how many fucking brushes did one woman need?

“Better get used to it,” she quipped. “This is your life from now on.”

At some point Henry showed up in the room, followed by a stylist and a rack of clothes. Blue was wearing some odd contraption, nothing out of the ordinary for her but quite unordinary compared to most people, and both Henry and the stylist stared at her thoughtfully.

“Do you make your own clothes?” Henry asked.

Blue picked at her outfit. “Yeah. Well, with my cousin.”

“Fascinating.” Henry’s tone was such that he his compliment could have equally been earnest or condescending.

The stylist moved from Henry’s side to survey the work being done to Ronan’s face. She ran her hand over his shaved head, muttering under her breath. “Is this a choice you make? Or am I going to have to work around your early balding?”

Adam snorted. After sending him a dirty look, Ronan jerked away from the stylist and muttered, “I’m not fucking bald.”

“Grow it out, then.” She moved on from Ronan to Adam. “I’m not sure what to do with you.”

Adam blanched. His fingers instinctively landed on his cheek, tracing freckles, and Ronan wondered whether he was self-conscious of them. (Ronan would kill the makeup artist if she covered them up.) He watched as she ran her fingers through Adam’s hair, twisting it this way and that. Adam’s eyes fluttered closed, just for a second, and Ronan cursed him for having a hair fetish. (*Fucking Tad.*)

It took an absurdly long time for everyone to be prepped. Ronan felt like a stranger when he saw himself in the mirror. Blue found him still there, a few minutes later, and wrapped her arms around his waist. She was so tiny compared to him, even wearing heels that the stylist forced on her, and she had to stand on her toes to be able to rest her chin on his shoulder.
“You look nice,” she said.

Ronan snorted. “This is not what I had in mind when I thought we’d be a band.”

“We’ll get where you want to be, eventually.” She pinched his side and walked off.

The photoshoot was horrifically awkward for Ronan. He didn’t know what he was doing, and the photographer was clearly not amused by him. (Though he seemed to hate everyone in the band, so at least it wasn’t just Ronan who earned his ire.) Eventually he earned a break, where Gansey found him minutes later, offering him a water bottle.

“How I feel?”

“Fucking worry warts, all of you,” Ronan muttered. He took a drag of water all the same.

Gansey’s eyes turned away from Ronan, then back to the session. Blue and Adam were taking a few shots together, and Ronan didn’t miss the way Gansey’s jaw tightened.

Despite it not being in his best interest, Ronan couldn’t help but prod. “So, Blue and Adam. Old habits die hard.”

Gansey smiled, but it looked painful. “I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about, Ronan. If you like, I can discuss it with them. I know how you feel about inner-band dating.”

“How I feel?” Ronan arched one eyebrow. “I don’t really give a fuck, Dick. You’re the one who is so dead-set against it.”

Gansey fumbled, momentarily, with his words. He folded his arms to his chest, as if curling himself into a ball would take away the heat of Ronan’s gaze.

“I thought—” Gansey paused, clearly stuck in a past memory. “It was your rule, though.”

It came to Ronan, then, the memory of a discussion with Gansey so long ago. He supposed it was
Ronan had been the one to outlaw dating, in a fit of jealousy. But he didn’t really meant it. It was just an angry rant then, one of his many, and he'd always assumed Gansey’s insistence on making it an official band rule was motivated by the Gansey Pursuit of Excellence™.

Ronan clapped his hand on Gansey’s shoulder and squeezed it once. He hoped Gansey would understand it for what it was: a silent show of support. He left Gansey, hoping he wouldn’t have to see his friend with such a tormented look ever again. It was, finally, the official confirmation he needed that something was going on between Blue and Gansey. Ronan had no doubts about it now.

At the photoshoot, Ronan reminded Adam of a shadow. He was covered head to toe in dark black; even his eyes, rimmed with charcoal like Blue had done for Adam all those years black, reminded him of an empty cavern. It made him look dangerous and lethal, a man-made secret waiting to be discovered. Adam had to remind himself that this was the same person who gifted him touches.

Adam watched as Ronan lifted his arms behind his head, resting the palms of his hands on his scalp. It was a reaction to something nasty the photographer had said, a go-to pose when Ronan grew frustrated and exhausted. If the photographer were smart he would have snapped a photo right then. Ronan, with his shirt riding up, arms straining against a shirt two sizes smaller than he normally wore, looked straight out of a rebellious fantasy dreamed by a teenager.

The photographer did not share Adam’s sentiments, apparently. Instead of shooting a picture, they argued for a moment. Adam took advantage of the distraction, though, and quickly took out his phone. Henry had opened individual social media accounts for all of them, instructing them to document the process.

So Adam took a picture. Just in case.

Much later, though, when he was finally back in his dorm, Adam pulled out the photo. Gansey was gone, off somewhere taking a phone call (with Jane, which he never could prove was Blue, despite his constant flirting), and in the privacy of his dorm he looked at the photo. He had taken it, ostensibly, to post on Instagram. Now, though, as he looked at the photo, body feeling suddenly very tight, it looked far too intimate to post to the public.

He should probably just delete it, then.

Instead, Adam ran his thumb over his screen, zooming up just a little. He only allowed himself a few
seconds to enjoy it before he leaned his head against the wall and cursed at the ceiling.

Fucking Ronan Lynch.

Of course, fate wanted to press the subject to Adam, because his phone lit up with a text from the very same boy in question. All it said was, *What, oh what should I ask as my favor? The possibilities are endless.*

*Just get it over with. Rip the bandaid off.*

Adam could practically see the smirk in Ronan’s text when he wrote back, *Oh, sweet, naïve Parrish. I’m no fool. I’m saving this favor for when I most need it. The possibilities are endless.*

Adam cursed into the empty room, both in dread of what was to come, but also because his mind took Ronan’s words somewhere else entirely. *The possibilities are endless.* What Ronan meant by that and how Adam’s brain currently interpreted it were likely two very different things.

Fucking Ronan Lynch. *Seriously.*

So Adam gave up, for that evening at least, and took advantage of having the room to himself.

Within the first few weeks of signing the contract, the band recorded official versions of *Fast Night* *Feels Right* and *Young and Dumb*, the two songs that Cabeswater determined as worthwhile investments. The rest of the album, however, was to be made of new songs.

Recording the two songs was less fun than Ronan hoped. Because everyone lived in different cities, Cabeswater took turns recording each part. Ronan and Blue drove to a studio in D.C. to record their parts, while Gansey, Noah, and Adam all recorded in New York. Ronan would have complained about the band being separated - it didn’t feel right, recording in parts - but it meant that the college trio got to finish the quarter without much interruption.

On the brightside, once recorded the songs were officially put online for sale. It wasn’t like they blew up on the iTunes charts by any means, but the initial boost in sales was exciting to watch. As the
days went on, more and more people downloaded the songs. Whelk complained about it, as if he expected a better turn-out, but the band was ecstatic with the results.

Henry, to his credit, was much more encouraging than Whelk. Whelk had copied them all on a message detailing how he was disappointed with the sales and wanted more online presence. Henry sent them a separate message that contained links to positive reviews. (Though he did end the message with, “But seriously, guys, update your accounts. Especially you, Ronan! You haven’t posted anything.”)

Ronan was immediately tasked by Whelk to start writing new songs. He prefaced this request with the warning that, as promised, Ronan would take these songs to someone on their team. He’d been given sample work from various producers to choose from, though he didn’t recognize any of them. Only one producer interested him, and Ronan had no qualms in admitting it was because their sounds were similar.

When Ronan wasn’t writing songs he worked with Opal. It hadn’t occurred to him, when signing the contract, that his time with Opal was limited. Sure, it wasn’t like he would never see his Kid again, but the more successful they were, the less time he would have with her. It was inevitable. Even now, just having to balance Mr. Allen’s shop, Opal’s lessons, and writing new songs, was difficult. (His mom, thankfully, had hired actual help for the barns, otherwise he would have been fucked.)

Opal was...not something Ronan was ready to give up yet. Blue had teased him for his attachment to her, not realizing how strong it really was. Lately, Diane had begun to rely more and more on Ronan to watch her. It was definitely a problematic thing, Ronan knew. There was no way that Diane should have left her foster daughter in the hands of a 21-year old guy with no official child-rearing experience just because she was overwhelmed with all the other runts. But, at the same time, he fucking took care of her just fine. He’d mastered how to make an assortment of Kid-approved dishes that would reheat in the work microwave, he knew what triggered Opal’s outbursts, how to calm her down if he still accidentally triggered something, and he even had the fucking birds-and-the-bees conversation with her. It was messed up, but he didn’t really mind.

Until the contract signing, Ronan lived in constant fear that child services would show up to take her away. It was a sinking realization that, in the end, Ronan would be the one leaving her.

He probably should talk to her about it.

(He was not ready to talk to her about it.)

Blue warned him, consistently, that Opal would be devastated the longer he waited. He avoided
these conversations. How was he supposed to tell her that having the conversation would devastate him?

On the plus side, it did inspire a song. He played it for Opal because it was inevitable; he had to write at the shop, and Opal was always there, so she was bound to overhear. Of course, she was too young to understand the lyrics for what they truly meant, but she loved it all the same. The universe was cruel in that way.

A little after Christmas, once Ronan had written eight tracks that he was proud of, Cabeswater flew him down to Los Angeles to meet with the producer he chose. At this point, the album was behind enough that Adam and Gansey had decided to stay at Yale for one more quarter, opting to drop out halfway through if necessary. Noah, on the other hand, was done, done, done, and opted to make the trip with Ronan.

“For support,” Noah explained.

“What the hell do I need support for?” Ronan asked.

Noah just cupped Ronan’s cheek, and in a sickly sweet voice, he said, “Oh, honey, sweetie, no. I didn’t mean I was going to support you. They’re going to need all the help they can get with you.”

It earned him a cuff to the back of the head.

Regardless, it was nice to have Noah along. For one thing, he’d barely seen him over the past few years. True, they got to see each other over his school breaks, but being that they used to be inseparable, it never felt like enough time. Truthfully, Noah was the one he kept up with least. He didn’t demand weekly calls, like Gansey, and keeping up with Adam was - well. There was a different sort of motivation to do that.

They met in LA. Noah wanted to go a few days early to see Disneyland, and he picked up Ronan at the airport in a rental car, a bright red convertible, wearing a Mickey Mouse hat. “Get in, loser, we’re going shopping.”

Ronan dropped his bag on the ground and stared at Noah, perturbed. “What? No, we need to get to the studio.”
“Ugh, it was a joke. Nevermind, just get in the car.” Once Ronan had thrown his bag in the backseat and taken his place beside Noah, the other boy peered at him over his sunglasses. “You know anything about this producer?”

“Nope. Uses some pseudonym, just a letter. But his music is good.” Ronan had downloaded a few of his songs on his phone, and he played it over the speaker as they drove to the studio. “These are his songs.”

Noah recognized the first one, and the second, and by the third, Ronan stopped asking. He didn’t keep up with popular music much, but apparently the producer’s songs were frequently on the radio. It spoiled the music, just a bit, to know that most people liked it.

Noah must have noticed the sour expression that slipped onto Ronan’s face, because he punched him in the arm and said, “You’re such an elitist, Ronan.”

“I have good taste in music, the general populous does not.”

“You realize we’re trying to get the general populous to like us, right?”

“No, we’re trying to educate them on good music.”

Noah grinned, and with the light backing him, he looked less like a boy, more like the sun itself. Ronan’s heart swelled, both with sudden appreciation for him, and guilt for having let the friendship run on fumes for so long.

They stopped for lunch first, some overrated burger place that Noah said was a classic LA staple. Noah took pictures the entire time, narrating as Ronan tried his food. “Alright, Ronan is about to try In-And-Out for the first time.”

“What the fuck are you doing?”

Noah sighed, “Ronan, if you keep swearing on camera Henry will be super pissed.”

Ronan looked straight into the lens of Noah’s phone and gave it his middle finger. “Hi Cheng.”
Noah flipped his phone camera so that it faced him, and with a very exasperated look, he said into the camera, “Please forgive Ronan, he is an uncultured oaf who thinks In-and-Out is bad. We’re in LA to work on some music, so hopefully we’ll have something for you to listen to soon!”

Once Noah had set his phone down and resumed eating, Ronan asked, “Are you going to be doing that the whole time?”

“Probably. Henry says you can’t be trusted to document anything, so it’s my job.”

Jesus. Ronan was tempted to send Henry a text that told him exactly how he felt about this, but doing so would mean he’d end up in a conversation with him, so he weighed his options and chose to be silent. In the end it was pointless, because within a few minutes he got a message from Henry that said, **RONAN LYNCH you are a THORN in my SIDE. Don’t flip off the camera you thug! And post some goddamn pictures, will you?**

He would not.

Finally, over an hour after he arrived in LA, they got to the studio. Ronan was a bundle of mixed energy - half excited, half nervous - to work with the producer, and not being used to such chaotic feelings, he just wanted to get it over with. He was scheduled to be in LA for at least a week, but Ronan hoped there was the potential to go home early. He’d sent the producer his songs several weeks ago and was told they’d work on them together, but the idea of being away from Henrietta for that long was excruciating enough that he was tempted to let the producer do whatever he wanted with the tracks.

They were taken to a back studio room packed full of guys. At the center, manning a complex system of knobs, buttons, and keys, was a wiry piece of work. The man had his gaze stuck to a computer, but his fingers darted around the mixing table at an alarming speed. Ronan tried not to stare, but something about it was mesmerizing. It reminded Ronan, vaguely, of Gansey’s practice nonchalance; the man’s eyes looked dead, staring unblinking into the screen, but his hands gave him away.

“**You Lynch?**” The man asked.

Ronan nodded. “**You K?**”
K - the producer - turned toward Ronan with a shit-eating grin. His hair was swept under a backwards baseball cap, a look that Ronan had assumed gone out of style for white boys once they passed the age of eighteen. He looked nothing like Ronan’s expectations of an accomplished producer - much too young, for one thing, too much like a bro, for another - and it was hard not to stare.

“Call me Kavinsky,” he clarified. “K is code. Welcome to my lair, Lynch. Your shit is pretty good. Could be better, but that’s what I’m here for.”

Ronan felt the press of Noah’s hand on his arm. In that gesture, Ronan suddenly understood Adam a bit better. There was something safe in Noah’s touch, and it kept Ronan grounded. At least for the moment.

“I’m Noah, by the way.” He reached his hand around Ronan, offering it to Kavinsky. “I do the keyboard and synth.”

Kavinsky stared at his open hand. Without shaking it, he said, “That’s funny. I do that, too, but on my computer. Didn’t realize anyone bothered with you anymore.”

Noah’s hand recoiled at the remark. It was a cruel comment and Ronan wanted to smack the look off of Kavinsky’s face. Noah took it in stride, though, and just joked, “Well, I’m also the visual of the band. We needed a pretty face.”

Kavinsky turned back to his computer, ignoring Noah’s remark. He kicked over a chair to Ronan, though, and motioned for him to sit. “I worked a couple songs. Tell me what you think.”

Ronan looked to Noah for approval - still concerned over Kavinsky’s insult - but Noah just waved him on. Instead of sitting, Noah took out his phone and said, “I’ll get some shots. For Henry.”

“Henry - Fucking - Cheng,” Kavinsky drawled, hearing the name. He laughed under his breath. “You working with that pussy, huh?”

“He’s fine,” Ronan snapped. What a world he lived in. Ronan never thought he’d defend Henry, but something about Kavinsky’s tone made his gut churn. If he didn’t turn out some fucking amazing music, Ronan was going to make Whelk get him another producer.
Kavinsky snorted, clearly not buying Ronan’s defense. He moved on, though, and pulled up a couple of Ronan’s new songs. The first he played - *Magician* - started up through the speaker, a slow pulsing of a bass, followed by an unexpected synth melody. It was not what Ronan had in mind for the song at all, but as the music progressed, the hairs on his skin raised to reveal goosebumps.

**Dammit.**

Despite keeping his expression empty of any praise, Kavinsky picked up on it. He looked at Ronan and slapped his leg as he enunciated, “Fucking! Amazing! Right, man? If you need to go cream yourself, do it in the corner.”

“Well, guess we’re not using this video for Instagram, either,” Noah muttered from behind.

“Well because it doesn’t suck doesn’t mean it’s amazing,” Ronan said.

“Lies don’t become you, Lynch,” Kavinsky taunted. The song was starting to pick up even faster now. When the music dropped, Kavinsky kicked his leg into the mix table so that he propelled backwards, and as he spun in a circle he yelled, “Don’t fucking tell me this isn’t the shit! Prokopenko, go get me something sweet. Lynch needs something to yank the stick out of his ass.”

“Are we going to work or what?” Ronan asked, growing more irritated by the second. It was a jarring experience to both loathe Kavinsky so much, but have his music spinning in the background. Kavinsky’s work took his music to another level. Maybe Ronan could make music like this one day if he had the training and the equipment, but for now, Kavinsky was his only option.

“I don’t work with narcs,” Kavinsky muttered. He shot Noah a pointed look.

“I don’t have to film anything,” Noah offered.

He sneered. “Or amateurs.”

“*Noah stays,*” Ronan snapped. He was two seconds to strangling Kavinsky.

Despite Ronan’s words, Noah looked uncomfortable. He took a step to the door. “It’s okay, Ronan.
I’ve got some things I could be doing for Henry anyway. Just text me when you’re done for the day.”

Noah slipped out of the room before Ronan could even offer to go with. He turned back to Kavinsky with a growl, “Is everyone in this city assholes, or is that just you?”

Kavinsky shrugged. Prokopenko - one of the other men in the room - handed him a small bag over his shoulder, which Kavinsky reached for. “Welcome to La La Land. This room is for talented people only, you understand? My level is up here-” he raised his hand to the ceiling “-and I don’t tolerate anyone beneath it. So consider yourself lucky, Lynch, that I’m even working with you.”

“You’re a treat.”

“Fuck right I am.” Kavinsky took the little bag Prokopenko had handed him and began to dump it on the counter. It took Ronan a moment to recognize what it was - cocaine - and he instinctively looked away as Kavinsky leaned down to snort it. “Oh, no, am I hurting your delicate sensibilities, Lynch? It’s just blow.”

“I thought we were working,” Ronan said stiffly.

“Yeah, exactly.” Kavinsky took a deep inhale, and the powder disappeared in his wake. After making a guttural sound of approval deep in his throat, Kavinsky said, “This is how my best work gets done.”

“That’s sad.”

Kavinsky barked out a laugh. “Jesus, Lynch, you’re dumber than I thought. You want to know why my music is so much better than yours?” As an answer, he dangled the bag of cocaine in front of Ronan’s face. There was still a good amount left, and Ronan got the impression Kavinsky expected him to finish it off. “This gets you out of your head. You want to make good music? You need to live a little.”

Ronan knocked Kavinsky’s hand away and the bag sailed to the ground. “Pass.”

Prokopenko was the one to pick up the bag, even though he had to reach underneath Kavinsky’s leg to do it. Kavinsky exhaled a long, exaggerated sigh and kicked his feet onto the soundboard. “I
remember when I first came to LA. You’re cute, really. One month from now, when you’ve gotten over your moral high ground, I’ll treat you to the good shit and we’ll have a laugh. How’s that sound?"

Ronan turned away from Kavinsky and toward the computer. Maybe the best plan was to just ignore him, to keep the focus on the music. He jerked his head to the computer and said, “So, am I going to hear more or what?”

Kavinsky took the bait - or maybe he thought Ronan deserved a little mercy - but either way, he cackled and pulled up another song. “Let’s see what you think about this one.”

Near the end of Winter quarter, the band got a message from Whelk that it was time to record the album. Unlike their previous songs, Whelk wanted them together, and he wanted them in Los Angeles. It was a momentous conversation, mostly because of what it meant. The past six months had been spent in relative ease. Things were stagnant - yes, they were a band, and yes, they had a contract, and yes, their songs were doing decently well in sales - but Whelk kept them mostly off to the side.

Adam wanted to play. He’d heard Ronan’s songs but he wanted to be back with everyone, in actual practice, playing actual shows.

What Adam didn’t realize, however, was that Whelk’s insistence on coming to Los Angeles included permanence. Once their album was finished recording, Whelk intended for them to play shows, do interviews, and if they got successful enough, maybe even shoot a couple advertisements, and all of that required Los Angeles. It would be cheaper, he argued, to pay for a small dorm than to keep flying them back and forth.

Gansey, Noah, and Ronan could all afford their own place in L.A. Blue and Adam would not be so lucky. They took Whelk up on the offer of a place to stay, and Adam wondered whether he could convince the other three to join them.

He was scheduled to officially move once Winter quarter was done. His finals got done earlier than Gansey, though, leaving him with more time on his hands than he knew what to do with. Then, with just one phone call from Blue, he made a decision. He asked Gansey if he could borrow The Pig, packed up his things, and headed south.
For years, Adam didn’t know what it would take for him to make it back to Henrietta, but as it turned out, he was willing to do it for Ronan.

Ronan had made it clear that he didn’t need help moving - in fact, his brothers practically pushed their help onto Ronan, as an excuse to hang out one more time - but there was one thing Ronan had avoided doing in preparation for the move. He’d been extra pissy the past few weeks, hardly responding to any of Adam’s texts and being a general jackass when he did, and Adam couldn’t figure out why. He thought he’d be fine with the move - especially since Ronan had been complaining about the frequency of flights down to LA - but the closer to the move the rougher Ronan’s edges became. It wasn’t until Blue explained that Ronan had yet to conquer one major issue.

He still hadn’t told Opal.

Adam didn’t understand their relationship fully. Because he had never met Opal, nor knew what Ronan did on a daily basis, he assumed for a long time that Ronan taught her lessons just for kicks. Then, when they first met Henry, Blue had mentioned she was always around the store. But now, when faced with weeks of Ronan being unusually withdrawn and feisty, he finally understood. At some point Opal became less of an obligation, more of a blessing. She had worked her way into Ronan’s heart, securing a place in it, and he would have to leave her behind.

Adam was more worried for Ronan than he was for Opal.

So, without telling Ronan, Adam decided to come back to Henrietta the week before the official move. It made sense to do it, anyway. Though Adam hadn’t collected much over his time at Yale, he did have some furniture that he wanted to keep. They’d been instructed to pack light for LA, and Gansey had offered that Adam could store his extra belongings at Monmouth.

The drive down took him twice as long as it should have. He kept pulling off to the side to catch his breath; found a reason to stop at a gas station every other city he passed; turned around twice, thinking *I can’t do this*, before reminding himself that he was doing this for Ronan.

Henrietta had not changed since he left. He passed Boyd’s - half tempted to stop and say hello, but too scared that word would get back to his father - and made his way to Gansey’s old apartment first. Blue and Ronan would occasionally stay at Monmouth, thankfully, so Adam didn’t have to face an apartment that was covered in dust and smelled like must. All of his belongings fit in the corner of the room, a compact pile, and it took him only two trips to the car and back to finish up.
Adam didn’t know why he was so nervous. His parents would never go to a music store - nor would any of their friends, because no one in the trailer park could afford music - and he was sure Ronan would let him stay at The Barns, as he always promised. But there was something about being in Ronan’s life again that made him nervous.

His GPS led him to Mr. Allen’s music shop. The parking lot was pretty deserted, other than Ronan’s BMW and an old Honda Civic. Adam wished, suddenly, that he had access to any other car than Gansey’s, because there was no hiding The Pig. He wanted to slip into the store quietly, but the orange monster was as loud in color as it was in sound.

Unsurprisingly, Ronan’s form appeared at the door to the shop. Seconds later a small, gangly thing appeared at his legs. Opal. She barely came up to his waist and hung on his leg tightly.

Adam pulled himself out of the car and relished the look of surprise on Ronan’s face once he realized it wasn’t Gansey. An unassuming smile slipped to Ronan’s lips, but before Adam could enjoy it, Ronan ducked his head to Opal. Whatever he said was lost between the distance, but it made Opal’s mouth twist tight in an judgemental pout.

“Parrish,” Ronan said smoothly, though it was clearly the extent of what he planned to say. He fumbled for a moment before settling with, “You’re in Henrietta.”

Adam winced. “Let’s not make a thing of it.”

Opal tugged at Ronan’s pant leg. What followed was a strange, silent conversation; somehow Ronan knew how to interpret her request, sans words, and he tugged at a strand of her hair twice. Opal shook her head. Ronan flicked his gaze to Adam and nodded.

The conversation finished. Opal walked to Adam, dragging her feet, and said, “Hi.”

“Hello Opal. I’m Adam.” Adam wasn’t sure if seven-year-olds (or was she eight now? He had lost track) shook hands, but he offered his regardless. Opal took it, though she just let her palm hang limply in his hand.

“He’s a friend, Kid.”

“Uh huh,” she muttered. It came out oddly sassy, and Adam didn’t know what she found so
suspicious about him. Opal turned on her heel and went back inside the music shop.

“You said don’t make a thing about it,” Ronan began, watching Adam’s movements carefully. “But I kind of need to make it a thing. What the hell are you doing here?”

“Had to drop off some things at Monmouth. Figured it would probably be my last chance to really say goodbye to Henrietta, too,” Adam admitted. When he stood in front of Ronan like this, he had the urge to reach out and tuck his fingers into his belt loops. “Also, uh, figured you might want some support.”

Ronan’s eyes narrowed. Adam jerked his head inside the store, signaling Opal. At this, Ronan yanked the door to the store closed and said, “Was it Blue?”

“In her defense, I asked if she knew why you were being more of an ass than normal.” Instead of his belt loops, Adam resigned himself to picking at the leather bands on Ronan’s wrists. “Can I stay at the barns?”

“Nah.”

Adam dropped his hand and turned back to The Pig. “Well, see you in a week then.”

It took Ronan just two long steps to slide in front of Adam. He grabbed his shoulders and turned Adam back to the store, muttering, “Come on. She’s probably just hungry and pissy. I’ll make her some macaroni and she’ll like you more.”

Adam had never been in Mr. Allen’s store before, though he’d heard a lot about it. It was smaller than he expected, but Ronan did not exaggerate the vast wall of guitars. Opal had climbed to sit on the ledge of the register - she even had a small stool to help get up - and was watching Adam with cool eyes.

“You should play him a song.” Ronan tugged at Opal’s hair as he slid around her. “Show him what a good fucking teacher I am.”

“Jesus, Ronan--”

“She’s fine,” Ronan waved him off. Instead, he reached behind the desk and pulled out the smallest guitar Adam had ever seen. “Play him that new one I taught you.”
Opal pulled the strap over her shoulder and fitted her fingers on the strings. She plucked at a few notes, fingers moving faster than Adam could even do, and Ronan beat his hands on the counter with it. It was bizarre sounding - a mash of chords that Opal slammed her hands on - and Adam didn’t know what to make of it.

“Does it have lyrics?” Adam asked, hoping it might help the awful song.

Opal began to sing - if you could even call it that, it was more like a scream, really - and yelped, “Squash one! Squash two!”

Adam winced. Ronan caught the movement and cackled gleefully. “Whelk wouldn’t let me put this song on the album, no idea why.”

“Yeah, because it’s a real masterpiece,” Adam yelled over Opal’s annihilation.

Ronan nudged her, indicating that she should stop. “Play Tower for him. Adam knows the lyrics, so he’ll sing along.”

“What--”

Ronan pulled a microwavable macaroni pack from behind the counter and said, “Chill, Parrish. I’ll be back in a sec.”

He disappeared into a back room before Adam could complain. Being left with Opal was nerve wracking. Though she had been ordered to start playing, Opal kept her gaze on Adam, unflinching. What the heck did you say to a kid? Especially one like Opal.

“Is Ronan a good teacher?”

Opal shrugged. She wasn’t one for words, he’d heard, but this was excruciating. She began to play a different song, one that Adam did know (a recent creation of Ronan’s, for the new album), and stared at Adam while she played. When he missed his cue she said, “Hey.”
“Sorry. Start again.”

Opal complied. This time, when it was his opening, Adam sang along hesitantly. “I liked those moments best, sky lookin’ like a missile trail, back when it was us placed side by side, oh, I wonder why living feels a bit like dying sometimes.”

At the sound of his voice, a small smile slipped on Opal’s lips. She didn’t even need to look at her fingers while she played; she just stared at Adam, deliberately holding his gaze, and he wondered if she learned it from Ronan.

“I needed you to build me a tower, back then and maybe now.” Adam continued singing, Opal kept playing. “Build me an escape route, anything, I need to fade away. Just for a moment, just for a minute. How are people happy all the time?”

Opal stopped playing abruptly. Adam turned, wondering if Ronan was back with lunch already, but he was still missing in the back.

“Did I screw something up?” He asked.

“I don’t like this song anymore,” she whispered.

“Oh, okay.” Adam wasn’t sure what to do. Was this normal for kids? To abruptly change course? He shouldn’t have been surprised, he supposed; it was one of Ronan’s darker songs, and even if she was too young to understand the meaning, it was quite somber. “We could sing a different song?”

“Do you know Highway to Hell?” She asked.

“Yes.” Adam leaned back, speculative. “Do you?”

In response, Opal started playing the opening lines to the ACDC classic. Adam sat back, amazed, and tried to sing along as best he could. (His voice was really not made for this sort of thing.) They only got a few verses in before Ronan kicked open the door to the back, yelling, “Opal, we have discussed this. ACDC is not appropriate!”
“Now you’re worrying about what’s appropriate?” Adam asked dryly.

Ronan set a bowl of macaroni down in front of Opal and lifted the guitar over her head. “We have had multiple discussions about how ACDC is overrated. She shouldn’t be wasting her time on that garbage.”

Opal caught Adam’s eyes and just shook her head. Instead of dignifying Ronan’s tirade with a response, she dug into her macaroni. He’d never seen someone enjoy a microwavable dish so much.

Adam spent the rest of Ronan’s shift trying to get to know Opal. The macaroni did not help as much as Ronan said it was, because Opal was still difficult to please. She didn’t speak to Adam the entire rest of the day, barely even looked at him, really, though she did allow him to tie her shoes when Ronan was busy helping a customer. When Ronan closed up the shop Adam looked around warily, wondering when Diane would show up. Instead, Opal tugged Ronan’s keys off his waist and ran off to the BMW, stuffing herself into the back seat.

“Man, she likes you,” Ronan said.

“Your sarcasm needs work,” Adam muttered.

“I’m actually serious. She gave you the back seat - that’s huge. She makes Blue sit in the back.”

Adam thought this was a ridiculous reason to think Opal liked him, but he let it slide for more pressing matters. “Does she come home with you?”

“Once in awhile, but only when Diane goes on vacation. Opal can’t handle babysitters. I’m just dropping her off - it’s just a minute away.”

“Ronan.”

“Don’t look at me like that,” Ronan muttered.

“When are you going to talk to her?”
“Soon.”

“Ronan.”

“Fine, tomorrow. I’ll do it tomorrow.”

Adam didn’t believe him, but Opal leaned over the backseat and honked the horn at them, ending the conversation. Her house was - by Adam’s standards - quite nice, though the way Ronan sneered at it, Adam knew he didn’t feel the same. Before shutting the door, Opal looked at Adam and said, “See you tomorrow.”

In the echo of the door slamming shut, Ronan said, “Holy shit. She does like you.”

“Not sure why she would. She barely knows me.”

“She knows about you. I, uh, talk about you sometimes.” When Adam turned to Ronan with a gleeful grin, he added, “I talk about everyone, Parrish. Don’t look at me like that.”

“Sure.”

He tapped his thumbs on the steering wheel anxiously. “Her dad - her real dad - is pretty shitty. Kind of like yours. So I told her about you.” When Adam said nothing, he added, “Sorry.”

“Oh, uh, no, it’s fine--”

“You’re just a good example of someone who succeeded, you know?” Ronan kept gripping the steering wheel, and Adam found it fascinating to watch him fall about into a nervous bundle of energy. “She gets down, sometimes, and she doesn’t do well in school. So I told her about you, that’s all.”

“Ronan, it’s fine.”

“Okay.”
They fell into silence the rest of the ride to The Barns. It allowed time for Adam to think, for which he was grateful. He really didn’t mind that Ronan had told Opal about his past, she clearly wasn’t going to blab his story to any stranger, or start looking at him like he was a charity case. However, the knowledge that Opal could take inspiration from his story, well. That was something he had to think about. Because a couple months ago he’d finally told Henry about his past - the whole thing - and Henry had asked whether he was willing to talk about it in public.

Absolutely not was his first reaction.

Miraculously, Henry was fine was this. He accepted Adam’s boundaries, told him he’d do his best to keep it out of the media, and that was that.

But ever since then, he’d been thinking back to Henry’s initial idea. It’s not that I want to capitalize on your tragic backstory or anything, though the press would eat it up, believe me, Henry had said. But if you get ahead of this story, it’s yours to tell. You own it. And who knows, maybe there’s some little kid out there who needs to hear your story.

Adam had found that preposterous then. After all, he didn’t look back fondly on his story. Adam never got himself out, like he hoped, and he didn’t get to save himself, like he wanted. But now, when he thought about Ronan telling Opal his story, it didn’t seem as miserable as he once thought.

Ronan was trying very hard to keep his cool. Adam was in his room, in his fucking childhood room, looking around. It was both horrific and fantastic. Adam being at The Barns, meeting his mother, helping feed the cows, was not something Ronan ever expected to happen. He’d given up hope that Adam would ever come back to Henrietta. He couldn’t decide whether he was pissed or relieved that Adam sprung it on him. Some preparation time would have been nice - his room was a disaster - but had he known a visit was impending Ronan probably would have lost his mind.

“You have a lot of model cars for an adult,” Adam said.

“You’re just jealous.”

Adam set down one of the cars he was holding with a wistful smile. “I kind of am.”
Shit. He should have known better to say something like that, knowing Adam had no memories or mementos from his childhood. Adam saw his tight expression and just laughed. “It’s so easy to mess with you sometimes.”

Ronan threw a pillow at him. “Asshole.”

He took Adam to Declan’s old room, where he’d be sleeping, and forced himself to leave him there. It was too difficult to see Adam in his house, looking like he belonged there, like he fit so perfect into Ronan’s world, and not do something he would regret.

(Like taking his palm to his lips.)

(Like taking his fingertips into his mouth.)

(Like pressing him into his bed and worshiping his neck.)

(Fuck.)

Adam had come to Henrietta for Ronan. Jesus. It was an overwhelming thought, and it did not make his fantasies easy to ignore. Ronan set them aside with the reminder that, yes, Adam came to see him, but he came because Ronan was about to ruin the life of an emotionally unstable 8-year-old.

It was never the time to fantasize about Adam, but now was especially not the time. Adam was right - he needed to tell Opal, and he needed to tell her tomorrow. He tried to think of how to approach the subject (Dear Opal, you know I love you very, very much, but sometimes a quasi-brother/father figure gets the opportunity to be in a band and it requires he go far away, and when this happens, it makes more sense for him to do it than to stay in bum-fuck-Henrietta with an 8-year-old who technically has a foster family, even though he loves you very, very much) but any words he could come up with sounded fake.

He felt shitty that he was leaving her behind. He felt even worse that he waited until now to tell her.

Ronan didn’t sleep at all that night.
He wasn’t due at Mr. Allen’s store until two, where Opal would inevitably be waiting for him, so he spent the morning showing Adam how to do chores around the farm. He had hoped that seeing Adam truck through cow shit and smell like chickens would lessen his want for the boy. (It did not.) Aurora was taking advantage of Adam’s presence, too, and she pulled him into a baking session after lunch. Ronan had to drag him from his mother’s grasp in order to get to work on time.

“I could just stay here,” Adam offered. “It would give you some time to talk to Opal. Alone.”

Ronan did not like that idea, for multiple reasons. Thankfully, he had an easy excuse. “You left The Pig there yesterday. You need to get it.”

“The what--oh shit, I totally did. Why didn’t you say something yesterday?”

“Because I thought it’d be funnier if it got stolen, and Gansey lost his shit.” At Adam’s withered glare, he added, “It’s fine. Trust me.”

“Just don’t tell Gansey.”

The Pig, of course, was still where they left it, and also as expected, Opal was waiting for them out front. She had pulled her knees tight to her chest and was nursing a can of soda, and for whatever reason, the image was almost too much for Ronan to handle. Without meaning to, Ronan cursed under his breath.

Adam gripped his knee. “You can do it.”

Ronan didn’t know whether he should rip the bandaid off or ease her into it slowly. He also had the sinking suspicion today would be the last day he’d see her before leaving, though - she’d probably be hurt, and pissed, and they didn’t have enough time left for her to mourn and come back - so Ronan decided to enjoy his time with Opal first.

Adam stayed mostly out of the way. Ronan had given him Kavinsky’s most recent edits of the instrumental tracks to study, so Adam took them to the back of the shop to take notes, taking advantage of Mr. Allen’s better sound system. Opal would occasionally wander back to Adam - one time she even leaned against his shoulder - but she stayed mostly in Ronan’s orbit.
She helped him sort through the latest delivery.

He taught her how to play a new song.

They made fun of the expression on Blue’s face, after she bustled into the shop with pink cheeks, when she saw it was Adam and not Gansey. (“So obvious,” Ronan had muttered. Opal nodded solemnly.)

Then, around five, Adam joined them with a very pointed expression. He must have told Blue what was going to happen, because she whispered, “I can watch the shop. Go talk to her.”

He didn’t have any excuses left. It was time to get it over with. Ronan took Opal outside - a gesture that made her immediately tense - and sat her on the curb. Ronan grasped his fingers in his right hand, twisting them back and forth, as a distraction from the situation.

“I need to tell you something,” he said.

Ronan did not have a plan for how to do this. Talking to Opal reminded him a bit of being drunk. He didn’t think his words were making sense; he fumbled, backtracked, praised her too much, got a little too distant. Opal sat quiet through the entire thing. Her silence hurt more than he expected, though.

“I’ll visit,” he offered.

Opal pushed herself up from the pavement. She stared down at Ronan, bottom lip sucked into her mouth, and said, “I hate you.”

Nevermind. Ronan would take the silence, wanted it back badly. He knew, rationally, that children threw those words around without knowing what they meant. Opal was different from most children, though. She knew, distinctly well, what it felt like to have that word tossed in her direction. He didn’t think she’d use them as careless weapons unless she meant it.

“I’m sorry.” Ronan wanted to reach up and tug her hair. It was their sign. Hey. it’s okay. I’m here. You can trust me.
Opal turned on her heel at the apology, walking out of the parking lot. Ronan did not want her walking home alone - her house wasn’t far, but she was so young, and upset, and he wasn’t sure she would make it home. She would never get in a car with him, though, so instead Ronan followed behind Opal her entire walk home.

He gave her space, at least ten feet between them. A few minutes into the walk he thought to warn Diane with a text. To his credit, Ronan had enough forethought to warn Diane about his move. He had hoped, all this time, that Diane thought to sit Opal down to warn her herself. Clearly, she did not think it her responsibility.

Ronan was shit for leaving Opal. Diane provided a perfectly good home, but she was too busy to be a parent.

He was too young to be a parent. So why the fuck did he feel guilty?

Opal made it back to her house just fine. (It probably helped that he followed.) Ronan stopped three times on the way back to the music shop to crouch into a ball. If he kept his hands laced, pressed down on the top of his head, they wouldn’t find their way into walls or mailboxes or on a jogger who insisted on yelling, “On your left...left...LEFT!” like Ronan was some idiot.

He didn’t go back into the store, though. Ronan took his car to a nearby gas station and bought the strongest beer he could find. (7% proof. Weak as hell. What the fuck Henrietta?) Ronan knew he had an obligation to get back to his shift, but Blue was there and she could hold down the fort until closing.

Adam was there, too.

Fuck.

Ronan turned the car around and went back to the music store. Blue and Adam were waiting for him with differing expressions. Blue was pissed (“Jesus, Ronan, I said I’d watch the store, not close it!”), Adam hesitant (“How did it go?”), but they both fell to silence when Ronan blurted, “She fucking hates me.”

“She didn’t mean it,” Blue whispered.
“I think she did.” Ronan pressed the palms of his hands into his eyes and growled, “Fuck!” If he pressed hard enough he could substitute the want to cry with pain. He was thinking of Opal again, about her in Diane’s house, alone, suddenly without any outlet. And Jesus, he didn’t even send her home with her guitar. What if she didn’t come back for it?

Blue tugged at his arm, pulling one hand down. She used her thumb to stroke the back of his hand. “Come back, Ronan. Come back.”

He was trying. Ronan thought he was done with these reactions - he hadn’t felt such all-encompassing rage for himself in so long - and it was suffocating.

Ronan felt a different sort of pressure in his hands. Adam had pressed two drumsticks into his palm. He looked at Ronan, got in deep with that look, down where Ronan hid, and brought him back. “In her honor.”

Ronan looked toward the drum set. It was true: if Opal had a drumset at Diane’s, she would definitely be going to town. So he drug himself over to the drums and posed his hands above the crash cymbal.

When he was done, Ronan realized what a little genius Opal was. He should have done this sooner.

Adam wasn’t sure how to help Ronan. They were back at The Barns now, back in Ronan’s room once again, and he watched Ronan warily. He was three beers in now, though it had little effect on Ronan’s disposition. He wasn’t sure whether Ronan simply had a large tolerance, or if three beers only seemed like a lot to him.

Ronan had offered him one out of politeness. Adam refused, of course, and said, “I don’t think I’d be a good drunk.”

“You’re not going to get drunk on one beer.”

“Yeah, I know.” Adam leaned his head against Ronan’s door. Ronan had fallen to his bed as soon as they got upstairs, and Adam did not trust his hands if he were to join Ronan on it. “I just don’t want
Ronan was balancing a new beer on his chest. He didn’t look at Adam when he said, “Don’t take this the wrong way, cause you should do whatever the fuck you want. But I think your whole I-can’t-ever-drink-mentality is bad for you.”

“Oh, gee, and they said peer pressure ends once you’re out of high school,” Adam muttered.

Ronan sighed. “No, fuck, that’s not what I-- I’m not trying to pressure you.” He set the beer down and turned on his side to face Adam. “Just, you know you would never be your dad, even if you got wasted, right?”

Adam’s breath hitched in his throat. It was incredibly cruel of Ronan to say something like that, while looking at him like that. His unintelligent reply was to say, “Okay.”

“I just needed you to know that.”

“I do.”

“I don’t think you do.”

Adam hated Ronan for knowing him so well, sometimes. He wanted to win this battle, though, so he reached for Ronan’s discarded bottle and took a long chug. It was disgusting - tasted horrifically bitter. When he thought he’d drank enough to deflect Ronan’s words, he handed it back.

“There,” Adam said. “We good?”

Ronan laughed, though after the day’s events, it sounded hollow. “Sure, Parrish. You’ve solved all your problems.”

Adam didn’t have the heart to argue with Ronan today - especially when he knew Ronan was doing this out of the good of his heart, and he was probably right - but he couldn’t help but add, “It’s not like you’re that much better. Solving your problems with beer isn’t healthy either.”
Surprisingly, Ronan didn’t bite back. He just turned back to the ceiling and shrugged, “Got me there. If you combined us two, you’d have a nice, healthy medium. Someone who drinks a half cup of wine before bed, just to help them sleep.”

Adam didn’t have a good retort, so he fiddled with his thumbs, content to just watch Ronan. Adam didn’t mind the back and forth banter. It was almost enough to pretend that everything was normal, that Ronan wasn’t debating whether life was shitty, or if he was a shitty human being. (Because Adam knew what that looked like by now.) Ronan was trying very hard to act like he was fine, but Adam knew him too well. It was like someone had sucked Ronan’s spirit out of his body, and they thought they could pass it off with this shell.

He didn’t know what to do. Back in the store, Blue had stolen his only move - to touch, to offer support with a hand on the wrist - and he scrambled to recover. It was different this time. Adam wasn’t sure how to quell Ronan’s anger when he wasn’t on the other end of it. Before, they just fought. Hashed everything out until they reached an agreement.

But this wasn’t his battle to fight. He still wanted to help.

Ronan wanted a distraction, clearly. He found topics to discuss, things to tease Adam about, but the insults never touched down, never felt real. At one point, though, he perked up unexpectedly. Adam wasn’t sure why - he was just sitting there, twisting a finger through his hair - but Ronan leaned forward and said, “Parrish, Parrish, Parrish.”

“What?”

Ronan pointed to his head and said, “You really do have a hair fetish.”

“It just feels good,” Adam said, refusing to feel ashamed for something as normal as enjoying your hair played with. “You just don’t understand because you don’t have hair.”

Ronan flipped Adam off, then used the same hand to reach up to his hair and tug at the few inches of curls at the top of his head. “What the hell is this, then?”

“Your hair is a recent thing,” Adam clarified.

“I had hair the majority of my life. I only cut it a few years before you met me.”
This surprised Adam. “And yet you’ve never had anyone run their hands through your hair? Not even your mom?” When Ronan continued to stare blankly at him, Adam said, “Wow. Even my mom did that. You’re missing out.”

Ronan scoffed. “I’m sure.”

Adam recognized the perfect opportunity before him. It wouldn’t be that weird if he were to show Ronan what it felt like. In this context, this conversation, Ronan might not even suspect Adam had any ulterior motives. So he pushed himself off the ground, over to the bed where Ronan was sprawled, and hit the side of Ronan’s knees in a silent request for him to move them. Ronan looked irritated at the request, but he folded his legs to his body regardless.

“Face me,” Adam ordered. His voice was light, like a breath, and he cursed himself for it. This was obvious. It was so obvious. “Come on.”

Ronan complied, though suspiciously. They sat facing each other, both with legs crossed on the bed, and Adam forced himself to concentrate on the top of Ronan’s scalp. He reached his hand out and brushed a piece of hair from Ronan’s forehead, then used the palm of his hand to push the rest of the hair back.

Ronan straightened his back, suddenly very rigid. Adam swallowed the lump in his throat. It’ll just be weirder if you stop now, he argued. So Adam ran his hands through Ronan’s scalp again, letting his fingers drag behind Ronan’s ear.

Shit. Since when had being attracted to Ronan become this? Adam thought he had a handle on his feelings. It was one thing to look at him, but Adam wanted to press his lips to Ronan’s muscles in worship, to trace every inch of his tattoo with his tongue. He was taking advantage of Ronan’s kindness, and it was selfish.

“See?” Adam asked, desperate to regain footing. “It feels good. Right?”

Ronan didn’t have any words, he just stared at Adam in silence. Adam hoped it was a reaction to the sensation, not that Ronan was disgusted or contemplating ways to get out of the situation. Adam continued his movements, thinking it was the better option, and watched Ronan carefully. Until now, their touches had never felt like a two-way street. The whole time Ronan had offered himself to Adam, either by a hand to his wrist or a knee to a knee, Adam thought it was only him being touched. But suddenly, with his hand running through Ronan’s curls, Adam realized Ronan couldn’t touch him without feeling Adam on him too.
Ronan cleared his throat after a minute, though he didn’t push Adam’s hand away. “You let Tad do this?”

It was not the question he expected. “Oh, uh, yeah. Once. Not for long, because, you know.”

“No, I don’t know,” Ronan murmured.

His voice was awfully low, and the unexpected deepness made Adam’s hands shake. He used it as a reason to finally remove them from Ronan’s scalp.

“I didn’t want to lead him on,” Adam clarified.

Ronan was still staring at him. Adam wondered how long Ronan could keep up the staring contest, and what would happen if he were to break it. Adam hated losing this battle, because he’d grown to like these looks. In the past, he thought Ronan was dissecting him; now, Adam pretended Ronan was taking him in.

“Are you…” The words died on Ronan’s lips.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Ronan shut his eyes. The game was over, in that instant, and Adam turned so that his feet were planted back on the ground.

Adam didn’t know what to say. The air was different now. He excused himself - bed, it was definitely time for bed - before he could say or do anything more dumb than the stunt he just pulled. Once in Declan’s bedroom, Adam flung himself onto the bed, stuffing his face into the pillow to muffle a grown. He was the epitome of a teenage cliche, just a few years too late, and Adam again wished he’d had a better childhood so he wouldn’t be experiencing all this now.

Why the hell did he have to have a crush on Ronan Lynch?
The day before he had to leave, Opal visited Ronan in the store. She didn’t look happy, still, and refused to look him in the eye, but it was still something.

He gifted her the guitar. “I know I rag on the bass, but keep playing that, too. Then I can replace Gansey with you.”

Opal didn’t laugh at his joke. She did, however, stand on her tiptoes and press three fingers into Ronan’s cheek. He cupped his hand over her, holding it in place, trying to memorize how small she was. He didn’t want to think of an Opal who could grow older, grow larger, without him there to see it.

“Be good, Kid.”

Chapter End Notes

Adam Parrish: no chill. Amiright?

Kavinsky popped up this chapter and it was unexpected for me. Is he in character? I sure hope so. I just tried to write an asshole and went with it.

Thanks for still sticking with me everyone! Your comments, kudos, and support is super nice. Drop me a line at my Tumblr sometime.
Chapter Summary

He settled in for a night of writing, though it didn’t come easily. A melody was fine - he could do that in his sleep - it was the lyrics that always got him. Possibly because it required he think about love, which of course meant he thought about Adam, which then made him think about Adam running his hand through his hair, and looking at him like he might actually--

There was no way Adam would like him. Even if - and this was a big if - Adam was into guys, that didn’t mean he was into Ronan. Maybe all this time Adam was in a secret relationship with Tad-Fucking-Carruthers, because he saw Adam’s phone light up with texts from him all the time, and Tad got to run his hands through Adam’s hair, and Adam liked that sort of thing, so even if Adam thought Tad was a git he might fall for him because of his dumb fucking hair fetish--

Chapter Notes

Sorry, this chapter is a bit heavy on the band-shenanigans, instead of fluff-shenanigans. It had to be done.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Surprisingly, it wasn’t very hard to convince Ronan, Gansey, and Noah to move into the small dorm that Whelk provided. They boys had to double up two to a room - Ronan and Noah in one, Gansey and Adam in another - while Blue secured the only solo bedroom. Prior to deciding the arrangement, Adam worried whether he would end up in a room with Ronan. It seemed like a terrible idea, sleeping one bed away from Ronan at all times, not after the incident that was Adam’s birthday. (A.K.A. turns out sleeping next to Ronan was a great way to have your bisexuality awakening. Go figure.)

Thankfully, Gansey suggested Adam and he room, having gotten used to it the past two years, and that was that.

The first couple weeks of LA life passed by in a blur. It was filled with unpacking, band practice, meetings with Whelk, meetings with Henry, meetings with their shit-bag producer. Adam had looked forward to being back with the band for so long, back with his friends, but everyone was too busy to actually hangout. Gansey, as the unofficial leader of the band, was pulled into a promotion cycle by Henry, who had him attend meetings with companies about potential sponsorships, strutting Gansey around like a prized showdog, and he would return late in the night absolutely exhausted. Ronan was missing in action, too; it was nearing time to complete the official recordings, which meant he and the Shit-Bag were practically inseparable.
Adam really hated Kavinsky. The first time they met, in a meeting with just the two of them to discuss the vocals, Kavinsky dragged his eyes down Adam’s frame and laughed. Adam didn’t know what was so hilarious - he thought he looked perfectly normal in jeans and a t-shirt - but Kavinsky continued to shoot him looks of contempt throughout the entire meeting.

What really sealed in Adam’s hatred for Kavinsky occurred at the end of the meeting. Adam had spaced off - admittedly, not the best thing to have done, but it was going on two hours now - and had to have Kavinsky repeat the question. Kavinsky rolled his eyes, leaned across the table, and shouted, extremely slow and pointed, “I said, ARE. YOU. AVAILABLE. TUESDAY? Sweet Jesus, why you’d choose a deaf kid as your lead singer is beyond me.”

“I’m not deaf,” Adam said through gritted teeth. “And I’m not stupid either. You don’t have to talk to me that way.”

“Yeah, sure Princess.”

Whelk cleared his throat and sent a pointed look in both their directions, despite Adam being the innocent party. “Gentlemen, I’m a busy man. Does Tuesday work or not?”

It did. Adam left the meeting fuming. Kavinsky trailed behind him, cooing fake apologies, “Parrish, I was kidding! Come on. What’s with you Virginian kids being so fucking boring?”

Adam didn’t bother having him elaborate. That night, while Noah and Ronan were around to eat dinner at the same time, he complained over pizza. (Blue and Gansey both suspiciously had plans, though not with each other, no way. Their ruse was really getting out of hand, and Adam wondered how long they intended to keep up the charade.) After a ten-minute rant that detailed all of Kavinsky’s flaws, he said, “I don’t know how you stand him, Ronan.”

Between bites of pizza, Ronan muttered, “You get used to him.”

“But he’s an ass.”

“Look,” Ronan set down his slice and sighed. “I’m not denying he’s a douche. I don’t even think Kavinsky would deny he’s a douche. But he’s good at what he does, and the songs are great, so what are we supposed to do?”
It was the first time he and Ronan had gotten into an argument in months. It turned out they had fundamentally different ideas on what a person needed to be considered admirable; Ronan was willing to sacrifice attitude for talent, while Adam was not. Noah watched their argument progress like one would watch a ping-pong match, until Adam asked for his opinion.

Noah effectively ended the argument with a quietly delivered blow. “I don’t think I should comment, since he thinks I’m useless. I’m a bit biased.”

This shut Ronan up. He grabbed Noah by the waist and tossed him over his shoulder. (It was not a difficult feat, considering the discrepancies in height between the two.) Adam watched them disappear into their room with dismay, not ready for the conversation to end. As he walked back to his room he heard the echo of Ronan’s lecture through the walls.

“Kavinsky doesn’t know what the fuck he’s talking about. You’re not useless - no, don’t look at me like that - you’re not.”

Despite his rant to Noah, Ronan still seemed to be on Kavinsky’s side. Okay, well, maybe that was a bit of an exaggeration; the kindest thing Ronan had ever said about Kavinsky, with the exception of his talent, was that he knew how to make a good sandwich. But even that was too much. Adam thought Kavinsky was a degenerate piece of shit, and was baffled that Ronan didn’t use his colorful vocabulary to define Kavinsky at all times.

He was, maybe, a little jealous of how much they hung out.

Thankfully, Blue was on his side once the official recordings were scheduled. Kavinsky refused to refer to Blue as anything but “babe” or “sweetie,” and complained that she was “distracting his crew” by wearing shorts in the recording booth. The latter comment earned him an extremely angry rant, which Kavinsky immediately muted. As Blue yelled behind the recording glass, evident only through the rapid moving of her mouth, Adam wondered whether he should tell her Kavinsky didn’t hear a thing.

“You’re a jackass,” Adam had said.

Kavinsky didn’t spare him a glance. “And you’re a pauper. Pigs shit, sky is blue. Don’t waste my time, Parrish.”
It didn’t help that Kavinsky would save his worst insults for when Ronan wasn’t in the room. He liked to isolate Adam, deal his cards only when he was backed up with his team of lackies. Adam wasn’t an idiot, though; he knew he was falling easily into Kavinsky’s trap. The more he complained about Kavinsky, the more his bandmates tired of his rants.

So he had to suck it up.

Perfect.

Ronan was exhausted. Since moving to L.A., he couldn’t remember the last day off he had. Aside from the demanding recording schedule and Kavinsky’s insistence on re-doing half of the songs, Whelk had suddenly demanded that Ronan write one more song.

He blamed Gansey and his big fucking mouth. Because - good ole Dick - happened to make a joke about Ronan’s long-standing inability to write a love song in front of Whelk. And of course Whelk, once oblivious to this fact, read through the lyrics of every song and agreed.

“Who the fuck even cares about love songs?”

Gansey pinched Ronan’s thigh - watch your language, this is our boss - but Whelk hardly seemed phased. He said, “Girls. Teens, to be exact. The very market we are hoping to snag.”

Ronan scoffed. “Since when?”

“Since we realized they like boy bands, realized that they have parents willing to shell out hundreds of dollars on albums and concert tickets.” Whelk’s tone was matter-of-fact, and Ronan wasn’t sure how he kept such a straight face while saying such garbage.

“We’re not a boy band--”

“Thanks to Ms. Sargent, maybe.” Whelk poked at his phone and tossed it to Ronan. It was one of the
band’s social media accounts - Ronan didn’t know which one - and there was a list of comments from various accounts. The theme of said comments, it seemed, was to either comment on how cute they were (dear God, his name appeared more than anyone else, which was terrifying) or to curse out Blue’s existence. “Henry ran the data. As it stands, your fanbase is currently comprised of teen girls between the ages of 13 to 17, with a focused concentration in Vietnam, again thanks to Ms. Sargent I believe. So you’re going to write them a love song, Mr. Lynch, or I’ll pick one for you.”

Ronan didn’t want to imagine what Whelk could come up with for a love song. It was hard to imagine him loving anything besides money, whisky, or his own reflection.

“Fine.”

Whelk may have wanted to talk further, but Ronan didn’t give him the option. He wanted out of Cabeswater’s godforsaken building, away from Whelk and his shitty plans and away from Kavinsky being a pushy asshole and away from--

“Mr. Lynch! So glad to have caught you.”

--Henry Cheng and his incessant harping.

Ronan turned to Henry, preparing himself to face the perpetual doll that was his PR manager. Henry was quickly becoming the bane of Ronan’s existence, though his dislike for him differed from that of Whelk or Kavinsky. He couldn’t exactly hate Henry because he was too hard to read. Some days he was deplorable, other days he was just annoying, and very rarely he would be a decent human being. It gave Ronan vertigo.

Today Henry was back to being an ass, it seemed, based on the spurious smile spreading over his lips. He gestured to his office. “A moment of your time, please, would you?”

“I’m busy, Cheng. I don’t have time to argue about fucking Facebook or whatever.”

“Oh, no, no. I’m just planning a trip to D.C. and thought I’d ask you for some advice.” Henry’s gaze became pointed. “Since you used to frequent it.”

Ronan’s breath hitched, and the hairs on his arms stood on end once the implication of Henry’s words hit him. He cursed under his breath - he really did not have time to deal with this shit - but
didn’t feel like starting an argument in the middle of Cabeswater’s busy lobby. Just to be petulant, Ronan slammed Henry’s door in his wake.

Henry tossed him a few papers. It was an email thread, from a name Ronan didn’t recognize, detailing a supposed date they had gone on. At the end of the email, this person - Matt Johnson - asked for a ridiculous amount of money to keep their date secret. Ronan threw the paper down on Henry’s desk and said, “That’s a fucking lie. I don’t even know him.”

Henry slid his phone to Ronan, and it displayed a dating profile for said Matt Johnson. He did look sort of familiar, but even if they did go out, he definitely didn’t do anything more than grab coffee. He would have remembered otherwise - those shitty dates in D.C. still bothered him.

“So, what, you’re mad that you have to pay some idiot money?” Ronan asked.

Henry laughed. He had turned back to his computer, now, and was typing quickly as he spoke. “That was no problem. It was easy enough to find dirt on Mr. Johnson, and I settled the matter painlessly.”

“Oh, good, wouldn’t want my life to impact your profits,” Ronan drawled.

“Pardon me, I simply thought you didn’t envision having to come out because of blackmail.” He didn’t even bother to look at Ronan while he said this, and it made it hard to read his intentions. Was he actually being a good guy, or was this all a ruse?

See? Cheng was exhausting.

“So then what’s the issue here?”

Henry finally turned away from his computer. He folded his hands neatly together and said, “Well, mostly as a warning. Obviously Whelk knows about this, and though it was easily handled, he’s not happy. He’s asked me to schedule a few interview for the band, and I am to make sure you come off straight as a frat boy.”

“Are frat boys particularly straight?”
Henry let out a joyous laugh. “Oh ho, no. No they are not, in my experience. They try to be, though, bless their hearts.”

Ronan ignored him. “So Whelk is shitty, nothing new. Why are you wasting my time again?”

“Oh, Ronan, how I enjoy our banter.” Henry twisted his hair into a point, humming under his breath. “I noticed that you, still, have yet to post anything to your social media account.”

“I thought I told you to get to the point,” Ronan said.

Henry groaned. “Ronan, you are killing me here. You are the most popular person in this band - you or Mr. Parrish, certainly - and the teens want to hear from you. Who is Ronan Lynch? Why is he so dreamy? Why does he constantly make googley eyes at Adam? Why- woah-okay-sorry!” Ronan had picked up a rather large paperweight from Henry’s desk, aiming to throw it at his face. “Fine, I won’t mention your obnoxiously obvious crush. Doesn’t mean the tweens aren’t eating it up.”

Ronan cursed under his breath. “If someone talks to me about a teenage girl one more time--”

“Well, you can only blame yourself for that.” Henry leaned back in his chair and grinned. “You and Parrish used to eyefuck eachother on stage. Of course the girlies were going to take notice—oh come on, Ronan, it was a joke!”

Ronan couldn’t handle another sexual joke from Cheng - especially not one that involved Adam - so he flipped him off as he exited the room. They weren’t eyefucking back then, Jesus. They just had… fun. Ronan would be the first to admit when his infatuation for Adam crossed the line into being inappropriate, but those days - challenging each other to guitar battles, Adam grinning at him from across the stage when he messed up the lyrics - that was just fun.

The dorm was quiet when he got back. Probably for the best, seeing that he had to somehow pull a love song out of his ass. It was hard enough as it was to write songs in LA; the Barns were so much quieter, so much more inspiring - and he wasn’t sure he could pull the same magic here. (And no matter what Kavinsky said, Ronan didn’t think cocaine or acid would be that helpful. Definitely not for a love song, at the very least.)

He settled in for a night of writing, though it didn’t come easily. A melody was fine - he could do that in his sleep - it was the lyrics that always got him. Possibly because it required he think about love, which of course meant he thought about Adam, which then made him think about Adam
running his hand through his hair, and looking at him like he might actually--

There was no way Adam would like him. Even if - and this was a big if - Adam was into guys, that didn’t mean he was into Ronan. Maybe all this time Adam was in a secret relationship with Tad-Fucking-Carruthers, because he saw Adam’s phone light up with texts from him all the time, and Tad got to run his hands through Adam’s hair, and Adam liked that sort of thing, so even if Adam thought Tad was a git he might fall for him because of his dumb fucking hair fetish--

He was spiraling. This was bad. This is why Ronan did not enjoy writing love songs.

Ronan tried to focus less on Adam, himself, and more of the feeling of Adam. The love song had to be universal, anyway, so it’s not like the lyrics could be Adam Parrish, what a guy, he may be a smartass but at least said ass is delicious, oh, oh, oh.

He flicked a pencil around his finger and it smacked against the paper. The empty pages rippled, taunting him, until he wrote down the first thing that came to his mind:

_He will never be enough for you, but I’d like to try_
_Or let me just be around_
_I would take anything, anything at all_
_If it meant I could be next to you_

Ronan stared at the words. They were gross - cliche, really - what was he thinking? He ripped the page out, crumpled it, and threw it on the ground. It was soon joined by more discarded drafts, until Ronan stared down a small mountain.

In the end, the only lyric he settled on was the first line: _I will never be enough for you, but I’d like to try._

It was a start, at least.

Toward the end of the recording process, Gansey suggested that he and Adam hang out, just the two of them. After sufficiently teasing Gansey for his choice of words ( “Are you going to buy me flowers?” “Adam, please.” ) he agreed, which is how they found themselves out and about in LA, just the two of them.
Despite sleeping in the same room as Gansey every night, it was the first time he’d really seen him in over a month. Adam had gotten used to Gansey always being around, and admittedly, he kind of missed him. He’d been the only constant person in Adam’s life for the past two years, and sometimes he wished they could be back at Yale, stuck in their tiny dorm, talking about Welsh kings or black holes or whether Gansey would ever finish his 50-state quarter collection. (He never could seem to find Missouri; said it would be cheating to buy it. You had to stumble upon these coins naturally, apparently.)

They were making their way down West LA, Gansey chittering. “Henry introduced me to this place - it’s fantastic, completely sustainable sushi. Did you know that we have a serious overfishing problem?”

Adam turned on his heel. “I saw a deli a couple blocks down. We’re going there.”

Gansey hurried after him. “Adam, Henry gave us a credit card to use for this very reason. He wants us to go out to these nice restaurants to increase our awareness.”

“We’re mildly famous, Gansey. No one is going to recognize us in public,” Adam muttered.

It was true, really. They had gotten a bit more popular since moving to LA - all thanks to Henry, who had been steadily increasing their presence through articles and interviews - but they weren’t famous by any means. They were D-list, at best. If they went to some swanky LA-restaurant they’d probably go completely unnoticed, and Adam didn’t feel like dealing with LA-snobs for nothing.

Gansey wasn’t thrilled by the change in plans, but he trudged to the deli regardless. Adam ordered them each a meatball sub, which Gansey surveyed suspiciously and eventually ate with a fork. It was, weirdly enough, incredibly endearing.

Gansey was reaching for conversation the entire time. Perhaps his ruse might have convinced a stranger, but Adam had known Gansey long enough to tell when he was working. Adam allowed Gansey to go through his motions, though; he deserved space as he worked himself toward his ultimate goal.

Then, eventually, it happened. Gansey’s smile was 1000-watts, bright and charming and utterly fake. “Adam, can I talk to you about Blue?”
Ah. Was it finally time? “Sure. What about Blue?”

“Were you--” he paused, and Adam could see Gansey rearranging the words in his head. He felt a bit bad seeing Gansey so torn up.

The nice thing would be to alleviate his fears.

“Are you still interested in Blue?”

But being devious sounded way more appealing right then.

Plus, Adam was still annoyed about losing the bet. “What do you mean?”

“Do you really like Blue?” Gansey was fidgeting now, though he tried to disguise it by wiping the table down with his napkin.

“Why do you sound so surprised? She’s very pretty,” Adam said. “And I’ve known her a long time.”

“I don’t mean to imply she’s not likeable, that’s not what I meant at all--” Gansey stopped midsentence, shut his eyes, and attempted a different direction. “I just wanted to know if you were serious about her. That’s all.”

“And if I am?”

This time, a real smile did slip onto Gansey’s face, though it spoke of something Adam couldn’t quite understand. It was a sad little smile, a painful one, and upon seeing it, Adam regretted messing with Gansey. He shouldn’t look like that.

“Then I would support you, of course,” Gansey said. “If that’s what...you really want.”

Adam wanted to reach across the table and shake Gansey, but he resisted, just barely. He knew Gansey well enough to know he wasn’t joking; it appeared that Gansey was willing to give up his relationship with Blue, just for Adam. It was absurd. Part because, well, Blue was half of the equation and she would be furious to not be consulted in this decision, part because Adam didn’t actually like Blue, but mostly because there was no need for Gansey to sacrifice his happiness for
Where was this coming from? Was this leftover guilt from all those years ago? Adam had long since gotten past any issue he had with Gansey reporting his father. It was absurd, really, to think that Gansey would still feel guilty.

“Gansey.” Adam placed a finger to his temple and massaged it, suddenly feeling quite weary. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I’m not--”

“Gansey.” He fixed Gansey with a serious expression. “I know about Jane, okay?”

“Pardon?” Gansey’s cheeks turned a pleasant shade of pink, and it was such an endearing look that Adam felt his annoyance peter out. “Jane is just-- that’s--”

“I know you like her. Jane.” Adam wasn’t sure why he added the last bit - it was clear they were both talking about Blue - but using her code name made Gansey’s shoulders instantly relax a bit. “It’s okay, Gansey. I was just messing with you guys this whole time.”

“You could just be saying that,” Gansey said.

“Scout’s honor.” Adam held up two fingers, trying to mimic what he’d seen other boys do. Gansey shook his head slightly and gestured back, indicating that it needed three fingers. Typical. Gansey would have been a boy scout.

“Anyway, even if I liked her, so what? You guys have been a thing for...years?” Adam realized, then, that he’d never thought to ask when all this started.

“It’s more complicated than that,” Gansey muttered. “And it would matter. You liked her first. The fact that I even started anything, without talking to you--” he paused, eyes fluttering shut again. Adam suddenly realized it was a reaction to his guilt. “I have not been a good friend to you.”

Adam was feeling very torn. At first, Gansey’s comments seemed ridiculous. What were they, 16-
year-old boys who thought they could tag *dibs* on a girl? He never even liked Blue, anyway, so there wasn’t even a need to fight over her.

But then again, Gansey never knew this. Apparently no one had bothered to ever correct his assumption that Adam liked Blue. And with this knowledge, Adam *was* a little bothered by their relationship. If Adam really had liked Blue, he wouldn’t have expected Gansey to put aside his own feelings - especially since Blue liked Gansey in return - but he could have at least *told* him. Instead, Gansey had let three years go by without ever mentioning his feelings to Blue. *Three years.*

So suddenly, Adam *did* feel a little mad. He thought about telling Gansey the truth - explaining that he never even liked Blue - but did it really matter? In the end, Gansey’s intentions were still flawed. *Then again,* apparently Gansey was willing to sacrifice his happiness with Blue for Adam. It was a very stupid, stupid thing to do, and incredibly impractical, but it was sort of heartwarming.

It was all very confusing.

In the end, Adam decided it was best to just to move past it. “Gansey, I’m happy for you guys. Seriously. If this whole thing with *Jane* has been for my sake, well, it’s unnecessary.”

Gansey looked unconvinced. “Adam--”

“Do you need me to forgive you or something? Okay, I forgive you.” Adam reached over and clapped Gansey’s shoulder. “And I probably owe you an apology, too, because I’ve been messing with you both the past few months. I’m not interested in Blue.”

Gansey’s eyebrows raised. “Messing with us?”

Adam grinned bashfully. “I may have made a bet with Ronan about you two. Which I lost, because you wouldn’t stand up for your lady. So thanks, for that.”

Gansey dropped his head to the table, leaning his forehead on the surface. “Oh, God, Ronan knows too?”

“*You haven’t been very subtle, Gansey.*”
“Is he mad?”

“I’m not sure if he could care any less.”

Gansey lifted his head and rubbed it, muttering under his breath about it being sticky. Adam waited for him to say anything more on the subject, but Gansey was lost in thought. Maybe it was too much new information to process.

Adam asked, “So. Jane. It’s going well?”

“I am almost always screwing it up,” Gansey admitted. His cheeks began to heat up again, and Adam wondered if a certain memory was triggering it. At once he understood, though, because Gansey added softly, “I love her.”

“Jesus,” Adam breathed. He didn’t realize it was that serious. He really was a dick for messing with them. “That’s great, Gansey.”

“Thank you, Adam.” Gansey’s eyes fit his, and his gratitude took on a different meaning. “Thank you.”

Adam couldn’t take it - the mood was too serious, too ridiculous. To break the tension, Adam took his crumpled up sandwich wrapper and chucked it at Gansey’s forehead. “Let’s go home. These sandwiches could turn on us at any moment.”

As Henry forewarned, Whelk set up an interview for the entire band a week later. It wasn’t televised - thank God - but the interviewer wanted to snap a few pictures from the meeting, which meant everyone had to take a turn in the makeup chair. The only benefit to this was that, for the first time in weeks, the entire band got a few minutes to hang out. True, the stylist and makeup artist were there, and yes, it being an interview meant Henry was lingering as well, but Ronan knew it was better than nothing.

Blue and Gansey kept exchanging pointed looks. Ronan would catch said looks and turn to Adam in return, pulling him up and away from some notes he was taking. Adam had told him about his talk
with Gansey, and both boys expected Blue and Gansey to be open about their relationship. Surprisingly, it still seemed like some secret.

Ronan didn’t understand them. He wasn’t sure he wanted to, either.

Once Blue was done getting her makeup done, though, Gansey settled down next to her and cleared his throat. “I have something to say.”

It was his tone that made everyone turn, even the stylist and makeup artist. Ronan wanted to tell them to look away - *this is none of your business* - but he had yet to be dressed, and he wasn’t willing to piss them off. Gansey turned to Blue, who was looking extremely irritated, and laced their hands together.

“Blue and I are together. *Have* been, together, for quite some time.” He smiled at everyone, though it was a politician's smile, and it betrayed his nerves. “I’m sorry to have kept it all from you for so long. We just... wanted it to be our secret, I guess.”

Silence filled the room. Ronan and Adam exchanged another look - *this is fucking weird, right?* - said Ronan’s, while Adam’s said - *what do we say?* - before Henry Cheng filled in the gap.

“Ugh,” he drawled, leaning against the couch by Ronan’s shoulder. “Straight people.”

Ronan had to bite his cheek from laughing. Something about the situation - whether it was Gansey’s serious tone, Blue’s pissy expression, or the way that the stylist looked at them with starry eyes - was ridiculous. Henry, fucking Henry Cheng, said just the right thing to undercut the tension and highlight its absurdity.

Ronan couldn’t help it. He reached his fist up to Henry, who bumped it with affection.

It was only, belatedly, that he realized this motion had the potential to put him in the same category as Henry - openly out, something he had yet to do - but no one seemed to think anything of it. He was almost disappointed. Ronan wasn’t sure he could imagine a better way to come out than one that included making fun of Gansey.

“I told Gansey we didn’t need to make it a scene,” Blue muttered. She turned to Adam, now, with a look of disdain. “Also, thanks a lot, Adam. Gansey told me about your *bet.***
“Look, I was simply trying to encourage you both to come clean, because I was worried about you-”

Blue snorted.

“--also, I didn’t even win that bet, so you can’t be too mad,” Adam finished.

Gansey turned to Noah and reached for him. “You haven’t said anything, Noah. Are you alright with this?”

Noah looked wide-eyed around the room, clearly unsure with how to react. Though he probably didn’t mean for his lie to be so obvious, he said, “Oh, uhh, I’m... super... upset that you kept this from us. But I guess I’m happy for you.”

Ronan rolled his eyes. “Don’t feed their drama, Noah.”

Gansey hung his head. “You knew too, didn’t you?”

“Oh, yeah.” Noah grinned, looking a bit bashful. “I mean, Blue’s wall is right next to mine at the dorm, so--”

“Jesus, can we please move on?” Ronan said, covering his ears with his hands. “I do not want details.”

Blue flipped Ronan off. He returned the gesture, but with an additional hand. Henry clapped several times and said, “Alright, alright. Lynch is right. We need to run over a few questions, as prep.”

They settled down as Henry listed off potential questions the interviewer might ask. They were all incredibly mundane - How did you all meet? What artists influence your work? Which is your favorite track on the album? - and Ronan spaced out. Henry flicked his forehead a few minutes later, enunciating with each snap, “Lynch. Pay. Attention.”
He batted Henry’s hand away. “What? Gansey’ll answer these anyway. Not my job.”

Henry leaned low in his ear and hissed, “In case you’ve forgotten, Whelk wants you to answer some of these.”

“I’ll be a perfect gentleman,” Ronan muttered.

Henry looked thoroughly unconvinced. He ran a hand down his face, pulling his lips comically apart, and sighed. “You will be the death of me, Lynch. I just know it.”

Once makeup was done and everyone was shoved into their respective outfits, they met the interviewer. She looked like every woman Ronan had encountered in Los Angeles - blonde, tanned, impeccably dressed, incredibly fit. She didn’t bother with introductions, though; Piper Greenmantle placed her phone in front of them, hit record, and blinked at the band.

Based on the conversation, Ronan could already imagine the printed article.

PIPER: Thanks for sitting down with me. I’ve been a fan of music for some time, though I admit, I didn’t know about you until Tarryn Smith Tweeted about you guys. Was that exciting?

GANSEY: Oh, yes. As you can imagine, we were all very stunned. We are, of course, huge fans of Ms. Smith, so it was very flattering.

PIPER: When were those videos filmed, anyway?

GANSEY: When we were still in high school, actually. Because a few of us went off to college--


GANSEY: Yes, that’s right. And thank you. We used to play together, in high school, but had to take a break. We are all extremely excited to be back together, though.

PIPER: You go by a different name than you used to though, correct? What made you decide to
change? And while we’re on the subject, care to explain what *Greywaren* means?

*GANSEY:* You’d have to ask Ronan about that one, actually.

It was here that Ronan realized, *oh,* she’s looking at me. He’d been content to space out during the interview, but suddenly the entire band was turned to him. He silently cursed Gansey.

“It’s from that old children’s fable,” Ronan said. “You know? The Greywaren?”

Piper looked at him blankly. Ronan huffed a sigh. This was the same reaction the rest of the band had given him when he suggested the idea. Had none of them been read that story? His father used to recite it to Ronan and his brothers as a bedtime story.

“Well, it’s a story.”

Piper knitted her eyebrows in frustration, obviously annoyed at Ronan’s curt tone. From behind her, Henry was shaking his finger at Ronan, mouthing, *Ronan Lynch, you son-of-a-bitch.*

Noah chimed in for Ronan instead. “It’s a great story! Ronan told me about it when we were younger. It’s about a man who has the power to take things from his dreams, but he’s very isolated and lonely, so he eventually dreams himself a wife. Wait, no, don’t look at me that way - it’s really sweet, I’m just telling it wrong.”

Piper turned to Ronan. “Want to clarify then?”

“Not really.”

Henry slapped his hand to his forehead. Piper, thankfully, moved on quickly, though. She continued to ask questions - most along the same lines that Henry had practiced with them earlier - and everyone in the band was able to respond to a few questions. So far, Ronan was only forced into one more question.

“What’s it like working with K?” Piper asked. “His music is amazing. I would love to see how he works.”
Adam visibly stiffened at the mention of Kavinsky, and Blue grasped the edge of her chair in an effort to conceal her anger. It was no secret that they both hated Kavinsky. In the background, Henry wildly gestured to his wide smile, hoping they’d copy it. Neither followed his lead.

“He’s very talented,” Ronan admitted. “I’m better, though.”

Piper lit up. “Oh?”

Ronan ignored Henry convulsing in the background. “It’s not that juicy of a story. He relies too much on computers and -- other means -- to make music. I don’t need that.”

Piper leaned her chin on her palm and smiled. “Let’s talk about what you need though, Ronan. You’re very secretive compared to the rest of the group. What do you need, more than anything else?”

Ronan turned to Henry, pained. Henry just shrugged and mouthed, WHELK.

He sighed, irritated at the turn of events, and leaned into the phone to state, “Food. Water. A place to piss.”

Piper hardly looked phased. “Okay, well, let’s talk about your wants then. What does Ronan Lynch want more than anything?”

*Adam Parrish* was the first thing that came to his mind. *To end this interview* was the second. Neither of these were possible answers, though, so Ronan said, “I want our album to come out.”

Piper wrinkled her nose, clearly unimpressed by his boring answer. “What else? No, wait. What am I thinking? Your fans will hate me if I don’t ask you about this. What does Ronan Lynch want in a woman?”

Ronan nearly choked. From behind, Henry held out his hand, as if to gesture, *And there it is.* This had to be the work of Whelk. Henry did say he wanted him to come off straight, and what better than an awkward and intrusive comment about his type of woman?

Blue tried to save him. “I feel like that’s quite the assumption to make of our fans. Just because we have fans that are women doesn’t mean they are obsessed with romance.”
Piper didn’t bother hiding the dirty look that crossed her face. She rolled her eyes at Blue, turned back to Ronan, and said, “Anyway. Come on, Ronan. Just give us something. We’re dying.”

Ronan looked to Henry, suddenly feeling a little desperate for his help. What was he supposed to say? What did guys normally like about girls, to start? His only experience was Declan - who liked any woman with money and a good social standing - and Gansey - who apparently liked small, loud feminists - and neither of those seemed like the type of answer Piper would be satisfied with. Henry could only shrug helplessly at him.

Enough time had passed that it was sufficiently becoming awkward. Adam nudged his knee into Ronan, perhaps assuming he spaced off again. Ronan took the contact as inspiration, though.


Ronan thought he was being vague enough, but his heart spiked when Blue leaned forward a bit. She looked at him, eyes narrowed, and he wondered if he blew it. (It was fine. He could deny it later. It was fine.)

For whatever reason, Piper found the response hilarious. She laughed gleefully and said, “Oh, God, I couldn’t have asked for a better answer.”

He couldn’t help it. “What’s so funny?”

“It’s just, you just managed to say the perfect thing to attract your entire fanbase.” When she was met with blank stairs, Piper jerked her head to Adam. “You know, the fans who ship you and Adam together.”

The room fell silent. It made the small shout of glee that escaped Noah’s mouth all the worse. “What?” he cried. “This is amazing!”

Adam’s ears had turned a familiar shade of pink, but otherwise he remained stoic. Ronan wasn’t sure what ship meant, but based on Adam’s embarrassment, Noah’s glee, and Piper’s waggling eyebrows, he could assume it’s meaning.

Piper hit the pause button on her phone. “Don’t worry, I’ll take this off the record. Whelk would kill me if I printed this, anyway.” She began scrolling through her phone, until she found an Instagram
account. She placed it in front of them. “See? There’s all sorts of sites dedicated to you two. There’s a few for Ronan and Gansey, or Ronan and Noah, but you two are, by far, the most popular.”

Ronan’s gut twisted when his eyes landed on one of the photos. It was just a picture of Adam and Ronan, way back when they were in Philadelphia for Adam’s birthday. He remembered a couple girls asking for a picture with them, but they must have been taking photos of them before they mucked up the courage to ask. They were sitting there, in the park, sides pressed together. Adam was laughing at something - Ronan had that day burned vividly in his memory, but not enough to recall specific conversations - but Ronan’s eyes were planted firmly on Adam.

Underneath, the caption read, “OMG WHY ARE MY BABIES SO PRECIOUS?” It had over six thousand likes.

Henry suddenly swooped in, grabbing the phone off the table. “Piper, don’t corrupt my kids. They’re too innocent to learn about the sordid world of celebrity shipping.”

Piper rolled her eyes. “Relax, Cheng. It’s just a joke. Anyway, like I said, I won’t print it the ‘freckles’ bit. It’ll be fine.”

“Why can’t you print that?” Adam said, voice oddly stern.

Piper exchanged a look with Henry. Ronan thought they were being extremely obvious - especially with Piper’s Whelk would kill me retort - but he had to remind himself there was no way they could know. Whelk wanted this stupid interview because of Ronan’s old DC dates, and the only people that knew of those were Whelk, Henry, and Ronan.

“Well, we’ll see,” Piper said smoothly. She checked her watched. “Time is up, I’m afraid. Cheng, I’ll send you and Whelk the article before it goes to print.”

She didn’t bother thanking them, nor did she even say goodbye. Just like how she entered, Piper Greenmantle left within the blink of an eye, leaving behind a trail of expensive perfume and unease in her wake.

Adam was still bristling, even after she left. Ronan hoped it wasn’t a reaction to seeing the Instagram account. There was no way that would upset Adam, right? He wasn’t so petty to be offended by just the concept of him and Ronan, right?
Henry turned to the group with a forged smile. “Well. Wasn’t that delightful?”

They finally finished recording the album in summer, aside from Ronan’s missing love song. (Adam asked about the progress once. Ronan just gestured to an overflowing trash can in his room. It was answer enough.) Whelk was obviously displeased with Ronan, but there wasn’t much he could do. The last time he tried to force Ronan into giving him a song, Ronan delivered the *Murder Squash* song.

The company decided a celebration as in order. Kavinsky had volunteered to host the party - offering his oversized, LA mansion as the venue - which ensured Adam had no interest in going. Everything about Kavinsky was arrogant and disgusting. Adam wasn’t prepared to see his personal home; it would probably have a life-size mural of Kavinsky as a centaur, or some shit.

Unfortunately, Whelk made it abundantly clear that they *all* would be attending. “Think of this as your opportunity to kiss the asses of every industry leader who helped you out so far, and the remaining people we need on our side.”

So, really, it was less of a celebration as it was a marketing opportunity. Even Henry seemed a bit disappointed by this. Once he heard the news, he slumped in his desk and muttered, “Guess I’m working.”

Ronan - infuriatingly - didn’t seem that upset to go to the party. He had just shrugged and said, “There will probably be an open bar.”

Adam didn’t care about an open bar. He cared about seeing his friends - without a stylist, or a hairdresser, or Whelk or Henry or Kavinsky around - and he wasn’t sure when the next opportunity would be. This was not how he had imagined bandlife. He was tired of evenings where he was lucky to get an hour with them. He missed being ridiculous and candid with them.

“The them” being mostly Ronan, but whatever.

So the five of them made their way to Kavinsky’s place on a cool Friday evening. His house was just as Adam expected: insanely lavish and completely unnecessary. There were two pools, apparently (because an outdoor pool wasn’t enough, he needed an indoor pool for all those chilly Los Angeles days), his own personal theater, and a room dedicated solely to the awards he had one. (The latter
was the most frustrating, as Adam was forced to listen to Kavinsky brag about himself for ten minutes.)

On the brightside, enough people were at the party that Kavinsky couldn’t mingle with them for long. Once free from him, the band spread out to survey the place themselves. It was much more enjoyable this way.

Blue picked up a bizarre looking sculpture - long and thin and bumpy - and said, “What do you think this is supposed to be?”

Ronan took one look at it and said, “Kavinsky’s dick.”

Blue did not seem to appreciate the joke - she dropped it immediately and wiped her hands on her shorts - but Adam and Noah found it hilarious. Gansey was particularly amused by the personal theater, and spent almost twenty minutes searching through his videos.

“Do you think he owns The Notebook ironically, or because he likes it?” Gansey asked.

Noah held up another Nicholas Sparks movie and said, “Oh, he definitely likes it. Who would have thought Kavinsky to be a romantic?”

Blue gagged. “Don’t put Kavinsky and Romantic in the same sentence, please. In fact, can we please stop thinking about Kavinsky having a sex life at all? I’m just conjuring more images of that sculpture as his penis.”

Eventually Whelk found them and - with a pointed glare - summoned them to the main floor. People were congregating near the outdoor pool, and Adam wondered whether they were filming a 90s teen movie. (Though, admittedly, it was a nice deck, and someone had put lights on the pool so - ugh, whatever, he wasn’t going to compliment Kavinsky on his decor.) There was an open bar, which Ronan zeroed in on immediately.

“Parrish,” Ronan murmured into his hearing ear. “If you’re still interested in trying a few drinks, this is the place to do it. See what he’s pouring? That’s top shelf shit.”

“When did I say I wanted to do that?”
Ronan sent him a withered look. Then, once his memory hit him, he said, “Okay, so I suggested it. I’m just saying.”

“And this would be just the place to do it,” Adam said dryly. He gestured around the room. “Surrounded by my boss and the people who are in charge of my future. Just imagine: I get drunk for the first time, turn into a raging jerk—”

“You would not—”

“—and Whelk fires me, fulfilling Kavinsky’s ultimate wish to replace me with someone who isn’t hearing impaired. Fantastic.”

“He wouldn’t do that,” Ronan said, though where he got that information Adam wasn’t sure. Kavinsky routinely shit on Adam for being hearing impaired. It was one of his common jokes, even, to come up on Adam’s left ear and whisper into it. He never would admit what he said, but Adam knew it was nothing good. Ronan brought him back to the present by adding, “And, again, you would not be a dick. Gross, this is coming out like me peer pressuring you again. Just forget I said anything.”

Adam rubbed the back of his neck. He was feeling incredibly uncomfortable here, and he was almost tempted to take Ronan’s suggestion. Maybe a drink would take the edge off the evening. (At the very least, it would make it easier to deal with Kavinsky’s sneering.)

“What if I did something crazy? Or stupid?” Adam asked. “I’ve seen you do enough ridiculous shit to know it’s possible.”

“Parrish, you wound me.” They were nearing the front of line now, and Ronan arched his neck to view what all the open bar had to offer. His lips twisted to the side in thought. “If you wanted to try it, I could watch out for you if you wanted. Keep an eye on you, that sort of thing.”

“Yeah, not sure I trust your abilities to do that when you’re taking advantage of the bar.”

“No, I wouldn’t -- ” Ronan cursed under his breath, probably because of Adam’s insults. “I wouldn’t have anything to drink.”
“Oh.”

Adam let Ronan’s offer sink in. It was kind of sweet, really. Ronan had been extremely excited for the open bar (which was a bit absurd, considering he had more than enough money to drink whatever he wanted, but Adam supposed there was an appeal to getting something for free even when you were rich) all week. So to give that up so Adam could *test* drinking was... *nice*.

He thought about it for a moment. Truthfully, Adam really didn’t feel comfortable testing it out at the party. The logical, sensible part of his brain knew what a horrible idea that was. (And *no*, it wasn’t necessarily because he believed he’d be a shit head.) But, if he agreed to it, Ronan had to hang out with him all night. It was part of the deal, after all - Ronan would watch out for Adam, which meant he had a convenient excuse to stay in Ronan’s orbit.

But that would be a shitty thing to do.

*But then again,* Ronan - arguably - *did* drink too much. He even admitted it himself during the night of the dreaded hair incident. So, in a way, Adam was doing *Ronan* a favor by agreeing to this.

They were now at the front of the line. The bartender stared at them expectedly, clearly annoyed that neither knew what they wanted.

“Well, what do you recommend?” Adam asked.

*God.* He was a jerk. A *stupid* jerk.

Ronan leaned on the counter and scanned the various bottles. When the bartender cleared his throat, Ronan’s eyes flitted up in a glare, effectively shutting the man up.

“Well, you want to try something hard, or something easier?” He pointed to a couple bottles of liquor. “You got your basics here - this is some fucking good whisky, if I do say so myself - but you can’t really sip that. Might want to start with a beer, or maybe wine.”

Adam did not look back on his last experience with beer fondly, but somehow drinking wine at an event like this - basically a fancy *pool party*, sheesh - seemed *wrong*. Like he was some yuppy, ready to discuss politics or the state of America’s education system at length.
So he settled for a beer. Adam planned to nurse it incredibly slow, anyway (and maybe pour it into Kavinsky’s shoes, if he could find any laying around), so the taste didn’t matter.

They found Gansey, Blue, and Noah a few minutes later. Gansey was nursing a glass of red wine, sloshing it about in a manner that betrayed the fact it was not his first of the night, while Blue and Noah each had an absurdly bright blue drink. Noah was using his straw to blow air into drink, giggling like a madman.

“Strong drinks?” Adam asked.

Blue leaned into Gansey, a smiled dripping on to her face. “The strongest.”

“You might be watching everyone, tonight,” Adam warned Ronan.

“You’re not drinking?” Noah asked, and he followed his words with a comically long gasp. “Why not? Ronan, this is a celebration! We’ve worked so hard, we deserve a break.”

Ronan shoved his hand in Noah’s face and pushed him away gently. “I swear to God, Czerny, you better not get sick. I’m not going to deal with you puking all night and keeping me up.”

Noah brought one finger to Ronan’s lips and whispered, “Shh, shh, Ronan. It’s going to happen. Prepare for my puke. Imma’ puke all over your bed.”

“He’s joking, he’s joking,” Blue insisted. Then, she added, “But I’ll get him some water.”

Adam nursed his beer slowly, content to watch the other’s interactions as they increasingly got more and more buzzed. Gansey held his alcohol fairy well - having likely grown up drinking wine, this was not surprising - but Blue and Noah fell into bouts of giggling and singing. Adam finished his beer before he realized it, surprised that he didn’t feel any different at all.

Maybe it would be fine.
He got another beer, mostly to keep Ronan by his side, but additionally as a way to drain Kavinsky of his alcohol. (He knew, logically, that Kavinsky was rich enough that the open bar barely made a dent in his funds. It didn’t stop Adam from ordering a few extra drinks and immediately pouring them out into the bushes, though.)

As the night progressed, Adam’s shoulder began to hurt from the hundreds of claps random executives gave him. It was tons of, *We heard the album, boys, sounds great!* and a few *Music ain’t what it used to be anymore, but you kids are okay.* Whelk bothered them occasionally, too, usually to complain. (Adam offered Ronan a consolatory swig of his beer when Whelk berated him about the love song and its current lyrics.)

It was turning into a much better night that Adam expected, really. It was finally Adam and Blue and Gansey and Ronan and Noah together again. It was making bets on how many times Noah would hiccup in a minute, or saying “Gross” every time Gansey bent down to kiss Blue. And Ronan was there always, either with his arm slung around Adam’s shoulder, or his shoulder pressed against his, or sometimes, the best times, he would lean into Adam’s ear and tell him a private joke.

It was spoiled, immediately, by Kavinsky. He cuffed Adam on the back of his head, whispered something into his deaf ear, and then slapped him on the ass. He must have whispered something perverse or rude, because Blue immediately turned to Kavinsky, drink sloshing, and said, “Oh, knock it off, Kavinsky.”

“That’s no way to treat your gracious host,” Kavinsky leered. “Especially since he’s supplying you with much-appreciated juice.”

Adam shoved Kavinsky off him. “What the hell do you want, Kavinsky?”

“Calm your tits, Parrish. I’m just here to chat. I’m the host, I gotta’ mingle, make sure everyone is having a good time.” He leaned into Ronan instead. “No drink, Lynch? That’s no fun.”

“I was having fun until you got here,” Ronan said. If Adam didn’t want to kiss him before, he did now.

Kavinsky tugged a pair of sunglasses off his head and let them rest on his nose. It was an absurd look, considering it was already late into the night, but that was Kavinsky, he supposed.

“You turd-burglars want to do something a little more fun?” Kavinsky peered over his glasses at the group. “I got some real nice shit upstairs. It’ll be like your christening.”
“Like... drugs?” Noah asked.

Kavinsky did an obnoxious interpretation of him. “Jesus, Fuck, Narc. Are you twelve? Yes, drugs. Are all you Virginia hicks this dumb?”

“Well,” Gansey eyed Kavinsky from head to toe. “Aren’t you a cliche.”

“Oh, don’t look at me like that. You’re all a bunch of cliches.” Kavinsky turned to Ronan with a sneer. “Especially this one. There’s always one of you in a boy band, after all.”

Adam barely time to blink before Ronan was shoving into Kavinsky. Kavinsky cackled, apparently very pleased by the turn of events, and was seemingly unphased by Ronan’s attack. Gansey was already pulling Ronan back, muttering something to him, but Ronan shook his arm off.

“I’m fine,” he snapped. Ronan slammed his palm into Kavinsky’s shoulder and jerked his head inside. “You and me. Inside. Now.”

Adam watched them disappear into Kavinsky’s house. And just like that, his night was ruined.

Ronan wasn’t sure when Kavinsky had figured out he was gay. Maybe Whelk told him, or fuck, even Henry could have. As much as he hated Henry, Ronan really hoped he wasn’t the blabbermouth.

He didn’t want to hate Henry that much.

“What the fuck is your problem?” Ronan spit, once they were safe inside closed doors. “You get off on being a dick or something?”

Kavinsky grinned. “A bit, yeah. What’s the big deal? Ashamed or something?”
“No, I’m not fucking--” Ronan bit his tongue. This was pointless. Kavinsky liked to play games, and he was playing right into it. “Consider this your official notice that I’m not fucking working with you again.”

Kavinsky flopped onto a nearby couch and laughed. “Sure, Lynch. Tell me how that works out for you. We’re good together, you’re not going to like working with anyone else now.”

“I’ll manage.”

Kavinsky beckoned Ronan over with a curl of his finger. “If I say I’m sorry, will you calm down? Jesus. Let me guess, you don’t want your little boyfriend to find out? If he’s not queer, then I don’t know--”

“Kavinsky, shut your goddamn mouth before I shut it for you--”

Kavinsky held up his hands in defense. “Sorry, sorry. Look at me, mouthing off again. I just want your attention, Lynch.” He leaned back his head on the couch, eyes rolling up to look at Ronan. “I don’t want to have to tug your pigtails, but…”

Ronan pinched the bridge of his nose. “Isn’t that what little boys do when they like a girl?”

Kavinsky’s lips split into a thin grin. “Yeah, exactly.”

He really hated Kavinsky’s guts, but Ronan couldn’t stop his toes from clenching. Kavinsky was messing with him, clearly, and it was unfair. He really didn’t want the first guy that hit on him to be someone as shitty as Kavinsky, and he hated that his body reacted to the flirting more than his brain.

God, what he wouldn’t give for a drink right now. Or two. Or three. But he had promised Adam he wouldn’t, and-- fuck, he had left Adam alone. That was their whole deal.

“You want me to work with you again? Then stop acting like a fucking prick.”

Kavinsky pushed himself up from the couch with a sigh. He wandered to a nearby table and fiddled with the drawers, looking for something. After searching for a minute he found what he wanted and he tossed the small bag to Ronan. Inside were a few pills, and of what, Ronan wasn’t sure.
“Just try it once with me, Lynch. You’d be so much better with a little something-something,” Kavinsky cooed. “Just forget what they told you in high school, okay? It’s not addicting. It’s fun!”

“I said, no.”

Kavinsky walked up to Ronan and placed the bag in his front pocket, tucking it in with a neat little push. He let his hand linger on Ronan’s chest for too long, before he said, “Just think about it, Lynch. You take my present and I won’t tell anyone about your little crush, got it?”

Ronan bit back his anger. He just had to take it, he could throw it away later. Kavinsky turned around to a different room and waved Ronan off.

Ronan had to collect his breath before he went back outside. He found Gansey, Blue, and Noah where he left them, though the mood was clearly shot. Noah and Blue were staring into their drinks glumly, shaking the cups so that the ice cubes spun in circles. Gansey perked up when he saw Ronan.

“Everything alright?” He asked, grabbing Ronan by the elbow.

“Yeah, fine,” Ronan brushed him off. “Where’s Adam?”

“He had to go to the bathroom or something,” Gansey said. “I think we should probably go once he’s back--”

“Yeah, sure.”

Ronan searched the crowd of people. It was probably nothing - Adam had a few drinks, so of course he would need to go to the bathroom. But then again, Adam had a few drinks. Ronan tried to remember how many he’d seen him drink. It was just beer, so he should be fine, but what if--

He waited for ten minutes before he allowed himself to be nervous. “I’m going to find him.” Ronan nodded to Blue and Noah, who were suddenly looking a bit queasy. “You take care of them.”
Finding Adam was more difficult than he expected. He wasn’t answering his phone - which Ronan thought, briefly, might be karma - and the party was still in full swing. He was never sure if he had checked a room thoroughly enough; the loud music (which Ronan noted was their music, though it wasn’t the time to appreciate it) and constant flood of people made it near impossible.

It took him almost a half-hour to find Adam. Ronan finally stumbled upon him, mostly by accident, in Kavinsky’s indoor pool. Adam was sitting on the ledge, shoes discarded to the side and jeans rolled up his calves, kicking his feet through the water. In his hands he dangled an empty beer bottle; another one was discarded to the side. He acknowledged Ronan with a terse nod.

“Jesus, Parrish. Why aren’t you answering your phone?” Ronan didn’t like the anger in his tone, but after this long of searching, he couldn’t help it.

Adam looked surprised by this. He looked behind him, where his sweatshirt was bundled off to the side, and Ronan guessed his cell phone was tucked somewhere inside.

“We’re taking off,” Ronan jabbed his finger toward the exit. “Come on, Parrish.”

Adam tossed his empty bottle into Kavinsky’s pool and exhaled. “Everything okay with Kavinsky?”

“Yes. He was a dick, still is a dick. Let’s go, Parrish.”

Adam didn’t seem interested in leaving. He kicked his foot in the water, so that the bottle floated further away. Ronan had to bite back a curse. This seemed like classic drunk behavior, and Ronan was to blame for it. Clearly he’d had a few more beers since Ronan had lost him. He tried to remember how he liked situations like this handled - when he was drunk and melancholy - but it wasn’t really his area of expertise.

So Ronan kicked off his shoes and joined Adam. He sat close enough to press their forearms together, hoping it might appease Adam’s poor mood.

“Sorry that I left,” he muttered.

“What can you do? Kavinsky beckoned,” Adam said, quite petulantly.
“It’s not like that.”

“Why do you even like him?” Adam asked. “He’s a dick-”

“I don’t know why you think I do like him,” Ronan countered. “Putting up with Kavinsky is not the same thing. I’m just doing it for our music.”

Adam exhaled again, but this breath came out shaky. He nudged his foot into Ronan’s and mumbled, “We don’t need him. You don’t need him. Your music is great the way it is.”

“His music gets on the radio. We don’t know if our music--”

“Ronan.” Adam turned to him and tilted his left ear to the pool. Ronan wondered if he was testing it, trying now, of all times, to pick up any sound. “It’s not really our music. You write it all.”

“That’s not--”

Adam waved him off. “I’m not trying to sound self-deprecating. I just-- You’re the one who comes up with these songs. You’re the genius here. You should take credit for them.”

Ronan wasn’t able to take the compliment. It echoed off the walls of the room, too loud and too much with Adam pressed up against him like that. He kept trailing his toes over Ronan’s foot, seemingly mesmerized by the way it looked submerged under water. Ronan found it absurd how easy it was for Adam to give him goosebumps.

“Turns out you’re a somber drunk,” Ronan said, desperate for a change in subject.

“I’m not drunk,” Adam said.

Ronan eyed the empty bottles, the way Adam’s shoulders were slouched forward, the wild look in his eyes. He certainly seemed drunk, but Ronan amended, “Buzzed, then.”

“I’m not that either,” Adam insisted. He looked down at the bottle floating in the water, then back up
to Ronan with a sly grin. “I dumped them in Kavinsky’s pool. In his plants. It’s been fun.”

“I’m sure you did.”

“I did.”

Ronan didn’t believe that for one second, but he let Adam have his fun. He pulled his cellphone out and saw a message from Gansey. Where are you? I’m dying. They have hit their second wind and they are monsters.

“We need to get back,” Ronan said.

Adam let himself fall back onto the ground, relaxing into his position at the edge of the pool. His feet still dangled in the water, but his back was pressed to the tile. “Just a bit longer. I like it here. It’s...quiet.”

Ronan wasn’t one to deny Adam Parrish what he wanted. He texted Gansey back - Ten minutes - and mimicked Adam’s position. He made a face when his back hit the ground - not realizing he’d be faced with a wet back - and Adam laughed.

“Sorry, should have warned you.”

Ronan just shrugged. It was a bit humid in the room, and once he got used to the sensation, it was sort of nice. The feel of water on his back cooled him down just a little.

Adam shifted his body, just barely, but it was enough for their arms to press together again. It was rather cruel of Adam to do this to him, not that the boy knew. Ronan tried to remember that Adam was probably overwhelmed - alcohol did that sometimes - and pissed - because Kavinsky was really being a jerk - and he probably needed that little extra touch.

“You haven’t asked for your favor, yet,” Adam said.

“I told you, I’m waiting for the perfect thing.” Ronan tilted his head, just barely, because yes, he could get away with this too, so that he could look at Adam. “Can’t waste a perfectly good favor.”
“Well, what’s the perfect thing going to be?”

“I’ll know when I see it.”

Adam knocked his knee into Ronan’s and said, “That seems like cheating. You should have to choose right away.”

“Well, you should have made that a rule when you made the bet.”

He earned himself another jab, though this time Adam lifted one of his feet out of the water and shoved it into Ronan’s thigh. They scuffled for a moment - Ronan jabbing his elbow into Adam’s side, Adam slapping the back of his hand on Ronan’s stomach - before they settled back down.

“We should go, Parrish,” Ronan repeated.

“Tell them to just go home,” Adam breathed. He shut his eyes, and Ronan used the opportunity to take in his features. Sometimes he was hard to look at. Ronan wondered whether other people felt as overwhelmed by Adam as he did, or if he was biased. “We never get to hang out anymore. And you -- earlier --”

“What?”

Adam opened his eyes suddenly, and Ronan was caught staring. He couldn’t get himself to look away, though, as Adam said, “You left. You said you’d watch me all night, but you left.”

“Just for a minute,” Ronan argued. He really needed to look away from Adam, but he couldn’t get himself to do it. “You’re the one who disappeared.”

Ronan felt Adam’s fingers on his wrist before he saw them. There were his hands - long and thin and perfect - linking around his wrist. Then, Adam let his hand go just as abruptly. He pushed himself off the ground of the pool, twisting toward Ronan, and he said, “I know what I’d ask as my favor, if I had to choose.”

“It’s not your favor to ask,” Ronan said.
“Ask me anyway.”

Ronan’s whole body felt twisted and tight, and he felt flooded with heat. Adam was looking down at him - his fatigue almost masked by the glow of the pool - and Ronan wasn’t sure he ever looked so good. He liked this Adam; it reminded him briefly of being eighteen and stupid, getting to wipe eyeliner off his cheeks, able to see his freckles so close.

“What do you want, Parrish?” Ronan asked. He was surprised he had any voice at all.

Adam didn’t answer in words. He leaned down, one hand bracing himself on Ronan’s side, and kissed him. Adam took only Ronan’s lower lip in his caress, lingering just there for a moment, before he dragged his lips upwards, tentative and slow. There was no touching involved at first. Adam hovered above him, hands still inches from Ronan’s body, but it didn’t matter. It was more than enough just to feel Adam’s lips on him - coaxing out a longer kiss, a deeper kiss - and Ronan’s body responded instantly.

Ronan wanted to stay in that kiss, to savor it longer. Adam wanted more, though, evident in the way his chest pressed to touch Ronan’s, the way his tongue ran along Ronan’s bottom lip, and it was enough to startle Ronan back to the present.

He placed his hands on Adam’s shoulders and pushed him away, almost impressed by how gentle he could be considering the adrenaline coursing through him, and sat up from the pool. This wasn’t right. Adam could be three beers in, or he could be five beers in. He probably didn’t even know what he was doing.

“Adam, you’re confused,” Ronan said. “I think the beer-”

“No,” Adam said quickly, almost too fast. He reached for Ronan’s wrist. “I’m not drunk, I told you.”

Ronan pressed his palm to his forehead, trying to regain his breath. It didn’t matter what Adam said. Of course he was confused - Ronan had been messing with him for so long, and it wasn’t fair. All their touches, all this time. Maybe Adam hadn’t realized, on the surface level, what Ronan meant with them, but clearly he understood on a subconscious level.

But it wasn’t fair to take advantage of Adam’s state. He’d been drinking.
“It’s fine, Parrish,” Ronan muttered. “You didn’t mean to. I get it. It’s my fault for leaving you alone when I promised--”

“I told you--”

“Adam.” Ronan put all his energy into this look. He did not want to play games with Adam, and with the taste of him still on his lips, it was too tempting to pull him back. “You’re confused. It’s fine.”

Adam looked away from Ronan, back to the pool. “Yeah. Okay. *I’m* confused. I get it.” He scooped up his shoes and stuffed them onto his feet, wet and all, and grabbed his sweatshirt from the ground. His phone tumbled out, clattering against the tile in a miserable sound, and Adam took a moment to count his breaths.

“Parrish--”

“Just forget it.” Adam picked up his phone and shoved it in his pocket. As he walked past Ronan he took a large step to the left, avoiding him completely. “Let’s just go.”

_Fuck._

Chapter End Notes

And I'll just leave that there for you.

Thank you as usual!
Ronan was trying extremely hard to move on with his life, but Adam’s lips were making that difficult. He had the kiss on repeat - because holy shit, Adam kissed him - and for a moment it was better than he ever imagined. In his fantasies, he always did the work, and Adam just didn’t fight it. That was always good enough for him.

But he would have never thought Adam would be the one to initiate it. To be the one who furthered it, who took charge.

It was both horrible and magical.

After the party, Adam felt a lot of differing emotions, though the overwhelming feeling was annoyance.

This annoyance pooled in him, forming a sick and bitter pit in his stomach. Adam let it curdle in his stomach for days before he decided it was best just to blame Ronan for his feelings. Because Ronan was the whole reason he was in this position, which was to say, the position of being embarrassed, and turned on, and miserable, and ecstatic, and back to annoyed.

But it was hard to be mad at Ronan. Because, aside from the fact that he could still feel the trace of Ronan's lips against his and it made him burn even now, Ronan was probably confused. That was the only logical explanation: Ronan had gone on the defensive. His insistence on Adam being the one who was confused wreaked of projection. Adam was reminded of being young, when his father would say something horrible to his mother, and then blame Adam for treating her poorly.

It wasn’t really fair to compare Ronan to his father, though. Robert Parrish was an alcoholic who avoided his guilt with furthered abuse; Ronan was, quite possibly, just a man unsure of who he liked.

And anyway, it wasn’t right to be angry at Ronan, because Ronan was allowed to be confused. Adam was confused, once, too; it took him time to realize that he liked boys the same way he liked girls. Who was he to say that Ronan couldn’t have that reaction?

Still, it was very irritating. How could it feel *that* good and Ronan not realize it was a good thing?
Because they were so good together.

Okay, yes, there was the chance that all of this was actually Adam projecting. Maybe he was looking into things, hoping that Ronan was confused because it was easier than acknowledging the rejection. But Ronan had seemed, at least briefly, to enjoy the kiss. *Ronan* was the one who’d been looking at Adam, shamelessly staring at him. *Ronan* was the one whose voice caught. *Ronan* was the one who had goosebumps, who hitched a breath, who curled his fingers into fists.

And yes, Adam may have been the one to initiate the kiss, *but Ronan kissed him back*. It didn’t last long, *but he kissed him back*.

So Ronan had to have enjoyed it, at least a little.

Adam pushed his hands into his hair, pulling them at the end in a fit of frustration. He needed to stop this. It had been days since the kiss, days of Ronan avoiding him, and he had better things to do. Like focus on the letter he was writing, or practice Ronan’s new love song, or hell, even go on a walk with Noah because he’d been begging him to get out of the dorm all morning.

Instead, Adam turning to Noah, who was busy making lunch in the kitchen, and asked, “Do you know where Ronan is?”

As Noah unloaded a package of macaroni into a pot, he said, “I think he’s with Whelk. I heard him screaming through the phone about the new song.”

“The love song?”

“Yep.” Noah’s face transformed into a deep frown, and for perhaps the first time ever, his tone was sharp. “I don’t know what his problem is. It’s just a *song*.”

“Well, we’ve documented how terrible Ronan is at writing love songs—”

“No, not Ronan. *Whelk*. He thinks he can boss Ronan around, just because he’s got money and I’m getting really fucking sick of it.”
“Oh.” Adam wasn’t used to Noah looking like this - not just upset, but borderline irate - and wasn’t sure how to handle it. He struggled for a response, something that would both placate Noah and not implicate him too badly if it got back to his boss. “I mean, yeah. He’s your cliche, Hollywood exec.”

Noah wasn’t soothed by his words. “You don’t understand.”

“Did he say something to you?” Adam asked.

Noah sighed, clearly irritated, and snapped the burner off. Apparently the conversation spoiled his appetite, because he left the pot of barely cooked macaroni on the stove. “No, I told you. He’s just a jerk to Ronan.”

“If it helps, Ronan’s kind of a jerk back?”

Noah sighed. “It’s - nevermind. It’s fine. I’m going to go do laundry.”

Still, it didn’t seem very fine, as Noah made his way back to his room. Adam thought about going after him but he didn’t really know what to do. Or say. Noah was usually so easy; Adam was struck with the realization that he didn’t know how to comfort Noah, or what could make him happy, because he never had to.

It made him uneasy to realize, all at once, that he didn’t really know Noah very well.

He probably should have gone after Noah, pressed him to talk more, but he didn’t have the energy, nor the confidence to do so. Plus, as horrible as it was to admit, Adam didn’t feel like he was the comforting type. Blue and Ronan - as intense and sometimes volatile as they were - were best for matters like this. They would get indignant on your behalf, or distract you with something dramatic. He was better for logical reasoning - *How can we improve your situation? What can be done about your complaint?* - and he sensed it wasn’t what Noah needed then.

Or maybe he was a bit of a coward. Maybe he just wanted to stew over his Ronan-situation.

Adam wasn’t in the mood to write, so he gave up. Instead, he flipped through his phone, checking the band’s accounts for comments. He was trying to interact more with the fans, per Henry’s request, but it was still unusual. *Especially* with the fans who - er - liked him and Ronan. What was the term? *Shipping?* Henry found it hilarious. Adam found it embarrassing, if only because his crush was so
painfully obvious that complete strangers picked up on it.

Today, Adam had a shocking amount of new comments on each of his accounts. He wasn’t sure what spurred it on - he hadn’t even been on any of his accounts for several days now - but an unusually large amount of people were commenting different emojis, either hearts or hands praying. Almost every comment mentioned “Pynch.”

What the hell was a Pynch?

It didn’t take him too long to figure it out. He was looking through his Instagram feed when it appeared. Adam needed a minute to process the image. It was him, and Ronan, together at the party. Ronan had his arm around him, and he was bent down, saying something in his hearing ear.

In the caption, it said, “Rare #Pynch sighting at the album release. #AmateurPaparazziOverHere.” When Adam clicked the username it brought up a relatively anonymous account, with only a few random photos. Whoever it was - someone clearly close enough to be invited to the party - did not give their identity away. They were simply called @RB1991.

Despite the user’s anonymity, the photo had blown up. “Pynch,” it appeared, was some sort of nickname. The fans latched onto it, evidenced by the storm of comments. He scanned the first few comments, but gave up once he realized how many there were.

**OMG they are real**

**PYNCH?? Are you fcking kidding me? I'm DYING !**

**We are so #blessed. @RB1991 please use your insider abilities to get us more pictures.**

And on, and on, and on. Instagram said the picture had nearly ten thousand likes, and it’d just been posted the night of the party. It was the fastest growing post of anyone in the band, and at this rate, it would take over their most popular post of all time. (Which was a picture of Gansey’s shoes, in a trashcan, lit on fire. Blue had posted it not long after they got to LA.)

Adam shut his phone off. He was already thinking of Ronan too much, he didn’t need a constant reminder of his horrible crush from his phone, either. So, with an irritated sigh, he turned back to his writing, hoping it could somehow be distracting enough to push thoughts of Ronan from his mind.
It wasn’t.

Ronan was trying extremely hard to move on with his life, but Adam’s lips were making that difficult. He had the kiss on repeat - because holy shit, Adam kissed him - and for a moment it was better than he ever imagined. In his fantasies, he always did the work, and Adam just didn’t fight it. That was always good enough for him.

But he would have never thought Adam would be the one to initiate it. To be the one who furthered it, who took charge.

It was both horrible and magical. Magical, for obvious reasons; horrible because he was sure it would never happen again, horrible because it was even more of an indicator that Adam was probably drunk, or confused. Because why would Adam willingly kiss him? Why would Adam ever like him?

He’d been avoiding Adam all week, because he was a coward, naturally. It was also for the best. Adam was too much of a distraction, and Ronan needed to churn out the love song for Whelk, needed to call Diane to check in on Opal, needed to schedule a flight home to visit his family. If he looked at Adam, he inevitably looked at his lips, and then he never got anything done.

The love song was not going so well. Whelk hated the newest draft, claiming it was shallow and meaningless, and told Ronan he needed to have lyrics to him by the end of the week, else he’d get someone else to write it. As much as Ronan hated the idea of someone else’s words put to his music, the offer was tempting. It would just be one song out of the entire group. It’s not like he had to sing it, anyway.

So Ronan decided to let it go. Whelk was flabbergasted by Ronan’s approval, and it took him a moment to respond. “Well, fine. I’ll find someone else, then.”

“Great. So are we done here?”

Whelk held up his hand, signaling Ronan to wait. He was flipping through his phone now, another look of irritation passing his face. “Do you know who took this photo?”
Whelk placed his phone in front of him. Ronan didn’t understand what he was looking at. It was another picture of him and Adam - wait, it was from the party, weird - but what was the big deal? This had been going on for some time, apparently, and it’s not like Ronan did anything to encourage it. (Other then, you know, look at Adam. A lot.)

“It has almost fifty thousand likes, Mr. Lynch,” Whelk said seriously. “You don’t even have fifty thousand fans, which means this shit is attracting people who don’t even listen to your music.”

“This shit?” Ronan echoed. “Do you hear what comes out of your mouth?”

Whelk sighed, clearly irritated. “I didn’t mean it like that, and you know it.” Ronan definitely didn’t know that, but Whelk didn’t let him voice his thoughts. “You’re not thinking of this in the big picture. You don’t want this to become your image for the band. People will think Greywaren is nothing more than teenage-fodder; we want them talking about the music.”

“That’s the biggest bit of bullshit--”

“--I have to consider advertising, and sponsors, and your media image. You live in a world that doesn’t like what you are, Mr. Lynch, and I have to take that into consideration.”

Ronan leaned forward and tapped on his desk, enunciating each point. “Fuck that! There are fifty thousand people here who apparently do like what I ‘am’ - which, by the way, you can fucking say it. I’m gay. It’s not a dirty word.”

Whelk snorted. “Pardon me for not considering teenagers between the ages of 13 and 16 to be the pinnacle of reliability. Or sensibility.”

Their argument seemed to gather some attention, because there a quiet knock at the door. Once Ronan saw that it was Henry, who quietly let himself in, he blazed on.
“Why the fuck not? From what I can tell, they’re a hell-of-a-lot smarter than you. You keep acting like our fanbase is made of moronic idiots, but they’re smarter than you give them credit for.” Ronan pointed at the image on Whelk’s phone again. “They’re smart enough to realize that this is nothing to be fucking afraid of. That it’s perfectly normal, that it’s just love. If they know this already at fifteen, then what the hell is your excuse?”

He felt a press at his bicep; Henry had his hand on Ronan’s arm in warning, which he did not appreciate. Whelk was being the dick, the irrational one. Why was Henry acting like he needed to calm down?

Whelk had taken in Ronan’s rant with an eerie calm, though. He just sat in his desk, fingers folded together, looking mildly pissed. After a moment, he said, “Well, clearly you’re upset. I’m willing to forgive your completely inappropriate tone--”

“Oh, fucking blow me.” At this, Henry’s fingers tightened around him in warning.

“--again, I will ignore your attitude, so long as you agree to be more mindful of your behavior, especially with Mr. Parrish.” Whelk squared his eyes on Ronan. “I do not want this to follow you, do you understand me?”

Henry stepped in front of Ronan and answered for him. “Of course, Barrington. Ronan and I will have a nice, extensive talk about how to proceed.”

At this, Ronan had heard enough. He turned on his heel, kicked Whelk’s door open with his foot, and made his way out of Cabeswater. Henry was quick on his heel, though, and pestered him to slow down. He followed Ronan out of the office, out of the building, onto the streets of LA before Ronan finally stopped.

“What?”

“What were you thinking?” It was the first time he’d ever heard Henry raise his voice. He threw his hand back towards the office and continued his lecture. “What part of don’t mess with Whelk did you not understand?”

“I’m not going to let him talk to me like that. And the fact that you are okay with the shit he spews - no, sorry, you seem to condone it - tells me a lot about your character, Cheng.”
“I don’t like - or agree - with what he says, Ronan,” Henry said. There was hurt written all over his face, which was real rich. What did Henry have to feel hurt about?

“You sure about that?” Ronan jabbed his finger into Henry’s chest. “Staying silent when people are being dicks doesn’t clear you of any guilt, here.”

“I do what I have to for you all,” Henry argued. “You don’t understand what it’s like behind the scenes. If you knew how many fires I’ve put out for your group, you’d be--”

“Oh, real convenient. Your entire defense is dependent on mystery. How am I not surprised?” Ronan mocked.

Henry pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “Ronan, I promise, I’m doing my best. It’s not as black and white as you make it sound. I have to make nice with everybody--”

“Yeah, I’m well-aware of your mastery of deceit. I don’t think you’ve been straight with us this entire time, and I’m getting fucking sick of it. Just pick a side already, Cheng, so I know whether you’re a shithead like everybody else here,” Ronan said.

Henry shrunk back, clearly hurt. He shut his eyes and took the opportunity to search for words. After licking his lips, he said, “You’re right. I’m sorry. I don’t really have a good excuse, other than--” he paused. For as smooth as he could sometimes be, it was almost jarring to see Henry speechless. “I’m sorry.”

The sincerity of his words almost calmed Ronan. Almost. “So how are you going to fix this situation for Whelk, then? Am I going to get punished every time I look at Adam?”

Henry shot Ronan a derisive look. “Oh, please. Like you could possibly manage that. And anyway, no, I just said that to get you out of his office.”

“Sure.”

“I’m telling the truth! I thought you had a point. Our fanbase is smart, Whelk does them a disservice by writing them off as young and stupid.” Henry stuffed his hands in his pockets and shrugged in defense. “While I don’t want you to outright antagonize Whelk, I don’t expect you to change your relationship with Adam.”
“There’s no relationship--”

“Didn’t we just say agree that your fanbase was smart?”

Ronan bit his tongue. He wasn’t going to debate semantics with Henry. Yes, they were smart enough to pick up on Ronan’s massive crush, but he was far from having a secret relationship with Adam. “You’re giving me mixed signals here, Cheng.”

“No, you’re just too daft to understand me,” Henry crooned. Apparently it did not take long for Henry to bounce back from his guilt. “When it comes to Whelk, just sit back and shut up. You don’t even have to do what he says, you just have to pretend to. It’s about power with him. He wants you submissive, because he’s power hungry. And, okay, don’t look at me that way - I know you hate this, but it’s part of the deal in entertainment. You’re the idiot who wanted to be famous.”

“You keep missing the point, Cheng: I don’t give a fuck about Whelk,” Ronan said. “Remind me why I’m supposed to be afraid of him? He can’t hurt me if I don’t give a crap what he thinks.”

“Ronan,” Henry’s gaze was suddenly serious again, his tone cold. “It’s not just about you anymore. You’re under contract with Cabeswater for another two albums, if they choose. You have to play nice.”

“I don’t have to do jack shit--”

Henry dragged his hand through his hair. “Jesus, Ronan, I’m just trying to help.”

“I’m not interested in your help, especially not when you’ve made it so abundantly clear that you’ll only offer it when you have nothing better to do.”

Henry looked defeated. He didn’t bother faking a smile, and without his trademark look, it aged him. He looked tired. “Just do me a favor and play nice, okay? He’s not-- He’s not a good guy.”

Ronan still didn’t feel very threatened by Whelk, despite Henry’s serious facade. What could he possibly do? If he kicked them out of their contract, Ronan wouldn’t really care. Maybe he’d owe some apologies to the band, but whatever. They had enough of a fanbase that they could probably
find someone else to pick them up.

But he didn’t want to continue the argument with Henry. He had enough for one day, and he itched to get home. If he was lucky, Adam would be out - Blue had mentioned wanting to go out, and she often pulled him along with - which meant he could just go back to the dorm, maybe work on a song to vent his frustration, remember what it was like to kiss Adam one last time, and hopefully not think about Whelk.

“Fine, Cheng. I’ll play nice.” Ronan forced a smile on his face. “I’ll be a perfect gentleman.”

Henry’s eyes nearly rolled to the back of his head. “God help us all. I don’t even want to know, Lynch.”

It was a week and a half before Adam saw Ronan, in the flesh, after the incident at the party. He suspected it was an accident on Ronan’s part. Adam wasn’t supposed to be at the dorm - Whelk had scheduled him to record vocals for the new love song - but his plans were rescheduled last minute.

Ronan didn’t notice him in the dorm at first. Adam was reading a book in the living room, unexpectedly annoyed to have free time, when the front door opened. Ronan was on the phone, shockingly, and tore open the fridge as he occasionally chatted with whoever was on the other line. A few minutes into the call Adam heard Opal’s name which perked his interest. He hadn’t heard Ronan mention the little one in quite some time, and he wondered if Ronan had pushed her out of his thoughts. Apparently not.

Of course, the conversation had to come to a close at some point. Ronan had been making a sandwich while they chatted, and once he hung up, he stuffed part of it into his mouth and spun on his heel. Ronan dropped the sandwich to the ground once he saw Adam.

“Hey,” Adam chirped.

Ronan probably cursed - it was hard to tell with all that food in his mouth - and bent down to retrieve the sandwich. Adam hustled to the kitchen to retrieve a couple paper towels, but as soon as he knelt down to clean the mess, Ronan abruptly stood up.
“Parrish,” he clipped. “I’ll let you get this, then.”

Adam almost groaned. How long was this going to go on? He was tired of Ronan ignoring him, avoiding him; tired of Ronan acting stilted and awkward.

“Can we just talk, for a minute?” Adam asked. He meant it to come off like a plead, a request, but he sounded so irritated. Adam was never good at hiding his emotions, he supposed. “You can’t keep avoiding me.”

Ronan glared at him. “I’m not.”

Adam rolled his eyes. “Seriously, Ronan? Come on. I’ve heard better lies from Whelk.”

This was apparently the wrong thing to say. Ronan bit at the bands on his wrists, eyes narrowing at Adam from over them. He was clearly debating what to say - Adam could practically see his brain turning, trying to come up with something - but he was coming up empty.

God, he should have expected this, really. Ronan was already horrible at acknowledging feelings; he should have known that coming to terms with his own sexuality would be almost impossible. Adam was the idiot who decided to like the mess that was Ronan Lynch.

So Adam took pity on him. “It was a mistake, okay? You were right. I was… drunk, or something. I don’t know, it was a weird night.”

Ronan didn’t look relieved by his words. His lips were stuck in a deep frown, and his eyes bore into Adam. “A mistake.”

“Yep.” Adam let it pop on his lips. Then, either because he was stupid or because he really was a dick, he added, “A nice one, though.”

Ronan reacted instantly. His back arched straight, his cheeks turned a bit red. He was full-on glaring now, eyebrows dipped deep toward his nose. “You aren’t funny, Parrish.”

*I’m not joking*, sat on his lips. Seeing Ronan so instantly angry made him bite his tongue, though.
This was wrong. Hadn’t Adam just said that Ronan was allowed time to be confused? Teasing him wasn’t going to make him come around any sooner. If anything, it would just make him resent Adam.

If Adam wanted this to work - if there was any hope that Ronan might actually be willing to consider Adam as someone worth liking, worth dealing with very overwhelming and complicated feelings involving sexuality, Jesus - then he had to let him get there on his own.

But God, it was really hard not to tease Ronan. Because teasing Ronan meant Adam got to be candid with him; he got to acknowledge his feelings, even just for a moment. He liked touching Ronan, he liked flirting with him. Adam had just a small taste of what it would be like to be Ronan’s, completely and wholly, and he felt insatiable.

And, who knows, maybe subtly teasing Ronan would be the best way to introduce him to the concept of further making out.

“Well,” Adam said finally. He searched for a way to break the tension. “Bet you aren’t going to offer to watch over me get drunk any time soon.”

Ronan’s lips twisted to the side, puckered, before they slid into a cold smirk. “You’re a sloppy drunk, Parrish.”

“Sloppy?”

“Yeah. Sloppy. Get a little alcohol in you and you fling yourself at the nearest object.” Ronan tilted his head back and raised one eyebrow. “Pretty desperate of you.”

Ronan’s eyes were searching his face, and Adam felt like this was a test, suddenly. It was like a dare. Come get me, Ronan’s face said. I’m right here. Or maybe it was a reaction to Adam’s needling. Maybe it was his revenge: you bite me and I’ll bite back.

Still, he really wanted to take the bait. Screw the high ground: maybe he’d be forcing Ronan to come out, but come on, Adam was clearly being egged on. Fair was fair, right?

The universe told him otherwise. The front door of the dorm opened and Noah bustled in, sorting through a stack of mail. He tossed the majority of them on the kitchen table, though he handed Adam
“Hey!” He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “Shit, it’s hot out. Either of you want to go to the pool?”

Ronan jumped at the distraction. He tossed his arm around Noah’s neck, pulled his head toward his chest, and shoved his fist into Noah’s blond locks furiously. “What are you, ten? The pool is going to be filled with little kids.”

Noah said, “So you’ll fit right in!”

Ronan, snorting, began to pull Noah back to their room. He still had his elbow linked around Noah’s neck, though Noah hardly seemed to mind. This was the exact sort of thing he needed, Adam supposed. Though his anger hadn’t lasted for more than a day, Noah still seemed a little off lately. Adam tried talking to him about it again - a conversation that was awkward and ended with Noah saying Adam, please - but he should have known better. Noah needed Ronan: brash and loud and enormous, skilled at distraction.

They didn’t shut the door after them, this time, and Adam paused outside to listen to the conversation.

“Dude, did you do my laundry?” He heard Ronan shuffle around the room. “You even folded it. My love. My light. What would I do without you?”

“Yeah, and you owe me, because your socks were rank,” Noah muttered.

“What would I do without you?”

Adam admired the ease of their conversation, the way Ronan and Noah existed in each other’s orbit without question. He’d had moments like that, with Ronan, where it felt perfectly normal. Incredibly easy. The problem with falling for Ronan Lynch, however, was that it negated this possibility. Adam thought carefully about everything he said, everything he did. What will happen if I touch Ronan here? Is it okay to say this?

And as much as he enjoyed that kiss, Adam doomed himself to even more stilted conversations with Ronan. Ronan was careful around Adam; maybe it wasn’t forced politeness, like Gansey had once done so long ago, but it still wasn’t Ronan.
So Adam leaned against the hall wall, content to listen to their banter. He would just have to wait it out. Either Ronan would come around - ideally embracing the whole Yes-I-Did-Enjoy-Kissing-You-Adam-Why-Don’t-We-Do-That-Again understanding - or he wouldn’t, and time would eventually ease the awkward tension.

He hoped.

Apparently, Adam liked to play games.

This should not have surprised Ronan. Adam was smart; he always had a way with his words, knew what exactly to say in a battle of verbal wit. And apparently he liked to be a giant tease. It was a mistake; a nice one, though. Fuck. Maybe Ronan deserved it. He was the one who made out with an inebriated Adam, a decidedly un-chill-like thing to do. Adam had the right to be angry about it.

But did he have to be such a fucking tease?

No, it was fine. He had to get over it. Ronan had more important things to do. Like prep for the interview, or critique the lyrics for the love song, or make fun of Blue and Gansey.

Their album was officially finished. Adam recorded his vocals for the love song, which Ronan had avoided listening to until now, in case it was a total trainwreck. They had an official press day scheduled for when the album dropped, but until then, Henry had lined them up interviews with a few small journals across L.A. Henry argued it would be good prep for press day, which would apparently be non stop interviews; Ronan called it pointless.

All the interviews went the same exact way. They were incredibly boring. Gansey rattled off his pre-rehearsed answers to every question, Blue took the reins when it involved anything social-justice related, Noah made his jokes, Adam offered the occasional pointed and powerfully delivered quip, and Ronan glowered.

Except when Whelk forced him to talk. Which never went well, for anyone.
They were waiting for the interview to begin. It seemed as good of time as any to face the love song, so Ronan threw on a pair of headphones and gave it a go. He didn’t bother being involved with the process - Ronan knew all too well that he’d hate whoever wrote the lyrics, and find the job mediocre at best - but he hoped it wouldn’t matter. Hearing Adam’s voice to his music would be good enough in the end.

And like magic, Adam’s voice did the trick. Ronan found he enjoyed the song enough; the lyrics weren’t ground-breaking, but they were...objectively sort of sweet. There were a few lines he liked in particular, though he might have been biased. Hearing Adam sing, *It’s the little things you do, don’t you know? You built me a home out of smiles and touch and I got used to that, don’t you know?* hit a little close to home.

He didn’t really plan on making this a habit - relying on random strangers to write his lyrics - but hey, it wasn’t *so* terrible.

Ronan’s gaze slid to Adam. He was flipping through a book, something that looked far too advanced considering he didn’t have required reading anymore. Ronan nudged him with his shoe, and once Adam’s eyes flitted upwards he said, “So, the new song. What do you think?”

Adam stared at him blankly. “Are you talking about the lyrics?”

“What else? You’ve had the music for ages, now.”

Adam hummed to himself. “Yeah, they’re pretty good, I guess. Someone had a bit of inspiration, huh?”

Ronan realized the implication of agreeing with Adam. Clearly, the boy hadn’t heard that Ronan had delegated the task to someone else. It was slightly appealing to keep up this lie. It was Adam’s favorite source of insult, and maybe this would get him off his back. *On the other hand*, Adam’s tone was as suggestive as always, and he knew taking credit for the song, so close to their kiss, might be a bit suspicious.

Ronan spared a quick glance to the other band members - they were all otherwise distracted - so he leaned in close to Adam and lowered his breath. “Trust me, Parrish, swapping spit with you was not very inspiring.”

Adam wiped a grin off his lips with his thumb before he settled in, moving close to Ronan as well. Very slowly, and with a heavily enunciated accent, he said, “Interesting that your mind went there, Ronan. Couldn’t have been *so* bad, if you’re still thinking about it. Especially considering we both
know you didn’t write the lyrics.”

Then, Adam clapped him on the shoulder, stood up, and made his way to Blue.

Ronan had to turn his head away from the group to save face, because a silent curse leapt obviously off his lips. GoddamnAdamParrish. He wasn’t sure what game he was playing at, but there was no denying it was a game anymore.

He felt a press against his back, and within seconds, Noah’s voice was near his ear. “Everything okay, Ronan?”

Adam’s eyes slid from Blue to Ronan upon Noah’s question. He raised one eyebrow, in obvious challenge.

“Peachy,” Ronan muttered.

He hung onto his anger - if one could even call it that, because with Adam, it was hard to truly be angry - the rest of the interview. It provided itself to be a good distraction, at least. Twenty minutes had passed without Ronan’s notice. He was content to rehash Adam’s words in his head, wondering what they meant.

Okay, clearly Adam knew what he was doing, but Ronan didn’t know his agenda. Was this just a joke to him? Had he realized that night, finally, that Ronan was harboring an unfortunate crush? Adam didn’t seem like the type to cruelly taunt it in his face, though, which kind of left one option.

Was this some weird form of flirting?

He let his gaze trail to Adam, who was currently answering a question. Ronan had begun to suspect, possibly, that Adam might be into guys. He was pretty sure completely straight people didn’t kiss people of the same gender just because they were a little tipsy. But again, there was no way Adam Parrish, even gay or bisexual or whatever he might be, could like Ronan.

Maybe he was just confused by the touching.
Or maybe he’s flirting.

Ronan was brought out of his thoughts by an obnoxious snapping to his right. He turned, eyes dark, to Whelk, who had appeared next to Henry at some point in the interview. Whelk jabbed two fingers into his eyes, then jabbed them toward the interviewer, and mouthed, *Eyes. Up. Front.*

To his credit, Henry didn’t bother to hide the dirty look he shot Whelk.

Ronan was going to ignore Whelk, to keep looking at Adam, but the interviewer pulled his attention away. She was staring at him, batting her eyes, and he had to ask her to repeat the question.

“We asked some of your fans for questions, would you mind answering a few?” She tossed a strand of hair behind her ear and didn’t wait for his respond. “We have an overwhelming amount of questions about your tattoo. Is there a story behind it?”

“It seemed like a good idea when I was drunk.”

“It’s inspired by his heritage,” Gansey added, his eyes flitting to Henry. Ronan wasn’t sure when they’d gotten so close, but apparently Gansey was willing to save his hide. “His father’s side is extremely Irish, you see. I think - and correct me if I’m wrong here, Ronan - that you’d say it was a dedication to him, right?”

Ronan shrugged. “Sure. And I was really drunk.”

Gansey chuckled, though he gripped Ronan’s shoulder a little too tight. “I’m not sure his sense of humor will translate well to text.”

The interviewer didn’t seem to mind. She continued on with her questions (he got the dreaded *Who inspires you?* again, along with the unimaginary *What is your favorite food?* and *Are you watching any television shows right now?*) and he did his best to answer them, but after the third time he saw Adam shake his head, obviously finding his responses comically bad.

“He’s going to hate this one, I can just tell,” the interviewer started, grinning at Adam as if they were close enough to have this inside joke, “but it’s one of the most up-voted questions from your fans. So, Ronan, they want to know: if you could date any celebrity, who would it be?”
Ronan did hate the question. He gestured to the band and said, “Do they count as celebrities yet?”

The interviewer lit up with glee. She looked to Blue, probably because she was the only girl, and said, “Oh, my God, yes! Are we going to hear a confession, here?”

Blue sent him a dirty look. She probably thought he was messing with Gansey and her - they’d asked the rest of the band to keep their relationship secret, at least from the public eye - and okay, it would have been a textbook-Ronan move to mess with them. That was never his intention, though.

Ronan looked over his shoulder to catch Whelk’s eyes, before he turned back and answered, “Parrish.”

The room was first filled with an overwhelming silence, before it imploded. Noah barked a laugh, Henry muttered what sounded like a string of Korean curses, and the interviewer let out a shrill giggle - very forced - and cooed, “Oh, my God, Ronan you can’t say things like that! My heart nearly stopped.”

“There you go. Classic Ronan humor,” Gansey said, though the look he shot Ronan said otherwise.

Whelk looked furious, which Ronan enjoyed immensely. Adam, though, seemed to match Whelk’s temperament. He was sucking his cheek into his teeth, ears a bright red, and looked thoroughly unamused by Ronan’s remarks.

And, you know, Ronan didn’t feel that bad about it. If Adam wanted to play games, he was down to play.

“Let’s move on,” Whelk cut in.

“Sure, sure,” she turned back to her notes, scanning for questions. “What’s your favorite thing to do on a day off?”

Ronan wondered whether he should push his luck. Whatever. “Parrish.”
It took a moment for the interviewer to understand his connotation. She cleared her throat - clearly unsure what to do with the material - before she laughed feebly. “You are...quite the enigma, Ronan.”

“He’s joking,” Adam cut in. “We haven’t-- um. Yeah. He’s joking.”

(There was something a little satisfying about making Adam tongue-tied.)

Whelk turned his body toward Henry, pulling him into a quiet conversation. Whatever he said made Henry turn visibly more pale, and he nodded along tersely. Whelk stormed out of the room, the door slamming in his wake, and Henry fidgeted with his outfit in obvious uncomfort. Ronan couldn’t help but notice, however, that he avoided his gaze.

Somehow, only in the way Henry pointedly ignored him, Ronan suddenly felt nervous.

The interview concluded not much later. She thanked them all, exchanged contact info with Henry, and made a point to shake all of their hands before she left. Once she left, though, Adam turned on Ronan and whispered, “What the hell?”

Henry saved him. He stepped in-between the two and tugged his arm around Ronan’s shoulder, “Well, that was a delight. Ronan, a word?”

“You’ll have to wait in line,” Adam said.

“Think I’d rather go with Cheng.”

The look Adam sent him was almost comically upsetting. He was clearly itching to get his hands on Ronan - though probably not in the way Ronan hoped - and the trace of red that normally settled only on his ears had actually traveled to his cheeks. It was charming, really.

“Fine,” Adam snapped. Then, lowering his voice, he added, “But I swear to God, Ronan, we’re talking later.”

Henry pulled Ronan away before he had a chance to respond. They were silent the entire walk from
Cabeswater’s press room, all the way up the elevator, and through the lobby. It wasn’t until Henry had pushed Ronan into his office and shut the door did he whirl on him.

“What were you thinking?” Henry was pacing, a difficult task considering the size of his office. He didn’t let Ronan offer an explanation before he continued, “Look, I know you’re in love with the boy, but I thought we agreed that you were going to cool it with Whelk.”

“I’m not in love with him,” Ronan muttered.

Henry held up his finger to shush him. “Beside the point, Ronan. I can’t believe you. You’re such an idiot. Gansey warned me about this - your insatiable need to push everyone’s buttons - but I thought you were smart enough to know when to quit.”

“Whelk will deal,” Ronan said dismissively, literally waving Henry’s concern off. “Everyone will assume I’m joking. They always do, anyway.”

“Whelk doesn’t care!” Henry shouted. “God, Ronan, I warned you about this. Do you care about your friends at all?”

“What do they have to do with this?”

Henry crouched down, tucking his head into his knees. He massaged the back of his neck and muttered, “God, I could get fired if I tell you. But you’re making this really, really hard.”

“Dude, you need to chill.”

Henry jolted upward. “Fine. You know what? Go home, Ronan, and talk with your band. Check in with everybody. Really ask how they’re doing. And then, if you still don’t know why you’re such an idiot, come talk to me.”

Ronan peered at Henry, trying to understand the quick babble that he was sprouting. “Jesus, fine. I think you’re just paranoid, Cheng.”

Henry waved one hand toward the door, and with his other, he covered his eyes. “Just go, Ronan. I
have some shit to fix, *no thanks to you.*”

Ronan fled the office before Henry had an aneurism. Despite Henry’s warnings, the idea of going back to the band - in particular, facing Adam - was not his idea of fun.

He was offered a temporary distraction by the buzz of his phone. It was from Kavinsky - which was somehow unsurprising, considering he’d been sending him annoying messages ever since the party - and his instinct was to ignore it. *Sounds like we’re going to party tonight at the studio. You should join, Lynch.*

He had no desire to ever see Kavinsky again, not after the party. Not even the disaster of the day could persuade him to go there.

So, stuck with little options other than to go home or dick around, Ronan decided the best option was to walk home.

Adam was pissed.

*What the hell was Ronan thinking? Did he think he was funny, saying all that? There was teasing, and then there was cruelty. This wreaked of I’m aware of your massive crush and I’d like to rub it in your face, not I’m confused sexually.*

The band waited for Ronan for a bit, but after thirty minutes, it became obvious he wasn’t going to show up. Noah excused himself, apparently having plans for the evening, which left Adam to hangout with the lovebirds.

It was less than ideal. Now that Blue and Gansey were in the open about their relationship, they were nauseating. Not to mention, they’d picked up that annoying couple-habit where they believed themselves to be the pinnacle of success, thus both felt qualified to offer advice. Apparently being in a healthy and happy relationship meant they knew exactly how to handle life.

“Don’t be too hard on him, Adam,” Gansey said on the way back. “You know Ronan, he acts before he thinks. He was bound to act out about this *Pynch* issue sooner or later.”
Blue rolled her eyes. “I don’t think that’s the issue here, Gansey.”

“No?”

Blue just patted his knee. Adam found this mildly interesting - did she know something? - but he was too irritated to think about it further. Instead, he focused his attention on the outside window.

He continued to stew the rest of the evening, checking the time periodically. Blue and Gansey would check in on him, trying to pull Adam out of his bad mood, but they gave up after an hour. (And Adam turned on the television when he started to hear giggling coming from her room. That was not going to improve his mood.)

Ronan finally showed up a few hours later, trying to act nonchalant and failing miserably. “Oh, look who it is.”

Adam glared at him from the couch. “You couldn’t have taken a longer route home, right?”

Ronan ignored him. “Where is everybody?”

“Don’t change the subject--”

“No, seriously, I’m supposed to ask if everyone is okay.” Ronan turned back to Adam and narrowed his eyes. “Wait, you’re okay, right? You seem fine.”

Adam nearly strangled him.

Ronan turned to Blue’s door and raised his fist to knock, but Adam got to him first. He pulled Ronan back away from the door and muttered, “I don’t think you want to go in there right now. I think they’re fine.”

Ronan turned away from Adam pointedly. “Cool. Then Noah?”
“He’s out. How long are you going to avoid talking to me about this?” Adam tugged Ronan back to him by his wristband. “I’m not going to do this anymore. I thought I’d give you space, but I don’t think you need it.”

Ronan slipped his wrist away from Adam and took a step back. “What?”

“Why did you say those things?” Adam asked. “And no more lying, or omitting the truth, or whatever it is you do. Am I a joke to you?”

Ronan turned away from Adam and made his way to his room, groaning under his breath. “It’s just this thing with Whelk, okay? You got dragged into my battle, sorry.”

Adam followed him, nearly knocking into him when Ronan stopped abruptly in the doorway to check his phone. After a quick scan he threw it on the bed, ignoring it completely. Adam was almost pleased - at least he still had his priorities.

“What battle?”

Ronan peered at Adam, briefly, before he said, “Just...he’s shitty. That’s all.”

“That’s not an explanation.” Ronan’s phone started blaring a shitty techno song again, which was apparently his ringer, and it was frustratingly distracting. He waited until it was over to continue. “Did you mean what you said?”

“It was a joke, Parrish,” Ronan repeated.

“What is this?” Adam cut in, pointing to him and Ronan. “I need to know. Did that kiss mean anything to you or not? Because it did to me.”

Ronan looked suddenly stricken. Adam wondered if he pressed too fast - Ronan was blinking rapidly, and his lip kept darting to touch his bottom lip - but he didn’t regret saying it. Fuck it, Adam rarely got what he wanted, and he really wanted Ronan.

“I like you,” Adam said. “And if you don’t, then I’ll figure something out. But I think you do.”
Ronan swallowed. He was still struggling for words, and the longer that he waited, the sicker Adam felt. But then - blissfully - Ronan reached to grab the bottom of Adam’s t-shirt.

And then his fucking phone rang again.

Ronan shut his eyes and turned to the bed. He snapped open the phone, without even bothering to look at it, and snarled, “What?”

Adam could hear blaring music through the phone. He recognized Kavinsky’s voice instantly - it was hard not to, considering it was so horrific and whiney and deplorable - and it put him instantly on edge. Still, he leaned in closer to Ronan to listen.

“Lynch, get your ass over here!”

“Stop fucking calling me--”

Kavinsky barreled on. “No, come get your fucking monkey! He’s puking all over my room and I’m not having it.”

This made Ronan pause. His eyebrows knitted together in confusion, “What?”

“Your imp! The small one. He can’t handle his shit, apparently. We’re peacing out, though.”

Adam stole the phone from Ronan. “Noah is with you?”

Kavinsky didn’t seem to notice the change in person. He just drawled, “Yeah, that one. I told you to come party! Shoulda’ listened, man. It was wild until he starting upchucking. Oh, now he passed out. Better hurry!”

The last thing Adam heard was him laughing before he hung up on them. Ronan was a complicated mixture of worry and fury, and he ran out of the room. Adam followed quickly, grabbing the keys of the company car on his way.
“Shit, shit, shit,” Ronan muttered under his breath. “Cheng - fucking Cheng - this is probably what he was talking about.”

“What do you mean? What’s going on? Noah is with Kavinsky?”

“I don’t know!” Ronan took a moment to pause in the dorm hallway, pressing the palm on his hand to his eyes. “Shit. Shit. ”

“It’s okay. It’ll be fine,” Adam said. Unsure what to do, he tucked his hand into Ronan’s and pulled him toward the parking garage. “I’ll drive. Just get me there.”

Ronan’s grip on his hand tightened, but otherwise he said nothing. The entire car ride Ronan was silent, other than to occasionally mutter directions to the studio, and he chewed on the bands of his wrist. Halfway through the ride, though, he reached again for Adam’s hand. His skin tingled.

Don’t, Adam told himself. This is not the time.

Once they got there, though, Ronan turned to Adam and said, “Stay here. I don’t think he’d--”

“I have my phone on me,” Adam said. “Call me if you need help.”

Ronan disappeared into the studio. In the meantime, Adam called Blue and Gansey - neither of which answered their phones - and cursed. He didn’t know what to do. It seemed wrong to wait here, but at the same time, Ronan probably knew best.

Still, he felt so useless. Why was Noah with Kavinsky? Why did he do drugs? Was this related to his bad mood from earlier? Why hadn’t Adam done anything to help earlier?

Ronan came out of the studio five minutes later, carrying Noah over his back. Adam scrambled out of the car to help, and as they lowered him into the backseat, Ronan said, “We need to get him to a hospital. There’s one not far from here, I think it’d be quicker to just take him.”
“Shit, okay.” Adam rounded the car and hopped in the front seat. “Where the hell is Kavinsky?”

“Gone, that motherfucker,” Ronan snapped. “I’ll deal with him later. We need to get to the hospital, now.”

Ronan stayed in the backseat with Noah, holding his head on his lap. He called the hospital in advance, to warn of their arrival, and it was almost jarring to see him handle the situation so calmly. (Briefly, selfishly, Adam wondered whether Ronan had handled his trip to the hospital as well. He couldn’t really remember that night.)

Adam tried to focus on the road, but his eyes kept darting to the rear-view mirror to check on them. Once in awhile Noah would open his eyes and groan, and Ronan thumbed his cheek.

When they got to the hospital, Ronan picked up Noah in a quick bundle and said, “Go get Blue and Gansey, get them here now. I’ll call you if I find out more.”

Ronan was off before he could say anything more. Adam watched him disappear through the doors of the hospital, Noah’s legs bobbing as he ran.

He couldn’t get himself to leave for a few minutes. He just sat in the hospital parking lot, feeling numb, wondering how the hell he got from that momentary high of Ronan’s confession to such paralyzing fear.

Shit.

Chapter End Notes

Not as angsty as everyone worried, though sorry for the end.
Thank you for your wonderful comments and kudos!
The Truth

Chapter Summary

When Noah did finally wake up, there was an unsaid agreement that Ronan would be the only one to see him. He hung in the doorway, watching as Noah pushed a fork through jello without interest.

“Just get it over with,” Noah called.

Ronan took the only seat to Noah’s left and kicked his feet onto the bed. “Shut up and eat your jello. I made sure to get lime, just for you.”

Chapter Notes

Sorry in advance for any errors. It was either edit this tonight and have to post tomorrow evening, or just post this now and edit tomorrow. I figured people would prefer the former.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ronan never thought he’d have to worry about Noah; maybe that was his downfall. Often, Ronan was guilty of viewing Noah less like his own person and more like an extension of himself. Noah was always around, always dependable. Were you having a bad day? Noah was there with a joke. Declan was a shithead? Noah distracted you. He loved Noah, of course he loved Noah, but he thought of Noah as his friend first, an individual second.

He never really thought about what bothered Noah. Nothing ever seemed to bother Noah.

But now, as he sat next to a sleeping Noah - skin hinted green, sweat capturing hair to his forehead - Ronan was suddenly aware that, yes, things bothered Noah.

He just didn’t know what.

Ronan had called Kavinsky ten times to get the story. Kavinsky never picked up. Typical. He struck Ronan as the type of shithead who played hard, but refused to clean up his mess. Ronan would have to wait until Noah woke up to know what went down. The doctor wasn’t sure what he took; they had gotten him awake long enough to have him ingest some charcoal shit, which was meant to suck up anything left in his system. In the end, the situation wasn’t as dire as Ronan thought. Noah had puked - a ton, as evident by the recording studio, and even more at the hospital - and the doctor
hooked him up to an IV.

Noah would be fine. *Maybe just a little weak,* the doctor said. *And we will definitely need to have a serious conversation about whatever he took once he’s awake.*

*Get in line,* Ronan thought.

The rest of the band made it to the hospital before Noah woke up. Gansey had brought along Henry, disturbingly enough, though Ronan was grateful for his presence in the end. They weren’t quite famous enough to attract paparazzi yet, but a couple fans snapped photos of Ronan while he was in the waiting room. Once Henry got to the hospital he made a beeline for the receptionist. Later, Ronan noticed that Noah’s room was listed under the alias *Jonathan Johnson.* It was probably for the best.

Ronan had yet to be alone with Adam since...well. Since he said *that.*

He couldn’t think of that right now. He already felt horrible enough, having not noticed Noah’s troubles. Ronan didn’t allow himself to think of Adam (*Did that kiss mean anything to you? Because it did to me*) and what he said (*I like you, I like you, I like you*) , not while Noah was out for the count a few doors down.

Noah wasn’t unconscious, per say, but no one wanted to force him awake either. They waited for him to wake up, no one really saying much, no one able to answer questions about what had happened. Henry left a few hours into the hospital stay and Ronan told himself not to care. He didn’t need to come at all - he was a colleague, not a friend - but he was oddly disappointed to see him leave.

And then Henry returned with coffee thirty minutes later and Ronan had to excuse himself. He stood in the bathroom and continuously pressed the hand dryer, over and over and over again, while he cursed under his breath.

When Noah did finally wake up, there was an unsaid agreement that Ronan would be the only one to see him. He hung in the doorframe, watching as Noah pushed a fork through jello without interest.

“*Just get it over with,*” Noah called.
Ronan took the only seat to Noah’s left and kicked his feet onto the bed. “Shut up and eat your jello. I made sure to get lime, just for you.”

“I’m not hungry.” Noah’s eyes fluttered fast, and Ronan recognized it as the distinct look of a boy trying not to cry. “I’m sorry.”

Ronan rubbed his temples, “Why are you apologizing?”

“Because I’m wasting—” Noah swallowed back a breath. “I’m just sorry.”

Ronan took back his legs from the bed. He had thought he could handle this the way he always did - joking it off, distracting Noah with bravado - but that missed the whole point. Something went wrong this time, Noah went off the grid, and it required more from him.

He’d have to actually talk to Noah.

“What were you thinking?” Ronan asked without malice. “You aren’t the type to do this, I don’t get it.”

Noah’s bottom lip wobbled, but he refused to cry. In a hollow whisper, he said, “He thinks I’m useless. I can be replaced with a computer, remember? I just thought… Kavinsky kept saying that it helped him with his music. I thought he’d think I was more useful if I could help write.”

“Kavinsky is an idiot, I thought we went over this,” Ronan said.

Noah casted his eyes downward, picking at his hospital gown. “It doesn’t matter. No matter how much I take, it doesn’t help. I can’t write music like you.”

“No matter how much you take? How much did you take?” Ronan clenched his fists at his side and thought of the many ways he’d like to kill Kavinsky. “How much did he give you?”

Noah sucked his bottom lip into his mouth, clearly contemplating how best to answer. “It’s my fault. I told him I could handle more.” Noah shut his eyes in a wince. “I took something before. I found it, when I did your laundry. I took it and I waited and I tried to write something but it didn’t do anything
for me, and so I thought if I just took a bit more this time--”

Ronan had to turn away from Noah, both to stop his frantic rambling, as well as to avoid his own guilt. He had forgotten about the pill Kavinsky stuffed into pocket the night of his party. It had slipped his mind, after the distraction of Adam and his lips. And so when he went to bed that night, he had stripped off his shirt, tossed it on the floor, right into Noah’s tidy-obsessed hands.

“When did this happen? The first time?”

“Last week.”

Ronan didn’t even remember what he did last week, but he knew he wasn’t home much then. That had been in the height of his whole avoiding-Adam-deal, usually coming home once Noah was already asleep. Was anyone else around the dorm then? Blue and Gansey spent most of their free time together now, which only left Adam, who often kept to himself.

Which meant Noah was mostly alone. For a long time, now.

“I’m sorry,” Noah repeated. “I won’t do it again. It doesn’t work, anyway, so there’s no point…”

Ronan leaned forward, elbows leaning on the mattress so that he could really look at Noah. “Damn right you won’t. I told you, you’re not useless, and there’s no fucking way you’d be replaced by a computer. You are a part of this band, Noah, and you always will be.”

Noah choked back a laugh but didn’t comment further. Ronan was at a loss of what to say. They’d had this conversation - he’d tried this all before, and he wasn’t sure if it would do any good now - so he worked toward reassurance in the only way he knew how. Ronan placed his hand on the back of Noah’s head, smoothing down the tufts of blonde that were arranged haphazardly due to sleep, and patted his head slowly.

They sat like that for some time. Ronan welcomed the doctor’s presence once he arrived. He dismissed himself, figuring Noah would want privacy, but heard the beginnings of the conversation through the door.

“I need you to tell me what you took. You won’t get in trouble.”
“I’m not really sure…”

The rest of the band - and Henry, oh God, did he just group Henry in the band? - stood up when he came back. Blue was wringing her hands with worry, apparently not soothed by the feel of Gansey’s hand on her back.

“He’ll be fine,” Ronan muttered. “You can probably visit him in a minute. I’ll be back later.”

Adam’s eyes narrowed instantly. “Why?”

Ronan leveled his gaze at him. “Because I’m going to go find Kavinsky. And I’m going to punch him. And et cetera.”

Gansey’s protest was already on his lips, but Blue intercepted it. “Good. If I give you one of my drumsticks, will you shove it into his eye for me?”

“Among other places,” Ronan agreed.

“La la la,” Henry covered his ears. “I’m not hearing this.”

“We don’t even know what happened,” Gansey argued. “I’m not saying that Kavinsky isn’t despicable, but if Noah asked for the drugs, well… Noah is an adult.”

Noah’s wobbling voice echoed in Ronan’s mind. He thinks I’m useless. Fuck Kavinsky; the drugs were upsetting, and he did want to kill him for giving out untested or unreliable shit, but that wasn’t why Ronan aimed to punch him. If Kavinsky’s insults had gotten under Noah’s skin enough that it lead him to take drugs, then Ronan would simply make it so Kavinsky couldn’t insult anyone again.

It was for the good of mankind, really.

“I’m going with you,” Adam said. His hand lifted at his side, fingers drifting to Ronan’s arm. Ronan wanted the weight of Adam’s grasp to be a show of support. Burn him, he wanted Adam’s finger to
Realistically, they were a warning. Adam’s presence would force him to be less violent. He couldn’t exactly beat up Kavinsky in front of him; Adam knew this too, he was sure, and it was a very pointed move. *I’m coming with you you don’t get into too much trouble.* It was unfair, really.

But he wasn’t exactly going to send Adam away, either.

Ronan called Kavinsky’s phone to figure out his location. He didn’t answer, of course, which meant they had to hunt him down. It took almost an hour of driving around LA before Adam thought to check Prokopenko’s social media accounts for check-ins. According to Facebook, Proko had checked into a club in downtown LA; the two seemed joined at the hip, so Ronan felt confident that Kavinsky would be there as well.

Finding him in the club was a different story. They were quasi-famous enough to get immediately in, but the place was packed. Adam seemed instantly overwhelmed by the loud music and the bodies pressing against him. He could not be counted on to look for Kavinsky, which Ronan would have been more irritated about if it wasn’t an easy excuse for taking Adam’s hand again.

Once out of the hospital, he felt a little less guilty about enjoying Adam’s touch. Anyway, there was a practical need to hold hands.

They eventually found Kavinsky. He had secured a private booth in the far corner, one that was populated by the rest of his crew and a surprising lack of scantily-dressed ladies given the context, though a completely cliche amount of empty shot glasses.

Kavinsky caught his eye quickly - he looked a little dazed, eyes glossed over, a manic grin spreading over his lips - but he welcomed Ronan into the booth all the same. Proko was sitting to his left, nursing a drink, while the remainder of his lackeys were attempting a dance that was one part swaying, and two parts fumbling.

“All Lynch!” Kavinsky yelled. “I would say we have a party on our hands, but you brought the straight-edge.”

Adam didn’t react to the insult. Either he’d gotten better at ignoring Kavinsky’s ways, or more realistically, his one ear couldn’t make out Kavinsky over the music. Still, Adam edged closer to Ronan, leaning his forearm into his shoulder.
“We need to talk,” Ronan said. He jerked his head to the exit of the club. “Outside, preferably.”

Kavinsky folded himself into the booth and practically pouted. “No, no, I’m having fun here. Come join,” he shoved Proko away from seat and patted it, beckoning Ronan. “We can have a wonderful little chat here.”

When Ronan took a step toward Kavinsky, Adam fisted the sleeve of his shirt. Kavinsky’s eyes narrowed on the gesture and he rolled his eyes.

“Ugh, not this again.” Kavinsky leaned his head against the booth and whined. “It wasn’t enough to have to watch the security footage from my pool, don’t tell me this is official now.”

Ronan blanched. “You have a habit of spying?”

“It was my fucking security footage,” Kavinsky cried. The drugs - or the alcohol, Ronan couldn’t really be sure - kept him in a constant high. Despite his complaining, his face was plastered with a smile. “Anyway, I had to figure out who poured fucking beer into my pool. You are RUDE as FUCK Parrish!”

Adam apparently heard this because he rolled his eyes, though he couldn’t keep Ronan’s gaze for more than a few seconds before turning away in stiff avoidance. Ronan took the opportunity and crossed to Kavinsky, grabbed him by his collar, and said, “I’m going to kill you.”

Kavinsky lulled his head to the side and laughed, “Oh, dear, is this about your little friend? I thought we had moved past that.”

“What did you give him?”

The smile dropped from Kavinsky’s lips for a moment. “I didn’t give him anything. He came running to me and begged me for something. I warned him we deal some pretty intense shit, but he said he could take it!”

Ronan let go of his collar and stepped back, pulling at the back of his neck in frustration. He had to let the drug thing go. That wasn’t the issue here, and he’d never get anywhere with Kavinsky
arguing this particularity.

“Stay away from Noah,” Ronan warned. “You talk to him again and I’ll make your life miserable.”

Kavinsky smiled lecherously. “Oh, tell me more.”

He was going to murder him, he really was. The look Ronan gave him did the trick, thankfully, because Kavinsky heaved a long sigh and said, “Jesus, I don’t understand why I’m getting the third degree. I was just doing him a favor! I didn’t even charge him.”

It was the wrong thing to say. Ronan did not want to hear Kavinsky’s shitty attempt at an excuse, and unable to control himself, he kicked at the table. The empty shot glasses went careening to the floor. Both Adam and Proko jumped back, neither wanting to be hit by glass, but Kavinsky hardly looked phased.

“Don’t give me that shit. I know what you’ve been saying to him!”

Kavinsky laughed giddily. “I barely talk to the guy! He’s not worth my time, honestly.”

Ronan cursed under his breath. This was pointless. He’d have to talk to Kavinsky when he wasn’t high. Getting a straight answer out of him, or God, even trying to threaten him was impossible in this state. He could tell Adam was starting to get antsy; his hand was firm on Ronan’s lower back, pressing into him in warning.

“Just leave us all the fuck alone. That includes Noah, that includes me,” Ronan warned. “We’re never going to work together again, you hear me?”

This seemed to break through Kavinsky’s high. For a moment he almost looked upset: he twisted his lips to the side, pressed his hands down over his backwards cap, and looked out at the rest of the club. Then, as quick as it came, the look dropped off and he turned to Proko and dragged him back to the booth.

It was the sign that the conversation was over. Ronan took Adam’s hand again and pulled him back the way they came, eager to get out of the club as soon as possible. The whole encounter was completely unsatisfying - he had wanted this trip to mean something. He wanted Kavinsky groveling, or at the very least he wanted him to acknowledge what he did. Instead he got a tripped
out Kavinsky, hardly cognizant of Ronan’s anger.

When they finally made it out of the club, Ronan let go of Adam’s hand. He needed his hands free to flex into fists, to press against the wall of the club in frustration. Adam gave him space to do so, thankfully, merely keeping an eye out for people watching. Luckily, everyone around the club was either plastered or preparing to get plastered, hardly paying them any attention.

After a few minutes Adam said, “We should get back.”

“No,” Ronan said. “I’m going to wait ‘till he comes out. Try to talk to him again.”

“That sounds like a brilliant plan,” Adam said, his real opinion on the matter evident in his tone. When Ronan didn’t move from the wall, though, Adam added, “What did you expect to happen here, Ronan?”

He turned his anger toward Adam for the moment. “So I should just let him get away with this?”

Adam stared back, looking helpless. “Get away with what Ronan? Gansey was right. Noah is an adult. Kavinsky’s a dick, I’m the first to say that, you know that, but he didn’t force Noah to take anything.”

“He called him useless,” Ronan bit.

“Yeah, it’s despicable, I know.” Adam was trying to keep his cool, Ronan could tell, and he picked his words carefully. “But he also calls Blue derogatory terms on a daily basis, and calls me Deaf Boy. His insults didn’t bother you before--”

“Because his insults didn’t lead to this!”

“You think Noah took drugs because Kavinsky was mean to him?” Adam asked incredulously.

“Don’t give me that tone. He told me that was the reason,” Ronan said.

Adam couldn’t really argue with that, though his face betrayed him. He was clearly chewing over
Ronan’s claim, finding holes in it.

“What?”

Adam rolled his eyes at Ronan’s temper. “I just-- I don’t know. I find it hard to believe that Noah would care what he thinks. You weren’t there for more of our recordings - we make fun of him all the time. I always thought Noah found him to be kind of a joke.”

“Well, clearly not, since again, he fucking told me this.”

Adam shook his head, turned on his heel, and started walking back toward the car. “I’m not doing this.”

“Doing what?”

“Talking with you when you’re in a mood!”

“Excuse me?”

Adam turned to Ronan with an irritated expression and waved at his whole body. “This. You’re pissed, which I get - today has been long and stressful and shit has happened - but that doesn’t mean I have to deal with your bad mood. Let’s just go home.”

Ronan felt his stomach drop. Just like that his anger was gone, but it was replaced with nauseating dread. He fucked up. He lost his temper in front of Adam, just hours after Adam had said he actually liked him, Jesus Christ. Well, that was it, probably. There was no way he still liked him now.

He did not voice any of his concerns. Instead he stuffed his hands in his pockets and slunk after Adam, scowl still on his face.

They said nothing the car. Adam kept looking out the window, tapping his fingers quickly in anger, or many anxiousness. It was hard to tell with Adam. Ronan pulled up to their dorm and idled the car.
“I’m going back to the hospital. I’m guessing they’ll let me take him home.”

Adam sighed. “Okay.”

He took his time getting out of the car, checking multiple times for something he left on the seat, unbuckling his seatbelt carefully, letting his feet sink into the ground for an unnecessarily long moment before he pushed himself up and out.

It would have been the perfect time to apologize. Instead, Ronan muttered, “Bet you’re really rethinking things now, huh?”

From his place outside the car, Adam leaned down to peak at Ronan. “Nice try.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Even in the dark of the evening, Ronan could still make out the faint flush that simmered across Adam’s cheeks and down his ears. “I meant what I said, Ronan. If you’re not ready to talk about it, that’s okay. I’ll wait.”

Then he shut the car door and headed back to the dorm.

Noah came home late that night, but Adam missed it, having passed out soon after Ronan dropped him off. The club had given him a horrible headache. Anytime his hearing was thrown off considerably his balance followed, which meant dizzy spells and near-migraines. Adam knew, realistically, that if they played any concerts it was likely to happen, but he pushed the thought away. He’d figure that out when they got there.

He hoped that, come morning, Ronan would be less of a pill. Adam didn’t know how long he would have to wait for their conversation to finish - he needed to give Ronan time to grieve Noah, for one thing, and make sure of his feelings for another - and he was anxious to discuss it.
Adam would feel more guilty about wanting Ronan, even in the wake of Noah’s overdose, if it wasn’t a textbook-Parrish move. This was how Adam got through life: deciding he wanted something and recklessly achieving it, no matter the cost. First it was college. He had wanted it for the escape, for the late nights of studying, for the degree. Then he wanted the band. It, too, was an escape at first, but he also wanted time with his friends, people screaming for their music.

Now he wanted Ronan. Ronan wasn’t an escape, this time. Ronan was home.

Unfortunately, despite his desires, there were still societal rules he had to follow. The next morning Ronan hovered at Noah’s side. Adam couldn’t exactly walk up to the pair and confess his attraction once more.

And then Blue and Gansey insisted on staying with the band more. They took a break from their dates, choosing instead to spend quality time with the band. Adam would have loved this a week ago, having felt oddly abandoned in the house, but it was bad timing. Why did they need to be lovey-dovey now?

Right. Noah. He was being a dick.

At least Noah seemed to be recovering quickly. Within a few days his health was back to normal, the color in his cheeks had returned, he was back to scarfing down junk food. There were glimpses of hurt still evident, though. Ronan and Blue kept Noah distracted with jokes or hugs or outlandish statements, but Noah’s laughter didn’t always reach his eyes. He was going through the motions most of the time.

And there were moments when he’d grow quiet. He’d tuck his body into himself, somehow making his body smaller than seemingly possible, and drift off. It struck Adam, at these times, that Noah might have been doing this for months and no one noticed. It was so easy to look past him when he did this.

*How long had this been going on?*

*And what was going on?*

Adam still didn’t buy that it was Kavinsky’s fault. He’d been with Noah in the recording studio. They’d trashed Kavinsky together. (“Who does he think he is, wearing a backwards baseball cap?”
“He looks like if Vanilla Ice and a jug of milk had a baby.” True, maybe it was a defense mechanism, but Noah never seemed that threatened by him. Noah disliked Kavinsky, but he didn’t loathe him. That, apparently, was saved for Whelk.

But Whelk couldn’t have done something to Noah, right? He was a professional.

Adam felt a little queasy.

Four days after Noah’s overdose he finally got a moment to speak to Ronan alone. Adam couldn’t ignore the dread in his stomach, and instead of bringing up them, he needed to discuss Whelk. Adam recounted his discussion with Noah from earlier - how Noah’s whole continence changed at the mention of Whelk.

He expected Ronan to call him crazy. To tell him he was being irrational.

Instead, Ronan fell silent.

Then, Ronan left the kitchen, stormed to their room, and busted open the door. Adam followed quickly, warning Ronan to keep his cool, confused at the violent reaction. Noah was just sitting on his bed fiddling with his laptop.

“Is it Whelk?” Ronan asked.

Noah’s hands fell silent at the keyboard. His face turned a shade lighter, but he covered his face with a sunny smile. “Sorry?”

“Is Whelk the one who said you were useless?” Ronan pressed. He had yet to cross the room to meet Noah, and the space between them seemed endless. “Has he been -- Did he do something -- “

“It’s fine, Ronan,” Noah said quickly, shutting his laptop and setting it to the side. “I had a stupid moment and I made a dumb choice, but I’m over it--”

“Noah.” Ronan lowered his tone. “What did Whelk do?”
Noah was never good at lying. His eyes fluttered down to his linked hands, which he wrung anxiously. Despite the worry evident on his face, his tone was pointed and firm. “He didn’t do anything. It’s fine, Ronan.”

Ronan exited the room before Adam had a chance to catch his breath from the whiplash. What followed was the sound of the front door slamming shut, which Noah winced at. That left him and Adam alone in the room and neither seemed to know what to say.

“Noah…” Adam ventured. “If he did something - or said something - we can help.”

“I said I’m fine.”

“So he did do something,” Adam confirmed.

Noah leaned back on his bed and threw an arm over his face, shielding his eyes from Adam’s gaze. In a hushed tone, Noah pleaded, “If Ronan finds out he’ll do something stupid. I don’t want him to ruin his career because Whelk hates me.”

Adam was still hovering near the door. He moved to the desk, hoping that slow and careful movements might not scare Noah away from opening up, and took a seat.

“Why do you think he hates you?”

Noah turned to Adam with an almost bemused smile. There was a certain sickness on his lips, though. “Trust me. He makes it abundantly clear.”

“How so?”

“Nice try, Adam.” Noah turned back to face the ceiling and exhaled slowly. “I tell you and you’ll tell Ronan. Or you’ll tell Blue and then she’ll tell Ronan. It’s better this way. I will get over it. We just need to get the album out there so that people hear our music.”

“You’re more important than our music, you know that, right?”
Noah looked unconvinced, but he did say, “Thanks.”

They sat in silence. Despite the conversation clearly being over, Adam didn’t feel comfortable leaving Noah alone. Noah eventually pulled open his laptop again, though Adam didn’t get the impression he was trying to usher Adam out. If Noah was willing to let him be there, he’d take advantage of the situation. He did have a letter to write. Adam rifled through the desk, found a piece of paper, and turned to Noah.

“Do you mind if I write in here?”

Noah shrugged off Adam’s worries. “Sending another letter to your pen pal?”

“Mmhmm.”

They lapsed into silence after that, Noah typing away at his keyboard, Adam scribbling on his paper. Adam tried to focus on his writing, but knowing what Noah had told him - though he hadn’t given away much, really - was distracting.

*What the hell did Whelk do to him?*

Ronan was furious. He was mad at Noah, for refusing to tell him what was going on. He was mad at Whelk, for whatever the fuck it was he did. Mostly he was mad at Henry, because he refused to tell him he knew. *And he obviously knew something.*

Today was the official release of their album, and as promised, Henry had lined them up non-stop interviews for the day. Henry was, in the simplest terms, losing his God-damn-mind. His normally high and coiffed hair was permanently pressed flat against his scalp due to repeatedly throwing a hand through his hair from stress. He had a small coffee stain on the cuff of his pressed shirt, which normally Ronan would never have noticed, but it was so unusual for Henry that is stood out like a neon sign.
It probably didn’t help that Ronan started the day by cornering him and demanding that he tell him what Whelk did. Henry shot Ronan the dirtiest look he could muster and had said, “Of all days, Ronan Lynch, why would you choose to ask me this now?”

To be fair, Ronan had spent the previous days interrogating Noah - who refused, time and time again, to tell him the truth. He spent the next few days stalking Whelk, hoping he could catch him unpolished and sneak the truth out of him.

It had not gone well. He only caught Whelk a few times; the majority of his hours were spent in the Cabeswater waiting room, or outside the building. He had forgotten to take into consideration that, since the album release was only days away, Whelk was extremely busy and never left the office.

So it was Henry he had to rely on. Henry, who warned him about Noah in the first place but now refused to answer his questions.

After the fifth interview, Ronan tried Henry again. Things had been going fine, so far, and Henry was beginning to calm down. He was nursing a glass of water - having given up on coffee for the day, which was probably wise, considering the stain and his nerves - and was standing off to the side coordinating the next interview.

They only had five minutes until they were due on stage for a small press conference. It was unlikely that he could get the full details out of Henry in that time, but maybe a hint.

“Parrish,” Ronan nudged the boy next to him. “Keep Noah busy for a sec.”

Adam sent him a look that screamed God-what-are-you-doing-now? That was fine. Adam looked at him like that constantly these days. Ronan slid up to Henry, trapping him in the corner.

“Cheng.” Ronan hoped his height and glowering would come across threatening. It didn’t seem to work, because Henry looked up at him from his glasses, clearly unamused and unthreatened. “Tell me now or I won’t say anything during the entire interview.”

“You hardly talk anyway,” Henry said.

“What did Whelk do to him? I know you know.”
Henry growled - a pitiful sound coming from him, really - and tugged Ronan away from the Cabeswater team. Henry hissed, “Seriously, Ronan, now is not the time. We can talk after.”

“You said you’d tell me,” Ronan argued. “And how do I know you won’t run away afterward? You tend to be a coward--”

“If you think you can insult me into telling you, you’re an idiot.”

Henry had a point. Ronan wouldn’t be able to goad the answer out of him; Henry contained a distinct lack of pride, and trying to wound him wouldn’t work. Briefly, he considered whether Henry would respond to flattery, or God forbid, maybe Ronan could muster up a tear.

“I will do or say whatever you want, Cheng,” Ronan offered instead. “I just need to know.”

Henry barked a laugh. “You know what will happen if I tell you? You’re going to go into a full rage. You’ll find Whelk and curse him out, effectively ruining your career, and worse, this press conference. I will lose my job, you will lose your contract--”

“Fine, fine,” Ronan pressed his hand into Henry’s face to get him to shut up. “Cheng, please. I don’t ask for things nicely, and yet here I am, fucking begging you. I can’t watch Noah go through this alone anymore. He won’t tell me anything, so I don’t know how to help him.”

Henry shifted against the wall. “Ronan, trust me, I’ll tell you everything after.”

“Just give me something to hold onto. An incentive, to get through this fucking, God-awful day,” Ronan said. “Cheng, come on. If you don’t tell me now, I’ll ruin this press conference. I’ll talk politics. I’ll say that I don’t believe in dinosaurs. I’ll--”

Henry muttered a string of unintelligible curses under his breath. “God, fuck you, Lynch. If I do this, you must promise me - and I have heard you don’t break your promises - that you will not do anything about it for the rest of the day. You can’t go find Whelk, you can’t disrupt the interviews.”

“Fine, fine, I promise I’ll be a good little boy.” There was an announcement asking the band to take the stage. Ronan pressed closer to Henry. “Seriously, Cheng, hurry up.”
Henry whispered a quick prayer. “This is a mistake. God. Fine. He doesn’t want Noah in the band.”

“What?”

“Whelk wants to kick Noah out of the band. On the next album.”

The conversation paused when a stylist came up on Henry’s right and rattled something off about Blue’s wardrobe. Once she left, Ronan shoved his palm into Henry’s chest to keep him stuck in place.

“He doesn’t get to decide that,” Ronan said.

“Well go re-read your contract,” Henry muttered. The only thing that kept Ronan for smacking him for the callous remark was the way Henry’s hands shook. It betrayed his feelings on the matter. “You signed a contract that allows Cabeswater to option another two albums, if they so choose. They get creative control over those two albums. You agreed to this. So technically, Whelk can argue that getting rid of Noah is within his creative control.”

Maybe Henry was right to hold onto this information. Ronan’s blood was curdling. He pressed his fingernails into his palms to keep from yelling at Henry.

“No, we agreed that it would be a partnership --”

“Look, Ronan, we don’t have time to discuss this,” Henry interrupted. “I can’t dispute technicalities with you anyway, because that’s not my job. Go get your lawyer and talk with her. All I know is that, for the past few months, Whelk has pulled Noah into his office and made it abundantly clear that, if he didn’t make himself more useful, his time with the band would be cut short.

“Now go get on stage. And don’t you dare say anything about this during the interview,” Henry warned. “I’m putting my job on the line just telling you this. If you make a scene, I’m toast.”
Adam was exhausted. Regular interviews were stressful enough, but a full day of them was ridiculous. It didn’t help that everyone was on edge. Noah was still in his funk, Blue was growing increasingly irritated with the amount of offensive questions, Gansey was in permanent-President mode, and Ronan was -

Well, Ronan was something else.

Adam wasn’t sure what happened between him and Henry. One minute they chatting, the next Ronan was ushered on stage with a furious look in his eye. Adam had pulled him aside for a minute to check in. Until now, touch had always been an easy way to calm Ronan. Adam looped his finger into Ronan’s wristbands and pressed his thumb into Ronan’s palm.

“Are you okay?”

Ronan clenched his jaw and shrugged Adam off. “No.”

Adam tried not to take it personally. It wasn’t about him. It couldn’t be about him. They’d barely talked since Noah’s overdose. What could Adam have possibly done to offend him? Plus, he’d been hounding Henry all morning to give him details about Noah. Maybe he had gotten something out of him.

Still, why didn’t the touch work? It always worked. Was it because they were in front of reporters? Ronan had never seemed ashamed of the whole Pynch-debacle before, but maybe he was sensitive to it.

Ronan hardly spoke the entire press conference. He just sat there, stewing, eyes boring into the audience of reporters like they were utter scum. Unlike most interviews, Henry was directing the event, pulling questions at random from different reporters.

At some point during the press conference, Whelk appeared to the left of the stage. His presence was the worst thing possible. Noah noticed him and instantly stiffened. Ronan picked up on this, of course - he hardly looked away from Noah these days - and upon seeing Whelk, he straightened in his seat.

Under his breath, Adam warned, “Ronan…”
A reporter asked, “What song are you most proud of?”

They each took a turn answering. When it was Ronan’s time, however, he leaned back in his seat, folded his arms, and stared at Whelk in silence. Adam kicked him under the table. When he still didn’t answer, Henry coughed pointedly in his microphone and said, “Ronan?”

Ronan leaned forward and said, “*Remember Me*, probably. It’s about the band. How we’re a fucking unit, a family, you know?”

From the side, Whelk rolled his eyes. Adam thought back to the lyrics of *Remember Me*. He had never thought it was about the band, but he supposed it was possible.

Henry pulled another question from the audience before Ronan could elaborate further. The reporter looked toward Adam and Ronan and asked, “Your band is known more for the relationship between Mr. Lynch and Mr. Parrish, rather than the music. Would you please comment on the nature of your relationship?”

From the corner, Adam saw Whelk shake his head tersely at Henry. Ronan’s eyes followed the action, narrowing when Henry intercepted the question, explaining, “At this time, we ask that questions remain on topic. We’re here to discuss the album.”

Ronan leaned forward to the microphone and cut in. “No, it’s fine. I’m happy to answer whatever questions you have.”

He then shot Whelk a dangerous look. Adam watched as Ronan, Whelk, and Henry all exchanged a silent conversation with subtle movements. Ronan, stoney as ever, stared at Whelk with challenge. Whelk, to his credit, did not seem phased. He simply raised one eyebrow and waved his hand toward Henry.

Henry, hesitantly, gestured for the reporter to continue her questions.

“Are you in a relationship?”

Ronan’s eyes were still on Whelk. With malice, he said, “No, we are not.”
A disgusting smile slipped onto Whelk’s face. Adam didn’t understand the context of this battle - whatever was brewing between Whelk and Ronan had been going on for some time, that he knew, but Ronan had refused to comment. Still, Adam understood that smile. It was cocky, arrogant; it said, look, I won, and Adam hated him for it.

For whatever reason, this didn’t seem to phase Ronan. He just blinked back at Whelk, unperturbed.

“Does it bother you, then, that the fans are so insistent on this relationship?” The reporter asked.

Adam knew he should weigh in on the matter. He was half of the equation, here, and despite Ronan’s strange insistence on discussing this topic, it would be odd for Adam to stay silent. Ronan beat him to the punch, though.

“Nah.” A little smirk had crept onto Ronan’s face, devious in nature. “I mean, I can’t really blame them for thinking that. I’ve had a massive crush on Parrish for years now.”

A hush befell the room, but not for long. At once, the reporters raised their hands to ask questions, though they didn’t wait to be called on to answer. People were shouting from every direction - it made Adam dizzy, not being able to trace where the sound came from - but even with little hearing, Adam knew what they were asking.

Henry was trying to settle the crowd, an easy smile on his face. He kept looking back at Whelk’s furious face with worry. “He’s kidding, everyone.”

“No, I’m not.” Ronan leaned toward the microphone again and slowly spoke into. “Consider this my official coming out.”

Adam didn’t know what to do. His heart was skittering in his chest, pounding so strong that it almost hurt, and his ears felt so warm he swore they were steaming. What the hell? What the hell was Ronan doing?

Whelk was furious. Ronan turned to him and shrugged his shoulders, though the grin on his face spoke few apologies. He leaned back in his seat, linked his fingers behind his head, and said, “I’m so grateful to be with a company like Cabeswater, though. They’re just so supportive.”
At this, Whelk caught Henry’s gaze and cut his finger across his throat. Henry understood the implication and turned back to the reporters. “That’s all we have time for today. Thank you so much for coming out; we hope you enjoy the album!”

Then they were quickly ushered off the stage and into the backroom.

Adam was in a daze. *What just happened?* He thought Ronan was confused, or at the least extremely closeted, and suddenly he was declaring his sexuality to *the entire world*. Adam couldn’t even begin to tackle the other part of Ronan’s confession. Somehow, in seeing the look passed between Ronan and Whelk, Adam understood that he was swept into their game.

He didn’t want to acknowledge that Ronan’s declaration - *I’ve had a massive crush on Parrish for years now* - might have been meant as a bullet.

Whelk was nowhere to be seen, of course. Henry was pulling his hands through his hair and glaring daggers at Ronan. “God dammit, Lynch, what did we *just* talk about?”

Ronan shrugged. “You said I couldn’t talk about Whelk, or ruin the press conference. Are you saying me coming out *ruined* it?”

Henry released a high-pitched growl. “God DAMN, Lynch!”

Gansey looked as frazzled as Adam felt. He kept licking his bottom lip, reaching for words but coming up empty. Finally, he said, “Ronan, that’s not -- you can’t joke about these things. Not only is it unfair to Adam, but it’s unfair to the gay community--”

Ronan flopped down in the nearest chair, looking bashful for the first time. “Yeah, well, I’m not fucking joking.”

“Oh,” Gansey’s laugh was full of force and embarrassment. “So you are -- I mean, that’s great! I just… And you like -- well, I don’t--”

“Jesus Christ, Gansey,” Blue muttered, shoving him away. “Get it together, man.”

Gansey was still grasping to understand the situation, though Adam couldn’t blame him. *He* was still
surprised by Ronan’s admission, and he’d engaged in specific, indicative behavior that betrayed Ronan’s sexuality.

Blue walked to Ronan’s chair and wrapped her arms around his neck. “I’m happy for you, Ronan.”

He rolled his eyes. “God, Sargent, it’s not a big deal.”

“Don’t even, Ronan.”

Ronan had been avoiding Adam’s gaze until now, but they locked eyes for a second. Adam was filled both with the urge to shake Ronan, to yell at him for using their relationship as a weapon, and the desire to clear everyone in the room and force him to discuss their relationship.

And maybe kiss again. Or whatever.

Except, no, if Ronan was just doing this as a way to get back at Whelk, then no. That was an asshole move and Adam wasn’t sure he wanted to be in a relationship with someone like that.

One good kiss. That would be it.

God.

The mood was shattered by Noah, though. He had faded into the background again, like usual, but his abrupt exit from the room was obvious to all. Once he had left the room, Ronan turned to Henry and jerked his head toward the rest of the band.

“Tell them. Everything.”

Henry scoffed. “I don’t see why I should. We had a deal, Ronan, and you didn’t hold up your end of the bargain--”

“Henry, I swear to God, you’re dead to me if you don’t just fucking tell us all the truth.”
Henry looked unconvinced. It was Gansey, however, who finally pulled the truth out of him. All it took was a quiet, “Henry?”

Henry collapsed into a chair and dropped his head into his hands, allowing his body to finally reflect his fatigue. “I don’t even know the full details. I just -- I’m close with his receptionist, you know? And she hears things.”

And then Henry told them everything he knew. That Whelk didn’t want Noah in the band. That he would schedule meetings with Noah where, for an hour at a time, he would berate Noah for his contributions to the band. That he wasn’t a looker, that he couldn’t sing, or write music. That his only worth were his occasional social media posts, that only received attention if they featured another member of the band.

Henry told them how Whelk put Noah on an “improvement” plan. That he had to come up with a way to be useful to the band, otherwise he might be cut from the band for the remaining albums.

“Can he do that?” Blue asked, voice caught in her throat.

“No,” Gansey said. “At least, I don’t think-- I’ll talk to Pam.”

“That bastard!” Blue kicked her foot into the couch. “I’m going to kill him!”

“Well, Ronan got a little bit of revenge,” Henry muttered. “Whelk will be stewing over this interview for days. If I wasn’t so pissed at you, Lynch, I’d commend you for your stupid brilliance.”

Adam found his voice again. “What do you mean?”

Ronan had the decency to look ashamed, at least. It didn’t make his words any less infuriating.

“Whelk’s not a fan of my interests. I wasn’t supposed to draw attention to--” Ronan paused, looking briefly at Adam, but didn’t say the word hovering on his lips. To us. “I don’t know, I just wanted to hit him where it hurt, but I didn’t want it to come back on Noah. Or you all.”

Adam had to bite back an insult. How did this not hurt him? Ronan was practically taunting Adam for his feelings.
Gansey nodded in understanding. “So you came out, which thereby infuriates Whelk, while also giving Cabeswater credit for being a safe and inclusive company. That’s -- wow. That is rather remarkable, Ronan.”

“It’s devious and annoying, is what it is,” Henry muttered. “If I don’t get fired it will be remarkable.”

“Do you really want to work for such a horrible company, Henry?” Blue countered.

Henry’s shoulders sagged. Clearly Blue’s opinion of him mattered more, because he mumbled, “No, I don’t. If I get fired, though, I no longer get to work with you all. You realize this, right?”

“Are you saying you actually enjoy being our Public Relations manager?” Ronan crooned.

Henry shot him a dirty look. “I enjoy being their PR manager. You, on the other hand, are a disaster client.” Henry looked at his watch, then, and heaved a sigh. “I need to go find Whelk and soothe things over. Consider the rest of your interviews cancelled. There’s no way we could recover from that, anyway.”

“So we can go home?” Blue asked hopefully.

Henry waved them off. “Go find Noah. Make sure he’s okay. And then pray that Ronan hasn’t fucked everything up for you all.”

It didn’t take long to find Noah, luckily. He was waiting outside the building, perched on the edge of a concrete wall, kicking his feet in a daze. Ronan sent everyone ahead, knowing this was a conversation they needed to have in private.

Blue and Gansey offered him reassurance through a quick hand squeeze and a clap on the shoulder respectfully. Adam, on the other hand, refused to look at Ronan. He’d known Adam long enough, now, to know when he was upset.
He would figure that out later. He really would.

Once they were gone, Ronan hopped onto the ledge next to Noah and shoved him with his shoulder. “Hey.”

“How’d you find out?”

“How doesn’t matter. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Noah bowed his head. “I don’t know. Because I didn’t want you to do something stupid. Because it was embarrassing.”

Ronan was filled with regret once more. Noah looked so pitiful like this. He had clearly been crying – the stylist had lined his eyes with makeup for the interview, and the bags under his eyes were smudged with black – and not even the copious amount of gel in his hair kept it from falling across his face.

Ronan didn’t know what to do for him. He’d tried reassuring him, in words, how much he meant to him. How much he meant to the band. But that had only worked so much, and with the memory of Whelk and his words so close, Ronan didn’t think it would work now.

So instead he swung his arm around Noah and pulled him into his chest. Noah said nothing, but Ronan felt the tears through his shirt. He tightened his grip on Noah’s shoulder and leaned his cheek on the top of his head, hoping it would ease Noah’s small shakes.

When Noah’s shoulders calmed, and the sound of his soft sniffling finally petered off, Ronan said, “I won’t let him kick you out of the band. I don’t care if we have a contract, or whatever. I’ll write nothing but shitty songs if he makes me.”

From his chest, Noah muttered, “You already write shitty songs.”

Ronan shoved his fist into Noah’s hair, giving him a nooky. “You little jerk.”

Noah pulled back with a smile. His eyes were still rimmed red, the makeup had spread down his
cheeks now, but he’d regained some color at least. Ronan used his sleeve to wipe away some of the makeup.

“So,” Noah whispered. “Adam, huh?”

Ronan ignored him. “There’s snot everywhere. You’re so gross.”

“You make a cute couple,” Noah said.

Ronan had to look away from his cheeky grin. “Yeah, well, I probably just fucked it all up.”

“Nah.” Noah hopped down from the ledge and laughed. “Just go kiss and makeup. I’m sure it will be fine.”

“Please do not--” Ronan could feel the flame on his cheeks. God, why the fuck did he decide to come out again? Or, at the very least, couldn’t he have left the whole I-Like-Adam-Parrish-thing out of it? “Let’s just go home.”

“Yeah,” Noah agreed. “Then you can kiss and makeup faster.”

Ronan shoved him.

They hitched a cab back to the dorm, Noah chittering the whole ride about Ronan’s crush. He maintained that he always knew they liked each other (“I could see it in your eyes.” “Czerny, I’m going to murder you.”) and peppered him with annoying questions. (“If you guys got married, who would be your best man? Would it be me or Gansey?”)

He put up with it only because it kept a smile on Noah’s face.

The things he did for that boy.

The dorm was fairly quiet when he got home. Blue and Gansey had put on a movie and were watching it in the living room. Blue beckoned Noah with open arms, and he fell into them happily.
As they cuddled, Gansey turned to Ronan with a knowing look.

“Adam is in his room,” he said.

“So?”

This time, Blue and Noah looked at him, each with a filthy grin. He tried to ignore it. “He probably won’t talk to me anyway. I’ll give him time to stew.”

Gansey jumped off the couch and gathered some letters off the counter. “Here. He’s got some mail. He’ll have to talk to you if he wants his letters.”

They were all staring at him. Well, fuck. Another curse of coming out, he supposed, was that they now felt compelled to be in his businesses. Ronan snatched the letters from Gansey’s hands and, reluctantly, trudged to Adam’s room.

Adam answered his knock with a petulant expression. “What?”

Ronan leaned his head against the door frame. “I’ve got your mail.”

Adam held out his hand but did not move from his spot, effectively blocking Ronan from entering the room. Instead of passing off the letters, though, Ronan hid them behind his back and said, “Can we talk first?”

“Don’t feel like it.”

“Well you don’t get your mail.”

Adam twisted his lips to the side and stared Ronan down. He wasn’t sure why Adam cared so much about the mail lately, or who he received so many letters from, but he’d been carefully monitoring their mailbox for months now. Feeling inspired, Ronan pulled back the letters and muttered, “Let’s see who has you so interested--”
Adam snatched at the letters but Ronan was too fast. He held it above his head, using the few inches he had on Adam to his advantage. Sensing defeat, Adam stepped into his room and muttered, “You’re an asshole.”

Ronan wasn’t sure how to tackle the conversation, so he took the opportunity when he saw it. “For this, or earlier?”

“Always,” Adam clarified. “But especially for earlier.”

Ronan was distinctly aware of the three prying ears just down the hall, so he shut the door quietly. Adam was lingering at his desk, sorting through his books in an apparent attempt to seem nonchalant. Ronan let him have his space, choosing to lean his back against the door instead.

“I’m sorry,” Ronan offered.

Adam tossed one of the books to the side in anger. “About what exactly?”

“What do you want me to be sorry for?”

Adam shut his eyes. Ronan could see his fingers twitching at his sides, the obvious sign that he was counting breaths in his head. He didn’t realize he had upset Adam so much.

Was it the badly timed confession?

Was he not ready to be out?

“I told you that you’d rethink this,” Ronan muttered.

This was apparently the wrong thing to say. Adam turned to him, livid, and said, “I’m not the one who has a problem here, Ronan. I just don’t get you. I was fine when you couldn’t make up your mind because you’re confused, because I get that. Sexuality is a confusing thing. But you don’t get to mess with me like this, okay? You can’t use me for getting back at Whelk.”
“I’m not using you,” Ronan said. “Look, I get that it wasn’t great, what I did. And I know what it seems like. This wasn’t how I thought that I’d tell you.”

The glare didn’t inch from Adam’s face. “Tell me what?”

“That I --” Ronan dragged a hand down his face. “You know.”

“Not really.”

“I’m not good at this,” Ronan said.

“You seemed fine confessing it to a room of strangers, not sure why you can’t tell me what you feel,” Adam snapped.

Ronan bit the inside of his cheek. He’d be more annoyed with Adam if this didn’t seem so fitting. They spent half of their friendship fighting, in seemed only natural to begin a relationship the same way.

“I like you,” Ronan muttered. “And shit.”

Adam must not have expected him to actually admit it, because at Ronan’s words, the glare slipped from his lips. He became immediately flustered, a pink tinge covering his ears, and he said, “Oh. Well. Good. So do I.”

“Good.”

Ronan kept his place at the door, Adam kept his place at the desk. It was an odd sensation, to finally hear the words he wanted for so long, but to have such tension still in the air. Ronan wanted desperately, suddenly, to reach across the invisible threshold and touch Adam, but it felt wrong somehow.

God, he really fucked things up.
“Here.” Ronan held out the letters to Adam. Adam jumped at the change in conversation and began to reach for them, but Ronan’s eyes stumbled upon the return address. At once, he tugged the letters back and stared at it. “What the-- Is this?”

Adam snatched the letters out of his hand. The blush had reached his cheeks now, and he was fumbling for words. “That’s not-- I mean--”

“Why are you writing to Diane?”

Ronan had caught a glimpse of her name, and he recognized the address anywhere. He’d dropped Opal off there enough times to know it by heart. He’d recently seen it, too, when calculating how much it would cost for a shuttle to pick up Opal from her house and bring her to the airport. It was just tentative plans, for now, but he’d been talking to Diane about having her come out for a visit.

“Well, not Diane,” Adam clarified. “She just writes the address. It’s from Opal.”

Ronan stared at Adam, not fully understanding the situation. “You write letters to Opal?”

“We’ve written a few letters, yeah.” Adam tugged at the hair at the nape of his neck, looking almost as if he was caught doing something dirty. “I mean, it’s me mostly writing to her, because she can’t exactly write much at her age.”

Ronan tried to wrap his brain around that image. Could Opal even write? She was nine, now, but that meant little to Ronan. When did most kids learn how to write? Were the letters written in crayon? What did her handwriting look like? Did she draw pictures in the margins?

How had he never thought of this? He’d been struggling to communicate with her since he left - it was so hard, over phone, when Opal refused to talk - but he never thought to write letters.

Adam must have grown nervous at his silence, because he added, “Sorry if it’s weird. I just thought, since you said she likes to hear stories about me, that she might like getting letters. Clearly she doesn’t feel comfortable talking, so I figured writing would be easier.”

“It’s fine.” Ronan licked his lip. He was suddenly desperate to know more. “Could I -- “
Adam understood his fumbling, because he reached into his dresser and pulled out a few letters. The address on the envelope was always printed neatly - obviously Diane’s work - but the letters were another story. Opal’s handwriting was atrocious, falling across the page in uneven lines, and multiple words were horribly misspelled or completely scratched out.

He loved it.

Ronan didn’t need to read the letters in full detail to know how much they meant to her. In just a quick glance he had learned more about Opal than the entire time he taught her. She was incredibly vocal on paper, whether she was detailing her life (“Diane made macaroni for me”) or talking about the guitar (“I no how to play Ronans new song allready!”). One letter mentioned her father, brief as it was, but she’d never talked about him before. Any information he had about that scumbag he was told by Diane.

Once he was done, Adam took the letters back, carefully folding them and placing them back in his drawer. The fact that he held onto the letters was telling.

“Sorry. It’s weird, isn’t it?”

Weird was not the word to describe what it was, though Ronan could offer nothing out loud to counter it. His mind spun with the right thing to say - it was kind, thoughtful, unbelievable - but, as always seemed to be the case, around Adam he had no words.

So Ronan spoke to Adam in the only way he could. He crossed the invisible boundary they’d determined, took Adam’s face within his palms, and kissed him.

He tried to tell Adam everything he felt about him with his lips. That he was so grateful for the letters, grateful that Adam cared enough about his Kid to keep in touch when he’d only met her once. Ronan wanted Adam to understand that, in the brushing of his thumb back and forth against his cheekbones, he was saying, I have wanted this for so long, I have wanted you for so long. He needed Adam to know that this kiss - long and slow, full of ragged breaths and trembling hands - was meant as a worship. You are good and beautiful and everything to me.

Ronan pulled away when he couldn’t handle just another short breath, when he needed to inhale deep because he was so, so dizzy, but Adam chased his lips to beg off one more. Ronan obliged.

When he pulled away, Ronan let his thumbs rest on Adam’s lower lip. Adam watched his mouth -
counted the breaths Ronan took - and when he seemed satisfied with the way Ronan’s shoulders sagged in relief, he looked up to catch his gaze.

“More,” Adam pleaded in a breath.

It was hopeless that Ronan could conjure real words, now more than ever, so he nodded once, then twice, eager to dip his head back down to meet Adam’s lips. He was sure that he would kiss Adam forever if he could.

Eventually they stopped, though Ronan couldn’t tell how long had passed. Was it just seconds or had they kissed for minutes upon minutes? Ronan was torn with the desire to kiss him further - because he liked Adam’s lips, Adam’s tongue, the noise Adam made in his throat that was deep and almost wicked - and the instinct to retreat, to hide alone and recover from feeling so very, very much all at once.

Ronan needed to take a step back. He came up with, “Are you still mad at me?”

Adam looked dazed. Still, he found the energy to punch Ronan lightly on his shoulder. “Shut up.”

They stood facing one another in silence. Adam was fiddling with the hem of Ronan’s shirt, eyes darting rapidly around.

“So,” he began, voice low. “When did you realize that you were…”

“Gay?”

“Oh, okay, yeah,” Adam said. “Was it the kiss?”

Ronan wanted to laugh. “Uh, yeah, no. I’ve known since I was like thirteen, man. You didn’t turn me.”

For whatever reason it was the wrong thing to say. Adam whipped his head up to glare at Ronan, and with a stern tone, he said, “Get the fuck out of my room.”
“What did I do?”

“Are you kidding me, Lynch?” Adam spun back toward his desk and pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingers. “I thought you were-- This whole time, you already knew-- Are you serious?”

Ronan wasn’t sure why he was upset, but he grabbed Adam by his hand and pulled him back. “If I kiss you again, will you stop complaining about whatever I did?”

Adam sent him a dirty look. Still, he grabbed Ronan by the collar and shoved him toward the bed. “God, you’re the worst.”

Ronan was still grinning by the time Adam’s lips hit his.

Chapter End Notes

;) 

Please let me know what you thought, either in the comments or on my Tumblr! I'm friendly, I swear.

Also, slight spoiler, but people have been asking if Opal will make an official reappearance, and yes: next chapter!

Did anyone notice that Adam's been writing letters for the past few chapters? I tried to sneak it in, but no one has mentioned it yet.
“You need to relax about a lot of things, Adam,” Blue chimed. She gestured to the stage. “But this in particular. I know you’re worried about performing, but it will be fine.”

Ah, yes. There was that other whole debacle. Henry got them scheduled to perform on one of the late night shows, and though it wasn’t an official concert, it was the first time they’d perform in front of a crowd since he had lost his hearing. The audience was quite small, which hopefully would ensure that Adam could still hear the band and his voice, but it was nerve wracking all the same.

In all the excitement, Adam had forgotten that their album was released. Officially. It seemed rather ridiculous, now, to have let this huge moment pass without much thought.

They’d been working on this album for almost a year, longer if you considered that some of the songs on the album were from their years in high school. They had to deal with late nights, endless meetings, agonizingly unoriginal interviews, Kavinsky and his insults, Whelk. (One didn’t need to elaborate on the latter; enough said.)

Adam had waited for the album release with quiet anticipation, but that didn’t mean he didn’t want it. He existed on ambition. Relied on it. Needed it to feed him day in and day out. It wasn’t that the album wasn’t an ambition - it was definitely a goal - but its success was less measurable. Yale was easy; it would take four years to complete his degree, so he just had to do it.

The album always felt brittle. He was not used to working so hard for something, all the while knowing it could implode at any time. Adam found, though, that it made his want grow. If there was a chance he couldn’t get what he wanted - if someone, or something, tried to take what he thought he deserved - well, Adam would prove himself worthy.

Maybe that’s why he liked Ronan, too. Adam wanted him so badly, but it wasn’t a matter of ambition. He had to earn Ronan Lynch, it seemed, and even if he worked for it, there was no guarantee. Liking Ronan was a precious, tentative thing, and his affection was never guaranteed. So he wanted it, badly.
All this to say, of course, that Adam wanted the album. He wanted success for the band.

And yet, all it took to distract him from this momentous occasion was being able to touch Ronan where he really wanted. Well, at least some of the places he wanted.

Because there were many, many other places that he would like to touch. Adam knew he had to work up to it, though. Despite Ronan having apparently known his sexuality for years - which, Jesus, Adam still couldn’t wrap his brain around that and got frustrated at times but he really needed to let it go - he knew how Ronan operated. Knew that he got overwhelmed easily. Knew that he was lucky just to get any confession in words at all. (“I like you... and shit; ” it was unexpectedly romantic, all things considered.) Knew that he’d never have gotten that initial kiss if Ronan hadn’t been shocked by Adam’s confession.

He should probably feel a little guilty about all the kissing, but he liked it too much. Anyway, Ronan seemed to like it, too, as evidenced by the way he whispered his first name into Adam’s hearing ear. It was so rare to be called anything but Parrish , and it gave Ronan away.

The next morning, though, Ronan regained his sense a bit. He was a little shy, a little reserved. He didn’t look at Adam, much, as if seeing his face reminded him of their sordid little affair. (Never mind that it was just kissing. God, what would Ronan be like if they -- well.) But that was okay. He knew Ronan was likely overwhelmed.

Adam could give him the space he needed. So long as Ronan came around eventually, he could wait. Adam felt like he’d been waiting for this for a long time.

The album did come out, though. It debuted quite well - reaching position 28 by the end of the week on the Billboard charts - and according to Henry, their fan base had nearly tripled. (“I haven’t seen Whelk for days,” Henry confided to the band. “I think he's stewing. He thought Ronan’s sexuality would ruin the band, but it’s only drummed up more publicity.”)

Adam stopped checking his social media accounts; there were just too many comments, too many questions. Most, unsurprisingly, were about his relationship with Ronan. The press conference had ensured that everyone knew Ronan’s sexuality, of course, but Adam remained a mystery to them. He read through article after article that analyzed his own behavior toward Ronan, searching for clues as to whether he might return the crush.

He didn’t know how to feel when an interview popped up, one day, with a girl he’d gone on a few dates with back at Yale. She was quoted as saying, “Oh, Adam is definitely into girls, if you know what I mean.”
Thank God Ronan didn’t care about social media or the Internet in general. It’s not that he felt guilty or ashamed of his dating experience, but Adam had a feeling that Ronan got out much… less.

Though he was a good kisser.

A very good kisser.

Adam needed to stop thinking about it. It had been almost a week since they kissed, and though Ronan wasn’t avoiding him - he still occasionally leaned into Adam, touched him on the wrist, on his back, once on his lower neck - they hadn’t done anything more.

It didn’t help that their schedules were packed tight. Henry had booked them solid for more interviews and endorsements. They filmed a 30-second commercial for an organic juice, for whatever reason, and it took nearly twenty hours to finish. Then there were the constant parties; they had to schmooze with Cabeswater execs, thank them for their support.

There was also a distinct lack of kissing because Ronan was hovering around Noah, still. Actually, the whole band seemed to insist on being together. Adam had gotten used to the separate groups - Blue and Gansey were almost always together, and he and Ronan had spent more and more time as a unit as they got older - so it was a bit jarring to have everyone back together again.

It was conflicting. On the one hand, Adam was happy to have everyone together again. He had missed their friendship - the group as a whole unit - and he had forgotten how well they operated together. The way they slipped easily into teasing Gansey about anything and everything, the way Ronan and Blue were wild and charismatic. Noah was still subdued, not quite the bundle of optimism he used to be, but he would wrap his arms around Ronan’s neck or bury his face into Blue’s hair, and it sent Adam back to being eighteen and in wonder of them all.

On the other hand, it meant no opportunities for kissing.

“Dude, chill.”

Adam turned to Blue. “What?”
She was staring at him with a bemused grin, and thought it was impossible for her to know what he was thinking about - after all, he’d yet to admit to anyone of their little tryst, and he doubted Ronan had spilled the beans either - and yet her eyes bore into him.

“You need to relax about a lot of things, Adam,” Blue chimed. She gestured to the stage. “But this in particular. I know you’re worried about performing, but it will be fine.”

Ah, yes. There was that other whole debacle. Henry got them scheduled to perform on one of the late night shows, and though it wasn’t an official concert, it was the first time they’d perform in front of a crowd since he had lost his hearing. The audience was quite small, which hopefully would ensure that Adam could still hear the band and his voice, but it was nerve wracking all the same.

Also, it would be broadcast to the entire United States, granted very late at night, but Adam was distinctly aware that millions of people could hear him crash and burn.

It was a terrible idea, really, and Adam didn’t want to do it. But when Henry booked the show the band was so excited - even Ronan, who rarely seemed happy about anything Henry did, had clapped him on the back - and he didn’t have the heart to share his concerns.

Though his face apparently gave him away. It wasn’t long till they had to perform and Adam was feeling a bit faint.

“You don’t know that,” he said finally, mouth dry.

“They’re playing a backtrack of your vocals,” Blue reminded him. “Worst comes to worst, just sing really faint.”

“I’m not lipsyncing our first performance.”

“I said sing quietly, not don’t-sing-at-all.” Blue swung her arm around his neck, a gesture meant to be comforting but inevitably turned awkward due to her small stature. “You just need a distraction. I know just the thing.”

Blue was not skilled in subtly, and her cloying words told Adam exactly what she was getting at. It didn’t help that her eyes skittered toward Ronan as well. “No, Blue.”
“Oh come on,” she slithered away from him with a sigh. “Ronan came out, claimed he had a massive crush on you, and then disappeared into your room for hours. Either you let him down and had the grace to let him bawl his eyes out for the rest of the night, or you found something better to do.”

“It’s not really your business.”

“Yeah, but I still want to know,” Blue teased. She tugged on his hand and whispered, “Come on, Adam. You look ready to implode. Talking might help, you know.”

Adam wished he didn’t have product in his hair, because he badly wanted to tug it in nervous frustration. Blue was batting her eyelashes at him in an exaggerated fashion. God, she was kind of right, and she knew it.

“He likes me,” Adam said methodically.

“And you…?” Blue’s fingers reached to lace in-between his, keeping him steady.

Adam liked the weight of her hand in his, but he was painfully aware of how it compared to Ronan’s touch. He liked that her skin was soft, so soft compared to Ronan’s calloused fingers, but there was no warmth in her touch. It was jarring to realize that only Ronan’s touch could ground him.

Still, he squeezed her hand and said. “None of your business.”

Blue groaned. “Why?”

“You really don’t have the right to complain about this,” Adam argued. “You and Gansey kept your relationship secret for, what, three years? And even now, I don’t know anything about how you got together.”

“You can ask me anything! We can swap stories.”

“Okay.” Adam leveled his gaze at her. “Why does Gansey call you Jane?”
Blue did not expect this question. She sucked her lips into her teeth and looked over his shoulder, looking more flustered than he’d ever seen her.

“Oh, uh, Henry’s calling. I gotta’—”

And then she left.

Figured. Noah had confided in him awhile back that he suspected ‘Jane’ was some weird role-play game of theirs. Adam really didn’t want to know that story, but it worked to get Blue off his back.

It only took thirty seconds to regret sending her off, though, because his eyes landed on the stage and he felt queasy. Blue was right: it had proven to be a good distraction. He searched the room for anyone else, relieved to catch Ronan’s gaze. He’d been looking at him, of course, and quirked an eyebrow in response.

Adam held his gaze, even as Ronan slunk toward him. “You going to puke, Parrish?”

Ronan really deserved something worse for the remark, but he was so close, dressed in a tattered, oversized black sweater and looking a little like a god, that Adam couldn’t bring himself to do it. Instead, he tilted his palm toward Ronan and said, “You look good.”

The effect was instantaneous. Ronan lost his bravado and collapsed his shoulders toward Adam. Still, he lifted his fingers to dance them upon Adam’s resting hand. “You can’t do that.”

“What?” He let his thumb trace Ronan.

Ronan glared at him, and just by this action alone, he seemed to gain back his edge. “Be such a fucking flirt, in public. Your lack of chill is embarrassing.”

It was a game, of course, and Adam wanted to play. He kept his expression serious, dropped his hand back to his side, and shrugged. “How else am I supposed to get what I want?”
“Asshole,” Ronan muttered, though he ruined the effect by reaching to tug at the bottom of Adam’s shirt in shy affection. His eyes were watching everyone else in the room, but he spoke quietly to Adam. “Are you okay?”

Adam tugged at his left earlobe. “Just this.”

“I didn’t think—” Ronan paused, cleared his throat, and muttered. “If you need help, I can sing with you.”

“I thought you hated singing.”

Ronan allowed his eyes to rest for a minute from searching the room to settle on Adam. Adam wondered, briefly, if this was the norm for Ronan. He said he had known he was gay since he was young, which meant he had been aware of what society thought for almost half his life. It hurt Adam’s heart to think that Ronan, who was normally so unapologetically himself, had hid for so long.

"If you need me, I'll help you sing," Ronan repeated.

Adam really wanted to kiss him.

"I'm sure I'll be fine," Adam said instead.

Ronan's eyes were back to scouring the room, eyebrows already angled down in suspicious. As far as Adam could tell, Henry was the only one looking their way. His grin was an unholy thing, really, and Adam knew exactly what he thought of them. To drive his point even further, Henry grabbed his tie and held it above his head, as to pretend he was hanging.

"What's he doing?" Adam asked.

Henry gestured at them and mouthed what suspiciously looked like the word, "CUTE."

Ronan swore. "I'm going to kill him."
"He's not so bad," Adam said, though Henry nearly ruined his words by pretending to make out with himself. "He's just...excited."

"He's been doing shit like this for months," Ronan complained.

"Months?" Adam grinned up at Ronan. "So how long have you had a massive crush on me?"

"Don't say it like that," Ronan muttered.

"Hey, your words, not mine."

Ronan shoved his palm into Adam's face, either to shut him up or to hide his manic smile. Or maybe both. "Don't make me regret this, Parrish."

They were interrupted by an announcement over the intercom that it was time for a sound check. The room suddenly doubled in size, random assistants and sound professionals appearing from every direction, and Adam told himself to ignore the disappointment he felt when Ronan took an obvious step away. It wasn't meant to be an insult; at this point, Ronan had built up habits. It would take time for him to learn that he didn't have to hide.

Before they could be separated again, Adam asked, "So when do we get to hang out? Just us?"

"Are you asking me on a date?"

"It doesn't have to even be a date," Adam said innocently.

Ronan saw through that lie. "Jesus, Parrish."

"Sorry." He knew Ronan wasn't angry, but it was hard not to offer his apologies all the same. He wasn't going to push Ronan. He wasn't going to do it. "We can just hang out. I don't need... that."
"Ronan, you're up first!" someone called from the side, gesturing to his guitar.

Ronan muttered something unintelligible under his breath and wiped the hint of a smile from his lip. "Soon, Parrish. You're not the only one who wants..."

He didn't finish that sentence, so Adam allowed himself a minute to picture the answer. Ronan was a complicated creature, that was for sure, but Adam knew they had similar interests at heart.

Ronan hated himself a bit in that moment. It wasn't unusual to feel that way - he'd spent most of his life doing that very thing - but it was worse, somehow, when Adam was the cause. It wasn't that Adam did anything, of course; even completely fatigued and pissy, Adam could never truly upset Ronan. It was impossible, really, because Adam was the cause of so much of Ronan's happiness.

No, it was the fact that he completely failed Adam and Ronan knew it.

How did it not occur to him that this performance was a horrible idea? Of course Adam was nervous. He'd confessed to Ronan, after years of silence, that he went so far as to quit the band because he wasn't sure he could perform. It the excitement of the scheduling, though, this didn't occur to Ronan. He heard "BAND. PLAY. LATE NIGHT SHOW." and his emotions took over. It's not that he was a huge fan of the show in particular, but Ronan had spent many sleepless nights watching anything he could find on television, and the late night talk shows became a staple of his teenage years.

Ronan had selfishly hoped that, by agreeing to be in the band, Adam had gotten over his fear. Now, seeing him pale and shaky, he knew better. It still scared him, of course it did.

He couldn't believe he didn't notice sooner. All he ever did was watch Adam, so how had he missed this huge detail?

He was an asshole.

It was only a few minutes until they were set to play. The sound check had went fine. Adam had sang almost perfectly, save for the inevitable small issues that happened regardless. Still, he had his
fists clenched at his side in worry, and the cheerful smile that used to cover his face during concerts was missing.

Adam needed touch at moments like this. In front of all these people, though, Ronan couldn't bring himself to do it. It was easier before, when people didn't know he was gay. He had a brief, sickening moment where he regretted coming out at all, but he told himself to push that thought away. It was better in the long run. There was no point in regretting his choice. Plus, it was the catalyst for getting to be with Adam.

So why couldn't he just be with Adam? Ronan wanted to repeat that day again and again and again. He wanted to run his hands across Adam's back, cup his neck in his hands, kiss every freckle. He wasn't sure why he was so hesitant to do it again. It went well the first time.

Just, every time he saw Adam he was distinctly aware that he felt very, very much. When he went back to his bed that night, Noah had whistled long and low but let him be. It was for the best. He barely slept that night, choosing instead to run through the kisses over and over. The next morning, seeing Adam with sleep in his eyes and mussed hair and smiling in that very devious way he both loved and hated, was like a shock to his system.

His first thought was, Oh, God. He's cute.

His second thought was, How can I make that happen again?

His third thought was, I don't know how to make that happen again.

Because how, really, was he supposed to handle this? He knew he had permission to kiss Adam again - the boy hadn't hidden the fact that he wanted more, and Ronan felt the same - but people were always around. And then, the rare times they were alone, the room instantly filled with tension. He thought about walking up to Adam and just grabbing him, kissing him on the spot, but there was always so much pressure. What if he fucked it up?

Also, Ronan was very aware of the fact that, if he started kissing Adam, he didn't think he knew how to stop.

So Ronan was a little upset at himself for not being able to comfort Adam the way he needed. He was too nervous, in front of all these people who didn't know him but seemed intent to judge him, to touch Adam. And even alone, away from the crowd, he was too nervous to help.
He really, really sucked.

"You alright there, Ronan?" Gansey asked. He was holding Ronan's guitar in front of him with a bemused smile. Gansey pushed the guitar into Ronan's hands. "You might need this."

"Dick," Ronan muttered.

"You know, sometimes I can't tell if you're calling me by my name, or calling me names."

"Why not both?"

"Your wit is astounding, Ronan. I only wish you used it toward the world, and not me," Gansey said.

"Why not both?"

Ronan was spared another critique from Gansey by Henry snapping in his direction and motioning toward the camera. They had begun a countdown, now, that listed sixty seconds until they were set to play. Ronan used the opportunity to walk to Adam. He nudged his foot into Adam's shoe.

"I'll jump in, if needed," Ronan said, loud enough that only Adam could hear.

Adam said nothing. He looked stricken, worse than Gansey had ever handled his stage fright, and Ronan felt overcome with another wave of animosity for himself. What was he doing?

Someone signaled a countdown of thirty seconds. Ronan grabbed for Adam's hand, brief as it was, and laced their fingers together. "You can do this."

Adam was unguarded, at least for a moment. He stared at their entwined hands with an easy smile, then back to Ronan, and squeezed. "Okay."
Ronan heard Noah hoot behind him, so he flipped him the bird as he walked back to his place on the stage. Gansey seemed determined not to pay them any attention, while simultaneously also betraying how much he wanted to look with his steadfast devotion to looking forward. Blue had missed the whole exchange and was looking at Noah and asking, "What? What happened?"

Thankfully there was not time to linger in Ronan's gesture. Their time was up, the host was introducing them, and cameras were rolling. Gansey had a perfectly plastered smile on his face as he waved to the crowd, while Noah and Blue made faces at each other. Adam was still nervous, clearly, but he looked less like he was going to puke.

From the corner of his eye, Ronan saw Henry gesturing at him to smile. He did not. Henry was displeased.

Then Blue was counting off and it was time to play. They played Young and Dumb, which by far was the fan favorite based on YouTube counts at least, and the crowd instantly reacted to the tune. It helped Ronan's mood to see the fans; somehow Henry had gotten word out about the show, because the audience had signs (Ronan noticed with some ire that someone had written, ADAM, I'M BETTER THAN RONAN which was, frankly, insulting) and were chanting along.

Ronan watched Adam carefully for signs of distress, but he was fine. He sang as he always did - perfect and magnetically and dipping his voice to dangerously low levels in Ronan's opinion - and he loosened up. At one point Adam turned to Ronan, really barely looked at him, but the effect on the crowd was instant. There was a rush of energy and excitement, and the roar of the crowd took Adam back for a moment.

Ronan saw him reach for his hearing ear, pressing his earpiece further in, in order to hear his voice. He faltered, just briefly, and lost a few words. But as quick as it happened, Adam found his place again and sang on.

It was all fine.

Then it was over. Quick as it came, they were being shuffled off the stage, back to the green room, out of their outfits and back to the dorm.

No one really spoke of the performance until they were being transported back to their dorm. Henry had tagged along and spent the entire ride home talking about how well they did.
“And Adam. Adam Parrish.” Henry leaned across the seat and cupped Adam’s cheeks. “I’m so proud of you.”

Adam frowned at him. “This is unnecessary.”

“Shh. Let me be proud of my boys,” Henry repeated. He then turned to the remaining band members, sans Blue, and tried to kiss them on the cheek. He succeeded with Noah, was politely declined by Gansey, and was shoved back into his seat by Ronan.

“I can’t believe we’re going to be on national television,” Blue whispered. “My mom said they’re throwing a party back in Henrietta for us. To watch it.”

“Just your family?” Adam echoed.

Blue shook her head. “No, like, the entire town. They’re hosting it at our high school’s theater. Kind of crazy, right?”

Adam’s face darkened at that thought and Ronan suspected the reason. As far as he knew, Adam’s parents hadn’t contacted him since he left them behind, finally, and Henry had warned them the likelihood that estranged family might resurface once they became famous. Based on his sudden quiet, it seemed Adam worried for its possibility.

The logistics of the seating in the car made it impossible for Ronan to touch Adam, so Ronan decided to change the subject instead. “What’s our schedule like for the next two weeks?”

Henry pulled out his phone. “Let’s see…” He rattled off several events, a few more interviews, but stopped listing when he got to the end of the week. “Oh, would you look at that. You have actual free time for once.”

“Like, enough time to go home for a visit?” Noah asked. “Or like, enough time to get to sleep in, but otherwise we’re busy.”

Henry’s eyes lingered on Noah for a moment too long. Ronan had realized, by now, that Henry did everything deliberately. Ronan took the opportunity to look at Noah - really look at him - and noticed the way his fingers tightened into the plush of the car seat, how he sucked his bottom lip barely into his mouth.
Ronan didn’t miss the way Henry’s fingers skittered over his phone, quick but subtle. “I think you could go home, actually. There’s at least four days open.”

“You won’t get in trouble with Whelk?” Ronan asked. He had gotten a peak of Henry’s cellphone over his shoulder, enough to see that it was more filled than he let on.

“It’ll be fine. If he didn’t fire me over your interview, he won’t fire me for rescheduling an appointment,” Henry said with a wave.

Most of the car was thrilled with this notion. Noah instantly opened his phone and turned to Blue, “I’ll look up tickets right now!”

“Jane, would it be alright if I go to DC--”

“Gansey, we don’t need to do *everything* together.”

“Yes, right. I just wasn’t sure if you wanted--”

Ronan tuned out their conversation. He was watching Adam again, who seemed to be avoiding the conversation completely. He was staring into the dark of the outside, fingers tapping after each streetlight they passed, lips turned downward. Henry nudged Ronan with his knee, having followed his gaze, and had his eyebrows already posed in a waggle.

“Ronan, I suppose you’re going home to visit the family?” Henry asked.

Ronan didn’t miss the way Adam’s fingers stilled.

“No,” Ronan said. “I’m going to fly Opal down.”

“Oh, the elusive child you refuse to tell me about,” Henry mused. “Well, that sounds delightful. Perhaps, if you’re into it, we could even schedule a brief photoshoot--”
“Cheng.”

“I’m just saying. Imagine Whelk’s face when an article comes out, You thought you loved him before? Wait ‘til you see Ronan Lynch and his adorable foster child-- ouch! Jesus, Ronan, did you just pluck out one of my hairs?”

“You sure you don’t want to go home?” Adam asked. There was an edge to his tone, a look of suspicion in his eye.

Ronan shrugged. “I’ve been talking to Diane about flying her out anyway. She wants to see what I do, apparently. Hang out in California.”

“You could take her to Disneyland!” Noah chimed.

That idea pained Ronan. He hadn’t been himself, true, but just the idea of it. Screaming kids, two hour lines that led to two minutes of ride, fucking mice everywhere.

“Hard pass,” Ronan

The band - minus Adam, who was still stewing - swapped ideas of how Ronan could entertain Opal for the rest of the ride, and by the time they got back to the dorm, he had a list of everything he thought they shouldn’t do. (He couldn’t really blame them for their poor judgement, he supposed, considering he kept Opal and her interests so secret, but also because none of them had been around a child before.)

Henry did not come back to the dorm with them, despite Gansey’s suggestions. Instead, he thanked them for their “generous performance,” hopped back in the van, and left - ostensibly - back to Cabeswater. It was late by this point, far past the normal hours of a working day, and Ronan hoped Henry didn’t have much work ahead of him.

God. He’d gone soft for the boy. He’d have to fix that.

As soon as the band entered the apartment, Ronan was acutely aware he had the opportunity to talk to Adam. (And maybe do more than talk.) Blue pulled Noah into her room to talk plane tickets, while Gansey dismissed himself to take a call home. Adam lingered in the kitchen, placing an ice cube in a cup piece by piece and filling it to the brim, but he did not meet Ronan’s gaze.
Okay. This was fine.

He could do this.

“Parrish--”

And then Adam looked up at him and Ronan froze. God. Fuck. Shit. Why did Adam have to look so good all the time? Even with that stupid, pissy expression he was wearing, with his eyes blinking far too slow to be understood as anything but petulant, Ronan still wanted to kiss him. And et cetera.

But how…was he supposed to do that…exactly?

He could just kiss him. Just walk up and grab his face and kiss him, just like last time. But that might be boring, already. He’d used that move. And what if Adam didn’t want to kiss him? He was clearly in a bad mood from the car ride - probably due to the memory of his parents - and maybe it was just not the time and place to make out.

“Yes?” Adam asked. Another slow blink. Another obvious judgement.

Ronan bit at a hangnail on his thumb. “You did good.”

“Thanks, Pops.”

“You’re mad,” Ronan said.

Adam flinched. “I’m not-- It’s not you. Sorry. Just this whole day has been really long, and stressful. I’m tired, that’s all.”

“Oh.”

Well, so much for making out. He was tired, probably wanted to turn in early. See? This is why
Ronan hated this in-between, this unknown territory where he knew how great it was to kiss Adam Parrish, and thus knew how much it would hurt to lose it. He was so very aware of every way he might blow it all up.

Adam was still staring at him. “Seriously, Ronan?”

“What?”

“Nevermind,” Adam said with a sigh, taking his cup of water and heading back to his room. “I’ll see you tomorrow, I guess.”

Ronan felt like he was blowing it. No, he knew he was blowing it, but he just didn’t know why. Adam hadn’t shut his door behind him, and Ronan could hear him tinkering around his room. He stood outside his door for a minute, debating whether he should go in and apologize. (He should probably work on this - this whole standing-outside-Adam’s-door-thing was getting old.)

Adam poked his head around the door, “What?”

Ronan leaned his head against the wall. “Can I come in? Or are you too tired?”

“God.” Adam was laughing, now, for whatever reason, and Ronan felt like he was slowly going mad. Was this what dating was like? Adam tugged at his sleeve and pulled him into the room. “You’re an idiot.”

“You said you were tired.”

Adam kicked the door shut with his foot and Ronan tried to not to read into the action. “I said I was stressed, too.”

“Do you...want to talk about it?” Ronan asked.

“Talk? Not really,” Adam said as he reached out to link his finger through Ronan’s belt loop. He tugged on it gently until Ronan took a step forward. “You sure you don’t want to go home?”
“I just want to see Opal,” Ronan said. It didn’t feel right, to be standing this close to Adam, this close to his lips, and to think of his Kid. He tried to end the conversation topic. “Anyway, she wants to see you, too. Part of the deal.”

Adam slipped his thumb under the band of Ronan’s shirt, resting it on his hip bone.

Jesus.

“No Disneyland, though. What a shame. I used to want to go when I was a kid,” Adam said, thumb beginning to trace a pattern on his skin. “Most the kids in my class had gone, up to Florida at least, and I asked my mom once if we’d ever be able to go. It was stupid.”

“Have you heard from them recently?”

Adam looked up at Ronan; it made the touch of Adam’s thumb feel suddenly very scandalous. Very heated. “Talking is overrated.”

“Okay,” Ronan breathed. He found it very hard to concentrate, let alone talk, while Adam did that. “What what would help your stress?”

Adam said nothing, instead choosing to slip another finger under his shirt. He was waiting for something, and the longer he stared, the more clear the answer became to Ronan. This made sense. Adam like touched, he should have known he would want more. Ronan had permission to do this, to kiss him, he just had to do it. They could kiss, and maybe they’d kiss a bit more, and it could possibly lead somewhere else.

Ronan lifted his hand toward Adam…

He just had to place it somewhere nice. Like his cheek again. Or his neck. Or hell, even his shoulder or waist would be fine.

…and he chickened out and landed it on top of Adam’s head.
Adam’s eyes lifted to look at Ronan’s hand. He didn’t look mad, per say, but definitely quizzical. Possibly a little judgemental. Ronan tried to save face by sliding it down his head, fingers pressing into his scalp, pushing back the strands carefully.

“You said you liked this,” Ronan said.

Adam licked his bottom lip, looking very much like he wanted to argue Ronan’s point. When Ronan slipped his hand through Adam’s hair again, though, Adam’s eyes fluttered. Ronan watched him swallow back his words, watched how is appropriately named Adam’s apple strained.

“That’s not quite what I meant,” he said finally.

Ronan kept stroking his hair. “I can stop?”

Again, Adam swallowed. Ronan liked looking at his neck, and briefly he entertained the wonder of what it would taste like.

“I hate you,” Adam muttered, succumbing to the feeling and officially shutting his eyes in enjoyment. Ronan took it as permission to continue, laughing under his breath. “Laugh again and I’ll kill you.”

It popped out before Ronan couldn’t stop himself. “But then you wouldn’t get to kiss me.”

Adam’s eyes slid open. “So that gets to happen again? I wasn’t really sure.”

“I just--” Ronan paused, thinking of how best to articulate his words. This wasn’t what he intended. Why did he have such a strong desire to be a dick all the time? “I want to.”

“But?”

Ronan let his hand sink to the back of Adam’s neck, where he rubbed a strand of hair between this
thumb and forefinger. “It was a lot.”

Adam blanched. “Oh.”

“Not you,” Ronan quickly corrected. “It’s just a lot. I feel… a lot… about you.”

“Ah.” Adam’s lip turned up on one side. “The ‘And shit.’”

“Basically.” Ronan forced himself to keep his fingers on Adam’s scalp, as opposed to the many other places he wanted to touch.

“We can go slow,” Adam offered, though based on the way his eyebrows knitted together, it seemed somewhat painful for him to suggest.

Ronan nodded, “Probably smart.”

It seemed to be a mutual agreement that Ronan would still stroke Adam’s hair in the silence of the room. Adam was enjoying it, clearly evident by the way his lashes skittered against his cheeks every few seconds. Soon Ronan’s hand began to tire, though, and the tension got to be a little too much.

“I should let you go to bed,” he said.

Adam looked pained. “Okay. Can I -- One kiss is fine, right?”

“If we must,” Ronan joked. He hoped it came out confident, but he stuffed his hands in his jeans to hide his shaking fingers just in case.

Adam took the lead this time, kissing Ronan slow and chaste. Ronan tried to focus on this moment alone. To enjoy Adam’s lips, only them, just as is. But even this kiss, as quiet as it was, made Ronan’s heart hammer in his chest painfully. Adam paused to let out a shaky breath and used his hands to steady himself on Ronan’s waist, before he kissed Ronan again. It felt good. It felt very good, especially when Adam ran his tongue against his lips and Ronan could easily be persuaded into--
It was Adam who pushed away. “You should go. You definitely should go.”

Ronan was too dazed to be offended. “Yeah. Okay.”

“It’s not you,” Adam said, mimicking Ronan’s earlier words. “I just can’t be trusted, right now. I will always want more.”

He looked quite bashful, and Ronan added the image to his ever-growing list of Adam-Parrish-Is-Fucking-Cute moments. Why did he say they should take it slow again?

“Goodnight Parrish.”

“Goodnight Ronan.”

Noah was still hanging out with Blue by the time he got back to his room, a fact that Ronan was extremely grateful for. He needed time to recuperate. He spent twenty minutes just reliving the kiss, another ten minutes debating whether he had made the biggest fucking mistake, and the next hour writing a new song to work out his feelings.

He’d been trying, again, to put his feelings into words. It was not easy, of course, but by the end of the night he’d added a few phrases at least.

I will never be enough for you, but I’d like to try.
Though I admit, I’m a little afraid.
Your hands hold a lot of power over me,
(your lips too)
You make me really want to try.

Adam was looking forward to having a few days off. He was tired - the constant interviews that always asked about Pynch, the long practice sessions that left him with headaches, and also that little thing called trying not to think about Ronan Lynch and his lips and his back and his tattoo and the way he said Adam’s name 24/7 - and he needed a break.
As much as he loved the band, he was also excited to get the dorm (mostly) to himself. He didn’t have to worry about walking in on Blue and Gansey - because that had happened, frankly, two times too many - and knowing Noah would be out of the toxicity of Los Angeles was a relief. Being alone with Ronan would have been dangerous, especially with their agreement to take things slow, but Opal would inevitably nip that in the bud.

He hoped.

Adam was also excited to see Opal. They’d been exchanging letters for months now, but he’d still only met her that one time. It would be nice, seeing her in LA, getting to know her without the ticking time-bomb that was Ronan’s departure ready to burst at any moment. There were no secrets, now, and nothing to worry about.

Adam rode with Ronan to the airport to pick Opal up. Ronan was very nervous. (Adam was starting to recognize Ronan’s nervous habits easily now. He had known that he used to chew on his bracelets, or rub the back of his neck, but now Adam added saying “Fuck” much more often to the list.) He was driving a little too fast, and Adam had to remind him that the car belonged to Cabeswater.

“If you crash it, Whelk will murder you.”

“I’m not going to fucking crash the car, Parrish. And who the fuck cares what Whelk says anyway?”

Yep. Ronan was nervous.

(Adam let his mind slip, only briefly, to think of what Ronan would be like when they took things to the next step. He found that he didn’t mind the idea of Ronan whispering *Fuck* in that context.)

(No. Bad idea.)

They got to the airport far too early, of course. Ronan was a mess the entire time, cursing up a storm. Adam tried to calm him down for at least Henry’s sake. Their album was still climbing in popularity, and recently they had a few paparazzi follow them around town. There were none at the airport, thankfully, but occasionally a fan would tentatively walk up and ask for an autograph. Adam knew that, if word got out that Ronan snapped at a fan, Henry would lose his mind.
Then, finally, Ronan jumped up from his seat. Opal had come around the corner with a small carry-on bag, being escorted by a flight attendant who held her guitar case. She looked thinner than Adam remembered, hopefully just due to a growth spurt.

When she saw Ronan, her lips formed a shy smile.

In return, Ronan rushed toward her. Adam had never seen Ronan run, not that he could remember, and it was a foreign sight. It was nothing compared to what happened next, though. When Ronan reached Opal, he fell to his knees, reached out his arms, and pulled her into a tight hug.

The flight attendant looked at them awkwardly, dangling the guitar case in her hand, so Adam took it from her to allow Ronan and Opal time to savor the moment. He was trying not to stand too close - he saw that Ronan was whispering something in her ear, and judging by the way she wrapped her arms around his neck, it was something serious - and it wasn’t his place to eavesdrop.

Instead, Adam allowed himself to watch Ronan carefully. He’d seen him with Opal before, admired how carefully he treated her, was comforted by how much he took care of her. But this was different. He loved Opal, clearly, and Adam was in awe of what Ronan’s love looked like. This was Ronan fierce and unguarded; this was Ronan at his best.

Adam used to wonder if anyone would love him that way.

Now, looking at their embrace, Adam wondered whether Ronan had room in his heart for him, too.

He wanted there to be room.

Chapter End Notes

I’m sorry there isn't much Opal this round; I had meant to include a date with the three of them, but this chapter was getting long enough to justify putting it up, and I won't have much time the next few days to write, so I decided to save it for next time.

Thank you all for your super sweet words of encouragement and your comments and kudos. Teaching is tough and wearing me out, but every time someone says something nice, it just makes my day.
Anyhow, hope you enjoyed Ronan being super awkward, because I feel like he would be, and also enjoyed Adam being thirsty. I think the word "kiss" occurs almost 25 times in this chapter before any actual kissing occurs. And you thought the slow burn was over.
Chapter Summary

“Want to watch a movie?” Adam asked.

Ronan knew sitting on the same couch was dangerous, but the other option was the floor. Instead, he sat - perched a good foot away - and hoped he could keep up the distance. It started fine. Adam chose some action movie, which really wasn’t romantic in the slightest, and they spent the majority of the time making fun of it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ronan wasn’t lying when he said there was no fucking way they were going to Disneyland. He knew Opal wanted to - on the ride home from the airport, they passed a huge billboard and she pointed at it and said, “Can we go?” and Ronan, being a responsible adult, responded to her request in a respectful fashion ( “Fuck no!”) - but there were things he just wasn’t going to do. Bridges he refused to cross, if you will. He was willing to take her literally anywhere else. Even to one of those shitty celebrity house tours. Just not Disneyland.

And yet, nearing the end of Opal’s trip, somehow he found himself in Disneyland.

It was all Adam’s fault.

See, it had started like this.

When Opal first arrived, Ronan was extremely grateful. He’d missed her - more than he could adequately express in words - but he hadn’t realized how much until she was standing in front of him, gangly and knobby-kneed from a recent growth spurt. She still looked at him with a mix of awe and judgement, which Ronan returned with a look of hidden amusement, and he felt overwhelmed by her. She was here and talking more than usual and she buried her face in his chest as they hugged and hugged and hugged.

She calmed him down, quite instantly, and he was so grateful for it. With everything that had happened lately - the tremendous lows of Noah’s overdose and the overwhelming highs of Adam and his lips - he didn’t realize how much he needed to feel at ease. It didn’t matter how much time had passed since they last saw each other; Opal was the reason Ronan ever learned how to control his emotions, and he was grateful to have her steady him once more.
Opal was meant to be a good distraction from Adam, as well, and Ronan needed that badly. He wanted to take things slow - needed to take things slow - but the temptation was horrible. They’d been working on limiting their kisses, but it was a struggle. What started as chaste, goodnight kisses at their bedroom doors quickly turned into lingering kisses, with hands going places a little too low but a little too good, until Adam would shove him into the hallway and lock him out.

But with Opal there, that couldn’t happen. How could he think about pinning Adam against the wall when there was sweet Opal to worry about?

As it turned out, she wasn’t the best distraction.

It wasn’t to say that Ronan thought lewd things while she was around. He knew when to hold it together. It was more that he faced two shocking realizations: one, that he maybe, sort-of, possibly had a thing for paternalistic Adam, and two, that little kids went to bed much earlier than he realized.

The first fact was news to him. Ronan never thought he was a family man; he wasn’t sure he even wanted kids. It’s not that he thought himself a serial playboy, obviously, but he was Ronan Lynch, driver of fast cars and drinker of cheap beer. Yeah, he and Opal got along, but it had nothing to do with her age. It was just a coincidence. Two people with similar personalities and similar interests, who happened to have an age gap between them that was borderline the age difference between a father and a daughter. No big deal.

And then, as the three of them waited for their ridiculous tour bus to load, he saw Opal reach up to tuck her tiny hand into Adam’s palm.

Watching them like that - his Kid and his… whatever Adam was, boyfriend or bestfriend or giant crush - made Ronan feel, all at once, that maybe he wanted that little family. Adam thought he was awkward with children, mentioned that he was worried to actually hang out with Opal in case he screwed it up, but he seemed fine.

God. Opal was supposed to distract him from Adam, not make him think about Adam and him forming a family, Jesus. Ronan Lynch. Fast Cars. Cheap Beer. Right?

The second realization meant that the nights became incredibly tense. The first night, Opal passed out by seven, tuckered out from the time change and the long day of activities, and then it was just Adam and Ronan alone in the dorm. Ronan took his sweet time tucking her into Noah’s bed, but even then, it left him with at least three hours before it made sense to go to bed.
Adam was sitting in the TV room when he got back, aimlessly flipping through channels. He didn’t look at Ronan - kept his eyes firm on the screen - but Adam’s hands were tapping anxiously at his side.

“Want to watch a movie?” Adam asked.

Ronan knew sitting on the same couch was dangerous, but the other option was the floor. Instead, he sat - perched a good foot away - and hoped he could keep up the distance. It started fine. Adam chose some action movie, which really wasn’t romantic in the slightest, and they spent the majority of the time making fun of it.

But then, at some point, Ronan became aware that they’d gotten a lot closer. Maybe it was his fault - he had reached over to cuff the back of Adam’s head when he made a horrifically bad pun - or maybe it was Adam’s fault - because he had gotten up to get some popcorn partway through and didn’t exactly land in the same spot - but either way, at some point the space between them was less like a foot, and more like an inch.

Before he knew Adam liked him, Ronan didn’t think much of their shoulders brushing. He liked it, sure, but it fell somewhere between “This is nice” and “Adam is warm.”

Now, though, in the dark of the room and with the memory of his kiss, it felt a bit more scandalous. Ronan was very aware of the press of Adam’s forearm on his. He was very aware that Opal was fast asleep. He was very aware that it was literally impossible for anyone in the band to interrupt them, because they were miles and miles away.

He almost called Henry.

Instead, Ronan reached for Adam’s hand. He refused to look at him, to spare a glance at Adam’s face to know whether he liked it or not, but Adam hummed under his breath and curled his fingers between his and that was it, really. It was fine. They could be two boys who watched a movie together and held hands. Never mind the fact that they were far past the age where holding hands was considered cute, Ronan allowed himself to enjoy this. He’d never gotten to do this.

Holding hands, did, however, put an end to their conversation. It was as if this innocent act was still too much; as if palm against palm could conjure the same feeling as lips against lips.

The movie ended and Ronan wondered how long they would sit there. What was the rule on hand-
holding? Honestly, his hand was cramping and he wanted to shift or move but he also didn’t want Adam to think he didn’t enjoy holding his hand, because he did--

And then Adam solved the dilemma by unlinking their joined hands and kissing him. The home screen to the DVD kept playing the same song every thirty seconds, but Ronan hardly noticed. What else was there to think about, really, when Adam was leaning his chest to him, with his back against the arm of the sofa, with the dark making everything seem much, much sexier?

Somehow, Ronan slid his back down the arm of the couch and it made it easy for Adam to lean over him on all fours, pulling Ronan’s chin up to kiss him again and again. Adam hovered above, and Ronan wanted to tug him down, but things were getting out of hand too quickly. Ronan tried to remember that they had a reason for this - they needed to take things slow, because otherwise he couldn’t control himself - but then Adam’s lips left his to trail down his jaw, to his throat, and oh no it felt really, really good.

“Stop me,” Adam begged.

Ronan didn’t find him very convincing, and frankly, he wasn’t sure he wanted it to end. His voice caught in his throat when he managed to get out, “Who am I to deny you what you so clearly want?”

“You asshole,” Adam groaned into his throat, before he worked his lips up to Ronan’s ear. “How do you not want to do this all the time?”

Adam’s breath on his ear did very, very dangerous things to him. “You’re funny.”

“I’m serious.” Adam pulled away, looking mercilessly flushed, lips evidently red even in the dark of the room. “I think about you all the time. I want to do this all the time.”

“I’ve had practice,” Ronan said. He did not say, Also I do think about this all the time. I’ve thought about this since I first met you, when you were Ben Smith, with the freckles and the attitude, when you refused to eat extra food unless I forced it on you.

“We should have a plan,” Adam said, pushing himself back from the couch and sitting a good distance away.

“A plan? Adam.”
“I’m serious.”

“We’re not making a plan,” Ronan muttered. “We’ll just -- I don’t know, not watch movies in the dark.”

“But if we had a plan, we could - hypothetically - set up a schedule.”

“A schedule?” Ronan mocked. “We’re not going to plan when we-- you know. I just don’t want to go too fast and fuck everything up.”

Adam looked bemused. “Is that why you want to go slow?”

Ronan glared at him. How exactly do you say, Well, that, and everytime we kiss I can’t sleep because I just think about it again and again, and the fact that I have no experience, so if I suck at it you’ll probably be disgusted.

“I’m not easy,” Ronan said instead. “I have to be wooed, Parrish.”

“I’m sure.”

Ronan stood up from the couch and flipped on the lights, hoping it would ease the tension in the air. Adam squinted at Ronan through the sudden bright, allowing Ronan to let his eyes linger on Adam’s shirt. It had been pulled up on his side in the heat of the moment, and Ronan enjoyed the slip of tan skin.

“Go to bed, Parrish,” Ronan said. “Opal is going to get us up early, I’m sure.”

“Fine. But don’t act surprised when this happens again tomorrow,” Adam muttered.

Ronan knew he had a point. Alone, they clearly couldn’t be trusted. He didn’t want to discuss a plan, though, part because he didn’t have one, and part because it meant it would be easier to slip back into this. Ronan was constantly torn between being patient and saying “fuck it;” it was easier to be smart the further away he got from Adam, though, so he forced himself to go to bed.
The next day didn’t fare any better, just like Adam predicted. The three of them decided to explore a site Adam had researched. Ronan couldn’t handle the way Adam looked at Opal. He was always smiling down at her, looking easy and in awe of Opal’s actual interest in the Griffith Observatory, and Ronan felt compelled to pull Adam into his arms and kiss him senseless.

Which he may or may not have done when Opal ran to the bathroom halfway through the day.

Okay, he definitely did. They were tucked into a hallway of another museum Adam had researched, waiting for her to come out, and Ronan was distinctly aware that they were alone. And that Opal, generally, took about three minutes to go to the bathroom.

So he spun on Adam and kissed him, once, twice, then one more time. Adam had responded enthusiastically, bringing his shaking hands to Ronan’s waist, and swore under his breath.

“We’re in public,” Adam whispered against Ronan’s lips. “And we’re watching a child.”

Ronan pulled away and leaned back against the wall. “Shit.”

“This is why we need a plan --”

Someone walked down the hall, so Ronan stopped Adam the old-fashioned way, by cupping his palm against his mouth. A minute later Opal wandered out and she looked at their flushed faces with judgement.

“She can’t possibly have known, right?” Adam asked a few minutes later, while Opal was peering over the edge of an exhibit.

“No. I don’t -- No. No way.”

Later in the evening, though, when Opal was asleep and Ronan had pressed Adam up against the kitchen wall, Ronan realized they really did need a plan. It was too much, seeing Adam treat Opal like a prize, and he wanted to show Adam his gratitude. And then Opal suddenly burst into the kitchen complaining about being thirsty. They darted apart, trying to act casual, but Opal eyed them suspiciously.
So maybe they needed a plan.

And that’s how they ended up at Disneyland.

Because what better place to curb his insatiable lust for Adam than Disneyland? It offered a few solutions. First, as growing celebrities, it meant they were in constant peril of being spotted. Even with dark sunglasses and baseball caps, Ronan knew it would be easy for fans to recognize them, especially since they were together. He knew that worry would keep his thoughts preoccupied. Second, it was fucking Disneyland. There were children and freaky mascots everywhere, which meant he would have little time to think about Adam and his lips. Plus, if he took his eyes off Opal for even three seconds, he risked the chance of losing her.

It sucked, going to Disneyland, but really it was his only option. Hopefully he’d be so pissed by the end of the day Adam wouldn’t want to make out because he’d be so annoyed by Ronan. That would get them through the last night, then Opal had to head back, which solved their dilemma.

It was totally going to work.

He just had to survive Disneyland.

To its credit, Opal did seem immediately taken by the theme park. Ronan didn’t think she would like it - she wasn’t exactly a standard, nine-year-old girl, and he wasn’t sure she’d ever even mentioned a Disney movie before - but her eyes nearly went to the back of her head when they first saw a princess.

“Do you have a favorite?” Adam asked her.

Opal averted her eyes. “No.”

“That’s a ‘yes,’” Ronan muttered.

She glared at him and yanked at his pant leg, which Ronan took to mean, I’m going to murder you in child-speak.
The majority of their time was spent waiting in line, of course. Ronan had to admit that some of the rides were passably okay. The roller coasters, in particular. Adam alternated being extremely into rides or utterly terrified. Getting him into Space Mountain proved to be difficult. (“You like space,” Opal said with encouragement. “I like seeing where I’m going, ” Adam argued.)

Ronan found it passably easier to ignore Adam, at times. With Opal around, it made it difficult to talk about anything to do with their relationship, and with all the people around, Ronan was too nervous to stand next to Adam even. They’d been spotted a few times - though thankfully, at best, the fans either whispered from afar, or at worst, they just asked for a quick and quiet selfie - which meant they had to be on their best behavior.

It wasn’t that Ronan really cared what people thought. He’d come out, and he didn’t intend to go back in, and really, fuck Whelk. But he was a private person, and if fans were already intense about their relationship when they weren’t even a thing, he didn’t know if he could handle what they’d do if they knew they were.

He was grateful to his fans, really. But it was intense, being loved that much. No matter how much Henry begged him, Ronan couldn’t get himself to look at his social media accounts. The comments were supportive. They were usually very nice. There were just so, so many of them, and it made it hard to breathe sometimes.

Ronan would get used to it eventually. Hopefully.

In the meantime, though, he wanted to keep his personal life and celebrity life private. That included dating Adam. The fans could speculate all they wanted, snap secret pictures of them standing in line for Splash Mountain and write OMG Pynch sighting at DLand over their faces, but they wouldn’t catch them holding hands or kissing.

If he could help it.

Halfway through the day, Opal stopped them and fiddled with her words. She still didn’t talk much, though Ronan recognized she was trying.

“Can I be… Ariel?”

“What’s that?”
Adam elbowed him and muttered, “The Little Mermaid.”

“Uh, I mean, mermaids aren’t real, Kid, but--”

Opal tugged her hair down over her eyes. “No,” she groaned. “There’s this…thing.”

“Oh.” Ronan met Adam’s eyes, wishing they had mastered the telepathic communication his parents used to have. Adam’s only shrugged back. “You’re going to have to elaborate for me.”

Opal huffed a sigh and said, “Nevermind.”

He had fucked up, somehow, and Ronan wasn’t even sure what he did. Even though Opal refused to say anything more, she was clearly upset. They waited in line for a dinky little kid ride, and once they got to the front, she indicated she wanted to go alone. As they watched from outside the ride, Ronan wrapped his knuckles against a fence in agitation.

“What the fuck did I do?”

Adam looked up at Opal for a moment - who was sitting alone in a Dumbo car, looking totally unamused by the whole situation - until he pulled out his phone and typed something out. Within seconds his phone began to ring.

“Hey, Noah.”

“She wants to dress up like a princess you morons!”

Ronan could hear Noah’s shriek through the phone. He took it from Adam’s hands and said, “What?”

Noah heaved a sigh. “Seriously, Ronan. I can’t believe you went to Disneyland without me, for one thing, and second of all, that you’re so ignorant of this magical place. She wants to be dressed up! They have this thing - like, it’s really cute and I can’t believe you get to do this - where little girls get
a princess makeover. They do your hair and give you a dress to borrow.”

“That’s--” Ronan had unseemly things to say about it, but if Opal wanted to do it, who was he to refuse? “Okay. That’s easy. Why the fuck was she so weird about it?”

“It’s probably expensive,” Adam muttered.

“So? I have money.”

“You don’t understand,” he said, looking very irritated all the sudden. “She grew up really poor, and then it’s not like Diane has much money, either. It’s a big deal for her to ask for this.”

“I really don’t care, it’s probably like, what, a hundred bucks?”

“Oh, my God,” Adam laughed bitterly. “You completely missed the point.”

“Sorry, I just…” His stomach churned and he pushed down a wave of nausea. He fucked up again. Could he just go one day without being an idiot?

“Should I hang up…?” Noah’s voice rang from the phone.

“Sorry,” Adam said. “Thanks for the tip. Looking forward to seeing you soon, man.”

Adam still looked annoyed by the time the call ended, but Ronan didn’t know how to fix the situation. Instead, he focused his attention on Opal once she returned from the ride. She, too, was in a pissy mood, so Ronan forced her to climb on his back and claimed they were getting ice cream, though he planned to direct the party back to this dress-up event. It was apparently in Fantasy Land which - by name alone - made Ronan want to hurl himself into the nearest ride, but what could he do?

Opal’s grip tightened around his neck when she realized where they were. Into his ear she whispered, “No.”
“What do you *mean* ‘No’?” Ronan argued.

Adam eyed Ronan warily, as if to say, *Dude, I fucking told you,* as well as, *Why did I ever think I liked you?* (Or, okay, maybe his look didn’t say the latter, but he kept expecting Adam to realize this one of these days.)

Opal remained silent.

Ronan hitched her higher onto his back, readjusting her. “Listen, Kid. My PR manager says I need some good publicity. Do you know what that means? No? He says people hate me and think I’m a jerk.”

Opal snorted.

“Exactly. It’s bullshit. I’m a delightful human being -- stop that, don’t laugh. Anyway, he thinks it’ll look good if Adam posts pictures of us together on Instagram. Tug at the fan’s heartstrings and whatnot. I don’t like this any more than you do, but my hands are tied.”

She still didn’t look very convinced.

“Parrish,” Ronan turned to Adam with an exaggerated look of disdain. “Tell her. Did Henry, or did he not, explicitly beg me to post pictures of Opal?”

The way Adam’s lips twitched upward couldn’t exactly be called a smile, but there was a quiet power in it. “He did, in fact, do that.”

Opal looked between the two of them, the suspicion in her eyes beginning to fade. Ronan had to bite back an insult. How was it she trusted *Adam* more than she trusted him?

“You might as well do it. The company is going to pay for it, and they’re a bunch of asshole pricks, and I’ll take their money gladly,” Ronan added.

Opal slid down from Ronan’s back with a sigh. “Fine.”

Despite convincing Opal, however, they hit an immediate snag. Once they reached the front of the shop, an attendant asked, “Checking in for your appointment?”

“We don’t have one yet,” Adam said.

The attendant pouted comically, which looked fucking ridiculous if you asked Ronan. True, it was hard to take her seriously when - as an adult woman - she was dressed in a cheap-looking Disney costume, but did she have to be so obvious in her mannerisms, too?

“I’m so sorry, Sir, the boutique is booked for today. How long are you in town? We might have some available spots for next week.”

Shit. He didn’t anticipate this. If he were his father, he’d slip a hundred into her palm and wink. With Adam standing so close, though, he didn’t think that was the wisest idea.

Adam was fairly preoccupied, though. He kept staring at another shop attendant off to the side, who appeared to be on her break. She was tucked behind a counter flipping through her phone, but occasionally she would peek up at them before darting her eyes back down.

Adam pulled his hat off his head, discarded his sunglasses, before he did the same for Ronan. “So rude of us,” he muttered awkwardly. Then, raising his voice to an unusually high volume, he said, “Such a shame! We really, really were hoping to get a spot.”

Ronan had to bite back a curse. True, they weren’t the best disguises in the world, but it helped them keep a relatively low profile. What was he doing?

Adam kept babbling. “You see, we’ve never been to Disneyland before. We’re from the South, you see? First time. We live in LA now and thought we could swing by, but unfortunately we won’t have much free time from now on.”

The girl off to the side suddenly stood up. “Oh, my God.”
And all at once, Ronan understood.

“Aren’t you guys from Greywaren?” She whispered excitedly, running over to them. “Oh, my God! You are. You totally are. I’m a really, really big fan.”

The original attendant blinked at them. “Oh, goodness! I hardly recognized you!”

“Oh, thank you,” Adam said, stressing his accent more than usual. “We’re happy to take a picture with you, if you like.” She very much did like, and they spent the next few minutes trying to squeeze into a selfie. Once she’d gotten the picture, Adam tugged the girl into a side hug and said, “So nice to meet you, again. Wish we could have gotten Ronan’s cousin into the Boutique, but alas.”

She gasped. “What? Oh, no! We can definitely fit you in, I’m sure!”

The first attendant looked down at her schedule warily. “Well, not unless we cancel…”

“Don’t do that,” Ronan cut in.

The younger girl shook her head. “No, no. How about this? I’m on my lunch break right now, but I’m more than happy to give your cousin a makeover instead. It would be, like, my honor.”

Ronan didn’t feel great about taking the girl’s time, but Adam gripped his shoulder and said, “Well, if you’re certain it’s no trouble…”

She waved them off. “No, seriously. It’s payment enough just to get to meet you guys.”

From there, she pulled Opal along and shit happened. Well, okay, it wasn’t shit, it was picking outfits and choosing a hairstyle and painting nails, all of which Ronan had no interest in. He and Adam got to wait off to the side as Opal was given her little makeover. Adam snapped the occasional photo to keep up appearances, even forcing Ronan to stand off to the side at times.

The whole process took an insane amount of time, in Ronan’s opinion, and he was quickly growing bored. He tried to pass the time with Adam, discussing various ideas for upcoming songs, until Adam abruptly cut him off.
“That was nice. What you just did.” Adam leaned his head against the wall and replaced his baseball cap. He eyed the room warily, looking for watchful eyes, and lowered his voice. “I’m sorry I snapped at you earlier.”

“It’s fine.” Ronan felt the taste of _I’m sorry, too_, on his tongue, but he didn’t bother to share it. Cowardice and all that. He was a gem, truly.

“I think she’s having a really great time,” Adam said. “It’s going to be sad to have her go.”

Ronan glared at Adam, unwilling to have this conversation. “Don’t even.”

“Just making sure you’re prepared for it.”

“I’ll be fine,” he muttered. “It’ll suck, but at least the rest of them come back that day, too.”

Adam frowned. “Do they? I thought they weren’t back until the following morning.” He fiddled with his phone, pulling up an email. “Opal’s flight leaves tomorrow, the 11th. Blue and Noah won’t arrive until the morning of the 12th, then Gansey arrives in the afternoon.”

Ronan snatched the phone from Adam’s hands in terror. “Wait, what?”

Adam’s lips twitched into a knowing grin. “You didn’t realize? It’s just us tomorrow night.”

“Jesus fuck,” Ronan whispered, taking care, for once in his life, to remain decently polite in front of all the kids.

“Why are you so worried?” He asked. “It’s not like you’re the one with the problem. Just tie me to a chair and we’ll be fine.”

Ronan could feel his cheeks heating at that thought, despite knowing Adam didn’t mean it that way. Or, maybe based on the way Adam tongued his incisor, maybe he did. _ Fucking Parrish._
“Have you always been this thirsty?” Ronan whispered, careful to make sure no one was looking their way.

He thought back to that stupid article Henry had shown him, with the girl Adam dated in college. He could still hear Henry’s cackling in his ear. Well, look at that, your boy apparently knows his way around a dame, Henry had said. Don’t worry, Lynch. Women are much harder to get right, if you know what I mean. Which, I guess you wouldn’t. I’m just saying, if it was good for her, he’ll be great to you.

(And then Ronan had thrown his half-eaten sandwich at Henry’s face.)

It wasn’t that he was bothered that Adam had been with someone. Ronan, himself, had come close a few times, back when he was lonely and stuck in Henrietta. He just couldn’t tell if this was Adam all the time - a beautiful, insatiable creature who wanted so, so much, regardless of the person or place - or if it was something special, just for Ronan.

Adam was trying hard to formulate a response, but he failed epically. “It’s not -- I just -- You know how I am, just about...touch. It’s like that, but ten times worse.”

“You flirt.”

Adam groaned. “Leave me alone. You don’t understand. I’ve been thinking about this for a long time, okay? I didn’t think it was going to happen.”

Ronan couldn’t contain the snort. His mind, again, fell back to that article. The girl claimed they dated not too long before the band went viral. “I’m sure. You had to wait like, what, a year? Tops?”

“A year?” Adam rolled his eyes. “I mean, not that long, no. Just, back when we were in New York or something. Maybe a little before. That’s all.”

“That’s all,” Ronan muttered under his breath. God. If only Adam knew.

Opal’s transformation interrupted their conversation, which Ronan was glad for. The attendant showed them her new dress, Adam snapped a few photos, and then Opal was moving on to get her hair done. She looked happy, at least. The attendant wasn’t bothered by her lack of talking; she had just said, in a mock whisper, “Oh, I see. The witch has taken your voice too, huh? Don’t worry.”
Unfortunately, Adam didn’t seem done with the conversation once they were alone again.

“So, when did you…” He nudged his knee into Ronan’s leg. “How long has it been for you?”

Ronan really did not want to answer this. “None of your business.”

“I mean, it’s about me. It’s kind of my business.”

“Just -- “ Ronan cursed under his breath. “Longer, okay?”

Adam looked absolutely delighted. “How much longer?”

Ronan kept his lips firmly shut.

Adam looked around the room again, checking for spies, before he leaned into Ronan’s ear and whispered, “I’ll answer anything you want. Truth for a truth, right?”

This did appeal to Ronan. There were still many things he didn’t know about Adam, the man who seemed unknowable despite having known him for so very long. “How about three truths. For my one.”

“That’s unfair,” Adam argued.

“Guess you’ll never know, then.”

Adam thought it over for an agonizing second. Ronan hoped he would do the smart thing - because, really, it was a horrible deal, and Adam should really let it go - but then he straightened in his seat and said, “Fine. But you have to go first. I’m not going to spill three secrets just to have you keep yours.”

“I’m offended.”
“You’re also stalling.”

Ronan leaned his head back against the wall and shut his eyes. Jesus fuck. What did he do to deserve this? He could just lie. It wouldn’t be as embarrassing if he just said something else, if he claimed it was a lot sooner.

But… He really hated lying.

“You remember when you told me Tad liked you?” Ronan asked, keeping his eyes shut. He couldn’t stand seeing Adam’s face. “And you got mad at me, because I didn’t tell you sooner?”

“Yeah…”

“Well, you asked how I knew. And I didn’t exactly explain.” Ronan couldn’t keep his eyes closed anymore, so he focused on Opal instead. She was getting her hair done, now, and had some atrocious looking red hair being attached to her ponytail. “I mean, partially I knew because he was really fucking obvious. Like real obvious.”

“Ronan.”

“Fine. Just-- Okay, fine. I knew he liked you because I recognized it, okay? I knew what it felt like to moon over Adam-Fucking-Parrish.”

He could feel the edge of Adam’s fingers brush against the side of his leg. Then, to prove his point, Adam pressed them harder into his skin.

“That’s,” Adam sucked in a quick breath. “A long time.”

“It’s not like I was pining over you, or miserable or anything,” Ronan said quickly. He could feel his skin growing warmer and his stomach tumbled. He sneaked a look at Adam out of the corner of his eye. “It was just a passing crush, really. And then you were a dick and disappeared and I realized you weren’t all that cute. Then you reeled me back in with your new muscles and shit.”
Adam hummed under his breath. “I don’t think anyone has ever called me ‘cute’ before.”

“Don’t be a dick.” Ronan stretched his arms to the ceiling and sighed. “And now we are never going to talk about that again. Your turn.”

“I’m not sure my secrets are as juicy,” Adam said.

Ronan tried to think of questions that were as embarrassing. He knew what he wanted to ask - Who was that girl? Or, How many people have you slept with? Or, Will you dump me if I don’t know what I’m doing? He couldn’t start with that, though, so he tried to think of something more chaste.

“Did you ever actually, truly, have a crush on Blue?”

Adam barked a laugh so loud that it drew the attention of multiple staff members. Opal gazed at them suspiciously, until Adam had the sense to cover his grin with his hand and wave off her concern.

“I thought I made that clear a long time ago,” Adam said. “No. I mean, I definitely thought she was cute. And I liked when she touched me, because as mentioned, I’m a needy idiot.”

“But no lost love there?”

“No. I think, even then, that I knew we weren’t right together. That she needed someone else. Something else.”

“A better Dick?”

“You’re the worst.”

Ronan began to tap his hands across his legs, hoping it made him appear calm. He was anything but, and was searching for the right way to ask his questions. “Okay. So no Blue. I’m sure there were others, though…”

Adam raised an eyebrow. “You better clearly ask me what you want, Ronan, unless you want to
waste a secret.”

Ronan groaned. In a whisper, he said, “How many people have you dated. Or been with. Or whatever.”

“You saw the article, didn’t you?”

“Cheng told me. It’s not like I care--”

Adam sighed and shook off his worry. “I’m not mad. I figured you might see it, one day. It’s not like I have tons of experience or anything,” Adam mumbled. His voice was so low, so quiet, that Ronan had to lean in closer to pick up the conversation. “Just a couple girls in college. I dated a girl in high school, but we didn’t do anything.”

Ronan sucked in a quick breath. “That’s it?”

Adam was picking at a piece of string on his pants, avoiding his gaze. “I wanted to. I mean, look at me. Obviously I think about it a lot. It was just more stressful than I expected it to be.”

“Stressful?”

“Well, in high school, I was distinctly aware what having a baby would do to my life,” Adam said. He was still picking on that string, as if it held some sort of secret. “I was a mistake. My parents made that abundantly clear. So even once I was in college, away from them, I kept thinking, What if something goes wrong? I didn’t want to do that to another kid.”

Ronan found he felt a little sick. At once, he was struck with the urge to hurt Adam’s parents, to track them down and shake them, scream at them for how stupid they were to not realize how perfect their son really was.

And then abruptly, Ronan wondered what that meant for him. For them. Did Adam like him because he was a safe choice? Because he was too afraid to be with a woman?

It made him feel even more sick.
Adam must have picked up on the change in his expression, because he took a chance and squeezed Ronan’s hand quickly. “It’s not like that, I promise.”

“But I’m the only guy you’ve ever--” Ronan licked his lips and collected himself. “It’s true, right? Just me?”

Adam blew his bangs out of his eyes. “This counts as your third secret, by the way. And… not…exactly?”

“Parrish.”

“Are you the first guy I had a crush on? No. There was a guy at Yale who used to flirt with me, but it was when we weren’t talking. I liked him quite a bit, but nothing happened,” Adam paused, squinting up at the ceiling. “Are you the first man that I have actually wanted to kiss? Yes.”

“Wanted to kiss?”

“Er,” Adam scratched his head. “Well, when Tad came to visit once, he got a little drunk.”

“Sweet Jesus--”

“It was pretty harmless, honestly. Very sloppy. I felt bad because he was crying, so I just let him kiss me for a few seconds, that’s all.”

Ronan felt ill. “Fucking Carruthers. I haven’t seen him in years and yet he continues to be the bane of my existence.”

“You’re just jealous,” Adam said, knocking their knees together again.

“Good luck getting me to kiss you. Not after where your mouth has been.”
“Well, that’s good.” Adam lowered his voice to a level that was unnecessarily sexy. “Seeing as we’ll be alone tomorrow, we could use the help.”

Ronan shoved him away. “Not in front of the kids, Parrish.”

Adam pulled his legs up onto the bench and tucked them into his stomach. He was looking at Ronan, now, with a softer expression.

“I’m serious, though. It’s not like that. I like you because—” Adam stopped. He rested his cheek on his knee and sighed. “You’re what I want, okay?”

Ronan wasn’t sure what stopped Adam from saying what he felt, but he was oddly grateful for it. He didn’t know what Adam was going to say, and he couldn’t even think of any reasons to add, but he knew he could not handle a confession in the middle of Disneyland. Not when they were surrounded by the eyes of strangers. Not when he couldn’t hold Adam the way he wanted.

So Ronan broke the tension, muttering, “Because I’m hot as fuck, I know. You want my body, don’t lie.”

Adam grinned. “You’ve wanted mine for longer, apparently.”

Ronan was spared a response, thank God. Opal suddenly appeared in front of them in her full outfit. The attendant asked her to do a little spin, to which Opal looked up at her with an extremely judgemental frown, and refused.

“You look great!” Adam chirped. “Just like Ariel!”

Ronan thought Opal’s outfit looked ridiculous, but she also looked happy, so he supposed it was a win. Adam forced him to take another picture with the helpful attendant, sticking Opal in the center of them, and thanked her once more for helping Opal over her break. Once outside, Opal tugged on Ronan’s hand.

“Instagram?”
God dammit. Ronan was really hoping he could slip away with posting anything, but Opal was already sneaking his phone from his back pocket and pulling it up.

“Let me do it,” he muttered.

Ronan had only done this once, to take a photo of a Gansey’s snoring face up close. He was only mildly surprised to see at least ten other photos on his account, none of which he took. (He’d talk to Cheng about that later.) It took him a minute to figure out how to upload the photo, growing increasingly more irritated as it asked him to choose filters, and finally tossed it at Adam.

“Write something nice.”

Adam took a seat on a nearby bench and patted the space next to him. Instead of sitting next to him, though, Opal climbed on his lap and peered at the phone while he typed. Ronan had to turn away from the scene, pulling his baseball cap down over his face to use as a makeshift bag to breath into.

“How about this,” Adam began. “Thank you to Disneyland for giving my Kid Sister a last-minute makeover. She loved it!”

“That sounds nothing like me,” Ronan groaned.

Opal whispered something in Adam’s ear, causing him to grin. “That’s true. But I don’t think Disneyland would approve of that. This will just have to do. Ready for more rides?”

Adam rather liked his first trip to Disneyland. True, it was far too crowded and the lines were insane, but the rides were cute and everyone was in a good mood. It didn’t hurt that, with the band’s success, he suddenly had money to spend. The food was overpriced, but that didn’t stop him from spoiling Opal with towering swirls of ice cream or bags of popcorn.

Mainly, though, he loved watching Ronan and Opal together. They were an odd pair, that was for sure, but he took care of her so well. Every time she complained about her feet hurting, Ronan would sweep her onto his back and tote her around. When she got scared on a ride, he’d make a show of muttering insults, but would always tuck her into his side carefully.
They spent almost the entire day at Disneyland, only returning near bedtime. Despite the long day, Opal seemed wired. They tried to usher her into bed, reminding her she had to get up fairly early for her flight, but Opal was having none of it.

Adam was fighting back yawns himself. It was tempting to abandon Ronan; after all, it was his guest, technically. As soon as he stood up from the desk, though, Ronan shot him a dirty look. He took a seat back at Noah’s desk with a sheepish grin.

“Get in bed,” Ronan ordered to Opal. “I’m going to tell you a story.”

“I’m not a baby,” she said.

“Then good thing this isn’t a story for babies,” Ronan argued. “My dad used to tell it to me. It’s good, I promise.”

“Is this the elusive Greywaren?” Adam asked.

Ronan nodded. Adam’s interest was immediately piqued. He’d been told a rough summary of the story before - they all had, when they’d decided it to be the name of the band - but he had never heard it. Well, no one had heard it, apparently. Ronan maintained that it was a well-known story, yet not a single fan had ever confirmed they’d heard of it.

Adam wondered whether, if he heard the entire story, he might recognize it in another format. Maybe Ronan’s dad just called it something different.

Ronan pulled himself into Opal’s bed and slid under the sheets. Then, in what felt eerily synced, Opal and Ronan both turned to him with an annoyed look. “Parrish?”

“Oh. Um. Okay.” He moved from the desk to stand in front of the bed, feeling a bit lost. “Where?”

Opal patted the seat next to her. The bed was nowhere big enough for all three of them, and his legs dangling off the edge of the bed, but Adam found it comfy just to be tucked in as a unit. Opal shifted so that her head rested on Ronan’s lap, then tucked her feet onto Adam’s shoulder. That made him less comfortable, but he wasn’t going to complain.
It was a little jarring to hear such soft and whimsical tone come out of Ronan, who was normally so brash and sarcastic.

Ronan began the story. “Once upon a time, there was a man. In the day, this man seemed quite ordinary. He looked ordinary, nothing special about him, and he lived in an ordinary little apartment in an ordinary quiet town, and he liked ordinary things, like fresh-baked cookies and milk, or taking his dog on walks, or playing his guitar deep into the night.

“But you should know that looks can be very deceiving, because this man was not an ordinary man.”

Adam had not expected to find the story very interesting, having never been one for fairy tales or magic, but he was quickly pulled in. Opal was much the same; as Ronan described the dreamer, who was called the Greywaren for reasons never actually explained (which Adam found a little irritating, but it was beside the point, really), she would curl her toes into Adam’s legs in excitement.

The story was not unlike many fairy tales, and featured a man who could pull objects out of his dreams. The highlight of the story, Adam quickly realized, were the dream objects. It wasn’t the plot that caught Opal’s attention, or, Adam reasoned, Ronan as a young boy, but the fantastical nature of everything the man summoned. He would take more and more out of his dreams, trying to fill a void, until he finally realized that objects could never be the solution to his unhappiness.

In the end, the man dreamt himself a wife in exchange for the dreamworld. In return, the dreamworld passed on the Greywaren power to the man’s son, so that he too could bring magic to the world.

When Ronan finished the story, Opal was silent. She lifted her hand to trace Ronan’s chin with her finger, pinching it and humming under her breath.

“It’s bed time, Kid.”

Opal sucked in her bottom lip and dropped her hand from his face. “I don’t want to go.”

“I’m not surprised. Why would you? With us here,” Ronan said. Opal didn’t seem to notice the way his words caught in his throat, but it did not pass Adam by.
“Don’t make me go,” she repeated.

This didn’t seem like Ronan’s strongest area, so Adam stepped in. He grabbed Opal’s foot and began to tug at her toes. “Diane would be really sad if you stayed with us, I think. Anyway, we’re pretty boring most the time. We spend most of our time practicing or in meetings.”

“Plus, Blue is here normally,” Ronan added. “I’m sure you don’t miss her.”

Opal shrugged, and from there, it appeared she’d used up all her words. She said nothing more the rest of the night, but kept her eyes open for another thirty minutes. They sat in her bed, making small jokes about each other, until Opal’s eyes finally fluttered shut. Ronan and Adam snuck out after.

Ronan fell onto his back on the couch immediately, throwing his arm over his eyes. Adam hovered nearby, unsure how to handle the situation.

“You okay?”

Ronan’s response was to exhale loudly.

Adam stepped close to him, watching Ronan from above, and traced his finger down Ronan’s arm. “Use your words, Lynch.”

Ronan lifted his arm away to glare at him. Then, grabbing Adam’s wrist, he tugged him down on the couch and said, “Just come here.”

It was awkward, laying together on that small couch, and their legs were dangling off the end. But Adam found he didn’t really care. He fitted his hips to the side of Ronan, not daring to be so bold as to lay directly on him, and looked up at Ronan.

“It’s okay if you’re sad,” he said.

Ronan rolled his eyes. “Sad? Please, Parrish. I’m an adult. I’m despondent.”
“Oh, of course. My mistake.” Adam cursed himself for feeling so warm at the press of Ronan’s body against his; this was not a time for this, it was time for consoling. “We’ll talk to Henry. Maybe you can go down there soon.”

“Maybe,” Ronan agreed, though he didn’t sound convinced.

“Last time you had to say goodbye to Opal, I gave you a head massage,” Adam said. He lifted his hand to Ronan’s hair and tugged at the curls. “Want another one?”

Ronan hummed. “Oh, I remember vividly. You and your fucking hands, Parrish.”

“I was almost going to kiss you that day,” Adam said.

“You were not.”

“Well, I wanted to.”

“Well, you always want to kiss me,” Ronan said, suddenly pinching Adam at the waist. “I understand why. I’m very kissable.”

“Don’t go down this road,” Adam warned. “You recently confided how long you’ve been wanting to kiss me, Ronan. Do I need to remind you?”

Ronan turned his head away and muttered a string of curses. Adam grinned against his neck, not caring if Ronan could feel the edge of his teeth. It was a fact that he’d been thinking about all day - that Ronan Lynch had liked him, Adam Parrish, the son of trailer trash and dust, starved and overworked and bitter - and that he liked him for so very, very long.

At first, it was almost intimidating. He had to wrap his brain around it. It colored his memories in a very different manner. He thought back to the concerts, the trip to the hospital, the way Ronan had been so very, very upset when Adam quit the band. It made more sense, of course, to realize that Ronan had placed different hopes.

It was also irritating, in many ways. True, Adam didn’t like Ronan back when they were younger,
and realistically had they gotten together back then, it would not have worked out. But there were plenty of times afterward where--

Like Adam’s birthday. They had slept in the same bed, for god’s sake. (And Ronan was shirtless, which, in retrospect, Adam didn’t appreciate enough.) How easy it would have been to just turn over and kiss Ronan then.

Or the night of Kavinsky’s party. Sure, not the most romantic of times, but it felt so long ago now. What better way to piss off Kavinsky than to pull Ronan into the pool and kiss him in front of all those cameras--

He needed to stop thinking about this, especially with Ronan so close. He was distinctly aware of how his body reacted to such thoughts, and he wasn’t in the position to hide his... feelings.

Just to be safe, Adam shifted away from Ronan.

Of course, Ronan just pulled him right back with the tug of his arm around his body. Adam told himself to think of other things. Very unsexy things. Like Noah’s singing voice, or the way Gansey insisted on pronouncing “Porsche” as Por-sha, or the fact that Opal was sleeping in the next room over, Jesus Christ.

And then Ronan brought his hand to Adam’s head and began to run it through his hair, like the bastard he was.

“Why do you look so upset?” Ronan asked.

Really, the last thing Adam needed was Ronan’s breath on his ear. “I’m not. This is my happy face.”

“Yikes.”

It was hard to stay annoyed with Ronan when had his hands in his hair, though. Adam let himself enjoy the sensation, hoping that - the more relaxed he got - the more likely he wouldn’t make a fool of himself.
“That was an interesting story,” Adam said. “I’ve never heard it before.”

“Nor has the entire world, apparently. Everyone has parents who suck.”

Adam definitely had parents who sucked, so he couldn’t argue the point. Still, he was oddly suspicious that no one in the entire world seemed to hear about it. And, even though his parents never read him bedtime stories, fables and myths were usually discussed in school or popular culture. If this really was a famous story, he figured he’d know about it, just as he knew the story of *The Little Mermaid* or *The Tortoise and the Hare*.

“Do you think, maybe, your dad made it up?” Adam ventured.

“No, I know it’s a real story—”

“Just because he made it up, doesn’t mean it’s not a real story.”

“No--” Ronan paused, hand stilling against Adam’s ear. “He said it was a popular story. That was the only way he got us to go to bed, by telling us this stupid tale.”

“Ronan.”

He nearly whined. “What? Parrish, it’s a thing. My dad was not creative enough to write stories.”

“Didn’t he write songs all the time?” Adam shifted against Ronan’s hand, hoping it would convey the message that he wanted more. It worked, because a second later Ronan began to lightly tug on his hair. Adam continued, “Songs are basically shorter stories.”

Ronan fell silent, eyes drifting shut in what looked like complicated thoughts. It occurred to Adam, too late, that this might still be a sensitive subject to Ronan. They had never really discussed his father, not since the big fight, and Adam knew little of him except what Gansey shared during college. That he was a passionate man, kept sometimes too busy by his hobbies to be with his family, and who died tragically from an unexpected heart attack. He left behind an empty barn and an empty family, each who had a unique method for hiding their broken hearts.

The *Greywaren* was probably not a bad memory for Ronan, but it was still a memory. The scene with Opal had just proven to Adam that this, really, was what Ronan grew up on. Too many people
piled into a bed, choosing love over comfort. Being recited a whimsical tale as your father played
*This Little Piggie* with your toes or your mother piled pillows around your body.

“I’m sorry,” Adam said.

Ronan shrugged, pulled Adam closer, and said, “You can make it up to me.”

“This seems like a bad idea,” Adam warned, though he would be easily convinced to Ronan’s ideas.

“Then set a timer or some shit. I don’t know. You’re the one who wanted a plan.”

“Okay, for how long?”

“Jesus, Adam, just--” Ronan stole his phone, typed something into it, and chucked it across the room.
“Come here.”

When Ronan kissed him, it was soft and slow and exactly what Adam thought it should be. He was
cr early to kisses that went faster, that involved tugging at lips and wandering hands, but after the long
day, with Opal’s upcoming departure, and thinking about Ronan’s father, it wasn’t the right time for
that.

Ronan kept his hand in Adam’s hair, slowly sinking it to the back of his neck to keep him close.
Ronan would pause for a breath sometimes, and he’d use the opportunity to examine Adam’s face.
He wasn’t sure what Ronan was looking for - or if he was just looking - but it made Adam’s toes
curl. He liked being treated this way - carefully, quietly, perfectly - and he tried to show Ronan his
appreciation with his hands. He let them wander under Ronan’s shirt, over his side, thumbing his hip
bone.

There was something extremely satisfying about making Ronan shudder.

When Adam’s alarm sounded, they both ignored it for at least a minute. It was better, really, to just
keep kissing. Eventually, Ronan bit Adam’s bottom lip, extracted himself from the couch, and found
the blaring alarm.
“Better go to bed,” Ronan muttered. “Long day ahead of us. The drive to LAX is a beast.”

Ronan disappeared back into his and Opal’s room a minute later, leaving Adam to catch his breath on the couch. It was tempting to stay there, to pretend that Ronan was still there with him for a little bit longer, but he eventually dragged his heavy body to his room.

As he fell asleep, Adam couldn’t decide whether or not he was excited for the following night. Alone, just the two of them, sounded quite promising, in the sense that Adam had a dirty mind and being alone could lead to dirty things. On the other hand, he did not, in any circumstances, want to pressure Ronan into doing something he did not want to do. Each time they were alone and together, Adam worried Ronan would go further than he wanted, just to appease him.

It was an unfortunate situation, really.

When Adam woke up, Ronan and Opal were cooking breakfast around their tiny dorm kitchen. Opal had pulled up a stool to see over the counter, resting her chin on Ronan’s shoulder. When she heard him come in, Opal turned to offer him a faint smile.

His heart hurt.

The morning passed too quickly. It was home time operated, he supposed, when you weren’t ready to say goodbye. Back in Yale, his days seemed to drag endlessly along. When Blue and Ronan had visited, every minute had felt like a second, a ticking time bomb ready to take away the people he loved.

Adam wasn’t sure how he felt about this realization: that Opal had worked her way into his heart, had become so important to him that he didn’t want to say goodbye. It was sobering.

The only advantage was that, all at once, he realized how difficult this goodbye would be for Ronan. If Adam felt this way, having only exchanged letters for a few months, having only hung out with her for a few days, then Ronan would be destroyed. He tried to prepare himself in advance for Ronan’s inevitable reaction.
Opal packed her little suitcase in silence. Ronan had to help her shove various Disney memorabilia into it, until he eventually got so annoyed, he stole one of Noah’s backpacks and told Opal he would pay to have the bag checked. Ronan tossed her bags to Adam, leaned down to allow Opal to climb onto his back, and the three of them ventured down to the car.

They were leaving extraordinarily early, but it turned out to be a wise decision. The traffic to LAX was a disaster, just like Ronan prophesied, but that wasn’t why.

It was because Opal had a giant breakdown as soon as they parked at the airport.

Adam hadn’t been around kids enough to know whether this was typical behavior, or if something was truly wrong. He knew kids of trauma had sudden outbursts, had trouble controlling their emotions, if only because it wasn’t his reaction. The only time a teacher reported his abuse as a kid, his own school counselor had expressed her shock that Adam held himself so well. He could still hear her voice. *I’m so proud of you, Adam. You’re so mature.* He was too young then to articulate that it was just the opposite. That he wanted to scream, that he wanted to kick and punch and bite and make an adult feel what it was like to be hurt. That it was just easier to retreat into himself than to be honest.

He was almost proud, watching Opal react as she did. It was horrifying and heartbreaking, but there was no denying her feelings.

Throughout the drive, Opal had remained quiet, but that was nothing new. When they pulled into the lot, her fingers tightened around her seat belt, arms trembling.

“Come on Kid,” Ronan said, reaching across the driver’s seat to pop open her seatbelt. “Time to go.”

“No. I want to stay.”

Ronan’s face remained firm. Adam wondered if he’d practiced this. “You have to go back. Diane needs you home, remember?”

“I’m never going back there,” she said, words tumbling out of her mouth. “I hate it there. I hate her. Why can’t I stay with you?”

“You don’t hate her.”
“I do!”

Adam was grateful to be stuck in the backseat. He had no idea how to handle this situation, and the separation allowed him to pretend he didn’t have to. That he wasn’t part of the problem. It was cowardly but, really, Adam thought himself a coward in most things.

“Opal.” Ronan pinched the bridge of his nose. “You can’t stay. I wish you could, but you can’t.”

And then hell broke loose. Opal fell into silence and refused to get out of the car. Adam scrambled out first, hoping it would encourage her to leave, as Ronan rounded the car and opened her door. When she didn’t move, he took her upper arm and gently tugged.

Then Opal threw her arm across his chest with enough force that it sounded like a giant slap. Ronan stepped back, clearly shocked, and took a few seconds to collect himself.

“Opal -- what the fuck? Come on.” He reached for her again, only for Opal to slap at him at him. To his credit, Ronan kept his cool. He took a deep breath, repeated her name, and reached for again.

This time Opal tried to bite him.

It upset Ronan enough to compel him into action. He reached in, ignoring her kicking and screaming, grabbing her under the armpits and tugging her out of the car. It was awkward and messy and they instantly attracted attention. Adam stood paralyzed, completely unsure how to help.

“Opal, I need you to calm-- Jesus-- would you calm down?”

Opal escaped from his arms and started sprinting off in another direction. In a split second, Ronan tossed his phone to Adam, yelled, “Diane, now!” and sprinted off after her. Adam fumbled with the phone, feeling that he was taking far too long to type in Diane’s name, and held the phone to his hearing ear a minute later. In the distance, Ronan had caught up to Opal, but she was screaming bloody murder and pulling away from him.

Everyone was staring.
“Hey Ronan! You guys at the airport?”

Adam’s mouth felt dry. “Hi Diane, it’s -- it’s Adam. We’re at the airport but--” he winced as Opal’s shrill voice rang through the air, and he was sure Diane could hear it through the telephone. “She’s kind of--”

“Shit. Shit.” Diane began to breath heavily, and he could hear rustling in the background. “What’s wrong?”

Adam tried to explain the situation, but the words did not come easy. How did he explain that, within seconds, she went from a calm and rationale child to something resembling a violent toddler? Still, he did his best, and it must have been enough, because Diane cursed again.

“She does this sometime, it’s--” Diane paused, talking to someone on the other side in a hurried tone. “I’m so sorry, Adam. Kids with trauma, they can’t really-- sometimes she acts out. What’s Ronan doing?”

Adam looked to Ronan, who was now carrying Opal in his arms like a baby, if only to keep her from kicking and biting. (Were those scratch marks on his skin? Fuck. Fuck.)

“Ask her what I should do,” Ronan said, voice tight.

“What should we do?”

“First, stay calm. I know it’s hard. Adam, take a deep breath, I can hear you starting to hyperventilate.”

“Sorry--”


Adam repeated Diane’s directions, which was met with a delirious expression from Ronan. Opal was still squirming in his arms, now yelling obscenities and horrific things. Ronan tucked her tighter into
his body and shut his eyes.

“Adam? You need to calm her down. It’s going to be hard, I know. Where are you? Are you still at home? Can you put her in a room to calm down?”

“We just got to the airport,” Adam said, dread building.

“Just leave her in the car. Tell her she can’t come out until she’s calm.”

“But she doesn’t--” Adam’s voice was shaking. “She doesn’t want to go home. That’s the problem. If we leave her in the car I think she’ll be happy.”

“That’s okay. Just get her in the car. She just needs to cool down.”

Adam passed on the directions to Ronan. He didn’t seem convinced by it either, but Adam helped him get her into the car. She had stopped screaming now, at the least, and didn’t seem interested in biting them either. Instead, she sat in the car and began kicking at the dashboard.

Adam handed over the phone to Ronan after that. When he pulled the phone to his ear, Ronan had to cover his eyes with his hand. “Diane. I don’t-- I’m so sorry--”

Adam didn’t know what she said, but Ronan kept nodding along. Adam kept an eye on Opal in the meantime, making sure she didn’t hurt herself. The minutes seemed to drag on, with Ronan still on the phone, just nodding or cursing occasionally under his breath. Opal, to her credit, was starting to calm down.

Ronan hung up the phone and pocketed it. Adam looked to him, desperate for advice, but Ronan couldn’t meet his eyes. He just stared into the car, waiting.

When they couldn’t wait any longer, Ronan took a deep breath and pulled open the door to the car. Opal didn’t react. He reached in, extremely slowly, and offered her his hand.

“Hey Kid. It’s -- time.”
Opal didn’t look at either of them, but she did get out of the car and began walking toward the airport. As Ronan trailed behind her, he lifted his hand to place on her back before he pulled back, rethinking the decision. Adam followed behind both, carrying her bags, feeling absolutely worthless.

It was a somber situation after that, one that did not end in a tearful or touching goodbye. Opal was compliant the rest of the trek, but she refused to look at Ronan or Adam the whole time. Once she was officially checked in, an airport official greeted the three of them with a smile far too chipper.

“Hiya! All set for your journey home, Opal?”

How she didn’t pick up on the tension was beyond Adam. Or maybe she was just used to this; maybe she dealt with crying kids at the airport all the time. Still, Adam didn’t think this was a normal reaction. Not really.

“How can I get a ‘goodbye,’ Kid?” Ronan asked, bending down to her level.

Opal stared at him, eyes red and puffy from crying, and said nothing. She did nothing. She just stared, helpless and angry and looking very much like she hated him. Adam’s heart hurt for Ronan. Hell, it hurt for himself. This was not how he pictured their goodbye, and worse, he didn’t know how they could have avoided it.

So when Ronan finally pulled himself away from Opal, it was without a goodbye. They watched her disappear into the security line of the airport. It was an unsaid agreement that they would stay at the airport until her plane officially took off, so they found a seat at a cafe and waited. An hour later Ronan walked back to the check-in desk, nodding at whatever they were saying, before he turned back to Adam and gestured to the exit.

The car ride home was horrible. It was silent and stagnant; the evidence of Opal’s outburst still lingered, in the air and on the car, which was looking very beat up. Adam couldn’t help it. He trailed his fingers along the dashboard, along the skid marks left by her shoes.

When they finally got back to the dorm, Adam was exhausted. The dorm - empty and quiet - was hard to return to. It was almost comical, really, to think how he was so worried about spending an evening alone with Ronan. How could they do anything now?

Ronan went straight for his room. Adam thought, briefly, that it would be best to leave him alone.
Ronan needed space, sometimes, and this definitely struck him as one of those moments. But when he heard the unmistakable sound of fist meeting wall seconds later, Adam knew he made a mistake.

“Ronan--” Adam found him near the window, clenching a fist that was already bright red. “Ronan, stop.”

“You don’t--” Ronan barely gritted the words out before he lifted his elbow back for another swing. Adam was ready to pull him back, but thankfully Ronan changed his mind and turned on his heel instead, pressing his palms into his eyes.

“She’ll be okay,” Adam said. “Diane said this happens sometimes. I think… Well, when kids are abused, they do this…”

Ronan sat on the bed with a thump, leaning his elbows on his knees, eyes still covered by his hands. He was sucking in ragged breaths, whole body shaking, whispering something unintelligible under his breath.

Adam didn’t know what to do. Why was he always so helpless?

Unsure, he stepped toward Ronan and reached his hand to the back of Ronan’s scalp. It felt silly, but Adam tried to imagine what would comfort himself. He always liked Ronan’s touch, especially on his hair, and Adam hoped it would convey the same message. *You’ll be okay. I’m so sorry.*

He half expected Ronan to react poorly, to either shove him away or ignore his presence. Instead, Ronan surprised him by leaning into him, pressing his face directly into Adam’s stomach. He pulled Adam closer, between his legs, and let his hands rest on Adam’s hips.

“Ronan…”

Ronan’s voice was muffled from beneath his shirt, but Adam could still make out his words. “I could have hurt her. I probably *did* hurt her.”

Adam ran his hand down Ronan’s scalp, down his neck, and repeated the motion. “You did what you had to. And she’s okay.”
“She’s not okay.”

“She’s--” Adam paused. Ronan had a point. Maybe physically she was fine - somehow, miraculously, no one was seriously injured in the breakdown - but now, more than ever, Adam realized how very not fine Opal was. “She can get better. It just takes time.”

Ronan’s hands trembled on Adam’s waist, and he could feel the heat from Ronan’s shuddered breath on his stomach.

“She’ll be okay,” Adam repeated. “Diane is a good person. She knows how to help Opal. It just takes time to heal, that’s all.”

They didn’t talk much after that. Adam could feel the hint of Ronan’s tears through his shirt, but he didn’t comment on it. He just kept running his hand down Ronan’s neck, down his back, trying to soothe him. Eventually, Ronan pulled his face away from Adam’s stomach and dipped his head low, folding his hands together in what looked like a prayer.

Adam didn’t believe in God, but even he, in that moment, wished there was something out there to tell him what to do. To tell him how to heal Opal, how to make Ronan feel better.

As usual, God was silent.

Chapter End Notes

So sorry for this long delay! This was quite a long chapter, with much more kissing, so hopefully it was worth the wait. The ending is a bit sad, I apologize for angst, but as a teacher, I’ve been working a lot with kids with Emotional/Behavioral Disturbances, and it's pretty intense what it does to children.

Thank you so, so much for all the supportive comments and kudos! They make my day. c:
The First Time

Chapter Notes

Just to warn you, this chapter has mature content. I was going to split it into a separate chapter or post it on Tumblr, but I had a scene I needed to place at the very end, and I didn't want to put a link in the middle of the story for people who wanted more.

If you want, you can skip the scene and not miss out on anything big. If you would like to do this, when you get to the line, "You going to let us in?" just skip forward until the line, "Ronan woke to his hotel phone ringing." (I also separated it with a page break.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Just tell me the truth,” Ronan said. “Did I fu-- Is it my fault?”

“Oh, Ronan, no.” On the other end of the line, Diane sounded incredibly fatigued.

He wondered how the past day had gone for her, but was too afraid to ask. In her fit, Opal had said she hated Diane. That she didn’t want to go back. He knew better than to believe her; he’d been around Diane enough to know she was a good person, and knew Opal enough to recognize that she did, actually, love her foster mom. Still, he suspected Opal did not greet her warmly when she arrived back in West Virginia.

“There’s nothing you could have done to prevent this, Ronan. I had wondered whether she might…” Diane cleared her throat. “She loves you Ronan. You know this, right?”

Ronan did. He always knew, of course he did. Ronan knew that leaving Opal behind in Henrietta meant breaking her heart, just like it broke his. He had told himself, for a long time, though, that it was misplaced affection. That she didn’t understand who he truly was, that she simply found a (relatively) positive male role-model and figured it was better than nothing.

He realized, after this visit, that she loved him more than thought. That maybe he wasn’t just someone to fill a void in her life. That, just as she had worked herself into his heart, he had apparently done the same for her.

Ronan wasn’t sure what he dd to deserve this affection.
“I know,” Ronan said, clutching the phone closer to his ear. It should have been so easy to return the sentiments, to ensure Diane that the feeling was mutual. He had still not learned to vocalize his affection, though.

“Ronan, you treat her so well. Her life is so much more because of you, and I am eternally grateful to you for that,” Diane said, and Ronan’s stomach flipped. He heard the catch in her breath, the impending doom. “You have done absolutely nothing wrong. But, Ronan, I’m not sure if it’s such a good idea for you two to talk as much...”

There it was. He had gotten almost no sleep the night before, dreading this moment. Really, he expected worse. He thought Diane would be incredibly angry, would deny him the right to ever see Opal again. There was no point arguing her point; he knew Diane’s logic was solid, and he knew he was lucky to get this much.

He knew the answer already, and yet Ronan asked, “Because it’s too hard for her?”

“Yes. You have to realize, Ronan, that children are already so sensitive to change, even the ones who don’t have trauma in their lives. So, for Opal, you ‘leaving’ her over and over again is...”

Ronan didn’t know what to say. What could he say? Diane was the expert in this, it was literally her job to know what was best for Opal. She had the experience. Plus, he’d seen how Opal reacted. He had the scratches down his arms to prove how Opal reacted.

He couldn’t think about it too much. It made him sick. Not that he blamed her for anything - Ronan understood why she acted out - but he hated himself. No matter what Diane said, he felt like he could have prevented it. Could have kept Opal safer. He didn’t like having to chase after her, having to grab her forcefully and keep her limbs trapped. Ronan could have hurt her so easily and he just--

“Ronan?”

“Sorry. I -- I know. It’s fine, I kind of expected this.”

“I don’t mean forever,” Diane added. “And if you’re in town, I don’t think it’d be a problem to visit her. But maybe it can be the three of us, together. I think she gets her hopes up when it’s just the two of you. And with Adam -- well. She likes him, too. It was just too much for one visit.”
This made sense. If Ronan, at almost twenty two, had his own fantasies about the three of them forming a family, then a young child *definitely* might have issues with that.

“Do you think he should stop writing to her?”

Diane sighed. “God, I didn’t even think of that. Well. It’s probably hard for her, but at the same time, I think it’s good for her, to have someone who understands…”

“I think it’s good for him, too.”

“You think?” He thought he heard a smile on her voice. Sure enough, her voice lilted, “So, were you serious when you said you liked Adam?”

“God, do you watch our interviews?”

“We watch *everything* you guys do. Opal has a poster of you all in her bedroom.” Diane cleared her throat. “You don’t have to tell me, but you should probably know that Opal told me you two are together. Er, well, technically she said you seemed happier now that you get to kiss someone. So I’m assuming…”

“Jesus Christ.”

“I told her not to tell anyone. I figured you wanted privacy.”

Ronan sighed. “Thank you. Is that… a problem for you?”

“Oh, honey, please. We’re just happy that *you’re* happy,” Diane said. “Jim and I were so proud of you, when you came out publically. I’m so glad to know your company supports you!”

Ronan wasn’t sure how to respond to any of what she said. It was touching, definitely, to hear her support. It’s not that he and Diane were incredibly close or anything, but they’d developed a relationship in his time with Opal. Hearing anyone - but especially someone from his home town - support him was a bit unbelievable. Of course, hearing her praise *Cabeswater* was a hard to hear. He couldn’t blame anyone but himself for that, though.

He took it as an opportunity to end the conversation, making sure to thank Diane once more. Once
he hung up, he sat on the living room couch, trying to catch his breath. He tried to remind himself that the conversation went better than he thought. He could still make it work with Opal. He’d get to see her eventually. Maybe not as much, but it wasn’t -- It could still --

Ronan dipped his head into his hands, digging his fingers into his hair. He didn’t know what to do. This wasn’t anger, it was worse. Like someone was pulling the breath out of him, strangling him slowly. He wound his hands into his hair, pulling tightly at the strands. When the pain didn’t stop his panic, Ronan escaped to the bathroom.

He didn’t know what he was doing, not consciously, and yet his hands went directly to the hair trimmer. He barely registered the buzz of it over the ringing in his ears. His hands shook as he lifted it to his scalp and began to methodically shave his head. It took some time, but the movement eventually lowered his heart rate back to normal, as if focusing on this little task had the ability to bring him back from the edge.

When he was done, he inspected himself in the mirror. His eyes, puffy and weighed down by heavy bags, stared back at him. He felt hollow. Strangled. He hadn’t felt like this since--

God. Ronan wanted to run away. Find the nearest store and buy a fifth of whisky and down it all. It didn’t matter that it was eight in the morning, he just needed out.

He was halfway to planning it all out, making his way to his room to grab a change of clothes and his keys, when he was snapped out of his stupor. Because he had forgotten --

There was Adam, tucked into the sheets of his bed, squinting up at him at the sound of the door slamming open. Ronan had left him there around five in the morning, when he resigned himself to being awake for the rest of the morning. He had liked sleeping next to Adam, even in the too-small bed, but Ronan didn’t want to ruin his sleep. So he’d left him there, slipped out quietly to watch early morning infomercials.

“What time is it?” Adam asked.

When Ronan had left Adam, Adam had definitely been wearing a shirt. When had he shucked it off? Why did he take it off? The room wasn’t hot and there wasn’t any reason for him to do that and why --

“Ronan?”
He exhaled, ridding himself of his panic and his hatred in one breath, and all it took was seeing Adam Parrish in his bed. *In his bed, without a shirt, and God, with the sheet like that you couldn’t even tell if he was wearing—*

“What happened to your hair?” Adam asked suddenly, leaning forward and betraying the fact that, yes, he was wearing his standard pajama pants.

It was better this way. For everyone.

“What?” Ronan managed.

Adam rested his back against the headboard and sighed. “Ronan…”

“It’s about eight,” he said finally. He wasn’t aware of his feet taking him toward Adam, yet suddenly he was in front of the bed.

“Okay, one question down.” Adam held his hand out to Ronan, and when they touched, he tugged him onto the bed with him. He let his hand graze over Ronan’s freshly shaved head. “And this?”

“What?” Ronan dipped his eyes to scan Adam’s bare chest. He tried to remember if he’d ever seen him without his shirt. There was a scatter of freckles across his shoulders, underneath his collar bone, but he didn’t dare see how low they dipped. “Do you not like it?”

Adam rolled his eyes. “You’re missing the point.”

“No, I’m just *avoiding* the point.” Ronan desperately wanted to lift his hand and confirm whether Adam’s skin was as soft as it looked. Instead, he dug his hands into the sheets. “Did you sleep okay?”

Adam squirmed against the headboard, and Ronan wondered whether he was being too obvious. If so, Adam didn’t appear to mind *too* much, though, because he scooted down until he was laying on his back, stretching his body back across the bed. It gave Ronan and even better view. (Well, fuck.)
“These beds are too small,” Adam said with a shrug. His finger lifted to the bottom of Ronan’s shirt. “Did I keep you up? You left so early.”

Ronan was having a very hard time focusing. Without thinking about it, he said, “Well, I didn’t know you were going to take off your shirt.”

A delirious little grin slipped onto Adam’s face. He didn’t even have the decency to look embarrassed, Jesus. “Is that right?”

“Don’t say anything.”

“Fine.” Instead, Adam shrugged and lifted his arms behind his head, and made everything ten times worse with his fucking biceps. He didn’t even have defined muscles, not really, and yet in this position he looked --

Ugh.

Adam must have picked up on his reaction, because his lips split into a grin again. It didn’t last long, though, because soon Adam was trailing his fingers down the side of Ronan’s jaw, lips pursed together. “Are you okay?”

“I’m--” Ronan paused to think. The rawness he had felt just minutes ago had evaporated, and he realized this with a start. It wasn’t a lie when he said, “I’m fine now.”

“I’ll miss the curls a bit,” Adam admitted. “But this is nice, too. It kind of reminds me of my twenty-first birthday.”

“How so?”

“You had shaved your head, then,” Adam said, running his hand over Ronan’s scalp once more. Finally, he seemed to look a little flustered, because his voice caught in his throat. “And we shared a bed then, too.”

“This is a little different, though. I don’t remember you trying to feel me up in your sleep back then,” Ronan pointed out.
“What? There’s no way I did that—” Adam rolled his eyes when Ronan laughed, betraying his fib. “Well. I kind of wanted to.”

“Last night?”

“No-- well, yes, but I meant... then.” Adam covered his eyes with his palm, apparently regretting what he was about to say. “You took your shirt off and it did things to me.”

“What sort of things?” After the words left his lips, Ronan immediately regretted it. This was a horrible idea. They were still alone, and Adam was sans shirt, and Ronan was an emotional wreck. It would be so, so easy for Ronan to make a horrible decision.

“Uhh,” Adam licked his bottom lip. “Sexual awakening sorts of things?”

Fuck.

Well.

When in Rome.

Ronan dipped his head down to meet Adam’s chest. He wasn’t bold enough to touch his lips to Adam’s skin yet, but he pressed his nose to his him, allowing his hands to sit at Adam’s waist. Adam went rigid at the touch, and Ronan could feel his stomach muscles clench.

“Is this okay?” Ronan asked.

“No. I mean, yes, but--” Adam tugged at Ronan’s shirt. “This is unfair.”

It was probably the universe’s way of telling him to slow down, but Ronan ignored it. “Then take it off.”
“Okay. Yeah, okay.” Adam’s hands skittered underneath Ronan’s shirt, pulling it up and over him. When it was discarded onto the floor, Adam sucked in a quick breath. “Jesus.”

“What?”

“I don’t want to say.”

“That bad?”

“Opposite problem…” Adam pressed his palm to Ronan’s chest, before he dragged his thumb down the center of his abdomen. In a worried breath, he warned, “Ronan.”

Ronan didn’t want to think about whether it was the wrong or right time to do this. He was getting tired of playing it safe, of worrying about every step they took. He was so tired, and his heart still hurt, and Adam was the perfect type of distraction.

Ronan leaned back down, this time pressing his lips lightly to Adam’s collarbone. Against it he whispered, “I’m okay if you’re okay.”

“I’m always okay,” Adam agreed. “But you--”

Ronan dragged his lips lower, tracing them down Adam’s skin. Adam must have liked it, because he abruptly stopped talking. Instead, he curled one knee up, a move Ronan didn’t understand until Adam dropped it to the side and arched his back and -- *oh.*

Ronan had a string of curses readied on his tongue. He never got to release them. Seconds later, both boys heard the distinct sound of the front door slamming shut. Ronan yanked his mouth from Adam’s skin and stared at the open door of the room, waiting.

“Hello? Anybody home?”

At the unmistakable sound of Henry Cheng’s voice, Adam shoved Ronan away. (Not that it was necessary - Ronan was halfway to sprinting up already.) Adam shimmied back underneath the sheets quickly, covering his torso, before he quickly grabbed Ronan’s shirt and tossed it at him.
Ronan had only just tugged it back on when Henry popped his head around the doorframe. “Oh! You guys are… home…”

A peculiar hush fell over the room. Henry’s eyes darted back and forth between the two of them. Ronan smoothed down his shirt instinctively, while Adam tried (and failed) to look nonchalant in the bed.

Henry’s smile was near maniacal. He clapped his hands together and shouted, “Hot damn! What did I just walk in on?”

“Nothing,” Adam insisted.

Ronan found he couldn’t think of anything to say. Instead, he fixed his face into a glare, hoping he could intimidate Henry into silence. (It didn’t work. It never worked, not with Henry.)

“Okay, I’m a kind, decent human, so I’ll pretend like that wasn’t the worst lie I’ve ever heard,” Henry said, snorting impolitely. “So sorry to intrude, but I thought I’d come along to pick up the gang from the airport. Figured we could get some breakfast first. Catch up.”

“You couldn’t have called?” Ronan snapped.

Henry barked a laugh. “Would you have answered?”

“You could have at least knocked!”

“And you could have locked your damn door before you were going to get it on! Not my fault you’re amateurs.”

“Guys, come on,” Adam interrupted. By now, he had pulled back on his shirt, thank God. “Henry, you could have at least warned us.”

“Okay, okay. Listen, here’s your heartfelt apology: I apologize for intruding on your much-needed
Ronan pulled Adam back by his shoulder, keeping him on the bed. With the other hand, he pushed Henry toward the door and said, “You. Out. Give us a minute.”

Henry’s cackle echoed through the door and down the hall, only silenced by Ronan slamming the bedroom door shut. Adam was a hot pink mess on the bed, more frazzled than Ronan had ever seen him. Once alone, he focused a glare onto the floor, clearly avoiding Ronan.

“He’s so--” Adam paused. “I don’t even have a word to describe Cheng.”

“He’s Cheng. It’s an adjective in itself.”

Adam dropped his head into his hands and sighed. “He’s never going to let us live this down, and we didn’t even get to do anything.”

Ronan knew what he meant - how could he not, when the image of what more they could have done kept flashing through his brain - but he wouldn’t say they did nothing. He was going to enjoy the taste of Adam’s skin and think about the patch of freckles that trailed down Adam’s sternum for days.

When Ronan said nothing, though, Adam filled the gap. He was tugging at his hair now, staring at it through his fingers. He muttered, “It’s for the best probably, because you wouldn’t have wanted to kiss me. Morning breath and all.”

Ronan would probably regret this, but, “I will always want to kiss you.”

Adam’s body twisted uncomfortably. Ronan was starting to realize that, as much as Adam wanted physical touch, he shied away from most verbal affection. Was it Ronan’s fault, for never being able to express himself in words? Would Adam have liked compliments more had Ronan given them since day one?

“Well, easy for you to say,” Adam said, the hitch in his breath betraying his nerves. He was trying to ease the tension in the room. “You’ve been up for hours. Bet you’ve already brushed your teeth.”
Ronan decided to let the moment go. Dryly, he said, “Proper dental hygiene is important.”

Adam’s eyes lingered on Ronan for a moment, before he settled with, “Okay, go figure out Henry’s plan. I need a shower before we leave, so you’re going to have to stall him a bit.”

Ronan did not like the idea of talking to Henry, alone, after what had happened. He could vividly recall the grin on Henry’s face, and sure enough, it was there waiting for him in the living room. (Along with an obscenely over-the-top eyebrow waggle.) Ronan was determined to ignore Henry, opting instead to busy himself with dishes. Henry was nothing if not persistent, though, and a few minutes later he gave up on waiting and appeared at Ronan’s elbow, leering.

“So. Things going well for you two?”

“None of your business.”

“Not strictly true, since I almost saw a lot of your business--”

“Cheng, I’m going to stuff your fucking tie down the disposal if you don’t shut up.”

“God, what is wrong with all of you?” Henry hopped onto the counter and dangled his feet against the cabinets. “How come no one in your band is willing to talk about relationships? This is natural. This is normal. I want to gossip about things and you’re all making it very difficult.”

“Why on earth would you want to know any details about Blue and Gansey? They probably roleplay as government officials or something.”

“It’s not the details I want, per say, so much as the... community. It’s nice to share feelings with your friends.”

Ronan eyed Henry carefully. It was in him to correct Henry, to snap something about how they weren’t friends, that they were colleagues. But for whatever reason, he didn’t have the heart to do it. Maybe it was Henry’s stance. Seeing him perched on the counter, looking a little like a kid, just seemed to cruel. That was it.
(Ugh. Fine. He might be friends with Henry Cheng. Fuck.)

“Anyway, it’s not just Blue and Gansey,” Henry said, fiddling with some kitchen utensils. “Noah refuses to tell me anything, either.”

“He doesn’t really have much to tell,” Ronan muttered.

“I find that hard to believe. He’s never had a crush on someone? Or, like, has no one propositioned him since becoming famous? As the only single member of your band, surely he’s gotten some offers.”

Ronan peaked over his shoulder, then turned back to Henry, bewildered. “Do I really strike you as the type of guy who has these talks?”

“You’re his best friend.”

“And?”

“Ugh. Fine. Well, props to you for being the most un-stereotypical gay man I’ve ever met, I guess,” Henry muttered.

Thank God, this horrible conversation seemed to finally be over. Henry seemed content to let it go, too annoyed at Ronan to dig deeper. Briefly, Ronan wondered whether he should know more about Noah’s dating life. Did that make him a bad friend? It’s not like he knew about Gansey’s dating life either; if not for Adam being so fucking observant, he would have never noticed Gansey and Blue.

Henry chewed on a hangnail. “So do you think he’s into girls, or guys, or--”

“Jesus Christ.” Ronan threw the soapy sponge down into the sink, leveling his gaze at Henry. “Why do you even care so much? It’s not like you have to worry about him ruining Cabeswater’s reputation, alright? He doesn’t have any dirty secrets.”

“I’m not--” Henry paused to take a breath. There was a strange look passing over his face, one Ronan had never seen. Almost like Henry was deep in thought, or maybe confused, or-- “God, why
do you always assume I’m an asshole? I thought we got past this, but apparently not. You know, sometimes I want to know things about you guys, just for my own personal knowledge. Sue me for being interested in your lives.”

Oh.

He was pissed.

Huh. That was new.

“Okay, okay.” Ronan wiped his hand on a dish rag before he clapped Henry on the shoulder. “I know you’re not a dick. You were just asking a lot of questions about Noah. I’m just trying to watch out for him, okay?”

Henry did not seem moved by the apology. (Which, Ronan realized, could have been due to the fact that he never actually uttered the word “sorry” anywhere in his apology, but still. The sentiment was there in his tone.) He slid off the counter and wandered back to the living room, muttering something in Korean under his breath.

Thankfully, Ronan only had to endure the awkward silence for a minute or two before Adam stumbled out of the bathroom, freshly showered. He eyed the two of them suspiciously, “Everything okay here?”

Henry switched back on. “Adam! There you are. Can I take you both out to breakfast before we head to the airport? There’s a great little place near the airport. Best eggs benedict you’ll ever eat.”

Adam agreed, of course, and in a few minutes they were tucked into Henry’s ridiculous SUV. Ronan fell into the back seat, not ready to face Henry so close. Henry had to stop to get gas, though, and once he was outside the car Adam turned around to glare at Ronan.

“What did you do to him?”

“Nothing!” Ronan sunk into the leather seats of the car, self-conscious under Adam’s gaze. “He was just asking all these weird fucking questions about Noah, and I got annoyed. It’s fine.”
“What sort of questions?”

“What about his dating history and shit. I don’t know. I thought he was worrying about Noah’s reputation or something, that it would look bad on Cabeswater, and he got super offended.”

Adam leaned forward in his seat, sneaking a look at Henry. “Interesting…”

“What?”

“Not sure yet. I’ll keep you posted.”

Henry’s bad mood lessened as the morning went on. He seemed pleased that they had both agreed to go out with them, and even more pleased when they did, in fact, enjoy their food. Adam and Henry talked the most throughout the meal, though, as Henry did not seem interested in directing any more questions Ronan’s way. It was nice, in some ways, to have the pressure taken off him. On the other hand, it made it even *more* apparent that Henry was annoyed at him.

Passive-aggressive little fucker.

It also allowed plenty of time for Ronan’s thoughts to drift back to Opal. Adam had proved to be the best distraction, of course, but he hadn’t realized that Henry and his annoying twenty question game had also kept his mind off Opal. It ruined his appetite to remember that he couldn’t see her again.

(No, he had to stop saying that. He *would* see her again, it just had to be under very specific situations.)

Ronan rubbed his hand against the back of his head, calmed by soft prickles of his fresh buzzcut. Yeah. There were perks to this cut, ones he had forgotten.

Later, as they waited in the airport for Blue and Noah to arrive, Henry told them, “I truly hope you enjoyed your time off, but I’m so glad to have you back. I have some great news to share.”

“What about?” Adam asked.
Henry shook his head. “Better to tell everyone at once. Oh, don’t look so worried. I told you it was great news.”

Despite his insistence, Ronan still worried. Surprises never sat well with him. The only news he could think of that wouldn’t set him on edge was if Whelk was stepping down, and somehow he doubted that. He hadn’t spoken to Whelk much since the press conference, but even the small conversations they’d had were tinged with Whelk’s typical bravado and determination. He was not likely to give in, not after the scene Ronan pulled.

Noah and Blue’s arrival distracted him, thankfully. He didn’t realize how much he missed the rest of the band until the two appeared in the airport, both looking a bit ridiculous pulling large bags behind them that were nearly the same size as their owners. Blue was wearing a new outfit - Ronan had memorized all her outfits, by now, because they were always so fucking weird - and it reeked of Orla’s hand creations.

“Blue, looking lovely as always,” Henry said, sweeping her into a hug.

She returned the hug with fury. “Henry! I didn’t know you’d be coming!”

“He has news for us, apparently,” Adam commented.

“That’s not why I came! I simply missed you, that’s all.” Henry stepped back from Blue and turned to Noah. He stuck out his hand. “And you as well, Noah.”

Noah’s smile was tired as he took Henry’s hand. “I missed you, too, Henry.”

Ronan thought the gesture seemed odd, but he wasn’t going to say anything. Handshakes were meant for business interactions, not friendly banter. To prove his point, Ronan made sure to fist-bump Noah once they were in close proximity. He was a little dismayed when he realized that Noah still offered him the same smile, one that didn’t reach his eyes.

“Long flight?” Ronan asked carefully.

“Been up since four,” Noah confirmed. “Also, Blue used my shoulder as her pillow the entire time, so I hardly slept.”
“You could have shoved me off!”

“You can sleep on the ride home,” Henry told Noah, while simultaneously reaching to take his bag from him. “I’ve got this!”

When Ronan met Blue’s eyes, she hugged her luggage close to her and muttered, “Don’t even think about it. I can carry my own things!”

She turned on her heel and started toward the exit before either could argue. (Not that Ronan would have - if Blue wanted to carry her bag, he’d let her carry her own fucking bag. Adam, on the other hand, might have been convinced. Without Gansey there, it fell to Adam to be the Southern Gentleman.)

Noah seemed uneasy having Henry carry his bag, which led to a brief and exceedingly polite argument. The sort of thing Ronan would never be caught doing. (God, just hearing the exchange of, “Oh, no, you really don’t have to--” “No, no, it’s no problem!” “Oh, but I packed way too much--” “Please, Noah, I insist!” made Ronan tired.)

They eventually followed Blue toward the exit, leaving Ronan and Adam to linger behind. Adam nudged his elbow into Ronan’s side.

“I think I get it now.”

“Get what?”

Adam flicked his eyes toward Henry.

“You’re going to have to be more specific,” Ronan said.

“You don’t see it?” Adam asked, one of his eyebrows reaching a spectacular height. “Seriously?”

“See what?” Ronan was starting to get a little irritated now.
“No wonder it took us so long to get together,” Adam muttered. At Ronan’s glare, Adam peeked over his shoulder for spying eyes, then leaned into him. The whisper of Adam’s breath on his ear was enough to ease Ronan’s tension. “It’s okay. It was worth the wait.”

Ronan shoved him away before he’d be too tempted to kiss him in front of baggage claim.

Adam knew he should be thinking more about Henry’s big surprise. Ronan had been pulling hints from Henry all day, even dragging Noah into the mess as the day progressed. They were waiting for Gansey to arrive back from the airport - poor guy, no one was willing to make a second trip back to LAX, so he had to take a taxi back - and everyone else was talking about the surprise.

Adam did not care about the surprise.

He cared about Ronan Lynch, shirtless, on top of him. He cared about Ronan’s lips on his skin, dragging lower and lower. He cared about the hard muscles of Ronan’s stomach, muscles that Adam wanted to touch with more than his hands.

Adam could not stop thinking of that morning, again and again and again. Considering he was surrounded by his friends, though, Adam really needed to stop thinking about it. He tried to focus on Henry. Stupid Henry, and his stupid timing. No, wait, that thought would lead back to Ronan and Ronan shirtless and he just needed to stop--

“Brethren! And my lady, of course. It feels like it’s been years!”

Oh thank God. Gansey. He was like an instant cold shower.

“It’s been four days, Gansey,” Adam said, relishing the moment of distraction. Gansey was planting a kiss on Blue’s cheeks, knocking his (Three? Ridiculous) bags of luggage over in the process. “Is that how many bags you brought with you?”

“Oh, no! My mother just sent me home with quite a few gifts for you and Cabeswater, and I had to
put them in a third bag.”

“So what’s the excuse for the second bag?” Blue asked.

“What do you mean?”

Adam and Blue exchanged a look of exhaustion, though why they bothered after all these years he didn’t know. Gansey would forever be Gansey, and Adam had long-since resigned himself to accepting his peculiar ways.

“They just don’t understand how much work it takes to look this good, Three,” Henry cut in, straightening his tie. “They simply don’t appreciate the little details.”

Even Gansey looked a bit perturbed by this statement. With a pained expression, he said, “Well, I’m not sure I can claim to be at your level quite yet, Henry. But Mother did host a Congressional dinner at the house, so it was quite necessary for me to--”

“Yeah, yeah. You needed five different pairs of boat shoes, in case one clashed with your sweater vest. I get it. Can we move onto the big announcement already?” Ronan asked.

“Oh, are you going to tell them about that?” Gansey said.

“Dick gets to know the secret? What gives?”

“Ronan, please.” Gansey relaxed into the couch, angling Blue so that she was cupped under his arm. “It’s not my fault that you refuse to participate in the development of this band. Henry and I have weekly meetings to discuss our future endeavors, so of course I’m privy to the ‘secret.’”

“How about less arguing, more talking about said secret?” Blue suggested.

“Oh, fine.” Henry leaned his elbows on his knees and made sure to connect eyes with each of them. “This is big. Not many new bands get an opportunity like this so soon, but you’re doing exceptionally well in sales.”
“You’re welcome,” Ronan said cheekily.

Henry rolled his eyes. Apparently, his annoyance toward Ronan had yet to fade completely. “Cabeswater has agreed to sponsor a tour for you. It won’t be big - maybe seven shows total, if we’re lucky - but we’ll be touring the US over the next few months.”

The words had to sink in for a few seconds before the news was understood. The band reacted differently. Ronan and Blue seemed instantly impressed - unsurprising, seeing as both loved performing - and Blue threw her arms around Henry’s neck and exclaimed, “A tour? Holy shit, Henry!”

Noah, who Adam would have assumed would be equally excited, remained rather neutral. Adam hoped it was the effects of the long plane ride still lingering, but as the day had progressed, something about Noah’s mood made him feel uneasy. True, ever since his hospital visit, Noah was much less animated than usual, but he still got excited about things. Seeing him just nod along numbly to the news was worrisome.

Or maybe this was all Adam projecting. Maybe Noah was simply tired, and it was a reflection of how Adam felt: instant dread. It’s not that he hated concerts - they used to be his favorite thing - but playing in front of a crowd had lost its appeal ever since he lost his hearing. He knew, realistically, that he would probably be fine, but he still had to worry about it. It took the thrill out of performing, knowing he would be second-guessing his every step.

But he was being stupid. Of course they would have a concert, eventually. The more famous they got, the more likely it became. He would just have to get over his fear. Adam had agreed to join the band again knowing he would have to face his fears.

He just thought he’d have a little more time.

“What size of venue?” Ronan asked. “We talking shitty cafes here or possibly arenas?”

Those are details you’d have to talk to Whelk about,” Henry said. “I may take on the majority of his managerial duties for you all, but I’m still just the PR-guy. I don’t get to know those details. But based on your current popularity, I think you’d have the capacity to fill at least ten thousand seats in a bigger city, possibly more.”

“Ten-thousand?” Adam asked in disbelief, while Ronan sat back with folded arms and said, “Oh.”
Adam didn’t want to know whether Ronan’s response meant, *Oh, that’s it?* or *Oh, holy shit.* He couldn’t think about it without an immediate wave of panic settling in his throat. How on earth was he supposed to perform in front of ten thousand people?

“Maybe more,” Henry offered with a grin. “We’ll have to see what sort of reaction it gets. Anyway, the current plan is one show here, in LA, one in San Francisco, one in New York, Vancouver if we can get your Visas processed in time, and - don’t get your hopes up - but I’m swinging to get you a show in D.C.”

“My mom could actually come to a show,” Blue whispered. “Ronan, if we had a show in DC, I bet you could get Opal to come!”

Ronan bit at his thumb, eyes hitting the floor. “Maybe.”

“Well, I’m glad to see that most of you are excited by the news,” Henry said, eyes crinkling in the corner from a smile that seemed a little too forced. It came as no surprise to Adam, then, when he turned to him and asked, voice tentative, “Is this okay, Adam?”

Adam thought it was a little cruel of Henry to ask him this in front of the rest of the band, when they were all so excited. Before he could respond, though, Ronan jumped in.

“Nothing is official, right? We still need to discuss this as a band. We’d need to know the logistics of the arena, the technology we’d have access to.”

Adam knew he was doing it for his benefit, but it irked him that he didn’t come out and just *say it.* He tried to push that anger down - he was being irrational, he understood Ronan just wanted to protect him - but it still slipped into his voice when he said, “He means to say, how am I going to sing if there are ten-thousand people screaming in my one good ear?”

“We’ll get you a good earpiece,” Henry said gently.

“Still--” Adam licked his bottom lip as an excuse to pause. He had to keep his worries in check. It wasn’t a good look on him. “What if I can’t hear the music *and* my voice in the earpiece? I could ruin the whole show.”

“Adam,” Blue said. “You’re a good singer. You can do this. I think you worry too much.”

Gansey must have sensed that Adam did not appreciate her words, because he placed his hand on
Blue’s shoulder, “Not that you worry too much, we understand why it concerns you. We just mean to say, we trust you. You can do this. And in the rare chance that something happens, we’ll deal with it.”

He felt marginally more comforted. Why were his friends so terrible at this?

“We don’t have to jump into this,” Henry said. “It’s all talk right now, anyway. Whelk will want to balance figures, anyway. He won’t do this if it won’t yield considerable profits.”

“No, no, I’ll do it,” Adam muttered. “I’m not going to spoil this for everyone.”

Blue sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and glanced at Gansey, clearly unsure how to best handle his reaction. Ronan had fallen into an uncomfortable silence, eyes flitting to Adam every thirty seconds or so. Well, that was great. Adam made everyone uncomfortable, including his boyfriend. What a guy.

“Well, as kind of that is of you to say, Adam, you’re not the only one in the band who seems unenthused,” Henry said quietly. He cleared his throat and turned to Noah. “You okay with this, Noah?”

Noah - that’s right, Noah, shit, he had already forgotten about him in his own self-loathing - perked up from his seat and shook his head in a daze. “Oh, sorry. I was just thinking.”

“Well, what do you think of this?” Henry pressed.

“The concert. And stuff. Sorry, I’m just still really tired from the flight,” Noah said. He forced a smile on his face, one that couldn’t have fooled anyone in the room. “How long do you think we’d be touring?”

“A month or so, I imagine. We’d be taking a bus, so we’d have to schedule shows at least four or five days apart.”

Noah hummed under his breath. He didn’t seem thrilled with the news, but he didn’t look upset, either. He took the news in stride, nodding absentmindedly, before he adding, “Well, keep us posted when you hear more then, I suppose.”
Henry stared at Noah a bit too long, though Adam was probably the only one to notice. He had his suspicions that Henry’s interest in Noah was much less sinister than Ronan originally imagined. He couldn’t prove it, exactly - after all, Henry was a flirt with everyone, so it was hard to say if he was genuine or not - but it was for that same exact reason that Adam was so suspicious. Henry was only subtle when he really wanted something, and his casual interest in Noah spoke volumes.

Adam didn’t want to think about it too much, though. Being in his own relationship was stressful enough; he didn’t want to think about Henry and his (likely) unrequited crush.

Once the thrill of the concert wore off, they shared stories of the past four days. Ronan, unsurprisingly, left out the drama with Opal. Noah perked up when he shared stories of his little sisters, but once done, excused himself to nap in his room. Henry left not long after - just another little hint that no one but Adam seemed to pick up on - which left the two couples in the room together.

“So,” Blue said, a coy smile creeping onto her face. “You two enjoying having the dorm to yourself?”

“None of your business, Sargent.”

“Well, not that you need to tell us anything.” Gansey started, drumming his fingers against his chin. “But I think it would be, in the best interest of the band, for you two to be a bit more transparent about your relationship. I mean, for all we know this is just a fling--”

“Gansey, come on,” Adam muttered.

“Look at them blush!”

“Sincerely, I didn’t mean to embarrass you both,” Gansey said quickly, elbowing Blue discreetly. “I just want to ensure that you’ve both thought this through carefully. If something were to happen--”

“Look, why don’t you just trust us? We’re adults,” Adam said, kneading his fingers into his thighs to keep from raising his voice. “Plus, we didn’t give you guys this lecture when you two started dating.”
“Oh, I didn’t mean to…” Gansey trailed off, looking to Blue for help. “I’m sorry. I just want you two to be careful.”

“We’ll be fine, Dick,” Ronan snapped. He nudged Adam with his foot and muttered, “Come on, Parrish. I want food.”

In two long steps, Ronan gathered his keys from the counter and his leather jacket. He stared at Adam near the door, waiting. Clearly, this wasn’t going to be a discussion. With a huff, Adam pushed himself past Ronan and out into the hall.

“What do you want to eat?” Ronan asked.

“You’re the one who said he was hungry,” Adam said, unable to hold back the bite in his tone. “You pick.”

“You’re mad.”

“I’m allowed to be mad once in awhile, okay?”

“I know.” Ronan leaned against the hallway and stuffed his hands in his pockets, looking so downtrodden that Adam’s gut flipped with remorse. God, what was he doing? It wasn’t Ronan’s fault that Gansey was living up to his name, and it wasn’t Ronan’s fault they had the opportunity to play shows.

“Sorry,” Adam amended, falling next to Ronan’s side. “I’m not mad at you. I’m just mad at… life, I guess. And I know I don’t really have the right to complain - because things are actually really great right now - but it still just…sucks.”

Ronan shifted closer to him, so that the length of his arm pressed into Adam. “You’re allowed to still be angry about your hearing.”

“Maybe.”

Ronan slid his fingers down Adam’s wrist, until he fit them in his palm. They laced fingers quickly,
pressing their palms tightly together, and Adam tried to focus on that feeling. It was just Ronan, warm and strong and everything he’d wanted for so long, and he liked Adam. Any time Adam felt mad at the world, he tried to remember this fact.

“About what Gansey said…”

“What?”

“He kind of has a point,” Ronan mumbled. “We never really -- We haven’t talked about it.”

“What else is there to talk about?”

Ronan tilted his chin toward the ceiling, squinting his eyes in pain as his freshly shaved head skid against the sharp wall of the building. “Just… Uh. Nevermind.”

“What?”

“It’s fine.”

“Ronan.”

“You still owe me a favor!” He said suddenly, pushing himself away from the wall and walking further down the hall. “You said you’d do anything I asked. So.”

Adam rolled his eyes, but he still found himself instinctively trailing after Ronan. “It’s not like I was avoiding it. You just never asked for anything.”

“Well, I’m going to ask now.”

“Okay…?”
Ronan stopped, his back still to Adam. He was clenching his fist at his side, while his other hand fidgeted. After a minute of working up to it, he finally said, with a bit too much malice considering the topic, “Be my boyfriend.”

Adam wanted to laugh. “What?”

“You can’t say ‘no,’” Ronan warned. There was an edge to his voice, and Adam realized with a start that he was worried.

What? Why?

“That’s a waste of a favor,” Adam said, tugging at the back of Ronan’s shirt to pull him closer. Ronan allowed himself to be tugged back, and once there, Adam wrapped his arm around Ronan’s back. “I already thought I was your boyfriend. Did you not think we were official?”

Ronan leaned into his touch. “We never talked about it.”

“I thought it was understood, in the fact that we’ve been making out off and on for the past month.”

Ronan muttered something under his breath that Adam could not pick up, though if he had to bet, it was likely a curse. Still, rather than get angry, Ronan lifted his hand to place it on top of Adam’s arm circled round his waist.

“Then that doesn’t count as my favor,” Ronan finally said, pushing the button for the elevator.

“Oh, it definitely does. Not my fault you’re an idiot.”

To shut him up, Ronan cupped his palms around Adam’s cheeks and kissed him. The hallway was deserted, but Adam still felt a little thrill at kissing Ronan in public. They darted apart when the doors to the elevator finally opened, but when were revealed to be empty, Adam tugged him inside and back to his lips.

Ronan pulled away to nudge his nose along Adam’s neck. “Everything’s a turn-on for you, isn’t it?”
Adam pressed his hand on the back of Ronan’s neck, angling it so that Ronan had to press his lips to his skin instead. Much better. “Yes.”

“So have you scheduled out our entire relationship yet?” Ronan teased. Ronan ran his hands up the back of Adam’s thighs before he straightened his body back, regaining his height advantage once more.

Adam was distinctly aware of the fact that neither of them had pushed the button to go down, and yet the doors had shut and they started their descent. It meant someone needed the elevator below, and he did not imagine they’d take too kindly to finding a breathless mess of a boy inside. Still, it was hard to ignore Ronan and his lips, especially after the thoughts that had been running through his mind all morning.

“I was kidding about that,” Adam said.

“Didn’t seem like it.” Ronan kissed him again, lingering more than was appropriate considering the elevator had stopped. “Had Henry not interrupted us, I’m not sure if I could have stopped.”

Adam couldn’t help it; he shuddered at the implication, pressing his hips forward into him. Ronan pulled back just in time, stepping away from Adam as the doors opened. He was trying to look cocky, based on the smirk gracing his face, but the way Ronan licked his bottom lip betrayed his nerves.

Bastard. He really would be the death of Adam.

Ronan thought he would regret teasing Adam like that - because after all, he was the one who wanted to take things slow, and yet he seemed to be doing everything he could to suddenly speed things up - but their schedule didn’t allow for much to happen. Within days of Henry’s announcement about the concert, Whelk officially approved it, a tentative schedule was laid out, and the band was plummeted into another round of intense schedules.

He wasn’t sure why they were required to go to most of the meetings; did they really need to know the intricacies of lighting the stage, or be involved in the planning of outfit changes, or pyrotechnics? (Especially considering that, after a two hour meeting arguing over the appeal of said pyrotechnics, they decided it would be too costly and scrapped the whole thing. Jesus.) He just wanted someone to
make the decisions and tell him what to do. *Stand here. Wear this. Play music.*

It wasn’t just the endless meetings, though: it was the additional hours of practice, over and over and over again. Whelk would sit in on rehearsals and yell at them for any small mistake. Apparently they had to be flawless. (A fact that was near impossible for Noah, who would get so nervous due to Whelk’s presence, that he’d make mistakes he normally wouldn’t have an issue with.)

Two weeks into rehearsals, Whelk also sprung the news on them that they’d need to learn a few remixes of their songs, as well as a few covers. The latter fact did *not* sit well with Ronan, who had never been a fan of cover songs. (He had only allowed it because Henry had convinced Whelk that, while they worked on these songs, the band could practice without his supervision. Ronan was willing to deal with his hatred of cover songs if it meant Noah felt more comfortable.)

It wasn’t like the intense schedule made him think of Adam less, but they were constantly exhausted or in a bad mood. By the time they got back to the dorm each night, Ronan’s fingers would burn or Adam’s voice would be shot from hours of singing; Adam would be suffering from a headache caused by hours of his earpiece pressed deep in his ear, or Ronan would be so irritated from Whelk and his shitty comments. They didn’t take their anger out on each other, but it still ruined the mood.

Because, as much as Ronan wanted to be with Adam, he didn’t want to be with Adam *like that.* He wanted his fingers to be able to appreciate every inch of Adam’s skin. He wanted to be fully awake, fully aware of every little thing Adam did, of every little sound he made. Ronan wanted to be clear-headed and happy and appreciative of the fact that he somehow got Adam Parrish to be his boyfriend.

Plus, even on his very best day, Ronan was pretty sure he was going to be terrible at the whole thing. He did not want to think about how awkward it would be if his head was stuck on practice, or his arms were dead to the world.

So instead, most nights were spent in Adam’s room, pulling Adam’s head onto his lap and running his hands through his hair. If Adam dozed off - which was a common result when Ronan played with the dusty strands of his hair - Ronan tried to finish the lyrics to his song. It was easier to be inspired when he could look down at Adam. He would type them into his phone, careful not to disturb Adam.

*How did you do this to me?*
*I was fine before I met you,*
thought I didn’t need this before I met you,
now I can’t think clearly without you.

I’m probably running on borrowed time.
How long will you let me be with you?

Somehow, a month slipped by without Adam’s notice. One minute the concert was just a hypothetical option, the next it was planned, six cities in a month and a half. San Francisco was scheduled first, as a way to ease them into the tour schedule.

It was going to be an intense day, having to pack up the entire bus, drive down to San Francisco, unpack, and setup, all before they had to play the show at eight. Henry had driven ahead to check them into a hotel for when they were done, so they went straight from the bus to the concert hall to practice. As soon as they stepped in the venue, Adam wanted to hurl. It was huge, despite Whelk’s insistence that they only saw need for a “mediocre” venue.

Ronan must have sensed his worry, because he elbowed him gently and said, “You’ll be fine.”

Adam didn’t dignify that with a response.

They spent the next few hours practicing on stage. It helped Adam’s nerves, somewhat, to realize the sound system at the venue was much more sophisticated than the technology they had at Cabeswater. He could hear his voice clearly in his earpiece, as well as the ticking beat they added for him to keep pace. It was impossible for him to hear both his own voice and the band, but this would have to do. He’d be fine.

Still, as the evening ticked on, Adam proceeded to feel more and more uneasy. On the bright side, at least he had company: none of the band members looked nearly as confident as they had earlier in the day. Noah was miming playing his piano chords as he sat in the makeup chair, Blue was twirling her drumsticks around her fingers over and over and over, and Gansey was just staring at his reflection in the mirror.

Only Ronan seemed fine, though Adam wondered if he was just putting on a brave face.

Half an hour before the show was scheduled to start, Henry showed up. He had his cell phone out as he narrated the events of the room, clearly taking a video.

“Say ‘hi’ Ronan.”
Ronan glared at the camera. “No.”

Henry turned the camera to Noah instead. “Noah, as the only dependable member of this band, would you please say something to your fans? You’re the only one I can count on for these things.”

Noah agreed, of course, and proceeded to narrate the events happening backstage as Henry followed him around. Ronan was watching them curiously, and Adam wondered if finally Ronan was picking up on Henry’s flirtations. If he did, Ronan didn’t comment on it. Instead, he went back to fiddling with his guitar.

When Noah was done with his tour, Henry turned to Adam and sat next to him. He was still filming when he asked, “So, Adam, how do you feel?”

“Nervous.”

“This is your first big show. It’s okay to be nervous! Just remember, everyone is here to support you.”

“I know.” Adam dipped his head, pulling at his deaf ear. “But that’s exactly why I’m nervous. I don’t want to let anyone down. I’m just hoping my earpiece holds up, otherwise I’m probably going to put on a terrible show.”

Henry lowered the phone immediately. “Oh. Don’t worry, I won’t post this.”

“Why not?”

“Well, you haven’t publicly stated that you are deaf in one ear,” Henry clarified. “I’m assuming you wanted to keep that bit of information private.”

Adam let his words sink in. Oh, that’s right. It was common knowledge within Cabeswater, but they never had officially stated that he was hard of hearing. This knowledge sat in his empty stomach, tumbling around. It wasn’t like he was ashamed of it, but he was also painfully aware that admitting it might lead to questions about how it happened. Was he ready to explain his past?
Before he realized what he was doing, Adam said, “It’s okay. You can post it.”

Henry bit his lip. “It’s okay, Adam, really. I don’t have to.”

He thought about being a kid again, of being tossed around like a ragdoll by his father. He thought about how he had felt the need to hide it all, like it was some sort of dirty secret, like he did something to deserve it. Adam thought of Opal. He thought of how much she seemed to like his letters, how she apparently looked up to him.

“No,” Adam repeated. “It’s fine. I want you to post it. It’s...time.”

By now, the rest of the band had turned toward them, clearly listening to the conversation. Henry clapped Adam on the shoulder and said, “Alright. You’re a good man, Parrish.”

Adam didn’t want to make a scene of it, so he immediately turned to his phone and pretended he was interested in something it said. He could feel the eyes of his friends still on him, but after a minute, everyone turned back to what they were doing. He did, however, get a text message from Noah that said, *Thanks Adam.*

His eyes flitted up to Noah briefly. Noah was avoiding his gaze, playing with a game on his phone.

*What for?*

Noah sucked in his bottom lip when he read Adam’s text message. Adam watched as he typed something out, clearly thinking hard about what he wanted to say. A minute later, his phone pinged and Noah’s message appeared.

*For being brave. I needed that.*

Adam wanted to pry further, but they were quickly ushered out of the room to get ready. Everything after that happened so fast. Adam was fitted with his earpiece backstage while the rest of the band was hooked up to their equipment. They had all agreed that, instead of Adam playing guitar and singing, they just wanted him to focus on his vocals. He missed the feel of a guitar in his hands, but it was easier this way.
Then, before he knew it, they were on stage. The lights were too bright to see the crowd, but he could hear the roar of the crowd even through his earpiece. It sent him into a momentary panic. How was he supposed to hear his voice over the crowd?

Then, blissfully, he heard a voice in his ear. It was unmistakably Henry Cheng. “Alright Adam, can you hear me? Nod if so.”

Adam nodded.

“Good, good. Don’t panic, Adam. If you can hear me over the crowd, you’ll be able to hear your music when it starts. I’ll pop in occasionally to check in on you, okay?”

Adam peered off stage to see if he could see Henry, to exchange a grateful look to him, but it was pitch dark from where he stood. Instead, Adam just smiled, hoping it would convey the message.

They had connected Gansey’s microphone to Adam’s earpiece as well, allowing him to hear Gansey welcome the crowd and introduce the first song. Adam grasped onto his microphone stand to steady himself, waiting in anticipation as he heard the ticking sound of the metronome in his ear. They had practiced this so many times. He just had to count eight beats before he was supposed to come in and then--

And then he sang the first verse. It was scary as hell, not knowing if he came in on the right beat. He concentrated on the sound of his voice, a pleasant reminder in his ear that he could do this, he could, and just sang.

Halfway through the song he looked to Ronan for approval. Ronan was looking at him - of course he was - and his mouth split into a grin. It was fine. He was doing it.

It gave Adam the boost of energy he needed. He could enjoy concerts like he used to. He could do this. So he shook out his arms and decided to just go for it, like how he used to. He played with the microphone, crooning into it and flirting with the crowd. He flirted with Ronan a bit too - because, hell, even if they weren’t ready to go public about their relationship, it was nothing new for them to have fun.

Their show lasted an hour and a half after quick costume and set changes. Everyone had loosened up half-way through the show, and they were all laughing and joking backstage. By the time they
finished the last song, Adam was covered in sweat, his shirt sticking to his back, but he didn’t even care.

This was fun. *He had had fun.*

When it came time to say goodbye to the crowd, Adam pulled off his earpiece, wanting to hear them as best as he could. When he did so, they screamed even louder.

Henry met them backstage, and he instantly pulled Adam into a hug. Adam felt bad, instinctively, because Henry was dressed so nice and he didn’t want to get his sweat on him, but Henry barely flinched. Henry moved onto Blue next, cupping her face in his palms and saying, “You magnificent girl, I’m so impressed!”

Adam felt all his energy sink out of him. He looked to Ronan, the only person he really wanted to see, to find him staring back. Adam managed a tired smile, which Ronan hesitantly returned.

When they checked into the hotel hours later, Adam was almost too exhausted to function. He barely listened as Henry explained the rooms, instead choosing to numbly follow Ronan around. It wasn’t until they reached the door, and Ronan looked down at him oddly, that he realized he probably should have been paying attention.

“You staying with me?” Ronan asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Am I with Gansey?”

Ronan ruffled Adam’s hair. “We each get our own room. Were you paying attention at all?”

“Oh. Uh. Well, where’s my room, then?”

Ronan twisted his lips to the side, and Adam briefly wondered whether he liked the idea of sharing a room. Well, shit. He assumed Ronan would want his privacy, but did he just ruin his chance to share a room with Ronan?

“Next door down, Parrish,” Ronan said, jerking his head to the left. “Maybe we can communicate through the walls. Knock *La Cucaracha* if you have a bad dream, and I’ll come protect you.”
“Shut up.” Adam made no move to head to his room. He fidgeted at Ronan’s door. “We could -- I mean, if you wanted, I could stay with… you.”

There was something hidden in Ronan’s gaze, a look that Adam couldn’t place. “You look tired, though, Parrish.”

Adam peered behind his shoulder. It was late - way past midnight, now - and there was no one in the halls of the hotel. Still, he felt scandalous, reaching to tug at Ronan’s belt loop. “Did you have something besides sleep in mind?”

Ronan swallowed. “Maybe.”

Adam pressed himself into Ronan’s hips, nodding at his closed door. “You going to let us in?”

Ronan pulled his key card out of his pocket quickly, inserting it into the door and fumbling with it twice before he got it to open. Once inside, Adam dropped his bags to the ground and looked around the room. It was the nicest hotel he’d ever been in - not that he’d seen many. There was only one bed, one that was gloriously larger than what they had at the dorms. If they were really going to sleep together - even if they did only that, just sleep - it was bound to be far more comfortable.

He felt Ronan at his back, and instinctively, Adam said, “I need a shower, first.”

“First?”

Adam didn’t dignify that with a response. “I’ll be quick.” He gathered a spare pair of clothes from his bag and disappeared into the bathroom before Ronan could notice the flush that he was sure covered his face. He turned on the shower, pleased that the water pressure was nicer than what they had in the dorm, and stripped off the clothes.

As he stared at his reflection in the mirror, Adam wondered if Ronan would like him. Adam knew Ronan liked his freckles - he’d made that abundantly clear over the past few months - and he hoped they would distract from the scars he had across his stomach and on his shoulders. He was lucky, he knew, compared to some kids: his father used his fists, primarily, and those did not leave scars. Still,
there was proof of his abuse in the form of a broken beer bottle across his side, and the scrape down his arm caused from carelessness during a late night at Boyd’s.

Adam let his eyes fall even lower.

God.

What would Ronan think of all of him?

Adam showered before he could psych himself out. After he pulled on a clean shirt and pajama pants, he gathered his courage and exited the bathroom. Ronan was sprawled out on the bed, flipping through the television without much thought. His eyes stayed put on the screen, even as Adam walked over to the bed and sat next to him.

“How was the shower?”

“Good,” Adam said.

Ronan lifted his eyes from the screen to look at Adam. Okay. This was it. Adam was just going to lean in to kiss him and--

“I’m just going to take one real fast then,” Ronan said, scrambling off the bed.

Okay.

Nevermind.

The wait for Ronan to shower was excruciating. Adam probably deserved this - after all, he’d played the same trick on Ronan, even stopping to check himself out in the mirror for a few ridiculous minutes - so he could be patient. He did not find the television distracting, so he turned it off and hid the remote. (He and Ronan did not share the same love of infomercials. It would not be the background music to whatever they did, even if all they did was sleep.)
Ronan threw open the bathroom door a few minutes later. He was shirtless - a fact that Adam noticed immediately. He took advantage of Ronan’s diverted eyes to look at him. Adam always felt a little self-conscious next to Ronan, who always seemed to so much larger compared to Adam despite their similar heights. His arms were just a bit thicker, shoulders a bit wider. He came and sat down next to Adam, refusing to look at him.

“We don’t have to do anything,” Adam said.

“I know. But I--” Ronan breathed. “Do you want to?”

“Always. You know that.” Adam admitted. “But do you?”

Ronan swallowed. “I want to.”

“Okay.” Adam tried to smile reassuringly at him, but he couldn’t deny he felt nervous. It was suddenly very overwhelming, to be sitting next to a shirtless Ronan in an empty hotel room, knowing they were going to try. “So how should we...?”

Ronan turned his body to Adam, so that they were sitting across from each other on the bed. He slid his hand under Adam’s ear, cupping his palm around his neck, and leaned forward. He stayed like that for a moment, not quite kissing Adam, and it was all so tentative, so careful, that Adam’s heart tumbled in anticipation. Ronan was waiting for permission, which Adam found ridiculously endearing, considering they’d been kissing each other for quite some time.

So Adam met his lips, first in a chaste kiss, then a little longer the second time. They sat like that, both with legs criss-crossed, mouths exploring each other slowly. Adam had been content to do this for so long, but with the knowledge that they could be doing so much more, he could stand it only for so long. So, before he could second guess himself, Adam uncurled his legs to sit on his knees, pressing Ronan into a deeper kiss. In response, Ronan spread out his own legs, placing them on the outside of Adam’s knees and tugging him closer by the back of his thighs.

Adam steadied himself by placing his hands on Ronan’s waist, enjoying the feel of raw skin on his fingers. It was easy to kiss Ronan, and even easier to let his hands wander. He felt Ronan’s stomach clench underneath his fingers, and in worry, Adam pulled away.

“Are you sure this is okay?” He asked.
Ronan nodded. “I’m fine. It just was -- it was a good reaction, okay?”

“Oh. Right.”

Ronan looked down at Adam’s t-shirt, then back at his eyes. He tugged at the shirt. “Can I…?”

“Yes.”

He pulled Adam’s shirt off, tugging it over his head in a surprisingly smooth manner, considering Ronan had no experience with this sort of thing. Ronan’s gaze traveled across Adam’s shoulders, then down to his stomach, then back to his lips. It must have set Ronan off, seeing him shirtless, because his kisses became more intense. Adam’s body liked it, clearly, and he was suddenly very aware how much he wanted Ronan.

Ronan pulled away with a ragged breath. “Adam.”

“Yeah?”

Ronan dragged his hands down Adam’s face, placing them around his neck. He thumbed over his Adam’s apple gently.

“Can I use my favor again?” Ronan asked.

“You used it already,” Adam said, though when his words got caught in his throat, it took the heat from them. “You can’t be greedy.”

“I just--” Ronan’s eyes lowered, down and down until he was staring at Adam’s lap. When Ronan cursed under his breath, Adam knew what he saw. It was his gut reaction to be embarrassed, but he pressed the thought down. Ronan looked back him, searching his face. “I want to use a favor.”

Adam said, “Okay.”

Ronan’s hands trailed down Adam’s neck, past his shoulders, down through his waist, to rest on his
hips. In a shaky voice, Ronan asked, “Can I touch you first?”

This was not what Adam expected. A flame of heat flew down his body, from his chest to his groin to his toes. “That’s your favor?”

“Yes.”

“That seems more like a favor to me,” Adam said.

“It’s not. Trust me.”

Adam could barely think straight. He nodded his approval, finally, before he fell back on his back. Ronan stared down at him, unsure of what to do next, so Adam decided for him. He reached his hands down to his pajama pants and arched his stomach forward, so that he could tug them off his hips. Adam had to look away - unable to face Ronan’s gaze when he was so bare - and he let out a shuddered breath.

After an excruciatingly long moment, Ronan leaned down to press a kiss to Adam’s throat. His voice, unnecessarily deep, whispered, “Adam.”

“You shouldn’t get to say my name like that,” Adam said shakily. He swallowed down a gasp when he felt Ronan’s hand at his bare hip. “It’s not fair.”

“I can stop,” Ronan said, extracting his hand.

“Please don’t.” Adam shuddered when Ronan replaced his hand. This time, he could feel Ronan’s thumb dipping into his inner thigh. “I just meant -- I always thought I’d be the one to do this. To touch you first. Why do you get to go first?”

“Because I’ve waited longer,” Ronan said, dipping his head to pull his lips across Adam’s collarbone. “And because I’d be useless if you touched me first.”

Adam squirmed under his touch. “Good excuse.”
“Not an excuse.”

Ronan moved his hand to the left and then - shit - there it was, he slid his fingers around Adam, tentative and light, and Adam pulled his lips back to him to conceal a moan that was hiding in his throat. They kissed like this - Adam panting into Ronan’s mouth when he stroked him particularly well, Ronan slipping his tongue against Adam’s every time Adam would arch his hips forward, asking for more - until Adam tugged at Ronan’s pants in warning and said, “Ronan, I’m--”

Ronan didn’t let him finish his sentence. He just kissed him, long and slow, until Adam had finished shuddering. Ronan cleaned him up with Adam’s discarded shirt, before he tugged his pajama pants back and left a lingering kiss on his hip bone.

“Jesus Christ,” Adam breathed.

“Don’t say the Lord’s name in vain,” Ronan teased, pulling away from Adam to sit against the headboard of the bed. Despite doing all the work, Ronan looked disheveled. “It was okay?”

Adam nodded, unsure of how to explain how good it felt in words. He reached out his hand, asking for Ronan’s help to pull him up. Once at Ronan’s level, he placed his hand on Ronan’s knee and said, “Is it my turn? I mean, do I get to--”

Ronan smiled lazily, clearly amused by Adam’s flustered response. “Next time. You’re tired.”

“That’s not fair.” Adam’s gaze dropped down to Ronan. “I didn’t even get to see you.”

Adam wasn’t sure where he got the nerve, but his words caused Ronan to flush. The boy scoffed, shifting to adjust himself, and muttered, “Gotta’ keep you wanting.”

“That’s cruel.”

Ronan pulled the blanket from underneath them. When Adam made no motion to follow, Ronan rolled his eyes, slipped under the sheets, and wiggled around. A second later he threw his pants off the side of the bed and said, “Happy?”
Adam bit his cheek to suppress a smile. “Not really. You’re still under the sheets.”

“Well, looks like you’re going to have to get into bed if you want to see anything.”

Adam knew it was meant to be a trick - a way for him to slip under the sheets, to get comfortable, to fall asleep. Still, he followed Ronan’s orders, a small thrill shooting through him knowing that Ronan was naked underneath.

“Are you shy?” Adam teased.

“Terribly,” Ronan said dryly.

Adam turned on his side, facing Ronan, and reached his hand across the top of the sheets. He ran his hand down Ronan’s stomach, lower and lower, until he reached the bulge in the fabric. Adam let his hand linger on top, barely pressing down, as he watched Ronan’s face carefully. Ronan was maintaining a relatively calm poker face, but his labored breaths betrayed him. Adam gripped him through the fabric, trying to gage Ronan’s size.

“You sure you don’t want anything?” Adam asked.

Ronan’s eyes fluttered shut as he whispered a curse under his breath. “Adam.”

“You saying my name won’t stop me,” Adam whispered, curling his body closer to Ronan. “Kind of makes me want to do it more.”

Finally, Ronan opened his eyes and said. “Well, fine. You’ve convinced me.”

Adam quickly slipped his hand under the sheets, and with a grin, slid on top of Ronan. Ronan cursed the entire time, and Adam found he did, in fact, enjoy hearing the word “fuck” in this context.
Ronan woke to his hotel phone ringing. It was far too loud - who had chosen that ringer? - and it was only silenced when Adam groaned from beneath the sheets and picked it up. “Hello?”

Adam? Oh.

*Oh. Right.*

How had he forgotten that Adam was with him? After what they had done last night -- ah, shit. Ronan turned into his pillow and buried his face. How was he supposed to face Adam, knowing he had seen him naked, knowing that Adam had seen Ronan naked, and knowing very distinctly what Adam looked like breathless.

“No, it’s Adam.”

Ronan turned back to the telephone conversation. Adam was leaning half off the bed in order to reach the phone, and Ronan blessed the contractors of the hotel for allowing him this view of Adam’s long torso. Adam turned back to Ronan, looking embarrassed, and said, “No, uh, this is his room. You were right.”

“Who is it?” Ronan asked.

Adam mouthed, *Noah.*

“Okay, yeah. We’ll be there in a bit.” Adam hung up the phone and turned back to Ronan, his eyes darting off Ronan’s chest and back to his face. “Noah wants to meet for breakfast. Said he wants to talk to us about something.”

“That sounds ominous,” Ronan drawled.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Adam said, though the way his eyebrows dipped low betrayed his thoughts. “Apparently everyone else is awake, though. They’re down at the hotel restaurant.”

Ronan sighed. So much for having a nice, slow morning with Adam. He pushed himself up from bed and pulled the sheets back, before he promptly remembered that he was wearing absolutely
nothing underneath. Adam must have caught a glimpse of him, though, because he turned to Ronan with a wicked grin.

“Avert your eyes, please,” Ronan snapped.

Adam cackled, but he did what Ronan asked and turned away. They were dressed and walking down to the restaurant a few minutes later. Ronan had a hard time looking at Adam - God, every time he did, he just mentally undressed him and it was entirely not the time to be thinking about this - so he forced himself to look straight ahead. They found everyone else at the restaurant, including Henry, who looked a little dead to the world. His hair, which was usually styled in some sort of updo, laid flat on his head, falling over his ears.

“You look like shit,” Ronan commented.

Henry glared up at him. “It was a long night. So sue me.”

Adam pinched Ronan in his back before he sat down. “Did you guys order already?”

They hadn’t, and soon enough the waitress showed up to take their order. Ronan wanted to get straight to the point - after all, they didn’t get breakfast just to chit-chat - but everyone wanted to discuss the concert for a bit. Ronan watched Noah warily, looking for signs of what he might have to say. Noah seemed happy enough though, and was content to sip a mimosa through a comically large straw.

When Ronan couldn’t take it anymore, he kicked Noah’s foot under the table and said, “So?”

Noah nearly choked on his drink. After a minute of coughing - aided by Henry slapping him on the back a few times - he dabbed his lips with his napkin and said, “Okay. Right.” Noah’s eyes darted to Henry, who looked down at his cup of coffee with interest.

“Is it bad?” Blue asked hesitantly.

“It’s not--” Noah paused, readjusting his words. “Well, okay, first off, I just want to say that I’ve been thinking about this for a long time now. It’s not something I decided on a whim. So I need you to respect my decision.”
Ronan did not like the direction this was heading. He leaned forward, knocking his silverware off the table in his hurry, and said, “What is it?”

Noah sucked in a quick breath, his bottom lip wobbling. “When I went home, I realized how unhappy I was here. I hate Los Angeles, and I hate the entertainment business. I hate feeling like I’m always doing something wrong, like I’m a mistake.

“After I got back from home, I was going to tell you I wanted to leave the band. But then we had the concert lined up, and everyone was so excited, so I couldn’t do it. So I thought I would give the concert a try. I thought it would be good, too, to go back to playing shows. Like it might make me remember how much I loved being in the band.”

A silence fell over the table. Blue was struggling with his words, and she sputtered, “Okay, and you had fun last night, right? So you’re going to stay.”

Henry shifted in his seat, peering over at Noah. Noah sucked his bottom lip into his mouth, nibbling on it, while he twisted a napkin in his hand.

“Kind of. It was fun, I admit, but it wasn’t… enough.” Noah sent them all a painful smile. “I’m so sorry.”

Ronan’s breath caught in his throat. “So, that’s it? You’re… quitting?”

“I’ll finish the concert tour with you,” Noah said. “I don’t think it would be fair to the fans, who bought tickets expecting me to be there. Not that they probably care that much–”

“They would care,” Henry cut in.

Noah seemed unconvinced. “I want you all to continue the band, though. I know Whelk is a jerk, but he was right. You can still be a band without me, you can just use a computer for my parts. It wouldn’t be the end of the world.”

“Noah–” Gansey began.
“Gansey, as Noah mentioned, he’s thought about this for a long time,” Henry said, voice firm. “You need to respect his decision.”

Ronan wanted to reach across the table to shake Noah. *He was leaving? How could he leave?* They were a band, fuck, they were all *friends?* This was the dream they had together, and if Noah were to leave--

No. Ronan wasn’t going to allow this to happen. He pushed himself up from the table - because hell, how could he eat after that? - and left the restaurant, left the entire hotel, until he was standing in the back parking lot. He heard someone trailing behind him and was unsurprised to find Adam at his back, pulling him by the arm.

“Ronan, wait--”

“This is Whelk’s fault,” Ronan snarled. “He’s the one who ruined everything for Noah, he’s the one who has Noah scared. I’m going to destroy that bastard.”

“How?” Adam said with a sigh. Ronan didn’t appreciate his tone, so he met it with a glare. Adam backed off, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I’m not saying I disagree, I just -- *How,* Ronan? You’ve tried so much already and nothing works.”

“I’ll figure something out.” Ronan bit at his wristbands, his eyes narrowing at Adam. “Or you will. You’re the brains, here.”

“I don’t know how to take down Whelk,” Adam said quickly. “I’m good at calculating math equations, not taking down shitty and devious businessmen.”

Ronan was about to lose it. His hands were shaking so hard that he had to clench them into fists at his sides to keep from punching something. When Adam noticed this, he leaned over, grabbed Ronan’s hands, and said, “Okay, I’ll -- I’ll try to think of something.”

Ronan let himself be pulled into a hug, leaning his head into Adam’s neck. “I don’t want to lose Noah.”
“I know,” Adam said, patting his back. “We won’t. We’ll think of something.”

Chapter End Notes

So sorry for the long delay in chapters! I officially planned out the next few chapters, though, and this story should be wrapping up on chapter 20.

As always, I am so grateful to everyone who leaves any words of encouragement or kudos. You are all so kind to me, and I love the TRC community dearly.

Also, sorry I am so bad at smut.
Chapter Summary

So he asked Adam. Adam, who was both cunning and ruthless, a charming combination when used in Ronan’s favor. (And truthfully, a somewhat worrying factor when Ronan remembered Adam was his boyfriend. Thankfully, so far, he had little reason to believe this would ever happen, so long as he didn’t somehow enrage Adam.)

Adam, of course, needed more than a day or two to think about it. There wasn’t a lot of free time to plot sabotage when you were on the road. He was currently sitting next to Ronan on the bus, knees tucked up against his chest as he looked at the passing scenery. He was thinking - planning, probably - and Ronan didn’t want to disturb him. Plus, this way he just got to look at him.

Chapter Notes

There is mild mature content in this chapter again, but nothing detailed. Also, I am so fed up with writing this chapter that I’m too exhausted to edit it and plan to do it later, so apologies for typos.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They were on the tour bus, each band member sprawled out among the couches, tables, and beds. It was the fanciest bus Ronan had ever been on, resembling something closer to an elaborate RV, but he supposed it was necessary. For the next month, the majority of their time would be spent in the vehicle, traveling across the country to their various venues. Their second stop after San Francisco was Vancouver, a drive that took longer than necessary due to border control.

Still, Ronan was grateful for the trip. He needed space to think. Needed time to figure everything out.

Noah was not willing to discuss the matter further. Ronan had tried - again and again and again - to get Noah to talk about it. To make him re-think his decision. It didn’t go well. Noah would either grow irritated with him - his new favorite phrase was, “Ronan, you need to respect my decision” - or Henry would appear out of nowhere, hissing in Ronan’s ear to “leave the poor boy alone.” (Henry, too, was a fan of the whole “respect his decision” garbage.)

But the thing was, it’s not like Ronan didn’t respect Noah, or his decision. He got it just fine. In fact, Ronan even understood why Noah wanted to leave. He’d been there, after all, as Noah slowly slid further into himself, when he broke down from the pressure. But everything stemmed back to Whelk, not Noah’s insecurities.
So if Ronan took care of Whelk, he took care of Noah.

He wasn’t good at revenge, though. Ronan had the muscle, sure - if he could walk up to Whelk and pop him in the nose, he’d have done it again and again and again. That wouldn’t do him any good, though. Punching Whelk would just get the band in trouble. Whatever he did, Ronan had to remain blameless, so that the band was innocent, too.

So he asked Adam. Adam, who was both cunning and ruthless, a charming combination when used in Ronan’s favor. (And truthfully, a somewhat worrying factor when Ronan remembered Adam was his boyfriend. Thankfully, so far, he had little reason to believe this would ever happen, so long as he didn’t somehow enrage Adam.)

Adam, of course, needed more than a day or two to think about it. There wasn’t a lot of free time to plot sabotage when you were on the road. He was currently sitting next to Ronan on the bus, knees tucked up against his chest as he looked at the passing scenery. He was thinking - planning, probably - and Ronan didn’t want to disturb him. Plus, this way he just got to look at him.

There were moments when Ronan forgot this was his life. That Adam was officially his. That he could kiss him when he wanted, touch him when he wanted.

Ronan had to tuck his head into his elbow to hide his face. It was a painfully happy memory to think back to touching Adam. It was good of course - better than that, it was -- well, Ronan wasn’t good with words when it wasn’t a song, and his feelings for Adam were always a work in progress. But as good as it was, it shattered a piece of Ronan. Made him wobbly and weak. He kept replaying that moment in his head, wondering if he could have done it any better. Any smoother.

*Can I touch you first?*

God. What a joke. He was such a poser. He kept replaying that phrase in his head, tasting the sour on his lips, because regret was nothing more than a bite of lemon. He didn’t know what possessed him to say it, or what possessed Adam to fall for it. (Or maybe Adam didn’t fall for anything. Maybe it was pity. Maybe Adam was too embarrassed for him to say anything, but he didn’t feel right complaining over a free handjob.)

“What are you thinking about?”
Ronan looked up. Adam was staring at him, one eyebrow raised. “Nothing.”

Adam clearly didn’t believe this. “Well, whatever it is, it’s making you awfully red.”

“It’s just warm in here,” Ronan muttered.

“Uh huh.” Adam kicked his legs down from the seat and leaned in close. He was fiddling with his fingers, tugging at his joints until they popped, as he eyed Ronan up and down. The fucker didn’t even try to keep the accent off his tongue. “Wanna’ share another hotel room in Vancouver?”

Ronan shoved his foot into Adam’s shoulder, with just enough force to push him back. “Jesus, Adam. Not in front of the children.”

“They aren’t even paying attention,” Adam said, though his eyes slipped to the rest of the band a few seats back just in case. “You call me ‘Adam’ when you get flustered, did you know that?”

“It’s your name,” Ronan argued.

“Oh, is it? I wasn’t sure you knew that for the first three years of our friendship.”

“Har har.”

Thankfully, Adam remained a few feet away from Ronan, though the beautiful smile that slipped across his face did nothing to help Ronan’s desire to pull him close. Logically, he knew he could. While Blue and Gansey were light on the PDA compared to some couples, they didn’t hide their affection for one another; no one would be upset if Ronan were to pull Adam to him or kiss him chastely. Still, Ronan felt it better to keep their distance while in public. He wasn’t sure if he could stop at just a kiss. (And, knowing Adam, he definitely would struggle with that.)

Ronan was desperate to change the subject. “So, have you thought of anything…?”

Adam understood his trail of thought. He shifted in his seat, eyes once again darting to the back of the bus, this time to settle on Noah specifically, before he lowered his voice. “I have a few ideas. Nothing concrete. Are you sure you want to do anything—”
“Yes.”

“Maybe we should talk to Noah about it first. Bring him in on the plans.”

“No.”

Adam rolled his eyes. “I suppose I should know better, by now, to expect a more detailed response out of you, but come on. You have to work with me here.”

“Sorry.” Ronan pinched the bridge of his nose. Just like that, he felt a headache coming on. “If we tell him, Noah won’t let us do anything. He didn’t even tell me that Whelk was being a giant dick out of fear I’d retaliate.”

“He really missed the mark on that one, huh?”

“Shut up.”

“I’m just saying,” Adam began slowly, carefully, in a way that made Ronan cringe. He hated that Adam felt the need to walk on tiptoes around him. “Even if we get rid of Whelk, it might not solve Noah’s problems.”

Ronan didn’t want to think about that. He wanted to think of Noah, in the band, for as long as they could manage. He deflected with ease. “I know that. But he’s the immediate threat. Getting rid of Whelk may not convince Noah, but it will get us more time. I need more than one fucking month to convince Noah that he needs to stay.”

“And if you can’t?” Adam asked.

Ronan shut his eyes. He didn’t want to think about life without Noah. Of a band without Noah. It was no different from when Adam left the band all those years ago. It was all of them or nothing. Ronan didn’t want to tell Adam this, though. Adam had made his feelings clear on Ronan’s dedication to the band back in college, and he didn’t want to get into another argument.
“So what’s your plan?” Ronan said instead.

“I still need to formulate it a bit. I think I need to talk to Henry, too, to pick his brain.” Adam bit his lower lip. “I need to ask you something, though.”

“Is it about the plan?”

“Sort of.”

“Well, as long as it’s an on-topic question,” Ronan drawled. “Otherwise--”

“You’re hilarious,” Adam interrupted. Despite given permission to continue, it took Adam an obnoxiously long time to formulate his question. “Would you -- Do you want to keep our relationship a secret, or would you be willing to go public with it?”

The thought of going public with their relationship made Ronan’s stomach churn. It had nothing to do with Adam, himself, or the fact they were both men. The latter fact would get them both shit from the media and the general populace, but Ronan didn’t live his life for others. If bigots hated him, well, fuck them.

But that didn’t mean Ronan wanted to go public, either. He could barely stand the stares already - the way people snuck pictures of him when they thought he wasn’t looking, or the whispers and pointing. He hated that the media thought themselves obligated to information about his private life; the way interviewers grew annoyed when he didn’t answer questions exactly how they wanted. Hell, it even irked him when Henry - who, he finally was willing to admit, was his friend - grew irritated when Ronan refused to play the game. He just didn’t understand why they cared so much about his personal life. Why wasn’t his music enough?

And if Adam and Ronan went public with their relationship? Jesus. He couldn’t even imagine.

Adam was still waiting for an answer. If they were alone, completely alone, he might have felt safe to vent his frustrations. Ronan settled with, “I don’t know. I don’t think I could handle that.”

Adam frowned.
“It’s not you,” Ronan said quickly. “I’m not, like, fucking ashamed of you or something. God. This isn’t coming out right.”

“Don’t have an aneurysm,” Adam warned, though when Ronan sucked in a quick breath, Adam cracked a smile. He leaned forward to slip his hand into Ronan’s, to play with his fingers. “I get it. Don’t worry. I just had to ask.”

Ronan stared at their entwined hands. Adam was rubbing his thumb against the back of Ronan’s hand. “I could -- I could do it for you, if you… wanted.”

Adam sighed. “Just me?”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. Just a thought.”

Before Ronan could question him further, Adam leaned forward and kissed Ronan. It was slow and alarmingly good, considering they were in a bus that was definitely not designed for kissing, and briefly, Ronan told himself not to get absorbed by Adam’s lips. That this kiss - as good as it was - was designed to be a distraction, to pull Ronan away from further questions. Still, Adam’s hand was warm when he reached it to cup the back of Ronan’s neck and pull him further in, and the swipe of his tongue against his felt good enough to give in, to focus only on Adam.

It couldn’t last for long, of course. Within a minute, there was a loud whoop from the back of the bus. As Ronan broke away, he was pelted with a rolled up sock.

“Get a room, you two!” Blue shouted.

Ronan and Adam both flipped her off at the same time. This gesture - timed so well - pleased Ronan. Next to Blue was Noah, who had her feet propped on his lap, and he whispered something too quiet to be heard over sound of the bus. Whatever he said made Blue laugh, and she waggled her eyebrows at him suggestively.

Ronan took advantage of their joke to leave Adam’s side - because although he would have loved to continue what they were doing, he couldn’t stand the idea of the band spying on them - and leapt down the aisle of the bus to catapult himself on the bed, pulling Noah down with him. Blue yelled in
protest, something about getting his “fat ass” off of her, but Ronan ignored her.

Noah was laughing, really laughing, and that was enough for now. He wanted to remember Noah like this.

Adam was starting to get used to touring. They’d gone through several cities now - San Francisco, Vancouver, Chicago - and each of the concerts had been successful. Adam kept waiting for something to go wrong, expecting it to happen, but any problems were small and manageable. (Like when Blue flung one of her drumsticks into the crowd on accident and they had to play without drums until a stage manager could bring her a new one; or when Adam accidentally sang the wrong line.)

They were completing their sound check in New York when Whelk appeared. Adam didn’t notice him at first. The concert hall was relatively empty, but Whelk had slipped between a few sound technicians to watch from the audience. It was Henry who gave Whelk’s presence away; one minute he was off to the side, filming them from his phone, the next he had his arm slung around Noah’s neck, and he was directing him off stage. It was such an odd thing, to see Henry so close to Noah without his trademark sly expression or goofy grin; it was just Henry, serious, whispering something in Noah’s ear. It was a sobering moment to realize that Noah’s feelings toward Whelk had become such a problem that not even Henry, King of Contrive, didn’t bother to paint a better picture.

When they were finished with the sound check, Whelk stood below the stage. “We need to talk.”

“Everything alright, Mr. Whelk?” Gansey asked.

“Perfectly peachy,” Whelk drawled. His eyes moved to the empty synth stand before he looked back at Ronan. “Word is that your keyboardist is leaving the band. Did nobody think to inform me of this?”

“Why the fuck do you care?” Ronan spat.

Instinctively, Adam moved closer to Ronan, hoping his presence would soothe him. He didn’t blame Ronan for being angry - and hell, just seeing that snide smirk on Whelk’s face was enough to make Adam’s blood boil - but if they wanted to truly get rid of Whelk, they had to lull him into a false sense of security. Adam had mentioned this to Ronan on the bus, but clearly he’d forgotten.
Then again, if Ronan suddenly acted like a saint, Whelk would know something was up.

“Frankly, it’s irritating and completely unprofessional. If he wants to leave, that’s fine, but I should have been informed by now. We’re in the process of drafting up the plans for the second album, and now I’ll have to go back and re-calibrate for Czerny’s absence. Do you know how long that will take me?”

Adam gripped Ronan’s sleeve in warning. Gansey cleared his throat, “Pardon? The second album?”

“Yes. The higher-ups at Cabeswater decided your first album was profitable enough that they want to go ahead with number two. After the tour, we need to start work on it. We’re thinking a release within the next six months, so that we can ride your popularity.”

Every member of the band fell silent at this. Adam had always known this was a possibility - after all, they’d agreed to the contract stipulation when they signed all those months ago - but it was shocking to suddenly talk about more albums. Adam felt exhausted all at once. They had barely gotten time to enjoy their first release, and now Whelk was wanting them to move on?

And without Noah?

It was a little too much to think about.

Gansey found his voice first. “Yes, of course. We will… keep that in mind. Forgive us, I think we’re all just a little exhausted from the bus ride.”

Whelk waved his hand dismissively. To some, it might have read as a Don’t-worry-about-it wave, but Adam knew Whelk. The only way to interpret that move was I-don’t-care.

“Last,” Whelk pulled out his phone and began scrolling through emails. “Mr. Parrish. I’m going to have Cheng set up an interview with you and Piper Greenmantle when you get back to LA. Ever since you hinted at your hearing loss, the public has been eating that shit up. But I want less rumors, more concrete details. Let the public love you.”

This time, it was Ronan who made contact with Adam, reaching to place his hand on the small of Adam’s back. Even Ronan’s touch could not settle him in that moment.
“I don’t really—” Adam paused. His gut reaction was to reject Whelk. True, he said he was willing to talk about it, but did he really have to do a private interview solely on his hearing loss? It felt disingenuous. Like he would be taking advantage of people. Where was Henry when he needed him?

Adam reminded himself that this was still a month out, that there could be time to cancel it. If they played their cards right, Whelk would be out of the picture by then.

“Okay,” Adam said.

“Good. Glad that’s settled.” Whelk checked his watch. “Well, I really should be heading out. I have some business to attend to at the New York office. Keep up the good work, boys.”

Then Whelk was gone without another word from anyone. Blue watched his back with a murderous gaze, and once he was gone, she flipped to them. “Seriously? None of you thought to stand up for me there?”

“She didn’t look satisfied with that response, though her shoulders sagged slightly. Gansey, the dutiful boyfriend, walked to Blue and whispered something in her ear. Adam needed air, desperately, and excused himself out of the venue. The concert hall was built like a maze though, and after searching around for a few minutes, he resigned himself to the smoking balcony, praying it wouldn’t be filled with smokers.

What he found, instead, was Henry Cheng. He was staring at a cigarette, unlit, like it was a dead body or something. When the door clicked behind Adam, Henry looked up in surprise, throwing the cigarette off the side of the building.

“Adam! Hello.”

“Do you smoke?” Adam asked.

Henry waved him off. “Oh, everyone in the business smokes a little.”
“Yeah, but I’ve never seen you smoke,” Adam ventured, walking to the edge of the balcony to stand next to him.

Henry laughed, awkward and quick. “Oh, yeah, I forced myself to quit a few years ago. When I first got hired at Cabeswater, I got addicted so fast. It’s almost like a cultural thing, right? Businessmen love to smoke cigarettes and drink whiskey. Felt like I was in _Mad Men_ or something.”

Adam didn’t understand the reference, but he nodded anyway. “So… Is everything alright?”

“Oh, just peachy!”

“Henry.” Adam leveled his gaze at him. “You just said you quit smoking years ago, and suddenly, something has made you consider it again.”

In an uncharacteristically vulnerable move, Henry dipped his head into his hands, elbows resting on the balcony. He didn’t say anything for a long moment, just fiddled with his thumbs. Then, with a quick inhale of breath, Henry creaked his neck to the side and smiled wistfully.

“I’m feeling a little disillusioned, honestly.”

“With what?”


Adam could see there was more to this statement, and he had a few guesses as to what. Whatever was going on with him and Noah - whether it was reciprocated by Noah or not - was clearly weighing on Henry. He saw the look on Henry’s face the morning that Noah announced he was leaving. It wasn’t quite heartbreak, but it was close.

Still, mentioning this to Henry seemed off-limits. He was very particular about what information he shared with the band. Henry designed himself very carefully, as if betraying his true emotions would ruin him. Everyone in LA was like that to a certain extent, but no one was quite like Henry. _They_ were fake, Henry was just...guarded.
So Adam tried to skirt around the issue. “Henry, do you like your job?”

“Of course. I love being your PR manager.”

“That’s not really what I asked.”

Henry peered over at Adam, and all at once, he dropped the act. He looked tired, so tired, and almost nervous. “I used to like it. Love it. I know LA is a plague, but it fits who I am. Or who I was. I just did my work, and as long as I was doing well, no one cared. Because no one cares about anyone in this town.”

The implication was clear, that Henry could no longer claim he didn’t care for anyone. Adam let the words go unsaid, though he wasn’t sure if that was for Henry’s benefit or his.

“Your band has ruined me, you know that?” Henry said, voice catching in his throat. “Suddenly you aren’t just products. You’re people. Good people, fun people. People who make me want—”

Henry didn’t finish his sentence. Instead, he peered off the balcony, as if the street below could answer his question. Because Adam knew, in that moment, that Henry didn’t know what he wanted. That he couldn’t put it into words. When you grew up alone, friendship or love was hard to recognize when it was suddenly in your life.

“What would make it better?” Adam asked.

Henry sighed. “Wish I knew, Parrish.”

Adam wanted to ask, *Is this about Noah?* He didn’t want to scare Henry away, though, not when he was being vulnerable around him for the first time ever, so instead he settled with, “Would getting rid of Whelk help?”

Henry’s eyebrows darted up in surprise. “What do you mean, getting rid of him?”
“Not, like, killing him,” Adam amended quickly. Upon seeing Henry’s dubious expression, Adam grew nervous. “Ronan and I were thinking, if we can get Whelk out of Cabeswater somehow, then a lot of our problems would be solved, right?”

“I doubt everything --”

“I know that, okay? And I think Ronan knows that, too.” The latter statement, well, Adam wasn’t totally convinced of. Henry didn’t need to know that. “And hell, what’s the downside to getting Whelk fired? It may not make Noah stay, but at least he’s--”

“This is about Noah?” Henry laughed. “I don’t think Noah will stay, even if you get Whelk to leave.”

“You don’t know that,” Adam said.

Henry sucked his lips into his mouth. He was clearly judging Adam, but curiosity appeared to get the best of him. “So what’s your plan?”

Adam held onto the edge of the balcony and leaned back. “It’s not great. I’m not even sure Ronan would be willing to do it. And I’d need help...”

Henry groaned. “And why do I get the feeling that you’re talking about me?”

“I’ve thought about this for awhile. I tried to think of a way to get him fired - if we could somehow frame him for tax evasion or something - but that’s too complicated. Anyway, I don’t want him to get fired for something he didn’t do. There’s plenty of shitty things he’s done that we can take advantage of. So that’s my plan. We provoke him into saying something horrible and we record him,” Adam explained. He’d been thinking about this plan for days now, and it felt ridiculous to say it outloud. What if Henry thought it was stupid? “Then we leak it. Online.”

“Jesus.”

“If there’s significant backlash from the public, Cabeswater will have to let him go. Especially after Ronan made a statement about how supportive they were as a company.”
Henry didn’t seem thrilled by the idea, but Adam could seem him working through it quickly. “Well, there’s no way Whelk would say anything bad in front of a camera willingly. You’d have to sneak it in. And if it’s obvious that one of you filmed it, then Cabeswater would be furious with you.”

“So we hide the camera somewhere in the room. Blame it on some random fan.” Adam nudged Henry in the rib lightly. He’d dazed off again, deep in thought, but this is where Adam truly needed him. “The hard part is leaking it. It can’t be traced back to us, and that goes beyond my skills.”

“And you think I know how to do that?”

Adam levelled his gaze at Henry. “You’ve been in the industry for, what, ten years now? You have to have some sort of connection to someone with hacking skills.”


“What?”

“Ugh, 1991.”

“Oh.” Adam could feel himself flushing. “It’s not that you look old, I just figured-- I mean, you’re only 25 and you got this job? That’s kind of impressive.”

“I’m a highly impressive person, Adam, you just haven’t taken the time to notice,” Henry grumbled. His annoyance didn’t last long, though, because soon he edged back to Adam. “Alright, I may know a way to leak it. I’ll have to double check but… it’s possible.”

Adam told himself not to get excited. Getting Henry to help was the easier part. Hell, even recording Whelk would likely be a breeze. The hard part was getting Ronan to agree to the plan, or worse, having their relationship survive if they went through with it.

“So how are you going to make him say something shitty?” Henry asked. “I mean, toxic shit spews out of his mouth 90% of the time, but if you have to set up a secret camera, you need to probably provoke him. Especially if you want to leak this before Noah officially leaves. He’s planning to say goodbye at the final concert, you know…”
Adam did not know that. It made sense, though. Noah had said he was staying through the concert so that he didn’t upset the fans; he cared about them, it made sense he’d want to say goodbye.

“I know how to provoke him,” Adam admitted.

“How?”

Adam took a deep breath. “Well…”

The New York concert was their largest yet. Despite having done it multiple times, every concert felt like a new experience, a new opportunity to make more memories. Or - Ronan realized - more opportunities to fuck everything up.

He was always nervous, for every concert, but he tried to hide it. His worries were nothing compared to Adam’s; Ronan had no place being nervous, comparatively, and didn’t want Adam to feel even remotely responsible for pacifying his fears. No, that was his job. Thankfully, as he watched Adam test his earpiece from across the room, he seemed less stressed than normal. Maybe he would finally trust that the earpiece would do its job.

It was fitting, then, that this was the night where it betrayed him.

They were nearing the end of the concert, thankfully. To calm down the crowd after a particularly intense run, they generally played their only love song toward the end. Originally Ronan wasn’t pleased with the addition. True, he wrote the melody of the song, so really it was a Greywaren song, but knowing a random stranger had provided the lyrics made it feel somehow wrong. Like they were claiming it belonged to them, stealing someone else’s music.

Still, Ronan liked hearing Adam sing it. Sometimes he would look back at Ronan, when he sang, *This is it, isn’t it? What I worked and waited for?* and pretend it really was Adam singing to him. That they were his words, his feelings, which he sang so beautifully to the screaming crowd.
This time, though, Adam didn’t get to look back at him. The song was just finishing its first verse when Adam suddenly paused at the microphone, voice cutting out abruptly. At first, Ronan thought his mic went out, but Adam wasn’t singing at all, though. The rest of the band continued to play, waiting for him to continue. It didn’t happen. Instead, Adam put a shaking hand to his ear and pulled out his earpiece.

“I-I’m sorry,” he said into the microphone. “My, uh, my earpiece just-- I can’t really--”

Adam paused in front of the mic, tugging at the earlobe of his deaf ear. He looked terrified. Terrified and embarrassed. He was looking offstage for help, mouthing helplessly, before he turned to Ronan with pleading eyes.

Ronan could do this. He could sing in front of the crowd. His voice wasn’t as good as Adam’s, but it was still decent--

But, before he could gather the courage, voices broke out from the crowd. All at once, the fans seemed to understand the situation. As the chorus began, there were thousands of voices singing, It’s the little things you do, don’t you know? You built me a home out of smiles and touch and I got used to that, don’t you know?

They continued on, even after the chorus had ended, filling in where Adam could not. Adam had turned his attention back to the audience, looking at them with a dazed expression. As they continued singing, louder and louder, a slow smile crept onto his face. He was still shaking - fingers clenching into his jeans to steady himself - but the fear slowly left his eyes. Soon, Adam walked to the edge of the stage and reached out to hold the hands of several fans.

When the song finished everyone erupted into cheers. Blue and Noah were hollering in their own right, and Noah yelled into his own microphone, “Holy shit! Y’all are fantastic singers, you know that?”

When they had settled down, Adam took his place back at the microphone and stared out. “I’m sorry about that, my earpiece broke and I just-- well, I get really nervous--” at this, the entire audience began cheering again, the sentiment being, Ronan assumed, that Adam had no reason to worry. “I just-- Thank you, everyone. I can’t even begin…”

He paused, then, to shut his eyes. As expected, the crowd exploded at Adam’s moment of vulnerability.
After allowing himself time to put himself back together, Adam said, “I still owe you a show, though. You can’t sing the whole thing for me. I just need to go get this checked out, I’ll be fast, I promise.”

“I’m sure we can entertain them somehow,” Gansey said, grinning into the mic.

And they did, of course. Adam was gone maybe ten minutes, and in the meantime, the rest of the band took the opportunity to be candid with the fans. Ronan was, admittedly, not as entertaining as the rest of them, but he couldn’t help it. Once his friends started up their antics it was all he could pay attention to. He just wanted to watch his friends. Wanted to watch Blue and Gansey’s banter, or more aptly put, the teasing insults that fell easily from her tongue. He got swept up in watching Noah’s easy smile, the way he narrated Blue’s movements around stage like a nature documentary.

His heart hurt. It was all a little too much, seeing his friends so perfect and happy and knowing that it was all so tentative. Because even if they could convince Noah to stay in the band, moments like this were rare. He loved being in a band, but it was suddenly overwhelming to realize how calculated they’d all become. When had they become a product? Why couldn’t all concerts be like this?

*Whelk, Ronan thought. It all came back to Whelk.*

Whelk, who wanted them to be perfect. Whelk, who didn’t care about them unless they were making him money. Whelk, who was Los Angeles personified, a selfish, image-obsessed monster. They had to get rid of Whelk.

When Adam came back, they picked up where they left off, finishing the concert without any other hiccups. Backstage, Adam was handling the situation better than Ronan expected. He was upset, obviously, and Ronan could tell Adam was angry at himself, but he hid it well. When Blue pulled him into a hug and apologized, Adam simply shrugged.

“It was bound to happen, I suppose.” He smiled, and though it was a bit strained, it didn’t strike Ronan as fake. Adam was fighting the urge to be critical of himself, and in that small smile, Ronan saw he was winning.

When they were heading back to the hotel, Ronan leaned across the seat of the car to whisper in Adam’s ear, “I’m proud of you.”

Adam rolled his eyes at the compliment, but his lips twitched. “For what?”
It had taken enough courage for Ronan just to utter those words at all; he couldn’t get himself to say everything he wanted. *For being in this band, for singing in front of a crowd, but mostly, for forgiving yourself.* It was probably for the best that he couldn’t vocalize these thoughts because Adam would reject them, especially in the company of watchful eyes. So instead, Ronan kissed his ear.

He meant it to be a comforting gesture - something sweet, something gentle - but Adam turned rigid at the kiss. He turned to Ronan, eyes narrowed, and said, “Seriously?”

Ronan spent the rest of the car ride in a state of panic. What did he do? Was it that bad to kiss Adam’s ear? Was it because he complimented him? Ronan knew that Adam didn’t do well with praise, found it hard to accept, but it was just one, small compliment.

It wasn’t until they were back in the hotel that Ronan understood the issue. Adam followed him back to his room, and Ronan could feel the glare on his back. He turned to Adam, wondering how to apologize when he didn’t know what he did.

“Open the door,” Adam ordered.

“You still want to stay with me?”

“Ronan.”

“What? You’re clearly mad at me--”

Adam pushed Ronan against the door, snaking his hand around his waist to paw at his back pocket. His hand slipped into his pocket with ease, lingering longer than necessary to find the key card. Once he had it, Adam pushed it into the lock, slammed the handle down, and ushered them both into the room. As soon as the door was shut, Adam kissed him roughly.

In-between kisses, Ronan breathed, “Not mad?”

Adam pulled back to roll his eyes. “Not actually mad, just annoyed.”
He was pressing his full body against Ronan, and it was all too good. They’d been doing this after every concert - going to Ronan’s room after, putting lips to bare skin and hands to illicit areas - but it was still very new to Ronan. They’d never gotten further than that first night, and most times they didn’t even get there, but every touch threatened to undo Ronan.

It was getting hard to find his words, but he managed to ask, “Why annoyed?”

“Because,” Adam moved his lips from Ronan’s neck, to up his jaw, to his ear. “You can’t say shit like that, then kiss my ear like that, when we’re in a crowded car. It’s not fair.”

“It was barely anything--”

As if to prove his point, Adam bit his ear and exhaled roughly, the breath sending a charged chill down Ronan’s spin.

“I didn’t do that,” Ronan choked.

Adam huffed another breath, but his annoyance fell away once he got distracted. Adam had trailed his hands under Ronan’s shirt, his thumb tracing the edge of hip bone that stuck out from his jeans. Adam was staring down at it, as if his hipbone were something beautiful, something magical, but Ronan didn’t have the heart to inform him it was nothing special. (Plus, it would come across hypocritical, he supposed. Ronan was obsessed with Adam’s hands, after all, a fact that Adam never understood.)

Taking advantage of Adam’s distraction, Ronan asked, “Are you okay? Tonight was--”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Adam said. He made this abundantly clear when he grabbed the edges of Ronan’s shirt and tugged it upward, over his head.

Ronan shuddered, the sudden chill of the air - and Adam’s gaze - a little much. “I just think we should probably talk about it--”

“Later,” Adam insisted. His hands were at Ronan’s jeans now, unbuttoning them. He paused at the zipper, looking up at Ronan. “I promise I’ll talk about it when we’re done, but I just want one
moment, one really great moment, where I don’t have to think about it. That I just get to think about you. Is that okay?”

Ronan thought it was unfair that Adam chose to state his case when his hands were resting in such a devious place. “That’s fine.”

“You sure?” Adam asked, though he slid the zipper down all the same.

“Talking is overrated, anyway” Ronan breathed. “Whatever you want, that’s what I want.”

Adam smiled, brilliant and sexy and arrogant all at once, and Ronan loved that look. He loved the way Adam leaned forward, lips touching and moving and pulling him apart so effortlessly. He loved Adam’s tongue, meeting his shyly, and loved Adam’s hands, sweeping across his back and wandering lower. He was starting to get used to this, though only barely, and he prepared himself for where those hands would eventually be placed.

And then Adam dropped to his knees, and Ronan lost all coherent thought.

Later, as Ronan tried to piece his brain back together - because holy shit, he had not expected that, and holy shit, it was so, so much better than he could have dreamed - Adam turned toward him, tucking his nose into Ronan’s neck and spilled out his thoughts. Ronan was a terrible boyfriend. He tried to pay attention to Adam’s words, but his mind kept slipping back to the memory of Adam on his knees.

“Are you paying attention?” Adam asked at some point.

“Yes. Sort of.” Ronan pulled Adam close, wrapping his arms tightly around him, and muttered. “This is why I said we should talk first.”

“Maybe we should put our clothes back on.”

“Not sure how that would help.”

Adam rolled away from him with a groan, and Ronan wasn’t sure if he was complaining about
Ronan’s words, or the lack of contact. Adam forced himself to sit a few feet away, wrapping the sheet over his shoulder and around his whole body.

“We do need to talk, though,” Adam said quietly.

“I know. I’m sorry, I’m a shit boyfriend, I should have been listening--”

“No, no. Honestly, Ronan, I’m fine. It was scary, and embarrassing as hell, but the fans--” Adam paused to shut his eyes, reliving the memory. “It was nice. It was really fucking nice. They didn’t care that I screwed up, they just…”

“They love you,” Ronan finished.

As soon as the words left his mouth, he regretted it. It’s not like it wasn’t true. They had extremely supportive fans, who did love them. It was just, well, Ronan had never, ever said the word “love” around Adam, let alone “love you.” It felt dangerously close to telling Adam that he loved him, and he--

He did.

He was pretty sure he did.

But he needed more time.

Thankfully, Adam didn’t seem to over-analyze the words. He was pulling at a string on the sheet, avoiding Ronan’s gaze. “There’s something else we need to talk about.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t worry, it’s not about us. Well, not exactly.” Adam exhaled slowly. “I have a plan. For Whelk. I talked to Henry about it and he thinks it could work. Said he would help us out.”

“So why do you look so upset?”
“I don’t think you’re going to like it,” Adam admitted. “And I’m worried it could ruin everything.”

“Adam.” The somber tone, combined with Adam’s helpless gaze, was driving Ronan crazy. “Just tell me.”

And Adam did. The plan wasn’t the bad part. Filming Whelk secretly, distributing it online, made absolute sense. It was simple, easy, almost so much that Ronan felt ridiculous for not thinking of it himself.

But then Adam said, “I’ve been trying to think of what exactly to say to provoke him, to make him say something shitty. And I think we should tell Whelk we want to go public with our relationship.”

Instantly, Ronan’s stomach flipped. “What?”

“Think about it,” Adam whispered, fingers trailing up Ronan’s leg to rest on his knee. He was staring at it instead of meeting Ronan’s gaze. “Whelk will be furious. He hates the fans now, the way they put us together without knowing the truth. And he hates you for coming out, for saying you like me. If we say we want to admit we are in a relationship, he’ll be furious.”

“Yeah, but--”

Adam continued. “The public will get upset. It would look so bad on Cabeswater, they’d have to let him go. And it’s not-- well, it’s not a lie. We wouldn’t be lying to anybody. We are in a relationship, and Whelk is a shitty person.”

Ronan leaned his head back on the wall, feeling overwhelmed for the millionth time that day. What was he supposed to do? He knew Adam had a point, but the plan went against everything he wanted. Everything he felt comfortable with. Exposing their relationship meant losing that last bit of privacy he had left.

“It’s not about me, for the record,” Adam whispered. “I’m fine with keeping it a secret. I know it has nothing to do with me. And honestly, I like having our privacy. So don’t feel pressured to do this because you think it’s what I want. I’m happy, really happy, with what we have now.”

Ronan clung to his words. This is what he’d been wanting to hear. He wanted reassurance, he wanted Adam’s affection. Still, he felt a little sick.
“You told me you’d go public if I wanted. That you’d do it for me,” Adam said. “Now, you just need to decide if you’ll do it for Noah.”

Noah. How quickly Ronan had forgotten. They didn’t need to do this, no one was forcing them to go public. It was all for Noah. To get more time. Or, fuck, hopefully to get Noah to stay. (Which just led Ronan down another spiral of thoughts. What if they did it, got rid of Whelk, and Noah still wanted to leave the band? Could he handle the disappointment?)

“Can I think about it for a bit?” Ronan finally asked.

“Of course.” Adam crawled back to him, tucking himself into Ronan’s side. “Henry said Noah is going to tell the fans he’s leaving at the last concert. We just need to film it and leak it before then.”

“That’s not a ton of time,” Ronan said.

“No, it’s not.”

Ronan leaned his chin on Adam’s head, trying to focus on the warmth of his body, the press of his weight. It was calming, but only for a moment. Because abruptly, Ronan had remembered how Adam had started the conversation. He had said, I’m worried it could ruin everything. He meant them. He meant their relationship.

Was he willing to give that up, to keep Noah?

Before, he thought he would do anything, anything so that Noah could stay in the band. So that they could keep their family together, keep the band perfect and loving and fun.

Adam’s plan was a gamble in so many ways. It was a gamble for Noah - because, of course, it could do nothing. Nothing at all to convince Noah to stay. It was a gamble for their relationship. Maybe everything would be fine. Maybe going public wouldn’t change anything, anything at all. Hell, maybe it would change it for the better. He wouldn’t have to hide his affection for Adam anymore. He could kiss him in public, kiss him near baggage claim or when playing a song, anywhere, anytime.
Adam allowed Ronan to think about the plan for a week before he brought it up again. He felt shitty for doing it - like he was pressuring Ronan - but it couldn’t really wait. They were almost finished with the tour, the final show back in Los Angeles, and time was running out. It was after the Washington D.C. show when Adam finally brought it up. He didn’t have the heart to bother Ronan about it until the show was over.

Henry had swung an extra few days in the city for them, which left everyone in a good mood. Ronan, in particular, was ecstatic to see his family for a few days. (Well, as ecstatic as Ronan got, at least.) When Ronan introduced everyone to his brothers, he declared, “This shit-head is Declan, and this gum-drop is Matthew. They’re okay.” It was a noble try, Adam supposed, but Ronan gave away his true feelings soon enough. One minute he was complaining about them, the next the three boys were tumbling around the room, punching each other in the stomach or piling on one another.

Adam had asked Noah, briefly, if this was normal behavior for siblings. Noah watched the tumbleweed of boy limbs roll across the room and muttered, “This? No.”

Gansey and Blue had taken the opportunity to drive back to Henrietta to visit her family, as they couldn’t afford to stay in the city. Noah’s family joined as well, though Adam hardly saw them. Noah made the point to introduce his sisters to the entire band, but then he was swept away by his family, opting to stay with them in the hotel.

Adam couldn’t help but notice how happy Noah was with his family. It hurt, a little, to see the difference in his countenance. Noah loved everyone in the band, of course he did, but his family made him truly happy. The difference was a bit jarring.

Adam spent most of his time with Ronan and his family, but being around them was a bit overwhelming. Ronan had introduced Adam as his boyfriend, of course, which led to hundreds of questions about himself. They were nice - all of them, despite what Ronan said about Declan - but it was a lot. He’d never done this, meeting the family, and though he knew, realistically, they’d be happy with him, it was still nerve-wracking.
Adam had asked if Opal would be coming up, hoping to see her, but he understood the answer by Ronan’s reaction alone. He said, “No, Diane said they would be too busy to come up,” but the way he clenched his teeth said otherwise. (Adam would finally drag the truth out of him a few days later, when they were watching television in the hotel room. It made sense, of course, but Adam had a hard time with the news all the same.)

So, when Adam wasn’t with Ronan’s family, he spent time with Henry. They didn’t do much in particular, besides walk around DC and eat food and check out museums, but Adam liked it that way.

Once they were back in the bus, packed up to go home, Adam resigned himself to having the conversation with Ronan once more. They were passing through a particularly dreary state - Adam had lost track hours ago where they were - and most everyone was passed out in various seats and beds. Ronan was listening to music up front, and when Adam sat next to him with a somber expression, Ronan exhaled loudly.

“I know.”

“You don’t even know what I’m going to say.”

“Yes I do,” Ronan muttered, staring out the window. “I made my decision.”

“And?”

Ronan leaned his head against the window of the bus. It clearly pained him to say it, but quietly, he said, “We’re going to do it. If it means that Noah might stay…”

Adam slipped his hand into Ronan’s. “And if he doesn’t stay?”

“I don’t care,” Ronan whispered. He was staring at their joined hands now. “If there’s even a chance he might stay… I don’t want a band without him, Adam. There’s no point to continuing this without him.”

“It’s not quite the same as when I left,” Adam reminded him. “We’re contractually obligated to produce two more albums with them, remember?”

Ronan seemed unamused by Adam’s logical brain interfering. “That’s future-Ronan’s problem, okay? He’ll figure something out.”
Adam leaned his head against Ronan’s shoulder and squeezed his hand. Maybe now wasn’t the time to problem-solve. Maybe it was the time to just be together. “We’ll make it work, however it ends up. I’m not going to be scared away by a little attention.”

Ronan sighed, and Adam could feel his warm breath against his hair. In a cracked voice he said, “Adam, I just -- I --”

He never finished his thought. The rest of the day, Adam played it over in his mind, wondering what Ronan was going to say. He could imagine a hundred different things, but there was one phrase he kept coming back to. Again and again and again. But that - that specific phrase that circled in his mind - was equally wondrous and terrifying. In the end, Adam was glad Ronan didn’t share his thoughts. Somehow, Adam thought he would disappointed no matter the outcome.

When they finally got back to Los Angeles, they put the plan into action. Henry had easy access to Whelk’s room, and he claimed it was simple enough to install a camera. He showed the device to Adam and Ronan one evening, proudly holding the tiny camera in his hand. “I call it RoboBee.”

“Why?” Ronan asked.

“Why not?”

Ronan didn’t have a good response, but he still stared at the tiny camera and Henry with judgement. The camera could be triggered remotely, so Henry dropped it in Whelk’s office days before they planned to film. They’d check it occasionally, to make sure Whelk hadn’t found it. Each time, Adam’s stomach would tumble anxiously, but it was fine. There was nothing to be nervous about. Henry would remind him, delicately, that this wasn’t a spy movie.

“Whelk has no reason to suspect this,” Henry explained. “His arrogance is infuriating, but in this case, it works out well for us. I don’t think it would ever cross his mind to suspect that anyone might betray him.”

And Henry was right. It wasn’t a spy movie. It wasn’t life or death. In fact, the whole operation was rather boring. The night before they planned to film him, Adam slept horrifically, nervous energy keeping him awake far too long. In the end, though, the hardest part truly was convincing Ronan to agree, because everything went fine.
Adam and Ronan had scheduled a meeting with Whelk, claiming they wanted to talk about the second album. Whelk welcomed them with his typical attitude - feigned politeness, with obvious disinterest in anything they said - and gestured for them to sit. Adam silently thanked Henry for placing the camera at their backs, so that they wouldn’t have to worry about staring directly into it.

And then they told him.

It went as expected. Adam knew it was coming - after all, that was the whole point of this plan, that Whelk would be a dick about it - but it was surprisingly horrific to hear the words all the same. Adam had to tune him out, halfway through, and focus on something happier. Something more positive. Like how good it would feel to see Whelk get fired.

There was only so many times you could listen to shit like, Absolutely not. It’s already bad enough that Mr. Lynch has solidified the fact that Greywaren is referred to as “that one gay band,” or, Do you know how unbearable your fanbase is already? You confirm that you’re together and it’ll make all the other delusional teenagers out there think that all of my musicians are secretly fucking. No thanks, without wanting to hurl.

Ronan kept it together the whole time, miraculously. Adam wasn’t sure how he did it. True, they knew, the entire time, that this would come back to hurt Whelk eventually. That he’d get his punishment soon enough. Still, he was being a Grade-A-Dick and even Adam wanted to punch him in the face.

In the office, with Whelk, they agreed they wouldn’t say anything. Pretended that Whelk scared them into silence, or that it just wasn’t worth the fight. As they walked out of the office, they stopped by Henry’s first. He was sitting at his computer, staring at it intently, and nearly jumped when they walked in.

“Did it work?”

“Beautifully,” Henry muttered. “Fuck, though. That was hard to watch.”

“How are you going to leak it?” Ronan asked.

“Instagram,” Henry said, going back to his laptop. He was typing something furiously. “I made a fake account awhile ago. Traces back to nothing. I did my best to make it look like the account of an obsessed fan who doesn’t know their boundaries. Hopefully Cabeswater will buy that said fan snuck
into the facilities, somehow. And if not, well… We’ll just feign innocence.”

“When you going to post it?”

“Give me a couple hours.”

After they left Cabeswater, they made a point to go out. It’s not like they ever had perfect anonymity in Los Angeles, of course, because people often noticed them even with sunglasses and baseball caps pulled low, but Adam suspected any semblance of privacy they ever had was about to go out the window. So they went out, and Adam took Ronan’s hand as they walked around L.A, and he leaned in to leave a lingering kiss over the dinner table, and he thought, briefly, that maybe this wouldn’t be so bad.

Unlike the videos of their concerts that slowly became viral, the video of Whelk exploded. That night the band was sitting in their dorm, sorting through laundry, when Noah’s phone began to buzz. When he read the messages his mouth dropped open, and he said, “Guys. Holy shit.”

Gansey was first to look up from the television. “What’s wrong?”

Noah turned to Adam and Ronan, gaping at them. “Did you guys -- Oh, my God. There’s a video of you two online. Of you two -- Holy shit.”

“Words, Noah,” Gansey said.

Blue didn’t want to wait for said words. She leaned over and snatched Noah’s phone away, scanning the messages for herself. As she read, she slowly lifted a hand to cover her mouth, parroting Noah’s exclamations. Ronan tried to remain calm, tried to focus on the arm he had slung around Adam’s shoulder. Adam and him hadn’t discussed what their reaction to the scandal would be - if they would feign innocent or fess up - and Ronan wanted to follow Adam’s lead.

Gansey was staring at them. “You two knew about this, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Adam said, solving Ronan’s dilemma. “We did it on purpose.”
“What?” Blue shouted.

Adam shrugged. “We’re trying to get Whelk fired.”

The room exploded after that. The band not satisfied with that answer, of course. They wanted details, which Adam calmly provided. Ronan let Adam lead the discussion, knowing he would fuck everything up. He kept watching Noah, looking for signs of happiness or anger or -- fuck, a sign of anything. He still looked in shock. He kept flipping through his phone, likely scanning Twitter, with a dazed expression.

“I thought you wanted privacy,” Gansey said. He was looking at the two of them with pity, and Ronan wanted to wipe it off his face. Gansey meant well, though. “You realize this is going to explode, right? Everyone will know about you two.”

“We know,” Ronan muttered. He tightened his grip around Adam’s arm, pulling him closer. “It’s fine.”

“All this to get Whelk fired?” Blue asked dubiously. “I mean, like, thank you. You know I hate that guy. But this is-- this is risky, guys.”

Ronan was still staring at Noah, he couldn’t help it. Noah had tuned out the conversation, clearly, because he didn’t look up for his phone. He was staring at it, now with a furious expression. Blue caught Ronan’s gaze and sat back against the couch, her lips forming a small “Oh.” Thankfully, she said nothing.

Noah spoke up suddenly. “Was this your idea, or Henry’s?”

“Henry had nothing to do with it,” Adam said.

“Bullshit.” Noah’s exclamation made the room fall silent. He hardly swore, not at them at least, and his hands were shaking. “He’s the one who leaked it! It’s on his Instagram account!”

“What?” Adam stumbled forward, reaching for Henry’s phone. “He said he had a private account--”
Noah sat back in his seat and shut his eyes, bottom lip trembling. “Not his personal account. His -- you know, the one he’s been posting to secretly for awhile.”

“He has a secret account?” Blue asked.

Noah opened his eyes, only to stare back at them, confused. “Come on, you know. He leaked that picture of Ronan and Adam, back at Kavinsky’s party? @RB1991?”

“That was Henry?” Gansey looked shocked. “Did he tell you?”

“No,” Noah said, blinking. “It was just obvious. He’s born in 1991, and he was one of the only people at the party. And, come on, it sounded just like him. Plus, it was a subtle dig at Whelk. Henry’s hated him for years.”

Ronan could hardly remember the picture, other than the fact that it led to another ugly conversation with Whelk. It was Henry who had posted it, all this time? Ronan couldn’t decide if he was annoyed or proud. Sure, he didn’t really like the fact that Henry had invaded his privacy back then, technically, but he supported anyone who pissed Whelk off.

“Stupid Henry,” Noah said, though the venom had disappeared from his voice. He was typing something furiously into his phone. “What was he thinking? If Cabeswater finds out…”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t have done it if he felt it was a risk to his career,” Blue said gently.

“You don’t understand--” Noah paused, clutching his phone to his chest. There were a few tears pooling in his eyes already. “I need to--”

He rushed to his room, slamming the door shut, before anyone could blink. Adam was pressing his hand to Ronan’s back, whispering, “Ronan…”

“Okay, okay.”
Ronan suspected Noah didn’t want to talk, but since they shared a room, he didn’t have the option of kicking him out. Ronan found Noah on his bed, face buried in his phone as he typed what looked to be a giant text.

“Go away, Ronan,” Noah muttered.

Ronan wasn’t going to do that. He took a seat next to Noah on his bed, letting his legs dangle off the side. He didn’t bother hiding his gaze, looking straight at Noah’s text message. Noah pulled the phone to his chest with a glare.

“You need to talk to me,” Ronan said firmly. “Need I remind you of the last time you kept your feelings to yourself? It doesn’t bode well.”

“I’m fine,” Noah insisted, though the tear that slipped down his cheek betrayed him. “Shit. This is--This is so stupid. You’re so stupid, you, and Adam, and Henry. Especially Henry.”

“What’s so stupid about it?” Ronan countered. “Whelk was an asshole. He was an asshole to me, to Adam, to Henry, but mostly he was an asshole to you. He doesn’t deserve his job, he deserves nothing--”

“Is this about me?” Noah interrupted. His cheeks were starting to turn red, either in embarrassment or fury. Or maybe both. “Ronan, I’m not -- I’m not going to stay in the band just because Whelk is gone.”

“Why not?” Ronan asked. He sounded desperate, he knew it, but now was not the time for pride. If he had to beg Noah he would.

“Because it’s not--” Noah stopped, gulping in a deep breath. He wiped a few tears away with the back of his hand. “It’s more than that. I told you, I hate LA, and I miss my family, and--”

“We can figure something out,” Ronan said. “A way for you to see your family more. Maybe we can get a dorm outside the city.”

“Ronan, you’re not listening to me--”
“I am listening! I just don’t like your answer!” Ronan couldn’t help it. He grabbed one of Noah’s pillows and threw it across the room, feeling completely unsatisfied by the action. “Noah, I can’t do this without you. Fuck, you’re my best friend. You were one of the first people in this fucking band. You’re the -- God, you’re like, the heart of this thing. It won’t be the same without you.”

Noah pulled his knees to his chest, burying his face against them. “I know! I know, okay? Would you rather I stay here, miserable, just so we can stay a band?”

“No, of course not--” Ronan forced himself to lower his voice. Noah was right. He was being a dick. He was being selfish. Adam had warned him about this, hell, Henry had warned him about this, to prepare himself for Noah to still leave. He didn’t have to convince him now, though, he just had to get him to consider it. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want it to be like this. I just thought -- I thought if Whelk was out of the picture, you’d at least consider staying.”

Noah sniffled into his jeans. “It’s not just about Whelk, Ronan.”

“I know, I know,” he said quickly. “It’s your family and LA, I was listening, I promise.”

“No. It’s… something else, too.” Noah kept his face hidden in his legs, refusing to look up at Ronan. “It’s Henry.”

Ronan didn’t understand. “What?” His head was spinning. Did Henry do something to Noah? He wouldn’t -- He was a good guy, why would he--

Ronan barely heard Noah’s voice, and even though he did, it took him a moment to register Noah’s timid, “I like him, Ronan.”

“You--” Ronan licked his bottom lip. “You what?”

Noah sighed, tilting his head to rest his cheek on his knee, so that he was facing Ronan. He looked absolutely miserable. “I like him. I like him a lot.”

“Oh. Okay.” Ronan suddenly felt like he was the wrong person to be having this conversation with Noah. He should probably get Blue. Or even Adam might be better. But Noah was still staring at him, waiting, and so Ronan ventured, “I don’t get it. Why is that a problem? I mean, Adam is pretty convinced he has a massive crush on you, too.”
Noah laughed bitterly. “God, Adam noticed? This is--” he stopped his train of thought, shaking his head. “He does. Henry likes me, too.”

“Then isn’t that…good?”

Noah swallowed, breaking their gaze. He turned his attention back to his phone, which Ronan noticed lit up with a new message, before he looked to the wall. “I’m not -- Ronan, I’m not like everybody else. I’m not… normal.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? You’re totally normal.”

Noah barked a laugh. “It doesn’t feel like that. Not when I watch movies, or read books, or talk to anyone about relationships.”

“Oh.”

Ronan wasn’t good with this sort of thing - both sharing feelings and talking about relationships, and certainly not discussions about one’s sexualities - but he had a suspicion of what Noah was talking about. Noah had never directly stated it, but they’d always joked about it. About Noah’s disinterest in dating. Ronan never thought much about it, because Noah had been so carefree about it, had never complained.

Ronan sighed. What a shit friend he was. What a shit person. Of course Noah cared about it. How often had Ronan been upset with his friends when they completely disregarded the possibility of his sexuality, and yet, he always participated in the jokes. Had always brushed it aside, pretended he didn’t care. But it still hurt.

“I’m sorry, man,” Ronan said. “I didn’t realize--”

“It’s fine,” Noah said stiffly. “It’s not your fault. You didn’t know. I never said anything.”

Or I never listened, Ronan thought. Instead, he said, “But you…like Henry?”
Noah shrugged, dipping his head low. His hair was getting long, and it shielded his eyes. “Yeah. It’s new. I’ve never felt like this before.”

“I’m sorry if this makes me ignorant, but I don’t -- I don’t understand what the problem is then. If you like him...”

“I like him,” he said. “But I don’t -- I don’t know if I’m ready to be with him.” Noah buried his face in his hands and groaned. “This is so embarrassing. Why are we talking about this?”

“No, no,” Ronan patted his head, and it was awkward, but it was something. “This is good. You need to talk. Just keep talking. If you want.”

It took Noah some time to formulate his words, or to get over his embarrassment. Ronan wasn’t sure. As he waited, he let his hand linger on Noah’s head, patting it gently.

“I like him, I know I do,” Noah said finally. “I think about him all the time. He’s been there for me this entire time, back when Whelk was-- well, you know. He was always there for me. And even before that, he made me feel needed. I got to know him because he was always asking for help with social media, and he always liked what I would post, and it was just so nice. Having someone think I’m funny, having someone to talk to.”

Ronan knew that Noah didn’t mean it as an insult, but he felt like Noah had crushed him so quickly into his palm. His guilt was overwhelming. “I should have -- We should have been there for you--”

“No, it’s okay, it really is. You guys were busy, all of you, and I understand that. I don’t blame you, honestly,” Noah said. “I just mean to say, Henry was there. And somehow I started to like him. And it took forever for me to realize this, because I’ve never felt that for anyone before. But suddenly I wanted to see him all the time, talk to him all the time.”

When he stopped his train of thought, Ronan nudged him gently. “But...?”

“But...” Noah trailed off, biting the inside of his cheek. “I still don’t want that.” When Ronan blinked back at him, Noah sighed, apparently irritated at the slow uptake, and muttered, “Sex.”

“Oh.” Suddenly, once again, this felt like a conversation way out of his league. But no. He was the one who told Noah to talk to him. He could do this. “You’re not ready?”
“It’s not that. It’s more like - well. I mean, how often do you think about having sex with Adam?”

Nope. Nevermind. Ronan wanted to exit this conversation, ASAP. Who was he kidding? He wasn’t designed for this. He’d go get Adam. Afterall, Adam didn’t bother hiding his insatiable thoughts around Ronan, maybe he’d be fine with Noah--

But then he caught Noah’s gaze once more, and he was staring at Ronan with such wide eyes that he caved.

“A lot,” Ronan admitted. He could feel his cheeks burning. God, this was the worst. *You’re doing it for Noah. You’re doing it for Noah.*

“And did you think about it a lot before you met Adam?”

Ronan had to think. It was hard to remember, an embarrassing fact because it reminded him of how *God-fucking-long* he’d liked Adam, because he honestly had a hard time remembering anything before him. “I mean, a bit. Not as much, though.”

Noah nodded wistfully. “See? That’s where I’m different. I’ve never thought about it -- well, not about *wanting* it. And for a long time I thought, *I hoped*, maybe I just hadn’t met the right person. But even with Henry I don’t… I don’t think I *want* that.”

At once, Ronan felt he understood Noah’s hesitancy. Fooling around with Adam was such a new thing to him, true, but Ronan couldn’t imagine a relationship without it. He’d do it, if that’s what Adam needed, but he would miss it.

Ronan asked, “Does Henry know this?”

“*Yes,*” Noah admitted.

“He said it would be a problem?”
Noah hesitated. “Not exactly.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“He said he’d be fine with it.” Seeing Ronan’s dubious expression, Noah sped up his voice. “But come, on Ronan! You’ve heard him. He’s always talked candidly about being with people. You think he’s honestly going to be satisfied with me?”

Ronan didn’t know the answer to that, but he couldn’t help but add, “Shouldn’t you at least give him a chance? He’s an adult. He knows himself.”

“I--” Noah had to pause to wipe another tear from his face. “I just… If I give it a shot, and then he can’t handle it… He’s the only person I’ve ever liked, Ronan, and I don’t know if I could handle it if he had to give up on me.”

Then Noah was crying, sloppy tears that ran down his cheeks, hiccuped breaths that caught in his throat. Ronan pulled him into a hug. He didn’t know what to do for him. He didn’t know what advice to give. It was… a hard situation.

Once Noah’s tears had settled, he whispered, “I know I’m running away, but I can’t help it. I can’t be around him. It’s too hard.”

Ronan used the sleeve of his shirt to wipe away a few of Noah’s tears, focusing most of it on his nose. It was gross, but he didn’t care. He’d do anything for Noah.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” Ronan admitted. “I want you to stay here. Part because I’m a selfish shithead, but part because I think you should give it a shot. Being with someone you like is…” He tried to think of what Adam meant to him. Of what it was like to wake up next to Adam, to go to him anytime he was upset or angry or sad. “It’s good, Noah. It’s really fucking good. But just because it’s good for me, doesn’t mean it’s what is good for you.”

Noah smiled wobbly at Ronan. “You’re such a sap.”

“Shut up,” Ronan muttered. He leveled his gaze at Noah again, trying to be serious. “I think you should just think about it for a bit longer. And talk to Henry. Be honest with him. If you decide to give it a try, you have my back. And if you decide you need to go back home, then I’ll support you
in that, too.”

Noah exhaled a ragged breath. “Thanks, Ronan.”

Ronan pulled him into another side hug, shoving his face into his chest. He could sense that Noah still needed to cry, and he’d let him. Whatever he wanted. Whatever he needed.

Sure enough, Noah cried a bit more. Ronan didn’t care. He savored the moment, knowing now, more than ever, that there was a chance he wouldn’t get moments like this anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Phew. Okay, so much happened in this chapter that I'm not even sure how to begin this ending note, but I wanted to address a couple things in particular:

1. There were a couple of scenes in this chapter that I breezed over (meeting Ronan's family, the plot against Whelk) and I hope it doesn't come across rushed. Simply, I've realized recently that I have this obsessive need to write ANY and EVERY scene that pops into my head, and it's not possible, for one thing, it makes me write for far too long, for another, and last, I know my chapters go on TOO long sometimes. So I'm trying to work on this. Apologies if it feels rushed.

2. It was always the plan that Henry would be the one who posted that original photo, but I made a slight error originally and made his user name @BB1991 instead of @RB1991. For some reason I thought RoboBee was called BumbleBee, God knows why. Anyway, I went back and edited it to an "R," but if you wonder, that's why.

3. I try to mirror a lot of plot elements in TRC series, one of which is clearly the Whelk/Noah dynamic. I didn't want to kill Noah, though, but I've always thought it might be a bittersweet parallel to have him "die" in the way of quitting the band. But I also wanted to reference Ronan/Adam plotting, so I kind of combined Whelk with Greenmantle.

4. Last, and most important, I have written Noah's asexuality based on what I experience personally. I've, selfishly, used his storyline as an outlet for my own struggles and worries about my own life and sexuality. I hope it came across in a respectful way, but please know if there is anything that bothers you, I apologize. My experiences do not equal other experiences.

Anyhoo, enough rambling. Thank you, as always, to those who review and say lovely things. You all are so kind to me!
The Plan

Chapter Summary

Plot. Ugh.

Chapter Notes

I'm not a huge fan of this chapter, but I'm tired of looking at it. So.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Prior to being in the band, Adam wasn’t familiar with celebrities or the lives they lived. The idea of being famous didn’t specifically appeal to him; he didn’t dream about it as a boy, didn’t even think about what it meant. Being famous was simply a result of what he really wanted: the band - all together, Ronan - glorious, Henrietta - in the past. He couldn’t prepare himself for the celebrity life because he didn’t know anything about the celebrity life. There were the obvious things, of course. Adam assumed there’d be money, knew roughly about paparazzi and the media and how much they sucked.

So when they became mildly famous, it was amusing. When they became actually famous, it was a happy accident. A result he didn’t ask for, but one he didn’t mind.

Now that he was good and truly famous, though, he was beginning to mind it. Because how quickly it all turned.

He thought they had gone viral before. Tad’s videos were popular, sure, but nothing compared to the shitshow that became their expose on Whelk. It was passed around their fanbase, of course - the outraged fans made sure to vocalize their hatred of Whelk, their wish for him to be destroyed - but it took off even more. It was on almost every news station, on the front of papers and magazines at the grocery stores. Their social media accounts blew up - both with new fans, and an army of hateful bigots - and, worst of all, they attracted the media.

Blue was peering over the balcony of the dorm. As soon as her head dipped past the ledge she pulled back, ducking. With her back pressed to the wall, she muttered, “Yep. Still there.”

“Of course.” Adam sunk his head in his hands, digging the pads of his fingertips into his head. He’d be nursing a mild headache for days now.
Blue crept back from the balcony and into the dorm once more. She shut the blinds behind her, the room falling into darkness. Adam hated it, but it was for the best. The day before, photos of the band inside their dorm appeared online. Someone must have gotten access to a building across the way and took photos through it. Living his life in the dark was unnerving, true, but not as bad as seeing pictures of Ronan and him eating breakfast publicized for the entire world to see.

Going outside had become nearly impossible. It took about two days after the video broke for the media to find where they lived. Adam had wasted his freedom. Used his precious time to go grocery shopping and nothing more. Now, every time they wanted to step foot outside there was a crowd of ten to fifteen adult men waiting, pointing cameras directly in his face. The first time they appeared, Ronan broke two of their cameras.

That led to a horrible article written about him. Ronan didn’t care what it said, but Adam did. Ronan Lynch was no ‘egotistical nutjob,’ and seeing it reTweeted again and again infuriated him. He made Ronan promise not to do it again, and Adam supposed he agreed only for him. Ronan was not used to having to placate anyone’s anger but his own; when he held Adam’s shaking hands, he looked lost.

Blue tried to distract Adam by finding something on television. It didn’t work - nothing really did - until Henry knocked on their door an hour later.

Blue ushered him into the room, kissing him quickly on the cheek. “How are things out there?”

“Howrible, as usual,” Henry said with a smile. “It’s funny, this would have been my dream for you all a month ago.”

Henry’s presence triggered the rest of the band. Gansey came out first, offering Henry a quick fistbump; Ronan pulled Noah behind him, the latter still quite bashful around Henry. (Not that it was necessary. Henry spent so much of his life pretending to be something he wasn’t that, when it came time to face an awkward situation, he was skilled in deflection.)

“They officially fired Whelk today,” Henry said. “It was inevitable, like we expected. Of course, they offered him a wonderful severance package that should ensure he never even has to work again.”

“Pigs,” Blue bit.
“Yes.” Henry cleared his throat. His eyes trailed to each of the members of the band, though he lingered on Noah longer than the rest. “That’s not why I came, though. I wanted to discuss a couple things with you.”

“Oh good,” Ronan muttered. He fell into the couch and spread his legs wide. “You look like shit, which means your news is shit.”

“You look fine, Henry,” Gansey said quickly. Still, he ushered Henry to the couch and said, “Can I make you some coffee? Tea?”

Henry declined. The rest of the band found a place to sit, scattered on the minimal furniture. Before Adam could pick a spot, Ronan tugged him backward, pulling him into the space between his legs. It wasn’t exactly comfortable, but when Ronan leaned forward to rest his chin on Adam’s shoulder, he found he didn’t care much.

“Not all of it is terrible news, I promise. Though, I suppose that depends on how you interpret it,” Henry said quickly. He laced his fingers together to crack his knuckles. “Well, first off, they are rescheduling your concert in LA. With all this publicity, they wanted to capitalize on a bigger venue. It’ll be at the end of the month.”

Everyone looked at Noah. There was no point in being subtle, Adam supposed. Since their ploy went viral, Noah had yet to confirm whether his plans to leave the band had changed. Adam didn’t know what to think. Ronan had come back from their talk looking exhausted, falling into Adam’s arm with a heavy sigh. He didn’t go into detail what they talked about - nor did Adam ask - but Ronan’s view on Noah leaving the band had completely changed.

Adam could still feel Ronan’s warm breath on his neck, the way the pads of his fingers pressed into his sides, as he said, “I just want him to be happy. Whatever he needs to do.”

Noah’s shaky breath took Adam back to the present. “It’s fine. A little extra time doesn’t hurt.”

For a moment, it seemed like Henry was going to say something to Noah. Instead, he turned back to his hands and continued, voice too chipper. “I’ll get you more details soon. Now, moving onto the next agenda item: your next album. As you know, they’d like to officially go forward with album number two. Normally, you’d discuss this with Whelk, but seeing that he is no longer with us, you’ll have to discuss it with his replacement. I expect that will be imminent, though, so I wanted to warn you.”
“Do you know who that will be yet?” Gansey asked.

Henry shook his head. “No. They’ve - uh - been hesitant to share much information with me, lately. I’m not sure I’m in their good graces.”

“What do you mean?” Noah asked.

Henry waved off his concern. “I’m sure it’s nothing. They’ve just been a bit stingier in the information they give me. Though, frankly, I was always given far too much information on you all then necessary. Whelk delegated many of his responsibilities onto me, but I’m just your PR manager.”

“Henry.”

Blue placed her hand on Noah’s knee and squeezed it. “If Henry had anything to be worried about, I’m sure he’d tell us.”

Henry nodded eagerly. (Too eagerly, if you asked Adam. It sent him in a mental tizzy. Henry was calculated about everything he did; he didn’t have to act so obvious. Which only made Adam wonder if Henry wanted them to call him out on his lie.)

Noah looked unconvinced. He stared at Henry, eyes narrowed, while Henry stared back with a pleasant smile. Eventually Noah grew tired of it, because he stood up and excused himself to his room. Blue hurried after him, mouthing an apology to Henry.

“Don’t mind him, Henry,” Gansey said, patting his shoulder. “He has a lot going on right now. I’m sure this is just misplaced stress.”

“Yes, that’s it,” Ronan muttered, shooting Henry a very pointed look. Ronan’s hand squeezed against his waist, and if Adam was supposed to understand the secret message, he was failing. “Gansey, get lost for a minute.”

“Because I want to talk to Henry alone.”

Gansey practically pouted, but never one to push Ronan back, he launched himself up off the couch and said, “Well, Adam, I suppose we’ll just have to entertain ourselves—”

“No,” Ronan said. He slipped his arms around Adam’s waist and pulled him close. “He stays.”

“What?” Gansey pressed his fingers to his temples. “This is preposterous. If this has to do with the band, then I need to be part of the discussion.”

Ronan didn’t even miss a beat. “Actually, I need Henry’s advice.”

“On what? Maybe I can help—”

“Okay Gansey,” Ronan said, running his palm down Adam’s chest slowly. He stared at Ronan’s hand in confusion. It was an awkward gesture, which didn’t make sense until Ronan added, “I need some logistics on how to actually fuck a guy. They forgot to cover that at Aglionby. What position would you recommend?”

Gansey visibly paled. Henry looked absolutely delighted. Adam hung his head in shame. All around, a really great moment for everyone.

“Well,” Gansey said in a clipped tone. “I don’t necessarily believe you, but I shall just… leave you be.”

“Bye, Gansey!” Henry called.

Gansey scurried off to their room. Once gone, Henry clapped his hands together and said, “So glad that you decided to come to me for this. Here’s my first piece of advice: don’t overthink traditional—”

Ronan shoved Adam away - a gesture that Adam might find more annoying on a typical basis, if not for the direction this conversation was going - and glared at Henry. “Jesus, Cheng, I was taking the piss.”
“Oh, gotcha.” Henry waggled his eyebrows. “You already figured it out, then?”

Adam could have intervened, but seeing as Ronan was the one to get himself into this mess, he just sat back and watched. Anyway, it was quite fun to see Ronan flushed and sputtering.

“Cheng, say one more thing and I swear,” Ronan warned. (Though he was not nearly as threatening when embarrassed.)

Henry waved his hand in surrender and then made an "OK" symbol with his other hand. "Alright, alright, got it."

When Ronan sank back to the couch in relief though, Henry continued, "But just so you know..." He held up his hand in an "OK" again and slid a pointed finger toward it in a lewd fashion. "It's not too different from having sex with a woman. It’s all about finding the opening--"

Ronan lunged forward with a pillow from the couch, stuffing it into Henry’s face. Adam had to pull Ronan back, muttering under his breath, “Ronan, you can’t kill our friend.”

Roughly eighty-three seconds later, each of the three had regained some sense of composure again. Henry was picking at the button on his shirt cuff. “So, if not for sex advice, what do you actually want to talk with me about?”

“I want the bullshit-free version of what’s going on at Cabeswater,” Ronan muttered. “They’re mad at you, aren’t they?”

Adam was pleasantly surprised to see that Henry did, in fact, cut the crap. Rather than make up an excuse, Henry said, “I have a meeting scheduled with some of the higher ups tomorrow. They wouldn’t tell me what it was about.”

“Shit,” Adam breathed. “Are they going to...” He found he couldn’t say the words. Are they going to fire you? It was a terrible idea to bring Henry into their mess. Of course Cabeswater would be pissed.

“I don’t know. Maybe. Probably.” Henry hung his head. “I’m trying not to think about it.”
“Henry…” Adam thought the words sounded worthless on his tongue, but he spoke them anyway. “We’re so sorry. We should never have--”

“It was my choice. I knew what I was getting into,” Henry said. He cracked a grin and it hurt to see. “If I had to lose my job, I’m glad it’s because I was fighting the system.”

“You need to tell Noah,” Ronan cut in.

“It will only upset him.”

“You need to tell him,” Ronan repeated. “Look, Cheng. I didn’t want into your business, but somehow I’m stuck in it. It’s like I stepped in your romantic dogshit, and I can’t get it out of the cracks of my shoes. If you want to be with him, you’re going to have to communicate.”

Adam turned to Ronan, slightly shocked. Ronan Lynch? Giving romantic advice? Stressing the importance of communication, of all things? Wild.

“I’ll tell him if it happens,” Henry said. “No point in stressing him out early.”

“Your funeral.”

Henry ignored him. “Was this all you wanted to discuss? Or can we get back to the talk of sex? It was much more pleasant.”

“Get out.”

Henry did leave a few minutes later, though he claimed it had nothing to do with Ronan’s threat. Once alone, Adam tucked his toes beneath Ronan’s legs and leaned against the couch.

“This is a mess,” he said.
Ronan didn’t disagree. They sat in silence, every once in awhile Adam wiggling his toes, until Ronan grabbed his foot and yanked it onto his lap.

“Are you doing okay?” Adam asked.

Ronan pressed his thumb into the bottom of Adam’s foot. “Are you?”

“I asked first.”

“But I’m the one distracting you with a foot rub,” Ronan countered, again moving his thumb. Ah. So that’s what he was attempting to do. “You’re being lulled into a sense of vulnerability by my magic fingers.”

“You need to work on it a bit before we can call it magic,” Adam muttered. Still, it didn’t feel bad, so what harm was it to let Ronan practice longer? “Ronan, I’m serious. Are you doing okay? You were the one who just said communication was important.”

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to say,” Ronan said. There was a hint of malice in his voice, but considering what followed, Adam found Ronan’s tone to be shockingly civil. “No, I’m not doing okay. I hate the fucking media talking about us. I hate those shitheads waiting outside our door. I hate that we probably fucked over Cheng, that Noah’s going to leave, that I can’t see Opal anymore.”

Adam pulled his feet away and shifted to sit close to him. He took Ronan’s hand, letting the pads of his fingers slide down Ronan’s palm until their fingers were laced, and squeezed. “I hate it, too.”

“I don’t hate—” Ronan said quickly, struggling to find his words. “I don’t regret anything. With you. So don’t think that.”

Adam leaned his head against Ronan’s shoulder. “I figured. I mean, you’ve clearly enjoyed it so far. Already researching sex positions—”

Within seconds, Ronan flipped Adam around, pressing his back into the couch, and loomed over him. He was so flustered that it was hard to take him seriously when he said, “I swear to God, Parrish.”
“Oh, this is how you want to do it?” Adam asked, running his tongue along the edge of his top teeth in a grin. “Not the position I was expecting, but you know me. Happy to do anything, really.”

“Jesus Christ, Parrish,” Ronan muttered, dipping down to hide his face in Adam’s neck. It was so rare to see Ronan shy; Adam thought he’d never grow tired of it.

Adam rested his hand on Ronan’s neck, humming under his breath. “You have to admit: you deserve that.”

“Parrish.”

“You basically delivered that joke to me,” Adam countered.

“Adam.” Ronan’s lips were moving against Adam’s throat now, whispering curses on his skin. They felt closer to a blessing to Adam, though.

“Well, that’s a dirty trick,” Adam muttered.

“Don’t be so predictable then,” Ronan countered, kissing up Adam’s jaw until he reached his lips. “You can keep making fun, or we could do something more interesting.”

It wasn’t really a choice.

Ronan found Gansey still moping in the kitchen the next morning. He was nursing a cup of black coffee while scrolling through his phone, face looking pained, and completely ignored Ronan when he first walked in.

“Something the matter, Dick?”
Gansey set his phone face down on the counter and looked up at Ronan with a distasteful look. “Oh, you’re interested in talking with me again? Good to know.”

“You’re not one to be petty,” Ronan remarked.

“I’m just kidding,” Gansey said, though he didn’t look happy. It was not unusual for Gansey to be unhappy with him; they’d been playing that game since they were fourteen. Ronan would do something that Gansey disapproved of, which was evident because Gansey was not one to hide said disapproval. Then they’d go at it, Gansey ultimately caving to Ronan’s will. Rinse and repeat.

Still, it had been a long time since they’d had such a disagreement. In fact, it’d been a long time since they’d really even... talked, now that Ronan thought about it. He tried to remember the last time they were alone like this. The last time it wasn’t Ronan-and-Adam and Blue-and-Gansey, but just Ronan and just Gansey.

“Do you want to go get lunch or something?” Ronan offered.

“The paparazzi are still there.”

“Well, fuck them. I’m getting stir crazy,” Ronan muttered.

Gansey watched him for a long moment before settling back in his seat. “Alright. If you’re willing.”

Ronan regretted the choice almost immediately, but by the time they were outside, surrounded by shouting and cameras flashing and people shoving him from all sides, it was too late. Gansey tried to make friendly conversation with the photographers as they walked to their car, while Ronan just pulled up his hood and glowered. (Which earned him the shout, “Ronan! Why do you look so upset? Things going bad with you and Adam?”)

Thankfully, the paparazzi had quickly learned to stay away when Ronan drove. The other members would take their time pulling out of the parking space, driving at a crawl so that the paparazzi could continue to crowd the outside of the windows to take photos. Ronan, on the other hand, simply honked once in warning, revved the car in neutral, and yelled out the window, “If you don’t move in two seconds I’m running you over.”

(They didn’t believe him the first time. They did now.)
On the way to the restaurant, Gansey asked, “Are you doing okay? With all this?”

“People need to stop asking me this question,” Ronan muttered. “You know the answer.”

“It was a very brave thing for you and Adam to do,” Gansey continued. “Though I wish you would have told the rest of us about it. We could have done something to help. I probably could have asked my mother if--”

“Gansey.”

“What?”

“You don’t need to fix my problems for me anymore.” Ronan rested his hand on the gearshift, palm gripping it as he slipped into third. When Gansey frowned, he added, “It’s not that I don’t want you around or something. I just -- it’s my responsibility and shit.”

“Oh. Well. Okay.” And that was all Gansey said on that.

Desperate to change the subject, Ronan found himself doing something he’d never thought he would. “So. How have things been for you? With the maggot?”

“Quite well! We have squabbles often, because I tend to put my foot in my mouth--” Ronan gave himself a mental pat on the back for not snorting out loud, “--but it’s so good most of the time. She’s good for me, I think.”

“You were fine before,” Ronan said.

“I know. But…” Gansey looked over at him from the passenger seat thoughtfully. “I think being with the right person makes noticeable the things we often try to hide. The parts of us we weren’t comfortable to share with others.”

Ronan did snort this time, loudly. Thank God they were only a block from the restaurant. “Dick.
That’s cheesy.”

Gansey huffed a breath. “I’m just saying. Don’t you feel a more grounded, being with Adam?”

Ronan pulled into a parking spot and killed the engine to stall. He knew the answer. *Yes. Yes, Adam made him feel more grounded. Yes, Adam made him feel better. Yes, Adam brought out all the parts of Ronan that he wanted to keep tucked away from other people. The parts of him that he tried to hide by covering it with street racing and tattoos and curses and buzzed hair and his temper.*

That didn’t mean he was ready to acknowledge this to Gansey though. He could not think of one time, ever, in their entire friendship, where they discussed their relationships.

“Let’s get some food, Dick.”

“Wait—” Gansey stopped him from leaving the car. He wet his lips. “Before we go in. I just wanted to say something to you. That I’ve been meaning to.”

Ronan groaned, leaning his head against the window. “I swear to God, Dick, if you say something sentimental—”

“I’m sorry,” Gansey said quickly. “I never knew you were gay. I never noticed, or even... thought about the possibility. It can’t have been easy for you.”

“Well, it’s not like I was shouting it from the heavens, Dick.”

“I know. But that doesn’t it mean it didn’t hurt,” Gansey said lightly. “It’s the fact that I just assumed. And I knew we never discussed your love life, but it was easier for me to just figure you were picky or bored, rather than to take the time to ask you.”

He clapped Ronan on the shoulder, squeezing gently, and Ronan was sent back to being ten, waiting for his parents to finish talking to their friends at church. It wasn’t necessarily a bad feeling, but he shook Gansey off all the same with an annoyed look.

“Did your girlfriend tell you to say that?” Ronan asked.
Gansey did not take his bait. Instead, he just smiled and said, “Oh, I get plenty of lectures on sensitivity and inclusivity. But I’ve been thinking about this, since you came out, and wanting to talk with you about it. Wanting to apologize.”

“If I say I forgive you, will this conversation end?”

“Well, it is my full intention to have more conversations like this in the future,” Gansey said, finally pulling open the door to the car. “You’re my best friend, Ronan, and I intend to make up for lost time. How are things going with you and Adam, by the way? I admit, I was quite surprised to find out that you two were a thing, at first, but the more I thought about it -- Ronan, seriously?”

Ronan pulled the door to the restaurant behind him, holding onto the handle so that Gansey could not enter. From outside, Gansey stared at him through the glass, clearly annoyed.

“Ronan.”

He could still hear Gansey through the glass, but that didn’t stop him from saying, “Can’t hear you, Dick. Sorry!”

At least ten minutes later, the two of them had finally sat down for food. (Ronan had to let Gansey in when another couple wanted to leave the restaurant. It was unfortunate.) Ronan had chosen a random diner, knowing he would be safe from the paparazzi. (Though apparently not safe from random people asking for photos. They posed for several throughout the entire meal, until Gansey tactfully asked to be left alone.) It was just so enjoyable to see Gansey at a diner, analyzing the menu as if there was anything worth eating besides a sandwich of some sort.

“I’m dreading this next album a bit.” Gansey said at one point, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I thought, surely, we’d get a bit of time off.”

“Did you want to go home again? I’m sure Cheng could swing you another few days off,” Ronan said. It wasn’t until the words left his mouth did he remember that Henry might not have a job at all. Fuck.

“Well, seeing my family would be nice, but that’s not what I meant.” Gansey poked at a fry. “I just wanted a longer break, some significant time off so that I could explore some of my other interests. But alas.”
“Not that English King again.”

“Glendower was Welsh, and I know you know that. But no, I have finally put that to rest. Mostly.” Gansey sighed. “I just feel very stagnant right now. Yale was not - well, I’m not sure if I would go back to Yale, per say, but it was fascinating to get to study whatever I wanted. To have these rich, complicated discussions with others.”

Ronan thought that sounded horrific. He could just imagine the conversations, full of uptight and condescending idiots, debating the complexity of something ridiculous. Like whether or not the Bahamas were no longer a hip destination to go.

But Gansey had been nice to him today, so Ronan just said, “I’m sure you can bother Parrish if you want to discuss intellectual shit. I’m sure he feels the same way. It’s not like we talk about that.”

“You are plenty smart, Ronan.”

“Did I say I wasn’t?”

“Well,” Gansey sucked in a breath. When Ronan laughed, he tossed his used napkin at his face. “I hate you.”

In return, Ronan stole a fry. “Really, looking back, I can’t believe you ever wanted to be in a band in the first place. It’s never really seemed like your thing.”

Gansey shrugged. “It made you happy.”

“Me?”

“Yes. You were -- well,” Gansey paused, clearly trying to pick his words carefully. “After your father died, music was the only thing to pull you out of your room. I would have done almost anything to make you feel better. Thank God you chose music. Could you imagine if you had chosen something more ridiculous?”
Ronan felt uneasy. “Did you - I mean, do you even like playing the bass?”

“Oh, of course! Don’t get me wrong, it’s always been fun. I enjoy myself quite a bit,” Gansey said. “I just don’t think music is, to me, what it is for you. Or Blue.”

Ronan sat on that thought, trying to figure out why it bothered him so much. He knew this about Gansey, objectively. Knew that Gansey picked up the bass in the first place because Ronan convinced him to. Still, he had always assumed that Gansey wanted this. That making a career out of music was Gansey’s dream, too, just as much as it was Ronan’s dream.

He wasn’t sure anymore.

At 9:55 AM that morning, Adam got a text from Henry that said: Going into meeting. Texting you so that, if I disappear, there’s evidence of my capture.

Adam shot back, Henry. It’ll be okay.

You’re right. They wouldn’t murder me. They’ll just fire me!

And then he followed it with a string of various emojis.

Adam didn’t hear anything else for several hours. He checked in with Henry at noon, then again at two. By the time Ronan and Gansey returned from their outing around four, he still hadn’t heard from Henry. A quick check with the rest of the band proved the same.

“Why?” Noah asked, eyes narrowed. “Is something wrong?”

“Just trying to get ahold of him,” Adam lied.

Back in his and Gansey’s room, Ronan took Adam’s phone from him and looked at the original
message. He called Henry himself, hoping the shock value would force Henry to pick up, but the phone went immediately to voicemail.

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Adam said.

Ronan looked unconvinced. Around nine at night, though, Noah got a text message. He didn’t say who it was from, but when he said he was going out for the evening, he was suspiciously quiet about where he was going. Adam and Ronan exchanged a silent look, but neither made an effort to talk about it that night. (Neither slept well, either.)

The following morning he woke up to a text from Henry that said, Sorry. Things escalated. Will text later.

Adam decided he would have to have a talk with Henry about his wording. Things escalated? How vague could he be? And were they escalating to something good, or something bad?

Then, a few hours after that, Gansey got a call that instructed all of them to come to Cabeswater for a meeting about their new boss. Everyone was a little on edge, sans Noah, who was remaining irritatingly quiet about his destination the previous night. Still, they all piled into the car and went to Cabeswater, and while Gansey drove, Adam sent Henry another text. Just in case.

He received back the kissy-face emoji. (And then, immediately after, another text that said, Don’t tell Ronan I did that.)

So, by the time the five of them were crammed back in Whelk’s office - though it had been cleared out of the man’s things, thankfully - Adam was more than a little annoyed. He was also, somehow, not remotely surprised when Henry walked into the room, sat behind Whelk’s desk, and said, “So. Guess who got promoted unexpectedly?”

A hush befell the room, but only for a moment. Then, after a string of filthy curses, Ronan said, “You’re shitting me.”

Henry’s eyes slipped to Noah, quickly, before turning back to everyone else. Adam wondered if he was even trying to be subtle anymore. “It was completely unexpected. I thought they were going to fire me for my involvement in the leak.”
“I can’t believe they didn’t realize it was you,” Blue marveled. “That’s rather lucky.”

Noah snorted. “They knew he did it.”

All eyes turned to him to continue, but Noah just stared straight at Henry, one eyebrow raised. (Had it not been such a surprising statement, Adam would have pressed Noah for further details on how exactly he knew that, considering no one had spoken with Henry in a few days.)

Henry cleared his throat. “Well, they thought I orchestrated the whole thing. Which, in a way, is a blessing for Adam and Ronan. They assumed I planted the camera in Whelk’s office and leaked it, without either of them knowing.”

“And they liked you for this?”

Henry looked a little embarrassed. Or perhaps worried. His eyes kept flicking to Ronan, and he muttered, “Well, it’s essentially a publicity stunt for them, and one that has - luckily - paid off quite well. True, they looked a bit bad when the news came out, but your album sales almost tripled.”

“There’s no such thing as bad publicity,” Gansey said slowly. “That sort of thing.”

“You have to know, that was never my intention,” Henry said, clearly to Ronan. “I wasn’t angling for attention, nor did I ever expect to get offered Whelk’s job--”

“Dude, chill.” Ronan reached across the desk and slapped Henry’s shoulder. “I know.”

“Oh. Good.” It took Henry a moment to recover from Ronan’s blaise response, clearly having expected something much more turbulent. He straightened his tie, cleared his throat once more, and said, “It certainly changes things, though.”

“Does this make you our boss?” Adam asked.

Henry cringed. “Technically. It may make things slightly awkward, I suppose. Though, it also presents us the opportunity to roleplay a boss-underling fantasy I’ve always had. I would be willing to try it with any and all of you.”
“God, Henry,” Blue complained. “Now is not the time for these jokes.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” Henry forced out a laugh. “I just -- You guys are my friends. And this might put us in a difficult situation, sometimes, so forgive me, I’m just nervous.”

“Henry, don’t worry. We trust you. I’m sure none of us has any ill-will toward you,” Gansey said.

When he didn’t look unconvinced, Adam added, “Henry, if this is what you wanted - if it makes you happy - then we’re happy.”

Henry grimaced. “Well, I wouldn’t say I’m happy, but thank you, Adam.”

“You didn’t want the job?” Blue asked, concerned.

“I don’t know, I’m just a little conflicted about it. Maybe I’m just nervous. It’s a lot more responsibility.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t take more time to think about it,” Gansey said.

Noah snorted unkindly. Henry shot him a dirty look before adding, “Well, it seemed stupid to turn it down. It’s a promotion, a step up. Career-wise, I’d be insane to turn it down.”

Adam didn’t miss that Noah was still huffing in the corner, looking pissed. Henry was doing his best to ignore him, bless him, but he was doomed the moment Noah opened his mouth because Ronan, having such a laser focus on Noah, pressed the issue on his behalf.

“So why is Noah so pissy, then?”

Henry twisted his lips to the side. “I’m not sure.”
“Because he’s being self-sacrificing, and it’s unnecessary.” When no one understood his implication, Noah sighed. “I’m sorry, Ronan, I know you were hoping I’d reconsider, with Whelk gone, but I just… I can’t continue to be in the band.”

Adam watched Ronan carefully, ready to jump into action if necessary. To his credit, though, Ronan just nodded, voice devoid of any emotion.

Blue took it the hardest. She was blinking rapidly, clearly trying to hide her tears, and her voice wobbled slightly when she asked, “And what does this have to do with Henry?”

Noah stared at Henry, as if to say, *Your turn*, so Henry carefully folded his hands and explained, “Well, you are all officially my territory, so to speak. I have the right to approve certain decisions about your futures.”

When no one reacted, Noah added, “He can get me out of the contract.”

“But just you,” Henry amended. “In general, this allows me more leniency to review your contract as a whole. To make adjustments, if necessary.”

“What sort of adjustments?” Ronan asked.

“Well, you tell me,” Henry said. “With Noah leaving, I thought it would be wise for the rest of you to have a frank conversation about your future. About what you want. *All* of you.”

When no one spoke, Henry leaned forward, exhaling slowly. “Look. This is me speaking to you as a friend, not a boss. I have had the pleasure to get to know each of you. I think I can say, with some confidence, that I know you fairly well. And while I think you have all done extraordinarily well this past year - that you have grown as a band, as musicians - you don’t seem… Well, you don’t seem as happy as you once were.”

Adam let his words sink in, and the silence in the room proved he wasn’t the only one thinking carefully. *Was he less happy?* His gut reaction was to deny it. He had never *been* so happy. Things with Ronan were good. *Really* good. His cut from the contract meant he had a hefty sum of money tucked away in a savings account, more than he ever had in his life. He was with his friends.

But.
It struck Adam, quite at once, that none of those factors really had to do with the band. True, he only had money because of the band, but he wouldn’t suddenly lose it. And by now, Adam was confident that he would be friends with all of them regardless of the band. They weren’t friends because they were a band; they were a band because they were friends.

And Ronan --

Well, Adam was slowly starting to believe that Ronan might actually be something he got to keep. That it could be really good between them for a long time. That he could be capable of receiving love, and was just as capable of giving it out.

Adam was very, very aware that this reality with Ronan would only grow flimsier the more the media were obsessed with their lives. That having to run from screaming men and flashing cameras would only stress them out. That, thanks to the leak, their relationship would be constantly discussed and criticized by people who didn’t know them. That every time they went in public they might be followed or interrupted.

And Adam knew that Ronan could only deal with the scrutiny for so long.


It didn’t take long to understand what he meant. Gansey fumbled around, trying to make it not sound so bad, but the more he tried to claim that he was perfectly fine to continue being in the band, the more it became obvious that he was staying in the band out of obligation for the rest of them, not himself. Adam watched Blue carefully as she took in his words, as her eyes fluttered shut in pained understanding the more he spoke.

“Look, we don’t have to decide anything right away,” Henry said. “In fact, I hesitate to say that you should make any decisions before I talk with the president. It’s one thing to dismiss Noah and Gansey from the band, but it’s another to potentially… well, I don’t want to get your hopes up for a decision that I might not be able to promise.”

“If Noah and Gansey both leave…” Blue trailed off.

“We’re not replacing them,” Ronan cut in.
“That might not be your choice,” Henry said. “Again, there’s no reason to panic. I wanted to have this discussion now, so that everyone is honest with one another. Go home, think about it, talk about it with each other, and when everyone has made a decision, let me know. Then I can see what can be done. Try to convince them that it’s an economical decision for Cabeswater.

“In the meantime, though, we do need to discuss the concert. I have more details on that, and the album, but I say we skip the latter for now…”

Adam tried to pay attention, he really did, but it was inevitable that his mind would wander. He looked at his friends, watched each of them carefully, and tried to imagine what life would be like without being a band anymore. What each of them would do. Whether it was even worth being a band if Noah and Gansey left.

Mostly, he wondered what Ronan would do. If he’d be okay.

After the meeting with Henry, no one spoke much. Blue and Gansey both disappeared into her room, looking quite somber. Noah said he was going to call his sister, effectively taking over their room. Adam simply took Ronan’s hand and guided him to his room, where he immediately dragged Ronan onto the bed and forced him to lay down. They lay facing each other, not saying much at all, Adam occasionally running his finger down Ronan’s nose, along his brow, down his jaw.

“Are you okay?” Adam asked finally.

“I’m so tired of this question,” Ronan said without malice.

“If Noah and Gansey leave the band…” Adam began, trailing off. Now, he was running his thumb over Ronan’s bottom lip again and again. “What are you thinking?”

Ronan had thoughts, many thoughts, but he wasn’t ready to share them. They were spinning in his mind, aimlessly, just the word, *No, no, no*, repeating in his brain. He didn’t want to be a band without Noah or Gansey. He didn’t want strangers replacing them. Fuck, he wasn’t even sure *he* wanted to be part of the band anymore. He was so very tired of the media getting into his business, of having to follow orders from slimy executives who were hell-bent on using him to gain money.
What he really wanted, shamefully, was to be back in Gansey’s apartment. Or back in a small, local venue, playing for fun, smiling across the stage at Adam, knowing Adam was the only one to notice the secret gift. He wanted to be able to pack up his guitar, pull Adam in for a kiss, and head home without hundreds of people crowding him. He wanted to be back in Henrietta, writing songs as Opal picking at guitar strings by his feet.

He wanted this so badly, even though he knew it could never happen. Knew that he couldn’t survive life by being in an amateur band, picking up a little extra money by working at Mr. Allen’s shop. That at some point he’d have to move on from the band - everyone would - to have real careers, to make money, to have families.

Ronan hated that there was no in-between. That it seemed like his life would either be void of music, or controlled by it.

Adam tapped on his nose. “Hey. Talk to me.”

Ronan wrapped his arms around Adam’s waist and tugged him close. “Can we not talk about this? Just for tonight? I need a break.”

Adam hummed under his breath, making his disapproval obvious, but he allowed the conversation to stop by teasing, “Guess you’ll have to find some other way to distract me, then.”

“You’re so easy, Parrish,” Ronan whispered, rolling on top of him and capturing his lips with a kiss. After lingering, he whispered into Adam’s ear, “Oh, the things I could get away with…”

“Don’t test your luck,” Adam warned, though his stern tone felt a little ridiculous when Ronan could feel him stirring beneath him.

From above, Ronan tucked a piece of hair behind Adam’s ear, then dragged his thumb against his cheek. Adam said nothing, content just to be given these small touches. Ronan was glad for it, because it allowed him time to just look at him, his freckles and the blue of his eyes, and wonder, yet again, how he got Adam Parrish when he was far too good for him.

What was he supposed to do for Adam if the band fell apart? He felt wholly and completely responsible for Adam, not just because he was his boyfriend, but because Ronan was the only one who recognized what a big deal it had been to give up Yale for the band. Ronan did not worry about
Noah or Gansey - both came from supportive families with supportive financial backgrounds - both who would have no problem getting back into a college. Blue would be -- well, Blue would be devastated, he was sure. Ronan would owe her thousands of apologies. But she still had Gansey and a family to return to; she had still gotten out of Henrietta, found something special out there.

What was Adam going to do if the band ended? There was no reason for him to go back to Henrietta, nor did Ronan want him to go back. Henrietta did not deserve Adam. And while Ronan had fantasies about taking Adam back to the barns again, this time getting to show him his life while also getting to kiss him, he couldn’t imagine Adam staying there for long.

If he was lucky, he could go back to Yale. Finish his degree. But that would take time; time to reapply, time to be accepted, time to pack up his things and find a place in New Haven and get situated. Then time to adjust to being a student again. And even then, would he be treated differently? The entire world knew about their relationship now. Would kids bother him in class?

Adam was growing restless of being looked at, clearly, because his eyebrows dipped low into an almost glare. “What?”

“Let me look at you,” Ronan ordered. He didn’t mean for it to come out as a whisper, but it wasn’t easy to find his voice all of the sudden.

Adam rolled his eyes, but the tips of his ears were growing pink. There were words waiting on the tip of his tongue, because he kept parting his lips, as if ready to say something snarky or self-deprecating, but something in Ronan’s gaze kept him silent.

Feeling brave, Ronan said, “I like to look at you, Parrish.”


“Yes,” he breathed. Ronan kissed the hollow of his throat, then the side of his neck, then near his hearing ear. Into it, he murmured, “I will tell you that until you believe me.”

A complicated expression passed Adam’s face. He squirmed underneath Ronan, tilting his head on the pillow so that his deaf ear was facing up, and said, “Say it into this ear, instead.”

Ronan obliged, though he knew Adam was being a pain. It was easier, in some ways. Practice for
them both. Ronan still had trouble vocalizing his feelings, and Adam still had trouble receiving it. So he bent down, pressed his lips to Adam’s ear, and whispered the three words he wanted to say most of all, repeating the phrase three times in quick succession.

Adam twisted back, “Ugh, it tickles. What did you say?”

“I sang the Squash song into your ear. It was glorious.” When Adam glared at him, Ronan added, “You don’t get to ask what I said after you force me to say nice things in the wrong ear.”

Adam knew he had a point, but rather than lose the argument, he placed his hands on Ronan’s hips and said, “Why are we talking anyway?”

Ronan agreed.

He didn’t sleep well that night, though, partially due to sharing a too-small bed with Adam, but mostly from his thoughts. By six, he had grown tired of waking up every fifteen minutes and decided to go into Cabeswater. Henry was there already, tie loosened and hair limping toward the ground, nursing a cup of coffee.

“You look like shit,” he said.

Henry didn’t even look up from his computer. “Ronan, as much as I enjoy our chats, I’m a little busy.”

“You’re a big-time exec now. Don’t you have an assistant to do your dirty work?”

Henry snorted. “I wish. I’m starting to think they gave me this job because no one else would take it. Guess who was terrible at his job and left a metric-ton of shit for me to clean up?”

Ronan pulled up a chair next to Henry and kicked his feet onto his desk. “Cheng. How was Whelk supposed to find time to do actual work when so much of his day was spent being a giant tool?”

“Ha, ha. But, seriously, Ronan, I don’t mean to be rude, but I’ve been working all night--”
“It’s work-related,” Ronan said. “I can come back later, but I think I have a plan for the group. Something you can bring to Cabeswater.”

This captured Henry’s attention. He snapped his laptop closed and spun his chair to face Ronan, somehow still managing to look intrigued beneath his fatigue. “Go on.”

“Be real with me, first. Who will Cabeswater let out of the contract without a fuss?” When Henry cringed, Ronan added, “I know it’s not your opinion.”

“Noah and Blue,” Henry said quickly. “Both roles are easily replaceable. Gansey is tricky. His value is less on his skills, so much as his spokesmanship. Aside from Noah, he’s the only one who knows how to talk to the press, how to talk to fans, that sort of thing. And he’s reliable. Adam can do the schmoozing, but only when he wants to. Piss him off and he’s just as bad as you.”

“So if Adam can step up his game, they might let Gansey slide?”

“Possibly. Though, knowing that Three comes from a reputable background, they might put up more of a fight. Try to get some money out of him for breaking the contract,” Henry said.

Ronan thought for a moment. “So, really, all they care about is Adam and me?”

“Well, you are responsible for the majority of the fanbase.”

“Who do they like more, though?”

“Gee, Ronan. Let me go check the bathroom and see which one of you has your name written more on the stalls.” Henry paused, “Wait, no. I have a better joke. Pretend I said: well, you have that bad-boy thing going on, but Adam is the type of guy you could bring home to meet your mom.”

Ronan flicked a paperclip onto Henry’s face. “Shitbrain. I just -- look. There is no band without Noah, and there’s definitely no band without Gansey. I won’t do it without them. Everyone gives me shit for this, but I don’t give a fuck. Greywaren is all five of us or nothing.”
“I respect your loyalty, but the contract--”

“Let me get to that,” Ronan said. “I get we are contractually obligated to two more albums. That’s fine. I can give them two more albums, just not as a band.”

Henry leaned back in his chair, blinking rapidly. “You’re not suggesting--”

“I won’t sing,” Ronan said quickly. “I can do it, but it’s not my thing. I don’t feel comfortable singing in front of people, and there’s just…”

_There were still demons there._ There were still the memories of his father, singing to him in the car, to his mother in the kitchen, to Matthew as he slept.

“Anyway, it’s not my voice the fans like,” Ronan continued. “They want Adam. And they like our relationship. So let Adam keep singing. I’ll write his music, exclusively if you want, or not. Fuck, I’d even be willing to collaborate with someone, so long as it’s not Kavinsky.”

Henry actually seemed to consider it. He held a finger to his lip, tapping it occasionally in thought, and finally said, “It’s… not unthinkable, actually. Solo acts do tend to be more profitable.”

Ronan tried not to get his hopes up. This whole plan - thought quickly as he tossed and turned at night - seemed like a longshot. But if it worked, it would allow Adam to continue what he loved to do. He would get to keep his dream.

“What about Blue?” Henry asked.

Ronan sat back in his chair, deflating immediately. _This_ was the one area he could not figure out. Besides himself, Blue had always been the most dedicated to music. It was her dream, just as much as it was Ronan’s dream, to play in front of screaming crowds. He was sure they could make use of a drummer at Cabeswater for various songs, but it wouldn’t be the same. She loved being on stage, loved talking and interacting with the fans. Taking that away from her seemed cruel, especially when Adam might be able to continue on.

“I don’t know,” Ronan admitted. “I was hoping you could help me with that.”
Henry rolled his eyes. “Of course. Well, I could ask around. There might be another band that could use a drummer, though I doubt she’d take me up on it. It would seem like a consolation prize. Though...”

Henry trailed off suddenly, before he opened his laptop and began typing something quickly. Another notification popped onto his screen, though, and soon Henry was off in another direction. Ronan snapped his fingers in front of Henry’s face, drawing his attention back.

“Sorry, just another fire to put out,” Henry muttered.

“Did you think of something, or were you just having a fit?”

“Just a thought,” Henry mused. “Give me a day or two to put out my feelers. I’ll talk to Blue, and Gansey, to see what they are thinking.”

Ronan exhaled a heavy breath, unaware he’d been holding onto it for so long. This could work. This could actually fucking work. It wasn’t perfect, but nothing would be. The only perfect situation would be the five of them, all together, completely happy, and that was no longer possible. No matter what, someone would be screwed over. At least this plan, though imperfect, left no one abandoned.

It did leave one area that Ronan did not like, however. Right now, they were already insanely busy. They had constant, back-to-back schedules, filled with photoshoots and interviews and meetings. But they got to do it all together. It was annoying, but Ronan could count on being in the same room as Adam.

If Adam became a solo-act, though, Ronan would not be so lucky. Sure, he could tag along, but it wouldn’t be the same. They’d see each other less. And Adam might get preoccupied sometimes. Maybe he’d make new friends, celebrities that were equally as popular...

Ronan bit at his bracelets, suddenly feeling nervous. He forced himself to ignore his worries, or at least to press them aside. It didn’t matter. This was about Adam. Adam keeping his dream, Adam getting to continue to live his life. If Ronan had to step back in order for Adam to succeed, well... he could do that. He wouldn’t like it, but he’d do anything for Adam.

Anything.
Adam was going crazy.

It had been almost a week and a half since the leak, and the paparazzi were still hounding them. There were days when he was willing to put up with it just to go outside, but it drained him. He could not handle people grabbing at him, pulling him by the arm, jostling him back and forth as if he were a ragdoll again. In the end, it never seemed worth it to go outside. Unfortunately, staying inside was slowly driving him mad as well.

So, when Henry called everyone into a meeting, he wasn’t in the best of moods. It didn’t help that he was dreading the meeting. He’d overheard the whispers between Blue and Gansey, noticed how Gansey seemed on edge around her. His decision about the band was obvious. Over breakfast a few days after the meeting with Henry, Gansey apologized over breakfast and that was it. They knew his decision.

Which meant Adam could foresee no good outcome for the meeting.

The band was going to break up.

Adam didn’t know how he felt about that. The thought of the band ending was unsettling, but not necessarily...horrible. Perhaps it was the effect of the paparazzi; it’d been several weeks now since they performed, and the glow was disappearing behind the constant shouts and flashes. Still, even when he thought back to performing, his heart seized a little bit.

After the last concert, when his earpiece failed, his anxiety had been momentarily forgotten by how touched he’d been. They helped him. Supported and accepted him. It didn’t matter that he fucked everything up; they loved him regardless.

But as the days passed, it became harder to ignore the worry that followed him like a shadow. What if it happened again? He couldn’t continuously rely on the fans. At some point, the media would latch onto his hearing loss and twist it, corrupt it somehow, just like they were doing now with him and Ronan.

Adam was really tired. Exhausted, really.
So when he took a seat in front of Henry’s desk, with the rest of the band, he was ready to throw in the towel. He braced himself for Blue’s inevitable heartbreak, for Ronan’s sharp temper.

It did not go as planned.

“Jeeze, who died?” Henry asked, eyeing the somber group.

“Henry,” Noah said, tone clipped.

“Just trying to lighten the mood…” Henry muttered. “Well, let’s get on with this, I suppose. Noah, I spoke with Cabeswater about your leaving and they accepted. I was able to convince them out of charging you a fee for breaking your contract, given the whole Whelk situation.”

“Oh. Uh. Thank you.”

Henry waved a hand to dismiss his words. In what struck Adam as an unnecessarily polite tone, given their relationship, Henry said, “Please do not thank me. It should have never happened. Cabeswater is quite embarrassed that it happened under their noses.”

Adam thought that was the biggest load of garbage he ever heard, but Noah seemed grateful to hear it. So Adam bit his tongue, keeping his negative thoughts to himself.

“Gansey, I have some great news for you, actually,” Henry said, digging through a pile of papers until he found what he was looking for. “They were actually extremely intrigued by your offer. It took almost no convincing on my part.”

“Oh! That’s fantastic!”

Ronan barged into the conversation. “Secrets secrets are no fun, boys.”

“Gansey’s going to work for Cabeswater,” Henry said. “Well, sort of.”

“I’ll be interning here. Unpaid, sadly, but it’ll make up for the contract,” Gansey said. “I was
thinking about my future, what I would like to do. I’ve always enjoyed working with Henry, watching what he does, and my favorite part of being in this band was interacting with people. So, I figured, why not explore this as a career.”

“And hey, someone needs to fill my shoes,” Henry added.

Gansey looked ready to blush. “Oh, I couldn’t possibly. I’m sure it will be years before I’d be ready to do your job.”

“God, I hope not,” Henry grimaced. “The guy they got to replace me is a wreck. Doubt he’ll last more than a month or two.”

They chatted a little longer on the subject, but Adam let his attention wander to Blue. He was watching her carefully, checking for signs of distress. She remained quiet, however, choosing only to twist the end of her skirt between her fingers.

Eventually, Henry said, “Well, moving on. Blue, have you thought about my offer?”

“Jesus Christ,” Ronan muttered. “You both were keeping secrets?”

“I would have told you, it’s just—” Blue paused, focusing her attention now on smoothing down the wrinkles she had just created. “Henry offered me a job here. And I didn’t know what to do.”

“A job?” Adam regretted saying it almost immediately. He couldn’t keep the surprise out of his tone, and Blue zeroed in on it immediately.

“Yes, a job,” she snapped. “Is that so hard to believe?”

Adam bit his bottom lip, trying hard to stop himself from cursing out loud. Ronan was snickering under his breath at Adam’s mistake.

“No, I just figured you’d be more interested in continuing the drums,” Adam said slowly. “I didn’t mean to imply you couldn’t get a job here.”
Blue seemed unimpressed by his explanation. She crossed her arms and rolled her head to the side to catch Henry’s gaze. “It’s moments like this that make me want to take you up on your offer, though.”

“Will someone just please fucking explain already?”

“Clearly, based on Noah’s experience and the struggles you and Adam have had to face, Cabeswater needs to focus on creating a safer environment. We have no such department or group, however, to do so. I think we can all agree that Blue would be incredible at fostering diversity within our company, and ensuring that we are a safe and inclusive space. Cabeswater agreed with me.”

“Holy shit,” Noah breathed. He turned to Blue and cupped her cheeks in his hands. “Holy shit, Blue! That’s fantastic!”

Blue rolled her eyes at his enthusiasm, but she was clearly touched. “It’s not really a big deal. Anyway, I don’t know if I’m going to do it.”

“You have to!”

Adam had to take a moment to catch his breath. He was happy for Noah, Blue, and Gansey, but everything was wrapping up so nicely. Too nicely. How had this happened? Adam looked at Ronan, wondering if he was just as confused. Ronan caught his gaze, of course, and took his hand to squeeze it gently.

“Now, as for you two,” Henry said, turning his attention to Ronan and Adam. He grabbed two stacks of paper and held out one to each of them. “I drafted up a new contract, per my discussion with Ronan. It’s not official, of course, but I think the higher-ups will be quite pleased with it.”

Despite his confusion, Adam’s took the contract instinctively. “I’m sorry, what?”

Ronan cleared his throat, “Cheng--”

“The new contract. For you,” Henry said simply, as if that clarified anything. Adam’s eyes dipped to the tiny font while Henry spoke, trying to make sense of everything. “You can see if Gansey’s lawyer will look over it, but I promise I didn’t add anything sketchy. Take your time reading through...”
it. Essentially, it says you are committed to singing two albums, of Ronan’s songs, with a similar social media expectation as you did with the band. I also added a clause that states you must approve any and all requests to perform publicly. They may fight me on that, but I wanted you to have total control.”

Adam fumbled with the papers. “I’m sorry, Henry, I don’t understand.”

Henry narrowed his eyes at Adam, before turning to Ronan. His face contorted into several expressions before Henry finally settled with one of disbelief. “Ronan. Did you not discuss this with Adam?”

“Discuss what with me?” Adam asked, starting to get annoyed.

Ronan ignored Adam, instead shooting Henry a pointed look as he said, “I didn’t expect you to draft up a contract so fast.”

“Oh, this is rich,” Henry muttered. “You had the audacity to lecture me about communication, and yet you don’t think to run your idea past your own boyfriend?”

“That was different,” Ronan argued. “I just didn’t want to get his hopes up if they shot it down immediately. Anyway, it’s fine. It’s good, he’ll like it. This is what he wants.”

“What I want is for someone to tell me what the hell is going on,” Adam snapped.

It did the trick. Ronan sat back in his chair, looking rightfully sheepish, and rubbed a hand against his shaved head. Henry, meanwhile, leaned forward to grab the contract out of Adam’s hands, slapping it on the desk in annoyance.

“I’m taking this back until we actually have a conversation where you get a voice,” Henry said. “Your boyfriend came up with a plan for you, a good one, I admit, but that doesn’t mean we get to leave you out of the conversation.”

“Jesus, Ronan,” Adam muttered. “Seriously?”
“I was going to tell you! Anyway, like I said, it’s not bad.”

“Ronan suggested that you go solo,” Henry said, finally answering Adam’s question about what the fuck was happening. “He knew the band wouldn’t be able to stay together, and suggested we use the remaining two-album deal to sign just you. Said he would help write some of the songs.”

Logically, Adam knew what Henry was saying. Still, the words tumbled around in his brain, feeling foreign and so very wrong. Adam kept looking to Ronan, waiting for him to break into a smile, to say this was a joke. Because it had to be a joke.

When no one cracked a smile, though, Adam said, “Are you serious?”

Ronan crossed his arms to his chest and shrugged slowly. “I know it’s not ideal, but this way you get to keep singing. And you still get to sing some of my songs.”

“That’s not--” Adam had to swallow down a gasp of breath. Everyone was staring at him, waiting for him to say something. He stood up from his chair and said, “Can we talk outside?”

Ronan looked up at him from his seat, wary. “Why?”

Adam’s hands were shaking. He kept them at his side, digging his fingertips into his thighs, reminding himself to breathe steadily. He felt equally close to hyperventilating as he did to throwing a paper weight of Henry’s through the window.

“Outside. Now.”

He knew everyone was staring at him, concerned. Ronan finally got up from his seat, slowly, and gestured for Adam to leave first. They said nothing as Adam led them through the familiar hallways. He was nearing the front entrance to the building when he remembered the paparazzi, and, knowing there was no better option, he tugged Ronan into a stairwell instead.

“Are you mad?” Ronan asked, sounding sour. When Adam glared at him in confirmation, Ronan said, “Fuck, Parrish, I don’t get why you’re so pissed. It’s a good thing--”
“Are you kidding me?” Adam’s hands flew to his head. He ran his hands through his hair, pulling at the ends, hoping it would keep him calm. “Ronan, you just made a huge, huge decision for me, without talking to me about it once! Of course I’m mad!”

“I don’t really get what there is to talk about--”

Adam couldn’t help from interrupting him, but he found he didn’t even care. “Fuck. God, Ronan, I don’t want to be a fucking solo act! What made you think I would want that?”

This seemed to stun Ronan, albeit only for a moment. Soon, he was glaring back at Adam, now, which was infuriating because he had no right to be upset.

“We can’t be a band without Noah and Gansey,” Ronan said. “It was either this, or have Cabeswater try to replace them with random strangers--”

“So you decide to throw me to the dogs? Real nice of you.”

“Come on. That’s not what I meant!” Ronan seemed to realize that he was losing the battle, because he stepped closer to Adam, placing his hands on his shoulder. It did nothing to curb Adam’s anger this time. “Everything would go to utter shit if they replaced them. You know the media would eat up any gossip, and we’d destroy whatever good reputation we have. This is better, okay? You get to continue doing what you love--”

Adam stepped out of his grasp, “Singing alone is not what I love, Ronan.”

“I know, I know. But this was your dream! You gave up Yale to be a singer, I wasn’t going to let you waste that--”

“My dream was never to be a singer!” Adam yelled. “My dream was just to be with all of you! That’s all I ever wanted.”

Ronan cursed. “Okay, fuck, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize, okay?”

“God, that’s not even the issue here Ronan.” Adam couldn’t help it. He slammed his hand backward,
pushing down the pain as his fist hit the concrete wall. “It’s that you made a decision for me, without even talking to me about it. And, Jesus, you clearly don’t understand what I want or feel at all, either!”

Ronan reached for his hand with no words, cradling it gently. Adam allowed himself to enjoy the touch for a split second before he took it back.

“No, you don’t get to do that.”

“I’m sorry,” Ronan repeated, voice cracking.

Adam forced himself to exhale, to take several deep breaths, but it was no use. He couldn’t stop the fury. He needed to get out of the stupid stairwell. Away from Ronan. Before he said something he might regret, or, God, even worse, before he did something he might regret.

“Don’t call me,” Adam ordered. “I need… Just don’t call me, okay?”

He left Ronan in the stairwell.

Chapter End Notes

So sorry if this chapter feels more rushed or just, more "ugh," but I just needed to let go of it. Next chapter is the last one! I'm going to go die now.

Find me on Tumblr.
The End

Chapter Notes

Toward the middle of this chapter you will see song lyrics. These were generously written by my good friend Caitlin! She wrote, sang, and recorded a version of this song which you can listen to here!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ronan knew it was coming, but that didn’t make it hurt any less.

He knew he would fuck everything up. Knew that being with Adam was never for-sure, that he was bound to do something wrong or piss him off or ruin everything. He thought it would be his temper that ruined everything. One bad day that got ahead of him, where he accidentally snapped or hit a wall or something horrible, and it pushed Adam a little too far. Reminded Adam that he was just a shithead, low-life who wasn’t any better than Adam’s shithead, low-life father.

But it didn’t happen like that. Not at all. It was Ronan, doing what he thought was right but still fucking it all up.

And how was he supposed to come back from that?

Adam didn’t come back that night. He didn’t answer his phone. (Not that Ronan called, too afraid to upset Adam even more. He relied on Gansey and Blue to do that, who tried methodically throughout the night.) Ronan didn’t know what to think of his absence. His mind leapt to horrible thoughts - Adam getting drunk somewhere, doing something dangerous, hurting himself or hurting someone else - before he remembered that Adam was not him.

It mollified him, only slightly. He wished he knew what the patented Adam-Parrish-Deals-With-Tough-Shit response would be, aside from counting breaths or clenching his fists.

Adam came back to the dorm the next day around lunch. He ignored everyone, walking straight to his room, where he shut the door behind him. Ronan tried to busy himself with his food, swirling a ramen noodle endlessly on his fork, until Blue cleared her throat in an obvious manner.

“What?”
Blue gestured to the hallway. “Are you going to go say something?”

“He doesn’t want to talk to me,” Ronan muttered.

Blue dropped her spoon into her bowl of yogurt. It clattered about noisily, but was not nearly as loud as the expression on her face. “So you try any way, Ronan. That’s how groveling works. You try again, and again, and again.”

From beneath his bite of food, Gansey added, “She’s right, you know. Jane was never going to forgive me for breaking it off when I left for college, but I apologized and apologized, and then drove all the way back to woo her in person—”

“When the fuck did all this happen?” Ronan asked. “Wait, it was rhetorical, I don’t want to know. You two are the weirdest fucking couple.”

“Well, we’re a couple that’s still together,” Blue snapped. “You, on the other hand, will not be so lucky if you don’t get your ass in gear.”

The logical side of Ronan knew she was right. If he wanted to keep Adam - and fuck, did he want to keep Adam - he would have to apologize. But it wasn’t easy. Ronan was never good at apologizing; it required him to be vulnerable, one of his least favorite activities. Even if he managed to string together the right words, what would happen if Adam sent them back? He wasn’t sure he could do what Blue wanted - beg for forgiveness again and again and again. Each time he had to face Adam was a reminder that he could lose him.

And Adam had wanted space. So he could just let him have his space, and hope that distance would soften Adam’s anger, and then the next time they spoke he wouldn’t instantly break up with him.

“Ronan Lynch,” Blue hissed.

“Jesus, fine.”

God, there was little worse than Blue screaming in his ear. Ronan shoved his hands into his pockets and trudged down the hall, trying to think of how the fuck he was even supposed to start this
conversation. Hey, Adam, if you haven’t already decided to break up with me, maybe we could talk? I know I fucked up but I meant well. And honestly, I think you’re being a little irrational because clearly I was thinking of your best interests--

No. No, definitely do not say that.

Ronan stood outside the door for far too long before he got the courage to knock. Adam didn’t answer, of course, but the door was unlocked. He poked his head in slowly, waiting for something to be chucked at him, but his worry was for nothing. Adam was laying on his bed, staring up at the ceiling, completely ignoring him.

“Is it okay if I come in for a sec?” Ronan asked.

Adam just shrugged.

God. Fucking--

No. Now was not the time to get annoyed at Adam for being petulant. He got to have whatever response he wanted. Blue said he had to grovel, which implied being nice and caring and understanding.

“Where were you last night?” He asked, taking a seat at the desk.

“Out.”

“Were you--” Ronan paused, thinking of how to phrase his worries. Did you get drunk and find a beautiful person to sleep with? Someone who knows what they’re doing? He settled with, “Safe?”

“Yes.”

“Do you need me to get you anything? Food? Water?”

“No.”
“Adam, can you just--”

At the sound of Ronan’s voice raising, Adam turned to him, eyes set into a dead glare, and snapped, “If you came to lecture me, then don’t bother. It’d be pretty damn hypocritical of you, for one thing, and it’s also not your job. Send Gansey in here if you’re so concerned.”

“Look, I didn’t mean -- I just -- “

Adam sighed, turning back to the ceiling. “What do you want Ronan? I’m tired.”

“I know you’re mad at me. And I’m not asking you to get over it immediately, you can still be mad at me. But for what it’s worth, I’m sorry, Adam.” He said it all in one breath, refusing to second-guess himself.

“For what exactly?”

“What?”

Adam sat up in bed. “What exactly are you sorry for?”

This felt like a trap. No, this was definitely a trap. (Unless he knew exactly what Adam wanted him to say, which…he did not. Fuck. What exactly had he said the day before? Everything was a blur. He could only remember Adam’s face, breaking, Adam slamming his fist against the wall, hard, Adam pulling back his hand, saying No, you don’t get to do that. )

But he had to say something. Saying nothing doomed him.

“Because I didn’t talk to you first,” he said slowly. He was proud of the answer until Adam blinked back at him. Unnerved by the lack of a reaction, Ronan added, “And… because apparently you don’t want to be a singer anymore or something.”

This time Adam did react, but Ronan wished he could have the apathetic stare back. Now Adam was
glaring at him once more, fists clenching at the fabric of his bedsheet.

The wise thing would have been to immediately apologize again. To backtrack, at least, or try to cover it with something better. But Ronan was never smart, and seeing Adam grow furious once again ticked something off in him. Lit a fuse that he’d been setting aside for fear of pushing Adam too far. But fuck that, apparently there was nothing he could say that would appease him and so, why the hell not?

“Which is bullshit, by the way. You’re a great fucking singer, so you quitting is just wasting your potential!” Once it started spilling out, it was impossible to stop it. “And okay, yes, it was shitty of me to not talk to you before talking with Cheng, but how the hell was I supposed to know you apparently hate singing now? You never told me any of this!”

“Jesus, Ronan, do you listen to a word I say?” Adam spit. “I don’t hate singing anymore, but there’s a difference between singing in our band and being on my own! And even as a band, it’s not the same as it used to be!”

“Oh look, you conveniently proved my point, which is that you didn’t talk to me about any of this. It’s not the same as it used to be?”

“You think it is?”

“No, but we’ve established that I hate practically everything. You, on the other hand, have apparently been keeping secrets!”

“Oh, fine, I get it!” Adam pressed his palms into his eyes and pulled his elbows close together. “Sorry that I was trying to focus on you instead of whining about my own problems. Next time I won’t bother worrying about my boyfriend.”

God, this was getting out of hand too fast. “That’s not what I meant, Parrish--”

“Oh, we’re back to last names now?”

Ronan forced himself to take a step back, physically and mentally. He was getting too heated, too upset.
“Look, all I’m saying is this: I know I should have talked to you first. I made a decision for you and that was fucked up. I admit it, okay?” He dragged a hand over his scalp. “But I made that decision thinking it’s what you would have wanted--”

“Well, it’s not.”

Ronan bit his cheek. God, Adam wasn’t making this easy. Grovel. You’re supposed to be groveling.

“And I get that. Now. And maybe I should have gotten that before. But can’t you give me a little credit? You never told me what you were feeling. The last conversation we had about this you were willing to give up your entire education to be in this band. Is it so crazy that I assumed you would do almost anything to keep singing?”

Adam sunk back to the bed. He hung his head low, massaging his neck, and said, “We’ve known each other for years, Ronan. I didn’t think I had to say half this shit. It seems pretty obvious to me.”

“So are you mad at me because I made a choice for you, or are you mad that I don’t understand your feelings?”

“Both.”

An unsettling silence filled the room. Adam kept looking at his hands, pulling at the joints of his fingers until they cracked. He was very obviously refusing to look at Ronan. Briefly, he wished Blue was in the room. Ronan had gotten so offtrack, he needed her to stare him down and force him back to apologizing.

When Ronan couldn’t take it anymore, he said, “Can you just… tell me what to do? I don’t know what to do.”

“I don’t know either,” Adam said. “I’m trying, but I don’t see an easy solution.”

Ronan had to work very hard to hide his reaction. It was nausea and anger and heartbreak in one, a horrific combination that threatened to take him to his knees. Instead, he pressed his nails into his fists, harder and harder so that he could have one little break from this feeling, but it was no use. It
was there and it wasn’t going to go away and he wanted to be sick.

“Just give me some time to think, okay?” Adam said.

“Yeah. Fine. I’ll just –” and then he was out of the room.

He should have apologized again, should have made more of an effort to make things right. But he couldn’t stand being in that room any longer. Ronan couldn’t look at Adam - he was perfect and beautiful and everything he never thought he could possibly have - and he fucked it all up.

Once in his room, Ronan let his anger get the best of him. He shoved everything off his desk, books, music sheets, picks, everything, everything, everything, and watched as they crashed to the floor. When that didn’t do the trick, he opened the drawers of his desk and threw everything out. When he reached the third drawer he found a bottle of vodka, still half-full, probably left there by Noah from days ago. He set it on his desk and stood back, watching it.

This was definitely a time to get drunk. He definitely felt like getting drunk.

But -- there was another option. Something else that might make him feel better.

After his initial fight with Ronan, Adam found out the hard way that he didn’t really have an outlet for his anger. For years, he’d gotten through fits of rage by counting breaths or pressing his fist into a wall, wishing he had the guts to just punch it. Instead, he walked around the streets of Los Angeles aimlessly for awhile. Choose a rare moment to splurge on a baseball cap when people started recognizing him.

He didn’t want to go back to the dorm. Ronan might be there and he wasn’t ready to see Ronan. If he saw him he would say something he would regret. Adam was angry and he had every right to be angry, but he wouldn’t let the rage ruin his relationship with Ronan. He just needed time to cool off. With enough of it, he could go back to Ronan and look at him and not think about how he fucked everything up and --

No. God. There it was again. The anger.
In the end, Adam got tired of walking around. He cursed Cabeswater for forcing everyone to share a dorm, effectively ruining his ability to escape with a friend. Finally, he called the only person he could think of.

It occurred to him, as soon as he stepped through the door, that he’d never been to Henry’s place. It was nothing like he expected. For starters, Henry had roommates. A group of guys, about their age, who all nearly lost their shit when they realized who he was. (“Dude! Your voice is killer! Also, your boyfriend is super hot, nice job.”) After Henry ushered them off, though, Adam was surprised to find that the house was rather simple. For all of Henry’s tailored suits and meticulous style, his room was bare, save for a poster of Madonna that was tacked to his ceiling.

“You can take the couch out there, or share the King with me.” Henry wagged his eyebrows. “Just to warn you, I am a cuddler.”

“Henry.”

“I’m kidding! Anyway, Ronan would kill me.”

“And you have Noah,” Adam muttered.

Henry was digging through his drawers, looking for a spare change of pajamas for Adam to sleep in. When Noah’s name was mentioned he stilled, only for a second, before he tossed a pair of sweatpants in Adam’s direction.

“I don’t know what you heard, but we are not a thing,” Henry said. He then winced. “Admittedly, not by my choice, though.”

“Do you… want to talk about it?” Adam asked, tugging the sweatpants on.

“God, no. I’m talked out.” Henry jumped onto his bed. It wobbled strangely, taking in his weight, and it wasn’t until Henry patted the spot next to him did Adam realize that Henry owned a water bed. “Anyway, your problems are more pressing. Everything alright with you and Ronan?”

“I don’t want to talk about that, either,” Adam said, resting his head into the pillow. God, it felt good. The water bed was bizarre, but Henry clearly splurged on his pillows. “I just want to sleep.”
“Boo. You’re no fun.” Henry turned on his side. “I thought we were going to have a good, old-fashioned sleepover.”

“Sorry. Never had one. Not really.” Except, perhaps, for his hotel stay with Ronan back when he turned twenty one. That had a very different vibe, though.

“God. That’s the most tragic thing about your childhood, for sure,” Henry joked. It was terrible and absurd and technically insensitive, but for whatever reason, Adam found himself smiling.

Henry flipped through his phone silently for some time, keeping himself busy with emails and texts or whatever it was that occupied him. Adam tried to focus on sleep. He always felt better after a long nap, after having time to digest his thoughts. Unfortunately sleep did not come easy. He kept thinking of Ronan and Ronan’s face when he snapped at him.

Eventually, Adam said, “Henry? I don’t want to be a soloist.”

“I gathered.”

“So what do we do, then?” Adam drug his hand down his face, pinching his bottom lip in frustration. “I can’t -- I don’t want to replace Noah and Gansey either. Or Blue, if she takes the job. I can’t watch Ronan go through that.”

Henry put down his phone to listen, but he offered no solutions.

“What am I going to do?”

“I think the question is not what you are going to do,” Henry said slowly. “But what you both will choose to do.”

Adam let that thought linger for awhile. Henry was right, of course. Adam couldn’t get mad at Ronan for making a decision for him, while also deciding to make a choice solely for himself as well. They were together, they were supposed to be partners.
Still, as the night went on, he couldn’t help but think about what he wanted. He was tired of the band. Tired of being a celebrity, tired of music seeming like a chore and less like magic. But if not music, then what?

He had a goal for so long, whether it was surviving his father or getting into college or being in the band, that he didn’t know what he wanted once those were gone. Who the hell was Adam Parrish without a goal? Just some nobody, with a mediocre voice and a somewhat enviable drive.

God. Would Ronan even still want him if he wasn’t a musician? What if that was part of his appeal?

By the time Adam returned the next day to find Ronan in his room, trying to apologize and epically failing by making everything ten times worse, Adam was exhausted. He didn’t sleep well, he was angry, he felt guilty, he was confused, he was worried, he wanted so badly to just reach out and touch Ronan and make everything disappear in his lips, but knew that would only be avoiding all their problems.

And when Ronan asked, “Can you just… tell me what to do?” Adam was at a loss. Because he didn’t know either. He tried and tried to think of a logical way to end the contract, to somehow make Ronan happy without compromising what he wanted, but everything was a dead end. Someone was going to have to make a sacrifice and he was starting to think it had to be him.

It made it hard to face Ronan. He was still angry at him, too, which didn’t help. Thankfully, Ronan seemed to drop off the face of the planet. He stayed in his room, only coming out to eat or talk to Noah. At one point he left for an entire afternoon and Adam told himself, Okay, this time, I’m going to talk to him when he’s back and we’re going to work this out, because the silence (and okay, lack of kissing) had gone on for too long.

But then Ronan went right back to his room, slamming the door behind him. Adam wished he didn’t do that, for many reasons, but namely because it sparked his rage all over again. Why wasn’t Ronan making more of an effort to apologize? To mend the awkward tension? Did he think it was too much work, or that Adam’s requests were irrational?

A week after their fight, Blue dragged him out of the house - thankfully the paparazzi had significantly lessened as the story grew cold - citing that he needed to get out. She took him to a frozen yogurt place nearby, where she was greeted by name from the employees.

“Go here a lot?”
“Shut up,” Blue muttered. She tossed an empty cup in his direction and said, “Get a cup. My treat. And before you say anything, you’re doing me the favor. I’m not going to sit here and eat a giant cup of frozen yogurt by myself.”

When they were seated, Adam asked, “So. You going to take the job?”

She poked at her bowl, frowning. “That depends on what you guys do, honestly. But, I don’t know. It’s definitely intriguing… I never really saw myself at a desk job, though.”

“This is hardly a desk job, Blue.”

“True.” She hummed under her breath and looked up at him through her dark lashes. Blue always did have pretty eyes. “So, what are you guys going to do?”

“I don’t know. Ronan won’t talk to me.”

“As if you’re talking with him,” Blue countered.

Adam stuffed his spoon into his yogurt, not feeling hungry anymore. “He’s the one who did something wrong, Blue. And every time we talk, he just makes it worse. He tried to apologize and we ended up fighting again.”

“Have you tried having hot, angry sex, yet?” She sucked her spoon into her mouth and pulled it out with a sly grin. “That’s what we do. Works wonders.”

“Ugh, Blue, I don’t want to hear about that.”

She cackled. “Oh come on. If I have to know about your sex life, then you can know a bit about mine.”

“What do you know about my sex life?”

“Nothing real, I suppose,” Blue said. She waved her spoon around. “But, Gansey made me read a
bunch of smutty, Pynch fanfiction one time. The things I learned, Adam.”

He sputtered about, embarrassed, until he settled with, “Why was Gansey reading fanfiction about us?”

“Blame Ronan,” Blue said, turning back to her yogurt. She picked out a few berries and dumped them into his bowl, second-guessing her topping decision. “He apparently made some reference to needing sex advice or something and got Gansey in a tizzy. He took it upon himself to do some research.”

“Jesus Christ.” Adam buried his face in his hands. “And he ended up with fanfiction?”

“That was Henry’s suggestion,” Blue said. “I wasn’t going to read any, but Gansey actually got really into one so I read it. Pretty interesting! It involved magic, and like, Ronan could take shit out of his dreams. Noah was a ghost and he and I made out in one scene, super weird. But otherwise good!”

“I can’t believe we’re having this conversation right now,” Adam muttered.

“Hey, that one wasn’t even sexy. Do you want me to go into detail about the one where you guys get drunk and have sex in a seedy hotel room? Gansey found that one quite informative—”

“Enough, enough!” Adam grabbed her spoon and shoved a giant bite of yogurt into her mouth, hoping it would shut her up. He really did not want to hear about this. He especially did not want to hear about Gansey reading these sordid details.

Blue wiggled in her seat in happiness, clearly enjoying his embarrassment. When she had swallowed the big bite, though, her expression turned serious. “Listen, Adam. All jokes aside, I’m worried about you guys. You had something good going on.”

“I thought we did, too,” Adam said. “But I don’t know. It was so easy at first, and great. But it’s like he doesn’t even know me.”

“Bullshit. He knows you.”
Adam explained his side of it - the back and forth of their second argument - and when he was finished, Blue just rolled her eyes. “So you’re ready to throw in the towel because he sucked at inferring your feelings?”

“Well, I’m not--” Adam didn’t like the way she phrased that. It wasn’t that simple, for one thing. “I’m not throwing in the towel, I’m just saying it’s disappointing.”

“Duh, it’s disappointing, Adam, but I have to break something to you. You’re in a relationship now. With a guy,” Blue said. “You have to be very specific with men. They usually aren’t very good picking up on subtle feelings or emotions.”

“That seems a bit sexist,” Adam muttered.

“Ah, well. Cry me a river.” Blue reached over and patted his arm, in a move that did not exactly seem genuine. “Adam, I love you. I have loved you since you cherished my stupid Spanish notes. But being in a relationship means comprising. You’ve gotten by, all your life, on your own. And that’s insanely commendable and awesome. You can’t do that anymore, though, not if you want this relationship to work. You have to be open and honest with Ronan.”

Adam sighed. “I don’t think it’s that easy.”

“It’s not,” Blue agreed. “Look, I’m not one to talk. Do you know how many fights Gansey and I get into, because he does something to piss me off and instead of talking to him, I just stew? We have a lot of angry-sex for a reason.”

When Adam said nothing she reached for his hand and squeezed it. “Relationships aren’t easy. But you love Ronan, right? It’s worth it.”

Adam’s heart squeezed. He couldn’t meet Blue’s gaze, not when she threw around the word “love” so easily. It wasn’t her fault, she didn’t know that they hadn’t -- that Adam had never admitted --

He couldn’t think about that right now.

When they got back to the dorm Blue gave him a hug and whispered, “Just think about what I said, okay?”
Adam did think about it. He thought about it when he stood outside of Ronan’s door, staring at it, willing it to just *open, open, open*. But it never did, and Adam went back to his room alone.

---

Ronan knew everyone thought he was avoiding Adam, but he didn’t care. He was self-medicating and planning and, okay, yes, maybe *avoiding* Adam, but whatever. He just needed time to think.

He was not ready to give up Adam. Not yet. He was going to find a way to make it work, if he had to.

Unfortunately, time forced his hand. They still had a concert to play and Henry required he come out of his room to practice with the band. Adam tried to catch his gaze a few times, looking across at him at certain, familiar lines, but he forced himself to look away. Not yet. It wasn’t time. He wasn’t ready for that conversation.

No matter *what* that conversation was going to be.

Then, two weeks after their initial fight, it was finally time for their concert. Their *last* concert, Jesus. The venue was huge - double, if not triple the size of all the other shows - and it made Ronan want to hurl. There was so much at stake here, and if he fucked everything up he’d be fucking it up in front of thousands and thousands of people.

God. He couldn’t even imagine what Adam felt. And because he was being stupid and awkward and avoiding his boyfriend - or, *fuck*, if Adam even was his boyfriend anymore - because he was a coward.

But no. He had a plan. It would be worth it.

Despite it being their last show, Henry didn’t alter the setlist. It was exactly what they had done before, same songs, same placement, same lighting. The only difference, however, was --

“Just, have fun, okay?” Henry said. He had pulled the entire band into a huddle, throwing his arms
over Blue and Adam, who were on both sides of him. “I know Whelk didn’t want you guys screwing around, but I don’t care. Do what you want. Go out with a bang. Make a memorable show for your fans.”

“Can we tell them we’re leaving?” Noah asked.

Henry sighed. “Cabeswater would prefer you didn’t, since we haven’t decided what to do with the rest of the band. If you continue on, they’d rather save the news for when you announce album two. Free publicity and all.”

Noah frowned. “Alright.”


Noah bit his lip and smiled up at Henry. It was endearing, Ronan supposed, but apparently Henry thought otherwise because he cleared his throat and quickly left the group, muttering, “Off you go.”

As they waited offstage for the concert to begin, Ronan gathered up his courage and stood next to Adam. It was the closest they’d been in weeks, and God, he’d forgotten how good Adam smelled. How good he looked. He wanted to lean in and press his lips to his throat and whisper, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry--

“Hey,” Adam said. “Are you talking to me again?”

Ronan grimaced. “I didn’t -- I mean, you asked for space--”

“It’s fine, Ronan,” Adam said, sighing. “But I think we do need to talk after the show. Really talk.”

Ronan’s heart thudded in his chest painfully. “Okay.”

He wanted to reach out and touch him so badly. Ronan didn’t know what would be worse - kissing Adam, knowing it might be his last time, knowing that it could be a goodbye kiss, or never getting to kiss him again.
“You can do this,” Ronan said instead, nodding to the stage. “Just one more time. That’s all.”

Adam looked surprised. His fingers trailed to his earpiece, which he pressed in. Then, because Adam was nothing if not an angel, he offered Ronan a small smile. “Thanks.”

They were staring far too long. There was something in Adam’s gaze - longing, if Ronan was being optimistic, or perhaps regret - but it was going on for too long. He needed to look away. Before he did something stupid or ruined everything.

And then Adam’s eyes slipped to his lips and Jesus Mary Mother of God --

“You’re on,” a stage woman said, nudging Ronan.

Fuck.

Ronan didn’t have time to be upset, though. They were all rushing on stage, taking their places at their instruments, loading up their gear. The curtain hid them from view of the audience but it didn’t block their cheering. It sounded through the curtain, the chanting of *Greywaren, Greywaren, Greywaren*, and Ronan reminded himself to cherish the moment. Whatever happened to them, they would never have this moment again.

Gansey inhaled deeply and, over the sound of the chanting, yelled, “I just want you to know--”

“*Gansey! No saccharine speeches!*” Blue screamed.

“I don’t care!” Gansey said, throwing his arms in the air. “I love you guys! And I will miss being together, like this. You are my best friends!”

His speech, if you could even call it that, lingered in the air. It was cheesy but Ronan found he didn’t care. He reached to Gansey, pulling him in for a quick hug, and muttered, “Thank you, Dick.”

And then the concert started.
The concert was fun. **Really** fun. They played the first three songs in quick succession and it was insane to play for such a large crowd. It was hard to hear, of course, but no one seemed to mind if Adam paused to take a break. Occasionally he would walk to the edge of the stage and hold out his microphone to one of the fans, asking them to sing, and people would scream even louder.

After the third song they traditionally took a break to talk to the crowd. Originally, Whelk had made them memorize a boring speech, where they inserted the name of whatever random city they were playing at. Now, however, Gansey walked to the mic, looked at Noah, then took a deep breath.

“Thank you all for coming out tonight!” He paused for the screams to die down. “We need to take a moment to thank you all, for everything you’ve done for us. First, for being our fans. You are all so dedicated and wonderful. We could not have asked for a better fanbase, and we are honored that you chose to support us. Truly.”

From his keyboard Noah clapped enthusiastically, before he formed his hands into a heart and pushed it out toward the audience.

Gansey licked his lips. “Second, as I’m sure you’re aware, a few of our members had to undergo a truly horrifying and upsetting ordeal that went public. Instead of shunning us, you welcomed us. Kept us safe. Fought for us. I think I speak for all of us, but especially as their friend, that your support meant so much.”

Adam looked quickly to Ronan, wondering what his reaction was. He was quite somber and had been all day. He held his guitar close to his body, hand clenching the frets, but kept his gaze out at the audience.

“As great as you have been to us, I’m afraid we are not repaying you kindly,” Gansey continued, before he sighed into the microphone. “We regret to tell you that this will be the last time you will see the Greywaren before you.”

He had to pause for the inevitable gasps and screams. Gansey held up his hand, asking for silence.

“After much careful thought and deliberation, Noah and I have decided that it is time for us to leave
the band. This was not an easy decision, one that I promise we agonized over for quite some time. We hope that you understand and respect our choice, as you have done for us all this time.”

He let the crowd cry and scream for a bit longer before he added, “As for Ronan, Adam, and Blue, we are not sure yet where they will go. What they will do. However, in the chance that this is it for Greywaren, we wanted to express our gratitude to you all one last time. And to say goodbye.”

“But we promise to go out with a really fun show!” Noah yelled. As if wanting to prove his point, he slid his fingers down his keyboard. It was no remotely punk-rock but it was endearing all the same.

The rest of the show passed fast. Too fast for Adam. They danced and sang and played games with the crowd. Noah and Blue took turns throwing different things into crowd - Blue’s rings or Noah’s tie - and shirts that Henry had given them to sign. Gansey told a few horrible dad jokes and the entire crowd booed him. It was perfect.

Then, it was their last song. They had to pause, both to allow for the chanting to grow quiet, but also to give Blue and Noah time. Both were wiping away tears, laughing when the fans changed their chants to, It’s okay! It’s okay!

Before the song began Adam asked for a minute. He stood at his mic, inhaling a shaky breath, and said, “I don’t really know what to say to all of you. Please know that you have made this experience so amazing. There have been so many difficult moments, moments that have made me want to quit, but you made it easier to keep going. So, thank you.”

Blue took her turn next, her speech hardly comprehensible between the sobbing, but the fans appreciated it all the same. When she finished, Adam turned to Ronan, waiting. He shook his head, barely, but Adam got the message. He narrowed his eyes at Ronan, hoping his glare could set him straight, but Ronan just turned his back to the audience to fiddle with his guitar.

God. And to think he was going to kiss him earlier.

They played their last song, even repeating the chorus two extra times to keep it going. When they couldn’t avoid it any longer, though, the song finally ended. The crowd was loud, so very loud, and even Adam had a hard time fighting back tears. They took a bow, each of them individually, then as a group, before waving goodbye. Noah first, followed by Gansey, Blue, then Adam, with Ronan closing the show.
Or at least, that’s what he assumed, until he heard the crowd erupt again.

Adam turned to see Ronan standing center stage in front of Adam’s mic, with his guitar still strapped round his shoulder. Blue grasped Adam’s upper arm, pulling him close to ask, “What’s he doing?”

“I don’t know,” Adam admitted. “Maybe he wised up and decided to officially thank them?”

“Should we go back out?” Blue asked.

“No, no, let him be.” They all turned to see Henry, who was wearing a headpiece and directing multiple people backstage. “He’s fine.”

Ronan was clearly unsettled to be facing the crowd. He still hadn’t said anything - just stared at them, taking deep breaths - and from the side, Adam could see his fists clenching. Finally, he leaned into the microphone to speak.

“I need to say something. Something,” he winced. “Important.”

It was the most he had spoken the entire concert. The fans clearly enjoyed it. Typical. Ronan would get the loudest applause for doing virtually nothing.

“I should thank you, too. So. Thank you. Our fans are pretty fucking cool. I mean. Sorry, I shouldn’t swear, should I?” Ronan dragged his hand down his face, thankfully blocking his mouth right when he uttered another curse. It came out muffled but Adam recognized it all the same.

“Anyway. I guess, as a thank you, I wanted to do something special. I’ve been working on something for a few weeks now. A new song. It’s--” he paused, gritting his teeth and looking up. “--a love song.”

The crowd screamed again. Blue still had Adam’s arm in her grasp and her fingers tightened around it in excitement. Behind him, Noah whispered, “No fucking way!”

“Adam, did he tell you about this?” Gansey asked. When he shook his head, Gansey mumbled, “Then how are you supposed to sing it? Unless…”
“Maybe there’s no words?” Noah asked.

“Then it wouldn’t be a love song,” Adam countered, unable to take his eyes of Ronan.

“In case you didn’t know, it’s a long-running gag in the band that I can’t write a love song. You might have noticed, since we only have one, *Home*, which I...didn’t write.” Ronan inhaled a deep breath again, his fingers now drumming at his sides. “But I guess I just needed the right inspiration.”

Adam forgot to breath for a moment. Ronan picked up the handle of his guitar and placed his fingers on the chords. He then turned his body to the side of the stage, so that he was looking right at Adam, and said, “I’m no Parrish, but whatever. Here goes. So this is called *Finding That Love Song.*”

And then Ronan started singing.

```
Perfect and holy the 
touch of your skin stills my tongue
I whisper my secrets to stone and 
the words leave me dumb
The way that I love you is desperate and hungry and mean
The spark of a secret that I never wanted to keep

But we'll go back to the water
And we'll go back to the trees
And you'll pull notes from the branches
And wrap us up in the leaves
Oh I have ruined all my chances
I have ruins in my skin
And I will rue the day I wake from
The dream I made you in
So let me sleep
Let me sleep
Come and sleep
Here with me

I will unravel, oh I am unmade and undone
Find sanctuary in nothing and nowhere but us
I'm finding that love song in whispers and silent asides
I'll stand like a mountain and crumble until you decide
Decide
```
Ronan’s voice wasn’t polished, but it was perfect. His voice cracked a few times and he had to inhale in the middle of certain verses, but it was low and raspy and it was everything, everything. Adam was so caught up in his voice that he almost forgot to listen to the lyrics, until Blue was tugging at his arm and whispering, Adam, are you listening?

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Wish I could love you right} \\
&\text{Light constellations in your eyes} \\
&\text{It always sets me right} \\
&\text{To hear you breathing late at night} \\
&\text{Take me back to the water} \\
&\text{Take me back to trees} \\
&\text{Sing me down from the branches} \\
&\text{Bury us in the leaves} \\
&\text{Oh I have ruined all my chances} \\
&\text{I have ruins in my skin} \\
&\text{And I will rue the day I wake from} \\
&\text{The dream I made you in} \\
&\text{So let me} \\
&\text{Let me} \\
&\text{Let me sleep}
\end{align*}
\]

The song was over too fast and Adam wanted more, more, more. Ronan was breathing heavily when the song ended, staring at the crowd with a faint smile on his face. He was dazed by the response, or maybe the act itself, and it wasn’t until Henry started waving erratically to get his attention did Ronan clear his throat and remember where he was.

“Thanks,” he said, which would have sounded absurd if it had come from anyone but Ronan. “So, uh, this song is up on iTunes. If you buy it, all proceeds go to the American Society for Deaf Children. So you should buy it.”

Then he hustled off stage, as if he didn’t just do something amazing. He brushed past Adam, past everyone, and walked quickly down the hall. Blue shoved Adam after him, not that he needed the push. He was chasing Ronan down, unable to find his voice to call after him, and finally caught up when they reached the greenroom.

Without words, Adam ushered Ronan into the room and closed the door behind them. Ronan leaned against the wall, hands shaking and breath stuttered. Adam placed one hand on Ronan’s cheek, the other he used to run down Ronan’s arm until he found his hand, grasping it.

“Hey, you’re okay,” Adam whispered.
Ronan shut his eyes and banged his head against the wall twice. In a rushed tone, he said, “This was supposed to be my big romantic gesture, but I fucked it up--”

“You didn’t fuck it up,” Adam said, squeezing his hand. “I loved it.”

“--I fucked up the song, and I should have just talked to you sooner. And I know you want to break up with me but I thought if--”

“I wasn’t going to break up with you,” Adam said, using his thumb to smooth over Ronan’s brow.

Ronan didn’t seem to register his words because he barreled on, muttering, “--I’ll listen to you more, and I’ll pay better attention, and I’ll try not to get so angry--”

“Ronan,” Adam whispered, pressing forward to kiss Ronan quickly.

He was still mumbling something, so Adam kissed him again, lingering longer. It was the third kiss that finally registered with Ronan, because he suddenly raised one hand to dig it into Adam’s hair, the other at his back to pull him close. It was hungry and messy and Adam didn’t care, because it was Ronan’s lips on his for the first time in weeks. Then his arms were at Adam’s waist, hugging him tight, and Ronan pushed his face into his neck and said, “Adam.”

When Ronan had finally caught his breath, Adam pulled away and said, “You wrote me a love song.”

“It sucks, I know,” Ronan muttered, his hands skimming underneath Adam’s shirt to distract him. “If you don’t like it, I have another one.”

“Another one?” Adam echoed. “You wrote me two love songs?”

Ronan looked away. “I, uh, I actually wrote an entire album.”

“What?”
Before Ronan could clarify the door opened behind them, allowing the rest of the band to pour in. Blue was covering her eyes, yelling, “Is it safe to come in? Are your clothes on?”

“Jesus, Sargent.”

She ignored him. “Ronan, your song was amazing!”

“You must be so embarrassed,” Noah snickered.

Gansey huffed a breath, “I tried to hold them off, Adam, but they insisted–”

Adam wanted more time with Ronan - specifically, more time alone - but he couldn’t be mad when the band was together, joking like this. He let himself enjoy the moment. These were his friends, awkward and nosy and far too enthusiastic about everything, but they were perfect.

“Ronan, your song is already selling quite well!” Henry said, scrolling through his phone. “Sweet Jesus, it’s only been a few minutes but we’re already at ten thousand sales.”

“People are Tweeting about it like crazy, too!” Noah added.

“Whatever,” Ronan said, though he wore the exact opposite of a whatever expression on his face.

After, they quickly cleaned up and headed back to the car. Henry followed them back to their dorm, citing that a celebration needed to be had. He picked up a bottle of champagne on his way over and, once they were all together, he popped the top and yelled, “Huzzah!”

Adam took a glass, a very small one, and watched with interest as Ronan left his untouched the entire night.

Hours later, Blue looked at Ronan and Adam and said, “Thank God you guys are talking again. It was tiring just watching you.”
“Well, we still have to figure out what to do about the contract,” Adam muttered, leaning against Ronan’s chest. “Plenty of time to get mad at each other again.”

“Don’t even joke,” Blue muttered.

“My dear, at this rate, Ronan can be our soloist, I think. Who knew he could sing?” Henry looked at his phone again. “Nearing 75,000 downloads now.”

Ronan said nothing. He had his arm slung around Adam’s shoulder and was running his thumb back and forth along Adam’s shoulder blade.

“I can’t believe Cabeswater was willing to let all the sales go to charity,” Noah mused.

Henry winced. “They weren’t exactly aware. I’m sure I’ll get an earful tomorrow.”

Not long after, Ronan leaned into Adam’s ear and said, “Let’s go to bed. Please.”

“Yes.”

They left to several hoots but Adam didn’t care. He tugged Ronan into his room, kicking the door shut behind him, and got to work pulling off his shirt. Ronan was smiling against his mouth, clearly as amused as ever to see Adam’s want in full display, but one strategic touch had Ronan tossing him onto the bed and putting his mouth to better use.

Later, as the lay in bed, Adam asked, “When do I get to hear the rest of the album?”

Ronan had Adam’s back pressed to his stomach, arms wrapped around Adam’s front in order to play with his fingers. “Never.”

“Ronan.”

“It’s embarrassing,” he muttered, resting his chin on Adam’s shoulder. His breath skittered against Adam’s neck, warm breath tickling him.
“Why is it embarrassing?”

“It’s just,” he pressed his lips to Adam’s skin, likely as a method of distraction. Adam forced himself to pay attention to his words, “I just put everything out there.”

“Everything?”

“Adam.”

“What?”

“Adam.”

“You can say it,” Adam whispered. “I can -- I’m ready to listen this time.”

Ronan tightened his grip around Adam’s waist and pulled him closer, if even possible. Then, to his hearing ear, he said, “I love you.”

Adam waited for the panic to set in. Waited to be uncomfortable or upset or awkward. It never happened. Instead, the words settled over him like a wave. It was like the sips of champagne he’d taken earlier, an instant warmth the fell down his body and settled in his stomach.

He shut his eyes. “I love you, too.”

In the morning, Ronan walked out to the living room to find Noah and Blue passed out on the couch, curled together. Henry was sitting at the kitchen, nursing a cup of coffee. He perked up when he saw Ronan.
“There’s our Casanova,” he said, voice low. “I stole some coffee.”

Ronan poured himself a cup and sat across from Henry. They said nothing for awhile, content to sit with each other and nurse their drinks in silence. Ronan had been picking on an idea all night - one that he eventually woke Adam up to discuss, because he couldn’t put it down - but talking to Henry about it felt too daring. He would be putting himself out there and he wasn’t sure if he was ready to be caught.

“For someone who probably got laid last night, you look upset,” Henry whispered. When Ronan shot him a sour look, he added, “Or maybe you’re just constipated. Coffee will help.”

Ronan shoved his hand in Henry’s face, pushing him back. “God, I hate you. I’m not fucking constipated, I just -- I need to talk to you about something.”

Henry’s gaze fell to the sleeping Blue and Noah. He nodded to the outdoor balcony, then grabbed his coffee. When they were seated outside, Henry said, “What’s on your mind, Lynch?”

“The contract,” Ronan said. “I have a proposal. A different one. And before you give me that look, I already talked to Adam about it. He’s fine with it.”

Henry drummed his fingers against his mug, waiting.

“We owe you two albums,” Ronan said. “I’m suggesting a compromise. I’ll do the second album for you, just me. I’ll sing and everything. I have it written already, roughly, so Cabeswater could capitalize on our current popularity.”

“They would definitely like that,” Henry mused. “And album three?”

“I’ll write it, and that’s it. They can give it to whoever they want. That’s the compromise side of it.”

Henry hummed. “And Adam?”

“And nothing,” Ronan said, shrugging. “He’s okay to be done. If Cabeswater will let him go.”
“It’ll be a tough sell. I can try…”

“If they don’t go for it, tell them I’ll sue them for discrimination,” Ronan said.

“That might burn your bridges,” Henry warned.

“It’s fine.” He kicked his feet onto the edge of the balcony. “I’m not sure making music will ever be the same for me. Not if Adam isn’t singing.”

“Gross.”

Ronan smiled and took a long sip of coffee. “I know.”

Adam hooked his bag over his shoulder and took one last look around the dorm. It felt wrong, somehow, to have spent so much time in Los Angeles and still own almost no possessions. Someday, he thought, he would own things. Pictures or figurines or books or something.

He was still a few years away from that, probably. Once he was back at Yale he’d be back to a small dorm. Or maybe an apartment, now that he had a little money in the bank.

That is, if Yale accepted him back.

He had a good feeling, though.

“Ready to go?” Blue was waiting in the doorway, twirling the car keys around her finger. “You got a plane to catch.”

“Yeah, all set.”
Noah and Ronan were already waiting in the living room, both with significantly more luggage. It figured. They paused in the kitchen to look around the room one last time.

“Kind of sad to be leaving it,” Blue said, hugging her arms to her chest.

“How would you miss this dump? Your new place is way nicer,” Noah teased.

“Not for long. Gansey’s mom sent her interior designer down to look at it. Soon we’ll be swimming in silk curtains and fine china.”

“Sounds horrible,” Adam muttered.

“Bye dorm!” Noah leaned against the fridge and hugged it. “I'll miss you especially.”

Gansey didn’t allow them to linger, complaining about the long drive to LAX. They piled into the car, barely fitting all the luggage in the trunk, and made their way to the airport. Only Noah, Ronan, and Adam were flying back to West Virginia; Noah, only until he could start back at Columbia in the fall, and Adam and Ronan, back to his farm, where Ronan had set up a small-recording studio.

Henry had barely swung the deal, but he managed to convince Cabeswater to take Ronan’s idea. It had come with a few stipulations: Ronan had to commit to write a fourth album as well, was required to pay for his own recording studio time since he insisted on going home, and perhaps worst of all, he was required at least three social media updates per week during the production and publicizing of his solo album. (When Ronan complained about the latter fact, Henry had no qualms admitting it was his idea.) Thankfully, no one thought it wise to ask Ronan to perform his songs publically or continue with many interviews. He was better from a distance.

Rather than rent his own recording studio, Ronan used his savings from the first album sales to set up a studio back at the Barns. Since he left, his mother had sold the majority of the animals, finding the farm too hard to keep up by herself, and bought a small apartment nearby. She had offered the farm to Ronan, as a place to set up his studio, if he was willing to keep up with the remaining animals.

Adam wasn’t fond of going back to West Virginia, especially in a town so close to Henrietta, but it was temporary. Once Yale accepted him again he’d finish his degree, and then…
Well.

If he and Ronan were still together, they’d figure something out.

Blue had officially accepted the job, choosing to stay in LA with Gansey. Henry had helped find them a place just outside the city, which they had moved into just a few days prior. It was strange to think of being so far from them, especially after they’d lived in such close quarters, but Adam supposed it was natural. Friends had to separate someday. Families needed to be made.

Gansey found a place to park at the airport, barely batting an eye at the ridiculous price for parking. Adam almost complained but thought better of it. Somehow, it seemed wrong to just be dropped off out front. He wanted Blue and Gansey to walk them as far as possible.

Adam wished Henry had come along. He’d said his goodbyes the night before and Adam didn’t blame him a bit. He never got the whole story of what happened between him and Noah, what they ended up deciding, but he didn’t think it was what Henry wanted. His smile was forced the entire night, and the hug he gave Noah was quick and to the side. Adam had given better hugs to his own father.

“Well, looks like we got here a bit early,” Gansey said.

“Shocking! It’s as if leaving four hours early was unnecessary or something.”

“Oh Ronan,” Gansey slung his arm around his shoulder. “I will miss your wit. Coffee anyone?”

They pulled their bags up to a Starbucks and waited out the time. Adam was halfway through his coffee when there was a slight commotion in the airport, as someone ran through it quickly holding a bouquet of flowers.

“Aw,” Blue cooed. “It’s like a movie.”

When the man turned around, however, Adam nearly spit out his drink. “Is that Henry?”

Sure enough, as the man ran back toward them in what looked like a frantic search, it became more and more obvious that it was Henry. (There was no mistaking him once they could make out the
print of his shirt. Only Henry would wear a neon-colored shirt with a toucan.) Noah was staring at him, mouth hanging open.

“Henry!” Blue yelled, waving him over.

“Oh, my God,” Noah muttered, dropping his head to the table. “He didn’t.”

“Oh, look, he brought flowers for all of you!” Gansey said. “How thoughtful.”

Ronan ruffled Noah’s hair. “Somehow I doubt they’re for all of us.”

Henry needed a moment to catch his breath when he finally ran up to them. Between huffs of breath he said, “This is not -- oh God -- forgive me, I thought this -- would be -- really -- romantic --”

“Henry, don’t talk,” Blue ordered. “Catch your breath first.”

“Thought I wouldn’t make it,” Henry said. He shoved the flowers toward Noah, dropping them into his hands. “Noah, I have tried to move on, but I can’t. I’ve never felt this way about anyone, and I knew I would regret it if I didn’t give it one more shot. So I’m here. Wooing you.”

Blue clapped a hand over Gansey’s mouth to stop him from spouting whatever nonsense he had ready on his tongue.

Noah stared down at the bouquet, the wrapping crinkling in his hands as he pulled them closer to his chest. “Henry--”

“No, no, I have a speech. Let me do the rest of the speech.” Henry cleared his throat and lowered his tone, and for whatever reason, it made Noah crack a smile. “Look, I know you’re scared, Noah. I’m a little scared, too, because this would be new for me. But I want to give it a try. And even though you’re leaving, I think it’s fine! It might be for the best. Long-distance would be an easy way to try it out, right? It’s less pressure that way. We have an office in New York, so I can work there sometimes. Visit you when you’re at Columbia…”

Henry trailed off, suddenly losing steam. Ronan leaned into Adam’s ear and whispered, “Got any
He earned an elbow to his side.

“You don’t have to answer me now,” Henry said. “But just so you know, I’m not going to be with anyone. Not here, I mean. I’ll wait, even if you decide you don’t want to be with me. I’m just going to wait, okay?”

Most everyone tried to look busy, Gansey staring at his phone, Blue sipping her coffee, and Adam re-reading their boarding pass. Ronan, however, just cuffed Noah on the back of the head and said, “Dude, he brought you flowers.”

Noah groaned, shoving his face into the flowers. Before Adam had time to feel bad for Henry, though, Noah lifted his face back up, betraying his exasperated smile.

“Okay. I’ll try,” Noah said. “But I can’t promise that I’ll--”

Henry interrupted him by leaning across the table, grabbing Noah’s face in his hands, and leaning in. Adam assumed it would be a kiss, a big, grand romantic finale, but instead, Henry just touched his nose to Noah’s and closed his eyes. Noah’s pale skin flushed a pink hue, but soon he was grinning, biting his bottom lip.

On the plane ride back, Noah kept looking at his flowers and smiling. Ronan leaned into Adam and whispered, “How come you’ve never bought me flowers?”

Ronan stared at the music sheet in front of him. It was infuriatingly blank, aside from the guitar chords. This was one of the last songs he needed to complete the third album for Cabeswater, but for the life of him, he could not come up with any lyrics.

He blamed Adam. Well, Adam being gone at school. As soon as he left for Yale it was like Ronan’s creative juices took an immediate plunge. Thankfully, there was no rule saying the third album had to be made up completely of love songs, so he wrote his way around this last song, waiting for Adam to be back for summer break. Adam had been back for a week, though, and he still couldn’t think of
any lyrics.

Adam found it hilarious.

Henry found it annoying.

“Look, Ronan, I need this last song. Tarryn Smith is biting my head off to hear it. She wants it for her next album which is a big fucking deal!”

Ronan had Henry on speakerphone as he fiddled with his sound system, messing with one of the tracks he already finished. He was only half listening to Henry. This was the fifth time he’d called to lecture Ronan about the album and his threats were starting to get tiresome.

“I’ll get it done,” Ronan muttered.

“You keep saying that and I’ve yet to see any proof. Will you please just consider some help? We have so many lyricists at the company--”

“No.”

“Ronan Lynch. I swear to God--”

“Oh, no, I think our connection is starting to go out,” Ronan said dryly, not even bothering to make the charade seem more legit.

“Wait wait wait!’” Henry sighed through the phone. He could hear him shuffling in the background, probably pulling at papers. “Would you just think about it? Your collaborations have been some of the best songs you’ve produced. I still hear Home on the radio. Don’t you know? Ha ha.”

“Yeah, it’s a good song. But you know what they say, lightning only strikes once and all, Cheng.”

Henry muttered something under his breath, too quiet to be heard across the line. “Look. I’ll get that guy’s info for you. You don’t have to do anything with it now, but if you’re still stuck in a week,
promise me you’ll give him a call, okay?”

There was a knock at the door. It was Adam, looking comfortable in a Yale sweatshirt and pajama pants. “Lunch is up.”

Ronan still wasn’t used to this. Seeing Adam in his home, waking up to him every day. He’d gotten used to it, during the brief month after coming back from Los Angeles, but then Yale ripped it away from him. (Okay, that was unfair. Yale was great and important and good for Adam. Plus, as much as he loved having Adam with him, Adam Parrish without any immediate goals or plans was near insufferable sometimes. He was restless and unhappy and picked up the strangest hobbies.)

But now he had him back for two whole months. Then they only had to get through one more year of school. It was easy.

Ronan smiled instinctively at Adam’s form and told Henry, “I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“Ugh, I can hear your happiness through the phone. Hi, Adam!”

“Hi Henry,” Adam called back before he disappeared through the door.

“Okay, I know your secret weapon is back, but I’m still sending you this guy’s contact info when I get it, okay? Even the great Adam Parrish cannot be consistently inspiring,” Henry drawled.

Ronan disagreed. “Who is this guy anyway?”

“Some nobody. I’ll have to search through Whelk’s old emails to see if I can even find a contact number. There’s nothing in the system.”

“I wish you no luck,” Ronan said. He then grabbed the phone off his sound table and said, “Gotta’ go, Cheng. Lunch is calling.”

“Yeah, yeah. Go back to your disgusting little family.”
“You’re just jealous.”

Henry paused. “A little.”

He hung up before he could feel too bad for Henry. Ronan left the studio - which he had built in a back building - and made his way back to the main house. Adam handed him a plate with a sandwich, nothing fancy because this was Adam Parrish after all and cooking was not his forte, and took his place next to Opal at the kitchen table. She was munching on her own sandwich, eyes fixed on the screen of her laptop.

“You know the rules, Kid, no screens when we eat.”

Opal waved him off without taking her eyes off the screen. “In a minute. Watching Noah’s video.”

Adam slid next to Ronan and tossed him a bag of chips. Ronan peaked around the screen, reading the title of his video: MEET MY BOYFRIEND HENRY! It already had over fifty thousand views. He snorted.

“Why would anyone care about that?” Ronan asked, stuffing a bite of sandwich in his mouth.

“YouTube is all the rage now,” Adam said, reaching across the table with a napkin to wipe a smear of jelly from Opal’s cheek. She waved him off with a grunt.

“So lame,” Ronan muttered.

Opal tugged one of her earbuds from her ear and leveled a glare at him. “That’s how you got famous.”

He tore a piece of crust off his sandwich and chucked it at her face. Opal rolled her eyes, put the earbud back in, and went back to watching Noah’s video. She was only ten, but Jesus, the attitude was starting early with her. Guess it was true that girls matured faster. It almost made him think twice about officially putting in the application to adopt her, now that her real parents finally surrendered custody.
Almost.

Usually she just had to smile at him and he was back to being putty.

Ugh. He was mildly whipped.

Diane came to pick up Opal not long after they finished lunch. She was still Opal’s official guardian, though thankfully she was extremely supportive of Ronan’s decision. He worried she might want to adopt Opal herself, that they might have to fight over her, but Diane had simply pulled him into her arms and told him he was wonderful.

The process was probably going to take another year at least, but that was for the best. He was still learning how to take care of a kid. Currently, he watched Opal for the early morning hours while Diane ran errands or helped the other children. He’d wake up, pick her up from Diane’s, take her back to practice guitar for an hour, then she studied or hung out with Adam while Ronan worked on the album.

Once alone, Ronan dragged Adam back to the studio. He deposited him on top of the counter, stealing a kiss, before he played the song he was working on for Adam. Adam listened several times, kicking his legs at the base of the counter, and commented on a few of the changes. Then, Ronan handed him a piece of paper and had him listen again.

“You got it down?” Ronan asked.

“I think so,” Adam said. “Wait, does this say ‘face’ or ‘lace’?”

“Why would it say ‘lace’?”

“I don’t know! You once wrote a song about monkeys taking over the world, Ronan, I don’t think it’s insane to think your lyrics would include the word ‘lace.’”

“That was a public service announcement and it was very important. Ugh. Just get in there,” Ronan ordered, pointing to the recording booth.
Adam hopped down from the counter and grinned. Once inside, he hooked the headphones over his ears and stood toward the mic. Ronan started the song and counted down on his fingers. When he hit zero, Ronan started recording and Adam began to sing.

Ronan had gotten used to hearing his own voice since recording his own solo album, but he missed hearing Adam sing. It wasn’t the same. When he wrote songs, even now, he thought first of Adam. Thought back to being a teenager and sitting outside Adam’s shop, listening in secret to the cute mechanic. Their friendship, as tentative and tumultuous as it was, was full of good memories for Ronan. He would never trade their relationship for what it was now, but there was something special about getting to know Adam as a person first, then as a friend, before they got together. It was getting to know Adam slowly, learning what made him special without the touches and the kisses.

Though he very much liked the touches and the kisses.

So when it came time to write songs for the third album, it was hard to imagine someone else singing his songs. For a few weeks he refused to write music at all, unable to come to terms with the truth.

Henry got to him eventually, though, with a strong voicemail that simply said, *Oh, so you’re singing another solo album then?*

So he wrote a few songs.

Adam was back for Spring break when he finished the first few songs. Ronan had yet to record the demo vocals, though, so Adam only had the instrumental to listen to. He was humming along, looking at the lyrics, when Ronan first got the idea.

_Someone_ had to sing the demo.

Why not Adam?

It started as a joke, almost. (A joke that Ronan took selfish pleasure in.) Over break, Adam recorded the two songs Ronan had completed, assuming it was in good fun. Just something to do. But then Ronan sent them over to Henry, who then passed it onto Cabeswater, who then played it for one of their pop singers. She liked it, the song was bought, and two weeks later Ronan got a check in the mail.
Adam didn’t want to accept his cut of the check. Ronan made Henry research how much they typically paid demo singers for their work, and only then, after another fight, did Adam finally put the money into his bank account.

And then they just… continued doing it. Ronan would finish a batch of songs and Adam would come down when he could and record the demos. It was perfect, in a way. Ronan still felt like he was writing songs for Adam; Adam still got to sing while finishing his degree, without the pressure of stardom.

And sure, someday soon it would be re-recorded by someone else. It wouldn’t be Adam’s voice that got played over the airways. But Ronan never listened to the radio anyway, so it was easy to pretend. He had the version Adam sang saved, to listen to again and again and again.

It took about an hour to get a version Ronan liked. While Ronan finished the file, Adam hopped back on the counter, typing away at his phone. He joined him, a few minutes later, sliding his hands along Adam’s thighs to push them apart, giving Ronan room to stand close.

“What do you want to do today?” Ronan asked.

Adam hummed and ran his hand along Ronan’s shoulder. “I have something in mind.”

“Okay, well that’ll take you five minutes, so what after?”

Adam scoffed. “You’re hilarious.”

Despite the joke, Adam leaned forward to kiss Ronan, using his elevated height to his advantage. Ronan let himself be kissed, enjoying Adam leading him through it. Adam had a style - a chaste but lingering kiss, followed by a quick slip of tongue, before he inevitably pulled Ronan in for more - but Ronan didn’t care. It had been almost two years of kissing Adam Parrish and he loved every one of them.

Adam eventually pulled away and said, “I’m fine to relax here. Or go see a movie or something. Whatever.”

Ronan’s phone went off but he ignored it. “Are you going to fuss if I pay for the movie?”
“Do I get to do whatever I want to you when it’s over?”

“That backfired for me last time.”

“You and your body have very different definitions of the word ‘backfire.’” Adam slid off the counter and shrugged. “Or, I could pay for the tickets. Up to you!”

Ronan grunted. “Fine.”

It wasn’t until they were back in the house, getting ready for the movie, did Ronan remember to check his phone. It was a message from Henry, no surprise. His eyes scanned the message, then again when he thought he misread it. But no. The message was still there, clear as day.

*Okay, did some digging and found a name. Still looking for a number or email or something, but maybe you remember meeting him sometime? It’s some guy named Ben Smith.*

“Adam. Fucking. Parrish.”

“What?”

Chapter End Notes

Goodness. When I started this fic in July I thought it would be a short, ridiculous story. Six months and almost 200,000 words later, it morphed into something huge and crazy and amazing, mostly because it introduced me to the wonderful, wonderful TRC community.

Thank you so much to all of you who have been following this story. Thank you to every kudos and especially every comment, as each and every one of them truly makes my day. I don't like to ask for comments, doing so just makes me feel a tad awkward, however since it is finally the end, if you would be so kind to drop a comment or come say "Hello" on my [Tumblr](http://example.com) I would be so grateful!
Another thank you to my dear friend Caitlin who supplied the lyrics for Ronan's final song. She is an extremely talented musician, who you can listen to [here](#). You can listen to an actual recorded version of this song [here](#) if you like as well!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!