Still a Better Ending than Shameless?

by YertleTurtle

Summary

A very long Ian (Pt I & II) and Mickey (Pt III) POV fix-it.
Everything is canon through Season 7; started before S8, so divergent from there onwards.
Heavy on plot and character exploration.

Part I - Complete!
Ian exhales the breath he didn't know he was holding, shakily. There's so much he wants to ask - but he's distracted by the sound of trumpets in the background. "Is that ... is that Mariachi music?"

Part II - Complete!
It's a relief to crawl back under the covers because then he doesn’t have to think. And thinking makes him feel like he’s drowning in molasses, desperately trying to wade to a non-
existent bubble of goo-free clarity.

Part III - In progress.
One more time.
One more time and then he can get the fuck out of Dodge, for good.
Mickey scowls at the skyscrapers rising like Lego blocks from downtown, as the plane circles the South Side preparing to land. The smarter part of him says to look away, but he still ends up running his finger over the window, tracing the lines of familiar avenues and parks. Homing in. Waiting for the city to chew him up and spit him out again. He squishes an ant-sized truck on South Halsted under his thumb and turns away.

Notes

Part I is rated Mature rather than Explicit.
I do use trigger warnings (though not for language - including slurs), but it's not something I'm particularly versed in, so if you want something added let me know.

My Spanish is terrible. Please correct me.

Fuck it, please tell me what the hell I should be doing in general!
Mickey sighs at his reflection in the mirror, before knocking back another shot of tequila and reaching for his purple eye shadow. He’s not sure what he expected Mexico to be like, but he couldn’t have imagined this. His life seemed to read stranger than fiction sometimes and apparently fate was not done toying with him yet.

He turns towards the spandex.

Emiliano sticks his head around the door.

“Diez minutos, cabrón.”

Mickey gives a curt nod of acknowledgement, but doesn’t look up and Emiliano remains hovering by the door. He sniffs a bit and advances into the room instead.

“Here, Zacatecas’ finest.”

Mickey looks over as he places a large glass ashtray on the dressing table and heads out. He’s glad the greedy fucker has saved some powder for him tonight.

“Thanks man.”

Emiliano shoos it away with a wave of his hand over his shoulder, without looking back. Mickey carves out a little line for himself and snuffs it up, before turning his attention back to the rail of spandex, picking out a sparkly silver number encrusted with diamantes. He smiles in spite of his mood, marveling at the fact that he’s worn a dress almost every fucking day since that time he put-on-a-dress-and-swore-it-was-a-one-time-thing.

Needs must.

Fucking Gallagher.

He needs another line.

His first day in Mexico had passed in a haze of dissociation. He didn’t know where he was going, only some vague notion of a beach. Atlantic or Pacific? He wasn’t sure yet, he just drove, choosing forks and exits at random. By nightfall he was exhausted and he pulled into a quiet street in the next town he came to. There, in the back seat of his stolen wagon, he quietly fell apart - still wearing that fucking dress.

He awoke the next morning to an alien Mexican chorus – dogs barking, horns blaring, voices busy.
He was curled fetally in the footwell of one of the seats, his ears throbbing from those stupid clip-on earrings and the pattern of the floor mat imprinted on his cheek. He needed to get out of this dress. As got out of the car however, another need overtook him. He looked around for a spot to piss and selected a tree about 20ft away. To his horror, mid-stream, he saw several men running towards the car. Tottering back (as best he could in those damn heels, with his dick only half contained by the pantyhose) he managed to reach the car before they could take off. He wrenched the driver’s door open and hauled one culero out by his shirt. Evidently the lack of keys had thrown them for a loop and they’d not yet figured out the car had been previously hotwired.

“Motherfucker!” Mickey screamed, punching him repeatedly in the face. The guy in the rear seats sprang out to come to his friend’s aid, but Mickey was expecting it and swung round to aim a good kick with his boot, straight to his abdomen. The man doubled over in pain, snatching at Mickey with his hands as he went down, but he only succeeded in snagging the wig and dragging it off Mickey’s head. Somehow, this enraged Mickey further. He returned to his original victim and smashed his face into the windscreen, smearing his blood and features across it and temporarily stalling the third man, who’d moved into the driver’s seat and was desperately scratching wires. Unfortunately it wasn’t enough of a deterrent and the engine sprang to life. Suddenly all of Mickey’s money and possessions were screeching down the road in a twice stolen vehicle. He might even have chuckled at the irony were it not for the white-hot anger coursing through him. He took his frustrations out on the second man, who was just recovering from his winding, by kneeing him in the face and following through with a left hook as he went down. Both were now unconscious. Mickey snatched his wig up from the ground before he stiffened at the sound of clapping to his left.

“¡Oye puto! ¡Estás bien mamado!”

“The fuck did you just call me?” Mickey had only understood one word in that sentence and he didn’t like it.

The heckler recoiled a bit but continued to look Mickey up and down and his face broke into a winning smile when he spotted his knuckle tats.

“Hey gringo, relax – I’m paying you a compliment!”

Mickey still eyed him suspiciously, beginning to feel vulnerable as his anger subsided. This guy was even shorter than him and thin and wiry, so Mickey was confident he could take him, but he was wary too – cocky guys like that were usually tricky.

“You want me to give you a ride to the Police? Report your car stolen? We can deliver these perros and speed up the investigative process?”

Mickey’s not sure what this guy’s game is, but it’s shady as hell. He decides the best-case scenario is he’s angling for a tip for helping out a Yankee in distress.

“You know reporting this is going to accomplish Jack Shit. And all my stuff was in that car, so you’ve got fuck all to gain from me.”

“You Americans are so fucking paranoid! This is a nation of entrepreneurs, not criminals! Can’t make a buck off everyone.” His mock indignation didn’t last.

“Seriously though, did you really lose everything? ‘Cause I have a way you can make some quick money.”

Mickey sighs and begins to walk away. Luckily he’d stashed a few hundred dollars of Ian’s parting gift in a pocket of his dress, so he didn’t need to turn tricks just yet, but it looked like he was going to
be stuck in this shitty town for a few days at least. He hoped he could buy some pants.

“*Hombre*, it’s not sex!” Mickey still didn’t slow down. “It’s not even illegal!”

In spite of himself, Mickey turned around – though he attempted to keep his eyebrows from hitching too high to mask his curiosity.

Apparently not enough though, because the grin had returned with the knowledge that his mark’s interest had been piqued.

“So I gotta ask, what’s with the outfit?”

“Long story.”

“I got time.”

But Mickey wasn’t going to indulge him.

“Bachelor party road trip gone wrong, maybe?”

“Something like that.”

“Cool. Well you fucking own it. You always this badass – even in a dress?”

“Especially in a dress.”

Mickey growled the last line out. He was getting tired of this fuckwad with dollar signs in his eyes. Finally though, the little turd did something to redeem himself.

“Smoke? I’m Emiliano by the way.”

Emiliano turned out to be a pimp of a rather different stripe than Mickey had expected, and that night marked his *Mexicano* baptism by fire. Twelve hours after meeting, Mickey was in the storeroom of an abandoned abattoir in town, preparing for his debut as Emiliano’s newest *luchador*.

And not just any kind – no. Mickey was to be a *luchador exótico*.

Mickey was initially quite taken with the idea – he was still bulked from his stint in prison, he’d had plenty of practice clotheslining others in his youth, he was angry as fuck and he’d get to wear one of those crazy masks. Until it was explained to him he’d still have to wear his fucking dress.

“It’s easy, you just mince around the ring a bit, wiggle that ass and blow some kisses to your opponent – then beat the shit out of him”.

“No fucking way, NO FUCKING WAY!”

“Look, it won’t turn you gay, most of the *exóticos* are straight. It’s just a way to stand out from the crowd, once you dish out your first smack down everyone will know you’re no less of a man.”

“That’s really not my fear – its just fucking … degrading … and shit.”

“*Mijo*, you’re already wearing a dress, I thought you had bigger *cojones* than this?”

“I mean having to ham it up like some cartoon queen to gode a bunch of assholes into screaming
how much of a faggot I am. How is that good for me? How is that good for anyone?”

Emiliano sensed he was getting to the heart of the matter, but decided to try another tack.

“You’ll earn far more as an exótico – if all you want is enough money to get back on the road you’ll get booked more and earn it quicker. If you want to stick around, you’ll rise through the rankings faster. The fees and the prize money will get bigger. This game is all about theatrics and you need a gimmick to stand out. Unless you want to be billed as Gasparín el Fantasma Amistoso, this is yours.”

Mickey chewed on his bottom lip.

“No fucking mincing!”

“As long as you can hold their attention you can do whatever the fuck you want. I’m just telling you what works.”

“And I wanna be a bad guy.”

“A rudo, good.”

“And I want a mask.”

Emiliano spluttered at this.

“You can’t! Exóticos don’t wear masks, it’s the whole fucking point! It’s what sets them apart from the others.”

“I thought it was the drag act?”

“Well, I suppose - but the face is so integral to it, it could never go down well.”

“A mask, or I’m not doing this at all.”

“How could I possibly introduce it? Woo them with a tale of your cruel husband pouring acid on your face?!”

“I dunno, tell them I have to wear a mask because they can’t handle my face or some shit. Tell them, one look at its awesome power would turn them to stone.”

Mickey cocked an eyebrow as he considered this further.

“Or make them hard some other way.”

Emiliano huffed his arms in the air and appealed to the heavens for help with this wey mamón.

“Madre de Dios!”

And so it was that Mickey’s alter ego was born.

The Mother of God was a mean bitch. That first fight had been carnage. Mickey was scraping the bottom of the amateur Lucha libre barrel, the objective simply to establish who was tough enough and dumb enough to bother training further. There was no storyline, no choreography, just free-form
brawling with a few forgotten rules – and that suited Mickey just fine. The dress on the other hand was a goner, destroyed by the end of his bout, his modesty only just protected by his shredded pantyhose.

Still, the crowd had warmed to The Mother once Mickey had a chance to demonstrate his badassary. He strolled out nonchalantly to cat-calls and jeers, which had grown angrier as Mickey had refused to peacock around the ring. He leaned back against the ropes, lit up a cigarette and let his eyebrows do the talking as he watched a fat dude in a lime green banana hammock and yellow cape work the crowd.

Once the bout started however, the tide swiftly turned for the bitch.

Mickey didn’t bother to toss his smoke and let it dangle nonchalantly from his mouth as he danced around the fucker, skipping in and out of his reach and leading him closer to the ropes. Eventually he was able to feint out of a running lunge aimed his way and use Captain Banana’s momentum, as he ricocheted off the ropes, to dump tackle him to the ground. He wasn’t down long enough to get him pinned, but Mickey was able to grind his cigarette out on the man’s nipple and the crowd roared their appreciation.

Things got ugly after that.

*El patético plátano* unleashed a diatribe as they stalked each other round the ring, no doubt to win back some of his flagging support. Mickey couldn’t understand a word of it, but its intent was clear enough and it got the adrenaline pumping in his veins. He marched forward and squared up to him, but left enough space between them that the whole crowd could see as Mickey grabbed a fistful of his junk and spat on the floor between them. They went wild for that.

Mickey knew this guy was too big for him to take down sober, so he started to formulate ways he could weaken his foe. He was at least quicker, and a few foot sweeps and elbows to the abdomen later his cupcake was starting to look pretty winded. He waited until another opportunity to get near the ropes presented itself then rushed at the middling musa, before ducking under his arms, launching himself at the ropes and using their recoil to propel himself onto the shoulders of the man from behind.

The crowd stood silent for a moment, wondering what was coming next. Mickey tugged at the pussy bow around the collar of his dress and wrapped it round the neck of his opponent before jumping backwards and taking him down with him. They hit the floor on their backs, with a hard thud, but Mickey was right back on top, strangling him with the thin strip of fabric. The man alternately scrabbled at his neck and the fabric of the dress, but Mickey kept well back, so that all he could so was rip holes without getting a grip on his skin. He wasn’t going to let him pass out (even Mickey was sure there was a rule against that) and once his face had reached a satisfactory shade of purple, he released his hold and moved away. The bruised banana was able to roll onto his hands and knees to avoid the count and catch his breath, but Mickey was ready and waiting for him on the ropes. With a gleeful cackle he launched himself up and into a cannonball position, before slamming home in the middle of his target’s back. With an “Ooof” the banana sank to the ground and this time he was down for good, Mickey spread-eagled on top.

His elation quickly gave way to confusion though, as despite being counted out, he had not yet been hailed the winner.

“*Besos, besos, besos*” sang the crowd. Did they want him to do some shitty air kisses for them or something?

“Kiss him – you won’t win until you kiss him!” Emiliano hissed from the sidelines.
“The fuck?” Mickey muttered under his breath, but did as he was told and planted a peck on his vanquished fruit’s cheek.

A boo rang out through the crowd as Emiliano rolled his eyes.

“On the lips stupid!”

Mickey was not best pleased, but quickly pressed his lips to the other man’s, pulling away to reveal his mark – a combination of lipstick and blood. Mickey got to his feet, before bending down to help his opponent up – the mother’s mercy. It occurred to Mickey that he might have just played the most violent game of Kiss-Chase of his life. The crowd roared their praise, but even as they began to chant his name, his thoughts slid straight back to Ian.

However, he couldn’t help smiling to himself a little bit when he thought that Gallagher probably wasn’t even back in Chicago yet and already Mexico had crowned Mickey the fucking Mother of God.

Chapter End Notes

In case you were wondering, he totally went to Rubí’s Quinceañera.
“Cinco minutos”

Emiliano had come to fetch the Mother of God, but was still met with Mickey when he returned to the dressing room.

“Dude, hurry up!”

He stomped over and began to help Mickey with the task of shoehorning his culo into some very tight compression pants.

“Hands off douche!”

“Pffft. You should be so lucky, puto.” But he switched to lacing up the mask instead. They’d managed to compromise on it, cutting it with extra large eye-holes to reveal the full force of Mickey’s made-up eyebrows, while still affording some anonymity.

Banter aside, Emiliano was worried. He could tell his best prospect was in a funk and it was becoming harder and harder to lift it. Cocaine and tequila could only get you so far and he thanked the stars that Madre de Dios and co. were contracted to loose this tag-team fight.

Tonight they were the warm up act at a charreada and were booking increasingly large venues. The crowds loved him, chanting: “Fuck U Up, Fuck U Up!” whenever Mickey’s lips swooped down to claim another bitch. Emiliano knew he was onto a good thing with Mickey’s persona, but he could feel the fire mouldering in the inferno he had carefully cultivated. He’d realized early on that Mickey was suffering from a deep wound, but it had seemed to fuel his apatite for destruction then. He’d thrown himself into the training and the fighting; his natural swagger had covered the rest. Mickey had a good chance of turning pro in the near future and Emiliano could almost taste the pay out.

He needed to know if this was grief or depression, temporary or permanent. He knew the answer probably lay in how Mickey came to be pissing on Coahuilan trees in a dress, but every time he asked to be enlightened on that story Mickey simply replied: “I’d tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.” And he knew he was only half joking. But Emiliano came from a large family of Tijuanan luchadores and had seen it all; Mickey would hardly be the first or the last to burn out.

Mickey, for his part, was trying – he really was. But he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was adrift on the ocean, getting further and further from the shore. And everything he did seemed to exacerbate it, rather than bring him back. Having been to the beach now and seen the actual power of the ocean, Mickey knew he couldn’t beat that rip. Hell, he didn’t even know how to swim.

And the worst part of it was that Mickey didn’t really care. Or rather he didn’t feel enough to care that the fight and the fuck had gone out of him. He’d been a lot of sound and fury for a long time, but now he could see that it signified nothing. He was nothing. Shit, even Gallagher meant nothing in the grand scheme of things.
Emiliano always seemed to have a sixth sense for his ruminations and broached the subject while strapping on Mickey’s kneepads.

“You ever think about taking a vacation?”

“The fuck’s that?”

“Seriously mijo, you’ve been on the road for months now, don’t you want to unwind?”

“And I’m telling you that I don’t know what you’re talking about. Unwinding is for people who have fucks to give.”

“Well if you don’t unwind, you’re going to unravel instead.” He stood up and looked Mickey dead in the eye. “You’re sick man. Take some time to process whatever’s going on behind those freaky eyebrows of yours. And go see a doctor.”

They both knew where this was heading. Mickey felt sorry for the poor bastard who was gonna have to get FUCK U-UP tattooed on his knuckles.

Ian tries his best to juggle the two beers, hotdogs, burger and box of Cracker Jack in his oversized hands as he gingerly climbs towards their seats, but he’s caught by a flailing arm to his left as an unexpected foul ball comes soaring into the bleachers.

There goes one $12 beer.

Trevor, awaiting his return two rows up, makes a noise like a sad trombone.

Ian feels something that might be disappointment, but it’s his attacker who is inconsolable.

“NOOOO. Beer down! Don’t bleed out on me honey, stay with me!”

“Sir, I’m an EMT. I’m afraid it’s too late for this one.”

“I’m sorry for your loss son. She was a- FUCK YEAH YOU BETTER RUN BITCHES!” The man nearly takes out Ian’s other beer as his body snaps back towards the game. Ian starts to beat a hasty retreat, but the man grabs his sleeve and bends down to fish something out from under his seat, before balancing a can of beer on Ian’s already precarious meat tower. “Sorry about that man.”

It’s a PBR, but Ian’s not going to complain.

Trevor is laughing at Ian’s constipated face as he slowly completes his mission.

“Here’s some free career advice – don’t give up the day job. You’d never make it as a juggler in the circus.”

Ian carefully sets his beers down before smacking Trevor in the head with the Cracker Jack box. “Shut up and eat your grandpa snack.” They smirk a little at each other, but turn their attention back to the game.

Things have been going a lot more smoothly of late. Having gone quiet after Monica’s funeral,
Trevor had gotten back in touch about a month later to see how Ian was coping. And Ian had been so fucking grateful. That month had made him realize just how isolated he really was. In spite of his guilt at his behaviour, he was relieved that the one person in Chicago who knew the whole story still actually wanted to talk to him. Although he was sure Fiona and Lip knew where he’d been, the event (or perhaps it was Monica’s death?) had seemed to mark some kind of watershed in his relationship with his siblings. Their unspoken intimacy was intact, but there was a divide between them now, something that couldn’t be broached by either side.

Trevor hadn’t given Ian an easy time about it – they were through, clearly, but he’d been willing to try to be friends because that was the kind of guy he was. Besides, Ian knew that a dry spell might do him some good.

But somewhere along the line they had slipped back into fucking.

And after that the deeper intimacy had started to creep back in.

Trevor had wanted to take it slow, given how badly his trust had been shaken, and Ian wasn’t exactly going to object given how depleted his capacity to love was at that point. Between Mickey and his mother his heart had retreated so far he wasn’t sure it could ever be coaxed out again. Still, he was fairly sure he’d said goodbye to them both for the last time and while the pain was still unbearable and his future uncertain, he felt pretty confident that nothing that came after this could possibly fuck him up anymore than he already was. The nihilism somehow brought him a sense of peace.

And that peace allowed him to reflect on how unnaturally smoothly the machinations of his life seemed to run now. In past years he’d always felt that he was clinging to life by the skin of his teeth, having to do everything in his power just to keep himself in the same place. Lip had curled his lips into a sardonic smile, when he’d tried to explain this sensation and told him: “You’re chasing the Red Queen man, we all are.” But he’d look around to see others moving through life with apparently effortless ease and wondered what the hell he was doing wrong? Not just rich kids, poor folks like them who struggled to make ends meet but never seemed to suffer as much in the process. And now he felt like one of them. Life wasn’t necessarily easier, just simpler somehow – flat and boring, but vast and endless. Perhaps he was more resilient now. Perhaps there was just less drama in his life. Perhaps this is what life is, when you have your shit together.

So it was with some trepidation that he found Lip and Fiona in the darkened kitchen when he and Trevor returned from the game. Fiona had a beer, Lip a coffee and they were sharing an ashtray, smoking in silence. It had been a long time since Ian had seen either of them smoking in the house.

Ian hovered in the doorway, unsure how to proceed, but Trevor headed straight for the fridge and removed two beers, apparently oblivious to the significance of the scene before him. Fiona looked up and smiled weakly, motioning for Ian to come join them at the table, though it was Trevor who got there first and took the seat next to her.

“What’s up?” he asked nonchalantly. There was a pregnant pause as the rest of them struggled to find their voices. Fiona’s lips curled ever so slightly as she studied the ashtray, before lifting her head to make eye contact.

“Ian, I need your help.” She took a drag on her cigarette before continuing.
“A floor in the apartment building collapsed. It’s been condemned.” She looked at sea as she struggled to articulate her thoughts. “I need to raise as much cash as I can in a hurry, to shore it up, otherwise…” her voice tailed off and she brought her shaking hand up to her mouth to take another pull. “otherwise, I’ll be bankrupt – and we’ll lose the house.”

Ian wasn’t really sure where to start, his mind swimming with questions, but unable to latch on to one. Finally one came into focus.

“I thought we owned the house outright?”

“Yes, but I used it as collateral on the mortgage I took out on the laundromat.”

“But you sold that at a profit?”

“And I sunk that into the larger loan I took out to buy the apartment block.”

“Shit.”

“How big is the loan?”

“$250, of which $80 is the house value and $70 my profit on the laundromat.”

“So you owe $100,000 dollars? 180 if we want the house back mortgage free?”

“Yeah” she said softly. There was another pause, as everyone turned over this sum.

“Hang on a minute, shouldn’t the building’s insurance cover this?” asked Trevor.

Ian’s heart suddenly jolted in his chest. Surely she wouldn’t have been that careless?

“Please tell me the building is insured Fiona!” She smiled ruefully at that.

“It is.”

Ian exhaled.

“But it doesn’t cover pre-existing structural issues.”

“Pre-existing?”

“Dry rot. It will have been progressing for years. I took down some non-load bearing walls in the apartment I was renovating, which shouldn’t have done anything, but I guess it was just too much for the overstressed floor and it gave way.”

“Can you sue the surveyor? That should have been in the inspection report when you bought it!”

Poor Trevor was trying to be helpful, but he was asking all the questions Fiona had wished she could avoid. Now the tears began to flow and her head dropped down as she laid her hands in front of her on the table, palms up, the cigarette dangling precariously above the surface.

“It was, but I misunderstood the implications. I didn’t read it carefully enough and never talked to the surveyor because it was an old report. I thought it related to the window frames, which I was planning to replace eventually anyway. And somehow, I thought the owner would have told me if it was serious, since he did disclose the lead paint.”

Lip had yet to say a word, but his head swiveled a little at this. He would never understand why his
sister thought strangers were more trustworthy because they’d banged.

“And no-body else noticed?”

“I didn’t have an agent; I used his lawyer. God I’m so stupid.”

They all remained silent, each turning over the facts.

“So you can’t just sell it and take the hit?”

“I wouldn’t get enough to pay off what I owe, even if we mortgaged the house.”

“Can you increase the mortgage to cover the repairs?”

“The bank won’t lend me any more because it’s condemned. And I couldn’t afford the higher repayments anyway, without the income from the apartments.”

It was Trevor who once again got to the heart of the matter.

“So how much money are we talking here?”

“Too much. Most of the floor joists probably need to be replaced and I’ll have to bring a lot of other stuff up to code to get it certified as habitable again. I have to pay my tenants’ moving costs and their living costs until they find somewhere else. And I still have to pay the mortgage without any income from the building.”

“So…”

“I don’t know exactly, but it’s got to be near what I’d owe the bank on the mortgage anyway. And I’d need to pay a lot of it upfront. No-one’s going to give some South Side idiot up to her neck in negative equity financing.”

“Well at least there are a lot of us. I’m pretty well estranged from my parents since my transition, but we still have a bit of contact. I bet I could squeeze some shame money out of them – not a huge amount, but a few thousand initially, maybe more later.”

Ian’s jaw stiffened, Lip spluttered and Fiona’s eyes grew round. She took his hand in her own.

“Trevor no, we can’t ask you to do that. This isn’t your battle.”

“I want to. You guys are like family to me. And you’ve had my back far more than they ever did.”

Ian began to shrink with mortification. He wasn’t sure if it was Trevor’s assumption of his place within the Gallaghers, the fact that they really did need his money and he was able to offer it so easily, or the sting of hearing Mickey’s words repeated, but Ian had to turn his head away.

“I’ll call them now. See what I can do.” He got up to leave the room before turning around while he fished his cell out of his pocket. “Hey um, do you want cash or a check?” Fiona was lost for words, but Lip was quick to point out that cash is king.

Once he had gone they returned to pensive silence, contemplating the grain of the table. Ian had pretty much given up smoking months ago, but he found he needed something to do with his hands now that the labels on his beer had been peeled, so he stole one of Fiona’s cigarettes and joined his siblings in their huddle round the ash tray.

“Ian, do you still have any of your inheritance?”
“Yeah, pretty much all of it.”

Lip and Ian had taken Carl’s advice and sold their bags of meth to one of his old corner buddies. He’d given them a poor price - $7000/lb, but they’d both been eager to ditch their chemical albatross and get on with their lives. Ian had had to dip into his fund because he’d cleaned his savings out for Mickey, but his lousy social life meant he’d replaced it quickly enough.

“Will you give- will you give me a loan?” Fiona’s voice was stuttering. “I swear I will repay you, or give you a share in the equity, or-” Ian cut her off.

“Fiona, it’s ok. It’s yours. You don’t need to ask”.

“Same.”

She probably wasn’t going to get much compassion from Lip, but she was so grateful he still had her back.

“How about Debs? Did she ever get around to opening that account for Frannie she was talking about? Or did it go on child care?”

“I think she put it in savings, yeah.”

Fuck. Fiona was going to have to steal from an actual baby.

There was no point wondering about Frank’s share. He’d only recently reappeared after going AWOL after the funeral. They’d actually been impressed he’d managed to stretch his that long.

“And Carl - d’you know if he sold his?”

“No idea. You told him about this yet?”

“Nah, I didn’t want to worry him. He’s got his end of year exams coming up.”

Lip cocked an eyebrow at that. He was pissed that, despite her obvious grief and mortification at the situation, she was still trying to avoid some of the consequences of this shit show.

“You have to tell him Fiona, he’s got a right to know. He’s the one that bought this fucking house!”

She just nodded her head, too tired to fight more battles. Lip wasn’t about to remove the spotlight just yet though.

“What about you? Have you got anything? I thought you made 80, not 70, off the Laundromat?”

Fiona shook her head sadly. “Not really. I kept 10 of the profit back, but I owed Etta and the diner some money. And I put a down payment on the car, but it’s leased so I won’t get much for it. I plowed the rest and my surplus income into the remodeling costs – and all for nothing from the looks of it.” She smiled sadly.

“Spent my last dollars on getting the emergency scaffold put up today, actually. I can’t even buy groceries for us this week.” The sobbing started again and she returned her head to the table. Ian was at a total loss for what to do. He just wanted to escape upstairs to his room, but he knew that was probably where Trevor was negotiating with his parents.

It was Lip who spoke at last, poking her fingers to transfer the cigarette they were sharing, while the smoke curled around the corners of his mouth.
“Hey Fi, I bet you wish you hadn’t flushed yours and Liam’s shares down the toilet now, eh?”

A low moan escaped Fiona, but she didn’t look up.

“I didn’t flush it.” She mumbled.

“What?”

Fiona finally looked up and raked the loose strands of hair that had fallen into her face back over her scalp, before rubbing her puffy eyes.

“I didn’t flush it.” Lip and Ian exchanged a cautious glance. Their sister was a hypocrite, a fucking hypocrite, but at least she wasn’t a complete idiot. Perhaps they really could salvage this. Fiona responded unprompted.

“Don’t. Don’t get your hopes up, it’s fucking worse than that!”

“Worse than flushing it down the toilet?! You smoke it all or something?”

“I … I can’t even believe I’m saying this. I returned it to Monica. I put it in her casket before the viewing.”

“Oh.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

T.W.: Lots of talk of dead bodies.

This is going exactly where you think. After 7x12 it was too obvious not to do.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“We can’t do this.”

It was Fiona who finally broached the silence, acknowledging the scenario they had all been reluctantly turning over in their minds.

“We can’t do this. I mean, I know we’re Gallaghers, but this is a new low even for us.”

Lip was more sanguine.

“I dunno, we have dug up a body before. And stolen one. And mutilated it by cutting off a toe. Perhaps this isn’t so bad?”

“Yeah, but we barely knew Aunt Ginger. With this it’d be like giving her power over us. Allowing her to keep screwing us over from beyond the grave. I couldn’t stand it; fucking Monica.”

“Whoa Freud, that’s a lot of transference for one corpse to take! And technically she wouldn’t really be screwing us from beyond the grave.”

Ian finally spoke.

“Is there even any point?”

“I think the point is pretty fuckin’ obvious. We need the money.”

“Yeah I get that. But would the bags still be … you know … intact?”

“What the fuck Ian?”

Fiona and Lip stared at Ian agog. Their brother could be fucking morbid sometimes.

“I … I just think it’s a valid concern. We don’t want to waste our time.”

There was another long pause before Lip spoke again.

“You know, I think it might be alright. I seem to remember the baggies were made of thick polyethylene and sealed. That shit’s pretty resistant to corrosion. She was embalmed and buried in the winter so … so there might not be that much fluid yet …”

Lip trailed off, unable to complete his train of thought.
“Guess I need to study up on taphonomy.”

Fiona took the reins again.

“Ok, well assuming the bags are … unaffected, how would we even do this? Ginger was in a shallow grave in our back yard and that was fucking hard work – it’s not like we can just stroll into the cemetery and dig a six-foot hole without anyone noticing. And what about the concrete vault? We can’t fire up a jackhammer in the middle of the night.”

“Some kind of fake exhumation order or something?”

“I don’t think they let you dig them up yourself. You’d still have to have an undertaker do it. Might get a little awkward when we start fishing around in there for meth baggies in front of them …”

Ian remained silent. He knew who he needed to call - and it terrified him.

“Shit.

This was going to be every bit as bad as he had feared. A ‘douchebag’ or ‘assface’ would have put him at ease, but the hesitation in her voice confirmed how much shit he was going to have to take.

“Mandy?”

“Yeah?”

“How – how are you?”

“Er, yeah. I’m doing alright actually. What about you?”

“Well, M – mostly good.” God damn it, why had he chosen now of all times to develop a stutter?

“So uh, y – you still in, Chicago?”

Mandy was like a shark scenting blood in the water.

“You wanna chit-chat more or you gonna tell me what you want?” God, she was so much like her brother, but Ian was secretly glad she’d cut to the chase.

“So um, do you – or I guess I mean your family, have any … contacts at Holy Sepulchre cemetery?”

Amazingly there was actually a sharp intake of breath on the other side of the line. Ian knew his answer was probably not what she had been expecting and he was almost proud of the fact he’d managed to shock a Milkovich. However, Mandy’s silence then began to drag on longer than he was comfortable with - he should have enjoyed it while he could.

“You know what? FUCK YOU IAN! I dunno if you remember, but the last time I had a body to deal with it was YOUR HYPOCRITICAL ASS I called for help! You fucking Gallaghers are so fucking ARROGANT, thinking your shit doesn’t stink like the rest of us, who have to roll around in it. At least we know we’re trash. And we don’t palm our shit on to others to deal with or rub their
noses in it.”

Ian’s fears were confirmed.

“So, uh – I guess you’ve been in touch with Mickey?” he whimpered; thankfully this seemed to disarm and placate Mandy a bit.

“Yeah. Yeah I have.”

“Is he ok?” There was a little croak in Ian’s voice that he’d not quite managed to suppress, but it at least served to mollify the Mandy-beast a little more.

“I don’t know.”

“But you know where he is? You can reach him?”

“He calls me sometimes.”

There was a long pause now, each of them contemplating the Mickey sized hole in their lives. It was Mandy who finally broke it. Her voice came out almost in a whisper and it was a jarring contrast to her rage of a few minutes earlier.

“Why’d you do it Ian? I mean, I understand why you couldn’t go with him, I do. It was a fuckin’ stupid idea of his, busting out - but prison can make you desperate in a way that I don’t think you can understand. So why’d you get in the car? Why’d you get his hopes up?”

Ian’s croak had morphed into a full on choke as he tried to find the words to explain himself.

“I’m sorry.”

“Ian.”

“I just wasn’t ready to say goodbye.”

Ian could feel Mandy turning his answer over in her mind. It must have passed muster with her though because she then cleared her throat and returned to business.

“Alright, you’re going to need some burner phones and a couple of zip-lock bags.”

A few days later Ian was experiencing one of – no probably the most surreal conversation of his life. After a hastily arranged phone drop in the cavity of a tree in the cemetery, Ian was negotiating with Rudy, the live-in custodian.

“What’s your full name?”

“Er, Ian Clayton Gallagher.”

“That your real name?”

“Yes, sir.” Ian was sure he could hear tapping in the background - no doubt he was being vetted as they talked.
“You a cop Ian?”

“No, uh, no I’m not! Does asking that even work?” Ian couldn’t help himself, but luckily Rudy gave a little chuckle from his end.

“You’d be surprised kid. Course a pig can lie, it’s the reaction to such a stupid question that gives ‘em away.”

“I’m really not a cop.”

“I know. And I trust Milkoviches. So, what can I do you for? Fresh site, dig-and-deepen or a custom job?”

“Um, well what’s the turn around time and the price range?” Ian desperately hoped he sounded like he knew what he was talking about.

“Let me make this clear, this isn’t an industrial operation – I got a wife and kids to think of. I’m a careful curator and that’ll cost you. Custom jobs are my specialty, but it’s a long process moving all those compost piles so there’s a wait list, currently six months. Fresh sites are pretty easy to instigate, but the paperwork takes a little time to arrange and there are a lot of fees that go with it. Dig-and-deepen is your most economical option, but there are a lot of factors that affect how long it takes – I can’t do it if the ground’s too waterlogged for instance – makes too much of a mess. Or if the earth is settled and the grass is established I can only do it in the winter or spring, otherwise it’s too obvious the ground’s been disturbed. Course your best value will be to open a fresh plot in the fall, then dig-and-deepen in the spring while the earth’s still mounded but the turf has yet to seed. Gives you double or triple value since the bedrock’s so deep here. But I’m guessing you don’t have the facilities to wait that long if you’re calling me now.”

“Wow, I didn’t realize it was so complicated.”

“Like I said, I’m a careful curator. Although … if all you want is some niche storage I can do that real quick. People nowadays are splitting their ashes and getting them stored in several places, so it’s real easy to get duplicate paperwork from elsewhere in the network and pretend that’s what happened. It’s not big though, only enough for a few pounds of contraband.”

“Um well, I want to open an existing burial, how much is that going to cost me?”

“Full service dig-and-deepen is 15K.”

“Shit.”

“Guessing you don’t have the benefit of a wealthy benefactor behind you eh? Well, I do have a basic package for 8 that’ll give you my supervision and equipment, but you have to supply the manpower and the extra vault.”

“Oh uh, I don’t need an extra vault, I just need to get into the existing one.”

“So … you’re not actually deepening? Shit, if all that was needed was storage I could’ve provided a mausoleum spot, it’s much less hassle and cheaper too. I’m sorry if that wasn’t clear.”

“No, um, no it’s an actual burial.” A hostile silence suddenly enveloped their conversation. When Rudy spoke again his gravelly voice had turned grave and was tinged with threat.

“This some kind of party? I don’t do that. Don’t care what you wanna offer me.”
Ian chose this moment to have a coughing fit, desperately hoping Rudy wasn’t about to hang up on him.

“What?! NO! FUCK! It’s … it’s my mother!” he finally managed to splutter out.

Rudy roared with laughter this time, and Ian found himself feeling angry, ashamed, awkward and relieved all at once – more complexity than he’d felt in a long time.

“Aww kid, why didn’t you just say? I was starting to get worried there thinking you really were a cop! Grandma’s diamond ring eh? If I had a nickel … So how much money are we talking here?”

‘bout $20,000.”

“That it? Shit you must really need the money. Alright Ian, I got a soft spot for the hard up relatives, so I’ll give you my bargain basement price. But if you ever come looking for my services again I’ll know you’re full of shit and I’ll be charging you double from now on, capisce? Ok, 3K gets you entry, a security patrol and I’ll come look over everything when you’re done and tidy up the topsoil so it looks good. You bring your own equipment and manpower – no pneumatic tools. I gotta warn you though, I’ll throw you under the bus if the cops come looking. I’ll give you a heads up remotely, if I can, and I’ll scare away anyone I would as part of my normal duties, but I’m not covering for you, or obstructing the police if there’s noise complaints or some other reason for them to come by.”

“I understand, yeah, and we can stretch to 3K.”

“Good. Alright, you got the plot number? I need to go inspect it to see how easy it’s gonna to be to open. If it looks good let’s aim for the next clear night with a bright moon. I’ll need you to plant some new burners in the same spot as last time, to confirm all this with you.”

“Sure, thanks for your help Rudy.”

“My pleasure. And um kid … you might want to read up a bit on modern burial methods - sealed vaults and fancy caskets, they keep the elements out but uh, they don’t really stop decay they way people think they do, they just sort of … change it. Lot of variation in conditions, but uh, you might want to prepare yourself.”

“Um, thanks again Rudy.”

As Ian hung up he wondered if he had actually sold his soul to the devil.

Chapter End Notes

‘His gravelly voice had turned grave’ - geddit?

I’ll see myself out.
Chapter Summary

T.W.: Dead people and The Village People

Bad puns are the best way to deal with death - fact.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rudy had good news for Ian - the grass on the topsoil had only just started sprouting and the soil was still crumbly enough to replace without the texture giving away the alteration. Even better, his slightly miserly grandfather had gone for a plastic vault in the end, so getting into it would be a piece of cake. They could go ahead with desecrating his mother’s grave whenever he liked! Just have to be sure to chase off that hobo that seemed to like sleeping there, before they started. Ian hoped Rudy just relished the extra income, but he couldn’t help feeling a little discomfited by the custodian’s enthusiasm for his moonlighting gig. He wondered how Rudy’s life might have turned out if his parents had steered him towards taxidermy as a career instead.

Nevertheless, a digging party was organized to coincide with the full moon - a night which promised to be cloudless and still. It was to be a whole family affair, with the exception of Liam (and Trevor), as Carl was newly returned for his summer vacation. Although they’d tried their best to keep Frank out of it, his graveside vigil meant he’d probably notice any disturbance to the ground, so they’d caved and brought him on board in the hopes that appealing to his warped sense of quality-family-time would keep him quiet. Mostly though, he just wanted to take every opportunity to reiterate how wrong Fiona was to have rejected her hardworking mother’s inheritance, and smile at the karmic strings his dearly departed wife must have pulled from heaven to land his ungrateful offspring in this predicament. Another late addition had been Kev, who heard about the expedition when Fiona came to drop Liam off for the night and hadn’t been able to resist the possibility of seeing a real-life dead body.

For the first part of their mission, they worked silently, in shifts of three, sobered by the reality of what they were doing. However, their lack of mechanical equipment meant they began to tire before they were even a few feet down and started to talk amongst themselves to keep their spirits up.

“So uh, I think I’ve decided what I want to do once I graduate.” Carl announced.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I’m gonna try to get into the Naval Academy.”

“The Naval Academy, where’s that Carl?”

“Annapolis.”

“Where the fuck is that?”

“Maryland.”
“Maryland?! What the hell is there to do in Maryland?”

“Dunno, catch crabs I guess.”

“You slut, when did you become such a Macho Man?”

There it was again, those complex emotions Ian had missed. It was a bitter-sweet feeling, seeing his brother live out his former dreams, but experiencing them vicariously was enough for him now and he suspected the day Carl tossed his cover at the Academy would be the proudest of Ian’s life.

“Grandpa Bill might end up actually having some pride in his grandkids – well maybe not for this episode, but you never know, re-inheritance might be only a few years away.”

That moment of familial intimacy was punctured by Kev emitting a sudden wailing noise as he struggled to find the right opening note.

“lllllll the Navy, yes you can sail the seven seas, in the Navy, you can put your mind at ease, in the Navy, COME ON NOW PEOPLE MAKE A STAND, in the Navy, CAN’T YOU SEE WE NEED A HAND?!”

He appealed to them all, beckoning them to join with his hands, before turning around and shaking his ass to the rhythm in his head. Just as suddenly as it had started, he fell stock still, before twisting his torso round, aiming his finger at Carl in his best Uncle Sam impression.

“They want YOU!”

“Who me?”

“They want YOU!”

“They want you, they want you, they want you as the new recruit!” Debbie was on the bandwagon.

“But, but I’m afraid of water!”

“They want you, they want you as the new recruit!” Lip had broken.

“Hey look man, I get seasick just watching it on TV.”

“They want you.”

“Oh my Goodness.” Fiona felt she needed to be the voice of reason in this situation.

“What am I going to do in a submarine?”

“They want you, they want you in the Navy!”

“In the NA-VY, yes you can sail the seven seas, in the NA-VY, you can put your mind at ease, in the NA-VY, come on now people …”

“PEOPLE! PEOPLE!” Frank was suddenly bellowing, bringing their shenanigans to a sudden halt.

“I’d like to REMIND YOU of the gravity of this situation. Please have some decorum and think of your sweet mother’s dignity. We are in a sacred place of remembrance!”

“Pfft. I think all considerations of dignity were lost when I decided to fill her casket with meth then dig it back up again, Frank.”
“BE THAT AS IT MAY, your mother was a pacifist and a gentle creature. She would have been horrified to know her children were praising a war mongering organization while literally dancing on her grave! Shame on you!”

“She would have fucking loved this, and you know it Frank!”

As if on cue, they were startled into silence by the sound of one of their shovels hitting something solid. They had reached the vault.

A few minutes of shoveling around in silence and they had cleared the rest of the lid and located the hinges that kept it latched shut. The soil had clotted on them somewhat, but they quickly cleaned them off and were able to unlatch it and lift the tub out of the grave with little difficulty.

“Monica Jean Darrgen” Frank whispered the words inscribed in brass on the casket. Guess grandpa Bill had decided she shouldn’t be saddled with the Gallagher name for all eternity. They remained quiet for a moment, the enormity of what they were about to see and do stilling them into something resembling reverence.

“Monie, my Monie.”

Just as suddenly as the peace had come, so it was shattered by Frank’s pouncing on the casket and tugging at the lid with all his might.

“Frank!”

“No!”

Six other bodies were suddenly thrown down or pressed forward, snatching at Frank’s shoulders and trying to pull him back.

“Hold on!”

“It’s sealed you idiot, we need to cut the gasket- ”

But apparently grandpa Bill had also opted for a cheaper casket, sans seal, because their combined tugging and Frank’s tenacious hold on the edge resulted in it suddenly springing open.

For a moment they were rooted where they’d fallen. The first thing Ian registered was the smell. He’d always thought it was hyperbole when people talked about there being a scent to death, but now he knew it was like nothing he had ever experienced before, nor was it something he would ever forget.

The second was Monica’s face. Despite Rudy’s warnings, it seemed the cool earth had been kind to her thus far. A fine fuzz of white mold had crept over her greying skin in places and her cheeks and eyelids were sunken, but she was still very recognizable their mother; only her yellowed and blackened fingertips and earlobes gave away the fact that she was decaying from within.

“Monie!” Frank cried again, shrugging off the hands that had restrained him and diving forward again, apparently determined to join her bodily within. More hands grappled with him, seizing on to whatever they could hold, but their scrum was once again frozen by an almighty shout of “Hallelujah” from behind them, followed by unhinged laughter. All heads slowly swiveled to follow the sound.

Lip was out of the grave now, teetering on the edge above them, head tossed back and arms extended towards the heavens.
Huh, and there was Ian thinking *he* was the crazy one in the family.

“I’ve done it, I’ve done it! I’ve done the third step!”

He fixed them with a thousand-yard stare, his eyes gleaming with wetness and light in the dark.

“There is a God! There’s just no way this isn’t some giant cosmic joke!”

Their silence grew still more awkward and Lip could no longer hide his smirk of enlightenment from them.

“Don’t you see?” he whispered, gesturing at Frank.

“He’s fucking Heathcliff! It all makes sense now, this shitty, shitty life and world finally makes sense! Hallelujah!”

Chapter End Notes

A.K.A. That awkward moment Lip realizes he's a fictional character.

Also, apologies to any Marylanders I may have offended.

Bonus Fun Fact! The Leatherman from the Village People was *buried* in his biker outfit. He was just a gigolo; life went on without him.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

T.W. This one’s got drug use, mental illness and discusses Ian having sex (not graphically) and generally fucking up. If that worries you skip on down to the last couple paragraphs.

This is what I imagine is playing in the club (or perhaps just in Ian’s head) - Underworld – Born Slippy.NUXX
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tL84mvQxPm4

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ian’s fucked up. Oh God has Ian fucked up.

He’s been fucking up for weeks now, but he’s really done it this time.

His head swirls with the lights and his heart thumps in time to the beat. Sweat drips down his shirtless body, a mixture of his own and those around him. Arms dart in and out of the spaces between them, sometimes flailing, sometimes pushing, sometimes groping. The humidity around him is intense and the sensation of drowning grows stronger with each panicked breath he takes. Worst of all, the feeling of nails being drawn down a blackboard pervades his neurons and makes him shudder. There’s a snare drum hissing in his mind, growing faster and louder until his head is filled with nothing but deafening white noise. He wants to climb out of his skin; flay himself until the crawling sensation stops.

He casts around desperately, trying to spot Lip’s curly mop of hair - but there are too many people and the strobes and lasers sabotage his vision. Slowly, he starts to push his way through the crowd trying to get to somewhere wider, somewhere darker where he can escape the sensory overload currently engulfing him. He cowers by a fire exit, but it provides scant relief. He knows he’ll get none until this is out of his system and he’s too scared to leave the club on his own, not trusting his mind to guide him home. He needs Lip. He can’t go anywhere without him.

A guy wanders up to him - he seems to be feeling the love.

“Hey man, you ok?”

Ian slowly slides the hands that have been purposely covering his face down.

“Do you have any K? I can get you as much Tina as you like, but I need to come down. Please.”

Ian wonders if his eyes are actually bugging out of his head as much as they feel like they are, because the guy kind of recoils.

“Sorry dude, my favorite letter is E.” But he hands Ian the glass of water he was holding anyway.

Ian downs it and groans at the sensation it produces as a cold ribbon slides down his torso. What the fuck was he thinking taking meth? Every time he thinks he’s moving on in life those Gallagher self-sabotage impulses kick in.
In truth, he’d been enjoying it up until now. He had the excuse of familial loyalty and need to justify the majority of his indiscretions. It wasn’t like he wanted to spend every Friday and Saturday night in the clubs selling dime bag crystal exhumed from his mother’s casket.

But they needed the money. And they needed the premium price they could get by dealing on the club circuit and rave scene. No-one wanted to start a turf war on the streets and he and Lip moved around enough, selling in small enough quantities not to arouse suspicion. But at the current rate they were dealing it was going to take close to a year to offload their three remaining pounds and that was an unacceptable amount of time for Ian to live on edge. He wasn’t willing to risk carrying more, so he needed to sell more often instead.

Still, no-one had suggested that he get involved in Party and Play. That was on him. Problem was, it was a good solution – Ian had built up a respectable customer base who messaged him for resupply at any and all hours of the day. If it clashed with one of his shifts, Lip was usually able to take care of it. Ian rationalized that it had been worth the effort.

It was so easy to find people looking to party these days Ian wondered why anyone bothered to stand around on street corners and in alleys anymore. Through the wonders of the internet Ian found himself traveling to motel rooms and suburban homes all over the greater Chicago area. The problem was, if Ian made it clear that he was mostly there to sell, many people weren’t interested. He realized quickly that he had to give the illusion that he was down to play as well, to get his foot in the door. Once he’d made the effort to come out most felt obliged to buy some party favors, even if Ian couldn’t stay. But sometimes he would, if the guy was hot enough, or seemed rich and well connected - and then he’d have a customer for life. Who wouldn’t want to buy from a nice, polite, hung twink, who charged reasonable prices for top quality product and might work you over to boot? Everyone recommended him to their friends and before long Ian was visiting the kind of loft apartments he hadn’t entered since his days as a go-go boy. Ian didn’t consider it turning tricks – he only fucked those he wanted to (although he made sure he didn’t examine why he wanted to fuck them too closely) and he was careful, practicing safe sex and only huffing poppers.

In truth, it made him feel more alive than he had in years. He could have done without the anxiety of having to deal drugs, but the rest of it – the parties, the music, the sex – reminded him of the time before he’d been diagnosed, before Mickey had swooped in to rescue him, before he’d gotten too high. When he’d just been an anonymous boy dancing in the clubs, dust in the wind, doing whatever felt right in the moment. Objectively, he knew it had been a destructive and reckless period; all the hallmarks of his incipient disease were there in hindsight. But damn if he hadn’t felt carefree and happy at the time. And he’d never felt that more clearly than when he and Tina were friends. She had always been his favorite, despite Ian experimenting with almost every substance he was offered. Who would want to come down from that? No-one, it’s just that now Ian knew that the high was inevitably followed by a low, and would be for the rest of his life.

There’s a reason no-one wants to take their medication when they’re up – because it feels good. So good, and as necessary as breathing. Especially when so much of Ian’s life had been spent feeling bad. Or feeling nothing. But Ian had learned the hard way that he couldn’t control how high he got and that his instincts for when a line had been crossed were woefully underdeveloped. And so he dutifully took his pills, even though the process of titrating the medications to allow him to feel enough, but not too much, was a never-ending circle of frustration. He didn’t understand how some days he could feel perfectly content and satisfied with his life and circumstances and the next feel
overwhelmed and stifled, needing to resist the urge to jump. What was the authentic emotion? How much was his pills, his disorder, his personality? It was a chicken and egg scenario of the worst kind because his happiness and desire to continue on, to live, was bound up in the riddle of it. So Ian muddled through each day, taking them as they came and squeezing what he could out of them, increasingly relying on his gut to tell him what to do.

Unfortunately he was getting greedy, turning into a glutton for sensation. He wasn’t searching for a high per se, but for subtlety; the shades of grey that make life interesting. Those moments gave him a particular kind of satisfaction; a funny kind of happiness that moved him to seek out more. And of course that led him full circle to his original desire – to recapture the sensation he gets when he’s just started on the way up, when the world is fascinating and bright and he wants to explore it all, to see everything, to know everything – without the inevitable crash that comes later.

Somewhere in his frazzled brain, the idea came to him that the solution might be meth. Now that he’d been to the bipolar rodeo a few times, he recognized that the high he’d gotten from it before was very similar to hypomania. He reasoned that his mood stabilizers might counteract the worst of the drug’s effects and he had anti-psychotics and downers at home if he needed to cool it. He was stable; a sort of fake normal person as a result of his medications, so it followed that he would probably react normally too. He might have to tweak his medicinal cocktail a bit in the end, but he had to do that all the time anyway. And some bipolar people took amphetamines for ADHD right? This wasn’t all that different…

This was not how he remembered it. The speed and energy are there, but it’s not in a good way. His mind is racing, his toes are tapping and he wants to climb the walls. He needs to get away, he’s never been so sure of anything in his whole life. He almost cries with relief when he hears a cocky voice behind him.

“Hey, little brother! Some guy over here says he wants to give me a sunflower. D’you think the 4% gay in me can handle it?”

Lip’s apparently heading for the door, going to grab a cigarette. Ian actually does start to cry once he throws his sticky body against his brother’s and wraps his arms around him.

“I fucked up Lip! I fucked up so bad! I need to get out of here, please. Please, let’s get out of here, I want to go home. I need to go home so bad, please get me out of here, I can’t take it. I fucked up so bad Lip and I want to get out of here, please. Please Lip!”

“You take something?” Lip is trying to soothe Ian, running his hands up and down his trembling back, but the sensation on his skin is too much for him to handle and he breaks away.

“Yeah. Please can we leave?”

“Just let me grab my bag. Can you stay here Ian? Stay by this door and don’t move until I come back.”

It feels like an age before Lip returns and his face is drawn into a grimace, though it softens as he approaches. He tosses Ian his tank and pulls on his own.

“You still got anything on you?”
Ian nods and starts fishing around in his pockets for baggies, fumbling as he pulls them out and dropping one or two on the floor in his haste. Lip opens his bag and carefully tucks them into a hidden pocket of the lining. He takes the cash proffered by Ian too, but leaves him with $40 in case they get separated.

Unfortunately, the fire exit seems to be blocked. Ordinarily Ian would be searching the manager out, taking him to task for the health code violation, but right now all he can think of is his escape. They push back into the crowd, Lip leading the way and Ian clinging to his waist for dear life. The sensation of overwhelm is enough to make Ian scream, but the music is so loud no-one but Lip can hear it.

There’s still more delays as they head up the stairs towards the exit; too many people trying to get up and down. Ian presses into Lip’s back urging him to go faster.

“Shhhh. It’s ok. We’re almost there, we’re nearly there Ian.”

Lip starts to jostle a bit, trying to clear a path for them at the top, but people are oblivious, chattering, hugging and saying goodbye to friends. He pushes harder, trying to move the obstructions none too subtly.

“Hey!”

“Oww!”

“Fuck!”

Before Ian’s sure what’s happening his body surges forward. Someone’s tripped and like dominoes they’re falling down, being extruded through the door like fleshy paste from a tube. Something in Ian snaps and he can’t contain the incendiary energy within him anymore. He’s punching and kicking his way out of the tangle of limbs that have engulfed him, spitting like a cornered cat. Next, he feels strong arms on his shoulders, gripping him and pulling him up out of the mêlée. He spins around and quickly punches his assailant in the gut, who turns out to be a beefy doorman. Lip is up and trying to pull Ian back but he can’t break through; Ian’s strength is superhuman and it’s all he can do to avoid getting clocked himself. There’s a high-pitched noise as a siren suddenly blares. A passing patrol car has noticed the disturbance and is stopping to help. Lip freezes, firmly rooted to the spot. The noise is enough to break Ian from his trance and the doorman takes advantage to twist one of his arms up behind his back, immobilizing one of Ian’s fists of fury.

“Argh!” Ian yells out in pain.

“Go!” His eyes lock with Lip’s, but he’s frozen in place.

“Go you idiot!” Ian kicks him in the shins for good measure and it’s enough to finally get Lip moving so that he disappears into the crowd that’s quickly gathering to watch. The doorman begins to grunt as he starts dragging a still hissing Ian towards the patrol car. He’s handcuffed and unceremoniously thrown into the back seat. Despite his pain he’s ever so slightly relieved to be out of the heat of the club, isolated in the car, face down on the cool leather seats. Hands pass up and down his sides, then over his ass, before one reaches into his back pocket to pull out his wallet.

“Ian Gallagher.” The cop tries out his name, running his license through the computer.

Ian breathes a sigh of relief that Lip had the foresight to remove any contraband from him before they left the club. He’s going to have to spend the night in the cells (and he won’t be sleeping, that’s for sure) but at least he’s not going to be busted for possession.
“Hey, nice one Marcellus!” The first cop nods at the doorman still hovering by the car, his wounds being inspected by the second.

“This guy’s got a warrant out!”

Shit.

Ian’s fucked up. Oh God has Ian fucked up.

Chapter End Notes

Don’t do meth kids.

Soo…
I know fanfic doesn’t really do explicit criticism, so the crickets chirping have me kinda worried since I’m getting fewer hits with each update. Anything you want to share with me? I welcome all feedback and don’t bite (unless you want me to). I’m doing this mostly as a creative outlet for myself and already have the plot outlined, so I’m not looking to make major changes. But I’d still like to know what you do and don’t like, especially if you stopped reading at some point.

Not angsty/smutty/fluffy enough? I’ve got some of that planned for later (there will be a hat shopping scene! - see Chapter 30), but I care about plot and pacing and wanted to do something a little more complex than ‘Ian-and-Mickey-have-a-misunderstanding-then-spend-50000-words-fucking-and-talking-about-their-feelings.’ (Not that I haven’t enjoyed some of those fics!)

Too much Ian/not enough Mickey? That’ll change, but there’s more to be done with Ian before we can get to that from a plot and character development perspective.

Do my choppy sentences annoy you and hurt your eyes? Do you cry when they start with ‘But’ or ‘And’? Humor too weird? I’m afraid it might be too late to teach an old dog new tricks, but I can try!

Thanks!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

T.W. Brief discussion of suicide and self harm - not graphic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ian hasn’t brushed his teeth in more than two days. This would be upsetting for him at the best of times, but on the rare occasions that he’s missed a clean, the intervening period doesn’t usually include taking meth and eating nothing but mustard and bologna sandwiches. To say that Ian’s breath is ripe would be an insult to durian fruits and Limburger cheeses the world over.

After his arrest Ian spent the night picking at the white walls of a concrete isolation cell – his fidgeting was keeping the drunks in the tank awake and they complained to the officers. By morning he was starting to crash, just in time for him to be transported to the Cook County Jail. He’d never been in before but he knows the intake and processing times are notoriously long, so he figures he might be able to catch up on sleep. Clearly that was naïve. Saturday and Sunday mornings are the busiest times at the jail and Ian is herded into a variety of bullpens, packed so tight he couldn’t sit down even if he wanted to. There is a bench running round the perimeter of the room but Ian knows better than to attempt to claim a spot on it, so he stands shoulder to shoulder with the other hungover occupants, determined not to touch the filthy floor unless he keels over. Eventually his name is called and he’s marched over to an intake desk.

The bored woman only glances up at him when she checks his face against his mug shot taken the night before. Ian can see he looks pretty crazy in it.

“Ian Gallagher, hold out your arm.” She grabs a huge sharpie and starts writing numbers down it - he guesses it’s probably his jail ID.

“Charged with simple battery and …” A single eyebrow then shoots up.

“… ten counts of harboring a fugitive. Oh you are gonna be popular with the C.Os.” She flashes him a wicked smile, but Ian’s still reeling from hearing his charge sheet.

HOLY FUCK. Even on his way down to Mexico the fact that he was breaking many laws had seemed like an abstraction. He hadn’t even considered that neglecting to cross the border might mean the law would eventually catch up with him. From time to time he’d thought of that gas station in Oklahoma where Damon had nearly gotten them killed, but as the months had passed it had seemed less and less likely that anyone was looking for him. He had always been so lucky.

More numbers and letters are scrawled onto his arm and Ian finds himself handing over his belt, wallet, watch and shoelaces in a daze, not really registering anything being said to him.

“Mr. Gallaher!” Slowly Ian pulls himself up from the depths of his ruminations.
“This is important. Any medical conditions, allergies, disabilities?”

“Um … yeah. Yes, I’m Bipolar. Bipolar one with psychotic features.”

“Are you taking any medication for this? If so what dosage?”

“200mg of Lamictal with 80mg of Geodon per day, and 2mg of Ativan when I need it.”

“And you’re taking these currently?”

“Yes, I mean, I’ve missed my last two doses now, but otherwise I take them.”

“Hep C, HIV?” Ian shakes his head.

“Any drug addictions?” Ian shakes his head again, even as he sees her side-eyeing his mugshot. She doesn’t challenge him though.

“OK please sign here to acknowledge surrender of your valuables. It’s Saturday, so you won’t get your arraignment hearing until Monday. You’re scheduled for noon.” More squiggles appear on Ian’s arm and he’s led into a different, but identical bullpen.

About an hour later the first of many bologna sandwiches show up, along with a little cup of medication for Ian. They don’t look the same as his regular pills and he hopes it’s just another generic manufacturer. Still strung out after his meth misadventure he’s not feeling particularly hungry for rubbery lunch-meats, (even if they weren’t grey-brown) but he knows taking the meds on an empty stomach means risking having to use the cesspool of a toilet in the corner of the pen, so he choke down the food and swallows his pills.

By the time the next round of sandwiches arrive Ian’s in his taupe uniform, having been strip-searched by a (thankfully) disinterested guard, but still no closer to seeing the inside of the jail. Soon after, he’s taken into a small nurse’s office where he has blood drawn and is poked and prodded with various implements. A woman in a smart suit with a clipboard then enters the room.

“Ian, I understand you have been diagnosed with Bipolar disorder?”

“Yup, Bipolar one with psychotic features.”

“And how long ago was this?”

“About three years ago.”

“Have you ever been hospitalized?”

“Yeah once, voluntarily, for a manic episode. That was when I was diagnosed.”

“And for how long would you say you were showing symptoms of your disease, before that?”

“At least a year before, so four total.”

“Have you ever attempted suicide?”

“Umm, well I’ve never tried to…”

“But you’ve had suicidal thoughts?”

“Yeah.”
“Did these go as far as planning or were they confined to general ruminations about death?”

“I thought about different ways, scouted out places to go …”

“Are you feeling suicidal now?”

“I don’t think so. I’m kinda dazed, overwhelmed.”

She was ticking a lot of boxes.

“Do you engage in self-harm behaviors?”

“Well I’m pretty good at self-sabotage, wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t.” Ian chuckled, but he didn’t get a response from his inquisitor.

“We’re mostly concerned with violent acts here - whether you’re a danger to yourself or others. Do you cut yourself, hit yourself or otherwise cause yourself physical injury?”

“No.”

“Have you caused injuries to others?”

Ian doesn’t know how to answer that.

The woman waits another moment before prompting: “This is all privileged medical information; none of it can be used against you in court.”

“I threatened a guy with a knife once - it was before I was medicated though. I’m not violent at all since I’ve been on my meds.”

“It says here you’re in on a battery charge.”

“I...uh...I was high, it was a mistake. I was just overwhelmed with stimulus and I lashed out. It was a one off.”

“Do you have substance abuse issues?”

“No, not really.”

“Not really...?”

“Well I mean I do drink, in moderation. And I smoke weed sometimes, but not too regularly.”

“And weed was what caused you to lash out?”

“Um no, it was meth. It was a one off though, I didn’t expect the reaction I got.”

“It was your first time taking meth then?”

“Well no, I used to experiment when I was younger, but I hadn’t taken it in years and I’d never had a bad experience before.”

More boxes were being ticked.

“Can you describe what this bad experience was like? How was it different from before?”

“It was similar in that I had lots of energy and my mind was racing, but it just wasn’t in a good way,
Ian tried to think of a more eloquent way of putting it, but his brain was working pretty poorly today.

“It’s like… before, when I took it, it was like hypomania. I felt great, loads of energy, found everything fun, felt like I was special. But this was more like its evil twin. The tempo was the same, but everything was inverted – I felt crushed, claustrophobic, despairing, but anxious and jittery too. The energy felt like fire instead of electricity. It was torturous, like dying.”

“Have you ever felt these sensations when you weren’t high?”

“No… should I?”

“Hopefully not.”

More scribbling.

“OK Ian almost done. You’re currently taking medication to control your symptoms is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“How long has that been for?”

“I’ve been on my current cocktail for about four or five months, but I’ve been on something continuously for the last two and a half years.”

“And would you say that your mood is stable since you’ve been medicated?”

“Yeah pretty much, I mean, I’ve had some ups and downs and I’ve switched out drugs and doses quite a few times, but it’s nowhere near like it was before. I wouldn’t say I feel like I did before I got sick but I feel normal… ish.”

“Any psychotic symptoms since you’ve been taking them?”

“No. Unless this is all a hallucination.”

“Unfortunately not.”

“Sounds like something a hallucination would say.”

She doesn’t smile, but he can see a little crinkle at the corners of her eyes, like she’s trying to squash one down.

“Ok, well unfortunately I’m going to have to put you into general population as you’re not a high enough psychiatric risk. Given the stress of this environment I’d prefer to have you in our specialist psych program for monitoring, but I’m afraid we’re too short on beds for that. You are far from our only bipolar inmate, sadly, and many are suffering from more acute symptoms.” She hands him a card.

“This is a suicide hotline number, you can call it from any of the jail phones at any time, for free. Please use it if you start feeling even mildly suicidal. The chaos here tends to amplify distress and progress things faster, makes people more impulsive. If you make bail please see your psychiatrist as soon as possible and discuss this episode; they should monitor you more closely from now on, as awaiting trial is also a very stressful experience. Good luck Ian.” She nods at a guard watching through the glass window, who enters and retrieves him.

Ian thought he might finally be on his way (not that there was much to look forward to) but instead
it’s back to the bullpen and he waits and he waits and he waits. A third round of bologna sandwiches arrive and Ian wants to scream. This is apparently dinner because he’s got more pills to swallow, so he stuffs it in, determined not to be cowed by Cook County Corrections after a single day. More waiting around and he is eventually fitted with a plastic wristband and presented with a towel that has never known the love of fabric softener and a bar of soap that might be more acid than alkali. Apparently wash cloths, toothbrushes and toothpaste are also standard issue, but it’s a busy day and they’re short on supplies, so Ian’s going to have to go without.

Finally Ian is cuffed again and led down a warren of underground passages with about thirty other men. It’s already after lights out when they arrive in a dormitory. It reminds him of his brief stint in the group home except this is much, much larger – there must be more than 300 men in the room and the cacophony of snores is something to behold. Thankfully he’s so exhausted by this point that he falls asleep within minutes of climbing into his sagging, slightly-too-short bunk.

The psychiatrist wasn’t kidding about this place being chaotic. When the lights come up in the morning (at least he thinks it’s the morning) the full scale of the scene comes into focus. Shouts and screams echo off the cinderblock walls and the room is a hive of activity. Ian waits in a long line to sit on an unscreened toilet next to 10 other guys. Next it’s into the showers, where Ian has his first surprise – everyone is wearing their boxers. It seems oddly prim, considering Ian’s just taken a shit 12 inches from another man and County-issue boxers are white, so don’t leave much to the imagination once they’re wet, but he goes with it. He’s doing his best to keep his gaze down and avoid eye contact, even as he feels other pairs boring into his back. He knows he sticks out like a sore thumb as a pretty redhead with an incongruously large dick, and he probably looks even more vulnerable with his hair wet and dripping down his body. As soon as his commissary comes through he’s going to the barber to get a buzz cut. He desperately wants to brush his teeth, but he can’t risk getting into anyone’s debt by borrowing toothpaste, so he heads towards the cafeteria instead. He walks to the back of the line and slowly progresses forward, not complaining when others cut in front, like a good unaffiliated ‘neutron’. When he makes it to the head he is gifted oatmeal, toast, a muffin and … bologna. He then starts walking towards the back of the room, closer to the guards, and casts about for a quiet table with some friendlier looking guys, so that his status as ‘fresh meat’ won’t be too obvious.

“Hey Firecrotch.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m a glutton for cliffhangers. Sorry.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

An early update, for the Obsessed one :-) Happy Weekend!

T.W. Trevor making awful jokes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

No.

Ian spins around and finds himself staring into blue eyes – but not the ones he’s expecting.

“I know that’s what he used to call you.”

Iggy Milkovich is standing before him, a shit-eating grin on his face. Ian is terrified he’s about to be shanked, but Iggy seems genuinely happy to see him and the next moment he’s pulled into a strong embrace.

“Ian fucking Gallagher. How’d you get busted?”

“I punched a doorman. Turns out I also had a warrant for ten counts of harboring a fugitive.”

“That so?” His eyes narrow, making his grin instantly sinister. “You gonna rat him out for a plea?”

“No. I earned this.”

“Good, then all is forgiven. Come sit!” Iggy steers him round and motions for him to take a seat at his nearby table, occupied by similarly scruffy and tattooed men.

“Guys this is Ian, we used to live together.”

“Yeah I bet.”

“Fuck off, you know I ain’t no fag.”

“So why’d you break up?”

“He ran off with my brother’s baby.”

“Fuuuck. That’s some messed up shit.”

“Nah man, it’s cool. Ian took good care of him, he was just crazy at the time, thinking people wanted to harm the kid.”

Ian’s blushing. He guesses Iggy’s just trying to talk him up so people won’t fuck with him, but it’s mortifying hearing his past talked about like this. He’d forgotten how goddamn blunt Iggy is.

“Shit if that was my kid I’d’ve strung you up.”

“It wasn’t like that. Mickey knows he was loco en el coco.”
“Mickey? That your brother that busted outa Stateville?”

“Yeah, that’s why Ian’s in. He helped him out once he was on the run.”

There were nods of understanding around the table. Apparently this information was enough to square Ian’s baby snatching proclivities with the men.

Ian lowered his voice and addressed Iggy.

“Hey Iggy, is your dad in here?” He saw the subtest of flinches, something Ian was sure was only perceptible to him after his many years of Milkovich watching.

“Why, you think you seen him?”

“No, just wondering if I need to keep my eyes open.”

“Far as I know he’s out. But I’ve been here eight months now, so I don’t really know what’s going on.”

“How long were you sentenced for?”

“Sentenced? Ha! Haven’t even gone to trial yet. Couldn’t make bail.”

“Shit man. What’s the charge?”

“Possession. At least once I finally go down I’ll probably get out on time served.”

Iggy looks at him hungrily and licks his lips, just like Mickey used to do. Ian’s pretty sure he’s not checking out his crotch though, as his eyes slide southwards.

“Hey uh, you gonna eat that bologna?”

By the time visitation rolls around in the afternoon, Ian’s teeth are mercifully clean thanks to Iggy. He’s also survived lunch – bologna again (wasn’t that a song?) and discovered that there isn’t a whole lot to occupy his time in the Cook County Corrections system. He therefore jumps at the chance of a visit, even if he knows he’s probably going to get his ass handed to him by Lip.

But it isn’t Lip who’s come to see him. It’s Fiona. And Trevor. A lump rapidly rises in his throat as he takes his seat on one side of the plexi-glass partition and picks up the phone. Fiona’s eyes are the size of dinner plates as she shakily does the same on her end. Trevor is hanging back, sitting on the bench running along the back of the room, awaiting his turn. He doesn’t seem too happy to see Ian but he’s not scowling either – his expression is largely inscrutable.

“Hey there sweet-face.”

Ian decides to try to crack a joke to break the ice and put Fiona at ease.

“Yeah, that’s what they’re calling me in here too.”

She tries to suppress a giggle but it comes out as erratic stutters of her chest instead. Then her already reddened eyes begin to brim with tears and the breathing spasms quickly give way to heaving sobs.
Shit. This was not the effect he was going for.

“No, No. Shhh. Fi. Come on Fi, don’t worry! It’s ok. I’m ok – really!”

“Ian I’m so sorry! This is all my fault! I’ve been so stupid!”

“You’ve been stupid?!” Ian laughs incredulously.

“Lip told you how I got caught right?” She nods her head but continues her silent sobbing.

“I mean, taking meth when you’re bipolar, it’s pretty high up there in the stupid stakes right? They should bring back America’s Dumbest Criminals just for me.”

She does laugh this time, looking up at him with doe eyes. He’s glad he didn’t go with what he was really thinking: It was such a Monica move.

“Even still, I can’t believe what a mess I got us into. I was so excited about making money off the laundromat I bit off more than I could chew. I thought I was onto a good thing with that building, but I was so distracted with Monica’s death and …”

“No, no Fi, you don’t understand …”

She snuffles.

“Yes I do, I put you and Lip in an impossible position. I’m so sorry about that. I should have cut my losses, but I thought maybe it would work out well for us in the long run if …”

“Fi listen to me, it’s not what you think …”

“… if we had that collateral. Maybe I could give you your first apartment. I wanted to be able to give you something tangible, something secure, like we never got from Monica or Frank. A real inheritance …”

It slowly dawned on Ian that Fiona was talking at him, not to him.

“… to keep you moving up in life, like you deserve. It would have made me so proud and happy to be able to do that for you, for all of you. I’ve seen you all grow so much and I wanted to give you the support I never had and …”

“Fiona …”

“… feel like I’ve done something right for once. I was so proud of myself when I made that first profit, I thought I could do it again, but I should have known someone from the Southside couldn’t strike it lucky twice, it’s just not…”

“FIONA! This isn’t about you!” It’s a little blunt, but also the stark truth.

She jerks up like she’s been hit, finally seeming to see Ian for the first time. He softens his expression as much as he can to soothe the sting.

“Fi, I’m charged with ten counts of harboring a fugitive.”

She is finally lost for words and instead turns around to look at Trevor and then back at Ian, suddenly sensing how awkward their conversation is going to be.

“When’s your arraignment?”
“Tomorrow, at noon.”

“They’ll bring around forms for you to fill out to get a public defender. Whatever the bail is, we’ll find it. At least I’ve got plenty of collateral.” She smiles sadly at him.

“Once you’re out we’ll see about getting you a lawyer. I owe you that much.”

“Thanks Fi.”

“Take care of yourself. I’ll come get you tomorrow.”

She presses her lips to her fingers and then touches them on the glass between them, before getting up and glancing over at Trevor while she moves towards the door.

Trevor’s still wearing his poker face as he lifts the receiver on his side.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

There’s a heavy silence between them. Ian gets the feeling that he’s being given one chance not to fuck this up.

“Did Fiona tell you what happened? What Lip and I were doing?”

“Yeah. I wish you’d told me. You’ve been all over the place recently, I’ve been worried about where you were, what you were doing. I might not have approved, but it would have caused me a lot less hurt than being kept in the dark.”

He looks up at him sadly and the lump in Ian’s throat hitches higher. He’s tired of injuring people, but he knows there’s more to come.

“Thanks for coming to see me. I know it can’t be easy for you being here.”

“What do you mean? Seeing you like this? Yeah, it’s shit, but it is what it is.”

“That and just having to be here at all, it’s not the kind of world you grew up in, probably not where you ever imagined you’d be visiting your boyfriend.”

A previously hidden current of anger suddenly flashes across Trevor’s face. He rolls his eyes and actually sneers at him in disgust.

“You and your fucking Southside sanctimony. I’m pretty sure I’m more familiar with Cook County Corrections than you are. At-risk youth worker, remember? Been here enough that the C.O.s aren’t surprised anymore when they pat me down and realize there’s nothing in my pants.”

Ian deserved that. He figures he might as well just get this over and done with.

“Look Trev, I’m not here because of our money problems. I had a warrant out, for harboring a fugitive. Ten counts actually.”

“Fuck.”

There’s a long pause now. Ian tries to read Trevor’s expression, but he’s not giving much away.

“I’m sorry.”
Trevor laughs bitterly.

“That much is obvious.”

Ian isn’t sure if he’s being sarcastic or not, but he doesn’t press it. Trevor finally takes a deep breath and shakes his head a little, as if trying to clear his mind.

“Let’s talk about this tomorrow, Ok? For now all that matters is getting you out of here, so you can keep your job. Got to get you some advice and a decent lawyer.”

“Thanks.”

“I haven’t done anything yet.”

“Yes you have.”

The guard enters the room at that moment and starts to usher the visitors out. Trevor starts to stand, but he doesn’t hang up the receiver.

“Hey uh, don’t drop the soap.”

Ian groans, but smiles and Trevor’s lips finally curl upwards.

“What, now I don’t get to inflict a little punny pain of my own?”

“That’s not even a pun Trev.”

“Whatever, you know I’m slippery.”

“Ugh.”

“Bye.”

Chapter End Notes

Update: Reading this over, much later, it occurs to me that the statement about ‘having nothing in my pants’ may come off as a bit transphobic. That wasn't my intention - it's actually a statement about the harsh reality of many jails/prisons being extremely transphobic environments, even for visitors. Given that canonically Trevor uses a pre-transition license, I imagine that he wouldn't pack while visiting an institution, because of the danger that it might be seized as contraband and generally paraded around to humiliate him. That's what I was getting at, but that may not be obvious to all readers.
Chapter 8

Ian is shaken awake at 5.30am the following morning.

“Gallagher, Ian Gallagher?”

For a moment he thinks he’s back in Basic. He mumbles a response but the man continues shaking him.

“You’re going to court today. Be ready to leave in 15 minutes.”

Ian rubs his eyes and yawns, but manages to pull himself upright and plant his feet on the ground. He’s really tired; between the noise in the room and the noise in his head it took a lot longer to get to sleep last night.

Still somewhat bleary-eyed he stumbles into the cafeteria 15 minutes later and is given the same meal as yesterday. With no Iggy around he tries to trade his bologna for more oatmeal, but no-one’s biting. They all know what they’re going to be having for lunch.

Next he is marched back to the intake center with the same 30 men he came in with on Saturday and placed in a familiar bullpen. As before, they wait around for a good hour or so, while their names are slowly called to be strip searched, then checked against their mugshots and court records. Eventually they’re all led out and individually cuffed before retracing their steps to a waiting Cook County bus for the short ride to the courthouse.

The lockups at the courthouse are much the same as those in the jail and the procedure similar, checking names against photos and assigning people to pens depending on the times of their hearing. The public defender forms Fiona promised arrive soon after and everyone who requests one is given the slim inner cartridge of a cheap ballpoint pen to write with. Ian looks quizzically at the guard handing them out, who just rolls her eyes and replies to his silent question: “Hard plastic’s a shiv risk,” before moving on. The tiny size makes it difficult to grip or write legibly and Ian wonders darkly if this is somehow a cruel game to make the inmates look barely literate to the court clerks. He notices some of the more experienced defendants are rolling squares of toilet paper into thick rings to wrap around the shaft of the cartridge, increasing the size of the gripping surface. Ian follows suit and his form no longer resembles chicken scratchings. The ‘pens’ are then collected and carefully counted to make sure none are missing.

A few hours pass and the only event of note is the arrival of the anticipated bologna sandwiches. The clock is ticking closer to twelve and Ian is beginning to worry he won’t get a public defender at all, but his name is eventually called and he’s brought into a small visiting room and seated opposite a tiny dark haired woman on the other side of a plexi-glass partition.

“Ian Gallagher?” Her voice is soft and quiet, almost timid. He hopes she’s just saving her energy for court. He nods at her, without replying and she begins to shuffle papers, apparently looking for his file.

“Do you understand what is meant by attorney privilege?” She doesn’t wait for his response before continuing.

“It means nothing we say here can be used against you in court, so I need you to be honest with me about your circumstances so I can advise you how to plead. We only have a few minutes.”

Ian nods and is about to ask a question, but she isn’t looking at him, fishing around in her bag for
something before pulling out a legal pad and flipping it open as she finally locates his file.

“OK, Ian. You are charged with simple battery and … ooooh harboring a felon, ten counts.” She mimics the reaction of the guard on Saturday as an eyebrow hitches up. She finally looks him in the eye and smiles.

“More interesting than my usual cases. Straight off the bat I’m going to tell you to plead not guilty to the harboring charges. Ten counts means we need to look at each one and that will take time, plus it’s the kind of thing that’s ripe for negotiations with the D.A. It won’t be held against you if you plead not guilty now and change that at the pretrial hearing. Is the battery charge related to the harboring?”

“No, I punched a doorman and got brought in, which is how I found out about the warrant for the other charges.”

“Simple battery is a Class A misdemeanor, the maximum sentence is a year in jail, but unless it was really nasty you’re more likely to get off with a fine and maybe some community service.” She flicks through his file as she speaks.

“Doesn’t look like you’ve got any priors, none that were prosecuted anyway.”

“Nope.”

“It doesn’t matter too much whether you plead guilty or not guilty on this one, from a bargaining perspective, but I’d only recommend going to trial if you’re sure you’re innocent and think you can get witnesses or video to back that up. The D.A. and courts aren’t going to want to use resources on a trial for something as trivial as this, so they’ll probably be lenient if you plead guilty. Anything else I should know about?”

“What do you mean?”

“Mitigating factors, family responsibilities, work commitments? Things I can throw at the judge to convince them to set a lower bail amount.”

“Umm. Well I’ve got a full time job, as an EMT. I’ve got a large family and we’re struggling at the moment so they definitely need my wages. And I’m bipolar.”

“One or two?”

“One, with psychotic features.”

“Do you take medications? Do you have a support network at home?”

“Yes, I’m a model nutcase.”

A guard enters at that moment; apparently their time is up and they both rise.

The woman is turning to leave, but Ian still hasn’t asked his question, so he calls out.

“Hey, uh, what was your name?”

She looks at him blankly, as if he has asked something so profound she can’t wrap her head around it. Before she has time to snap from her stupor the guard is removing him from the room and marching him down the corridor to join a line of cuffed men. He too is shackled before a door swings open and they are marched into court and seated on a long bench running the length of the
right wall. One by one they are prodded to stand as their charge sheets are read and they enter their pleas, before they are led out of a different door by the witness stand. As the last one in Ian will apparently be the last to be called and he slowly slides up the bench towards the judge, as all manner of charges are called out. He can see Lip and Trevor on the opposite side of the room in the public benches, so he tries to keep his head down, wanting to avoid eye contact for as long as possible. Finally he is called to stand and he can’t look away any longer as his counsel comes to stand beside him.

“Case 17CF7508 Ian Gallagher, charged with simple battery, a Class A misdemeanor, one count and harboring a fugitive, a Class 4 felony, ten counts.”

The judge is about to speak, but before he can the D.A. pipes up.

“Your Honor, it has come to my attention that, due to jurisdictional issues stemming from the crime taking place across state lines, the harboring case will be tried in federal court. The State therefore declines to prosecute.”

“Very well. I hereby order an entry of *nolle prosequi*, without prejudice, be added to those charges in the record. Ian Gallagher you are charged with a single count of simple battery, a Class A misdemeanor. How do you plead?”

“Guilty, your Honor.”

“I must advise you that this charge carries a maximum penalty of one year’s imprisonment and a $2,500 fine. You will be guilty of a misdemeanor, which means you will have a criminal record. By pleading guilty you will be exposing yourself to these possible maximum penalties. You will be waiving your constitutional rights to be tried by a jury of your peers. Do you understand this?”

“Yes.”

“Is counsel satisfied that the accused is competent to plead and has been adequately informed of the consequences of his action?”

“Yes, your honor.”

“I find that the accused is acting competently and is voluntarily giving up his rights, therefore I am prepared to accept your plea. Please state for the record how you wish to plead.”

“Guilty, your Honor.”

“Very well, this case is adjourned for sentencing reports. I am remanding you into the custody of the U.S. Marshal to face the federal charges. Court is dismissed.”

A guard comes and seizes his elbow, leading him towards the exit. Ian just has time to hiss to his still anonymous attorney:

“What’s going on?”

“You’re going to Big School,” she whispers unhelpfully.

Back in the holding cell he collects his thoughts enough to piece together what he thinks is happening. Clearly he’s going to be having another court appearance, but when is another matter. Soon all the men in the pen are rounded up and marched back onto the bus to the Cook County Jail. The now familiar process is repeated and he is strip-searched, before having his wristband scanned. This time however, he is put into a much smaller holding cell on his own. He takes the opportunity to
lie down on the wooden bench and catch up on some of the sleep he lost the night before. When he awakens he knows a few hours must have passed, but he’s still in the cell, alone, and he begins to wonder if he’s been forgotten. Soon however, the door opens and his name is called.

A man in a marshal’s uniform escorts him to one of the admin desks where he signs some paperwork and is given a plastic bag containing the valuables he surrendered on Saturday. He is surprised to then be put in fetters as well as manacles and escorted to a waiting car. There’s another prisoner in the back and Ian struggles to get in with his gangly legs held so close together. Even though he’s only been in jail three days he can’t help but think the car feels oddly luxurious, as the marshal buckles his seatbelt. He seems to read Ian’s mind because he tells him:

“Don’t get too comfortable, it’s not a long ride.”

“Where are we going?”

“The MCC.” He doesn’t elaborate, but the man next to him can sense his confusion.

“Metropolitan Correctional Center, it’s in the Loop.”

Sure enough, a short while later they pull into the delivery bay beneath a skyscraper Ian has passed countless times, but never realized was a prison. He is marched through double doors, then into an elevator (a strange novelty) and transported to the 5\textsuperscript{th} floor.

Receiving here is much the same as at Cook County, except it passes much faster due to the smaller numbers of arrivals. He resurrenders his valuables and signs the paperwork, before he is led away to be strip-searched for the third time that day. His breath catches in his chest a little when he’s presented with his new uniform – white underclothes and an orange jumpsuit, realizing that he has indeed made it to the ‘Big Leagues’. Those thoughts drift, as he pulls it on, to the last time he saw one of these. He wonders what Mickey would say, if he could see him now.

On his own in a holding cell, he’s struck by how much quieter this place is. He’s not sure if it’s disconcerting or a relief. What is not a welcome change however, is dinner, another paper-bag sandwich meal. The Federal Bureau of Prisons’ lunchmeat weapon of choice is Spam; Ian suddenly feels a strange nostalgia for bologna. Apparently institutionalization sets in fast.

Much later, after his paperwork has been processed, he is once again taken to the elevator and transported to the 11\textsuperscript{th} floor. Everything is quiet and it is apparently after lights out again. He sees that there are two tiers of cells arranged around a sunken courtyard but he’s not feeling too curious about the leisure facilities at this point. He is led into a cell where the guard removes his ankle chains, but leaves the handcuffs on. For a second Ian thinks he’s going to be left in them overnight, but once the door has been locked behind him he’s directed to back up to a small hatch and slot his wrists through, where the guard unlocks them, then quickly slams the flap shut.

It’s dark in the cell, the only light coming from a frosted slit in the outer wall, housing a five inch wide floor to ceiling window, with bars running horizontally across it at one foot intervals. He can’t see out, but it gives him enough illumination to find the sink and toilet. The bed is a single steel bunk bolted to the floor in the middle of the room. Running his hand along its edges he can feel raised slots at intervals and he deduces these are for attaching restraints. He shivers involuntarily at the realization.

Climbing in however, the foam mattress is surprisingly comfortable and this bed is long enough for him to stretch out fully. He can hear the L screeching away outside and he lulls himself to sleep imagining he’s at home in his own bed, listening to the same familiar sound.
Chapter 9

Hope y’all like legal drama!

Ian’s wake up call the next morning is even less friendly. The handcuff hatch is opened and a tray pushed through roughly. Ian stirs faintly, but not enough to satisfy the C.O. on the other side, who bangs loudly on the metal door with his cuffs.

“Gallagher, wake up! Be ready to leave in 15 minutes!”

Ian rubs his eyes groggily and starts to shuffle towards the hatch. The guard doesn’t elaborate on his impending journey, but Ian’s getting used to the uncertainty. His first federal breakfast isn’t too bad; there is actual fruit and a dearth of lunchmeats! He knows those are coming later though.

Soon the C.O. is back and Ian slots his tray and then his wrists back through the hatch to be cuffed. Now safely restrained, he’s allowed out of the cell, but he has fetters attached before he can go anywhere. He’s still getting used to the small, shuffling gait he has to use and he trips going down the stairs, though he doesn’t fall due to the fast reactions of the escort holding his elbow.

Back down on the 5th floor Ian is put in a holding cell and he waits around for an hour or two. He only has a chance to ask where he’s going when a guard enters to strip search him. The response, as expected, is to court. He doesn’t see why they needed to wait until he was butt-naked (balancing on one leg like a flamingo while he bares his sole), to tell him that though.

He’s herded into a van with half a dozen other prisoners, for about two blocks to the courthouse. Again, public defender forms are circulated with the useless skinny pens; if it weren’t for the arrival of Spam sandwiches for lunch Ian might have thought he was experiencing a groundhog day.

That impression is reinforced when he’s called into a visiting room (admittedly a little earlier this time) and sees the same woman as yesterday on the opposite side of the glass. He hesitates to sit.

“Ian, my name is Miranda, I’m a panel attorney acting on behalf of the Federal Public Defender’s office, please, take a seat.”

He shuffles to the seat and swings his legs around the metal stool, trying to avoid catching his chain on the large bolts pinning it down. The guard leaves them to it.

“I’m sorry we didn’t get better acquainted yesterday - state cases have so little time for preparation. I read over your file last night; I’ve got to say, this isn’t going to be an easy one. Mr. Milkovich’s escape and continued freedom is a huge embarrassment to the prison authorities, they’re going to throw the book at you, unless you cooperate.”

Ian stays silent, putting on his best neutral expression.

“I imagine they will press for the maximum penalty, which is three years for each count. Normally these sentences would run concurrently, but I’d bet they’ll find justifications for some of them to run sequentially. I’m guessing you’re probably looking at a 10-15 year sentence.”
She pauses to look at him and Ian sees pity in her eyes.

“I’m sure you’ll tell me that you’re not a snitch, but you should think carefully about what that means. I don’t know what your relationship to Mr. Milkovich and Mr. Flores is, but you should consider whether they would do the same for you.”

Ian can’t help it, but a tiny smile plays around his lips - she sees it.

“And if they would, whether they would want you to take this hit for them.” His smile dies.

“You have a serious mental health condition. You may be coping now, but prison is not a good place to maintain that. They will do enough to keep you from becoming a danger to yourself and others, but the resources are stretched thin, so you’re not going to get the same quality of care you would outside. You’re going to suffer, Ian.”

She looks him in the eye and he tries not to blink, but he can’t deny her words are intimidating.

“If you do go down you’ll have some credit with the other inmates, but it will also make you unpopular with the guards. Most of them are professional, but there are always going to be some who take your offense personally. Prison is a different world and the power dynamics inside are strange and complex. There are very smart and manipulative people on both sides of the fence. I’m sure you think you’re street-wise, but between your circumstances and this case there’s a huge risk you’ll end up in the middle of some nasty prison politics. You’re really going to have to keep your wits about you and I would urge you to put your mental health first.”

She pauses to let it sink in, but Ian can’t think of anything to say anyway.

“Let’s talk about the case. As I said yesterday, I strongly advise you to plead not guilty at this stage. I’m hopeful we can get you out on bail, but you’ll probably have to agree to electronic monitoring and possibly a curfew. I understand your job requires shift work, so I will do my best to have that taken into account, but you may have to negotiate with your employer as well. I don’t know what their personnel policies are, but you may well be placed on administrative leave and that might be unpaid.”

“What’s the evidence against me?”

“It’s too early to say, but I can tell you that the charge sheet breakdown reads as two counts of harboring in Illinois, then one each in Missouri, Oklahoma and Texas. There are ten because they’re counting harboring Mr. Milkovich and Mr. Flores as separate offenses. Given the multiple locations I’d guess they probably have pretty solid evidence of you traveling with them, from security videos or speed cameras. I imagine your defense will come down to why you were with them and not if you were.”

Ian still doesn’t say anything and she sighs a little.

“Look, I know it’s not what you want to hear, but please think seriously about cooperating with them. You should be able to get a good plea deal if you do and it may only entail telling them what you know. The feds are not stupid, Ian. What you know may not be much more than they do and not that useful, but it will be enough. And you need to do it sooner, rather than later, because it doesn’t take a genius to work out where you were headed. The U.S. and Mexican governments do cooperate and have had plenty of success tracking down fugitives in the past. Given the progress they’ve made on the case and in charging you, it’s probably only a matter of time until everyone is apprehended. They won’t be interested in deals once no-one is left to catch.”
The guard enters at that moment and they both stand. As before, Ian has time to blurt out one question.

“If you’re a private attorney, why are you taking this case? Surely it’s not worth the crappy pay?”

“If I cared that much about pay I definitely wouldn’t take cases for the State Public Defender too. I think it’s important that everyone has access to counsel, but I couldn’t handle the workload if I had to work for them directly. Plus this is an interesting case and the fed pays better.”

She smiles at him as he’s taken out.

“See you in there.”

Ian is led out of the room and into an elevator. Up and up it goes and when the doors open, he turns his head to the side and catches a magnificent view of the Chicago skyline from the windows down the hall. Unfortunately he is dragged in the opposite direction and into a windowless courtroom. He is the last one in again, but this time he’s seated in a plush leather chair at a table, with Miranda by his side. She barely comes up to his chest and her feet are skimming the ground. There are only two other inmates in the room, also at the table with their lawyers. He looks around the courtroom and spies Fiona, Debbie and a sleeping Frannie in the first public bench. He smiles and waggles his fingers at them, although he can’t do much with the cuffs on.

They rise as the judge enters and the proceedings begin. It is a much longer process, with a lot of preamble and legalese. Ian waits as the hearings for the other two men occur, before he is finally read the charges in ‘United States v. Gallagher’. When prompted, he pleads ‘not guilty’, as directed, and the proceedings morph into a detention hearing.

Miranda goes first.

“Your Honor, the defense moves for pretrial release. My client holds a full time job in a community-serving role as an EMT, something he is passionate about. He is dedicated to his career and to his family who are highly dependent on his income. Despite his relative youth, he is currently the largest earner in his family, supporting several younger siblings and a niece, some of whom are here today. They have no parents to speak of and will face grave hardship if my client is detained.”

The federal prosecutor spoke next.

“Your Honor, the Office of the United States Attorney considers the accused to present a major flight risk and is seeking pretrial detention. There is evidence that the accused accompanied one of the fugitives in question all the way to the Mexican border. This man remains at large, so it is likely the defendant would attempt to join him, now that it is clear he will face prosecution for his crimes.”

“I counter that my client’s behavior is explained by other factors that will not influence his future actions. He is not a flight risk and simply wishes to continue working to support his family. As such, the defense is willing to accept electronic monitoring as a condition of liberty, which will allow the authorities to know his whereabouts at all times, ensuring he will not abscond. He has no criminal record and has otherwise led a trustworthy life, despite facing significant obstacles and hardships in his life.”

“We accept that the defendant has no prior criminal record and does not present a threat to others, but we maintain that he still poses a significant flight risk. In addition to this crime, there are extradition warrants out for his arrest on charges of aggravated robbery and grand larceny of an automobile, in Oklahoma. These are equivalent to Class 1 and Class 2 felonies in Illinois. Furthermore, the accused was given an other-than-honorable discharge from the United States Army for fraudulently enlisting
underage, identity theft, theft and destruction of U.S. government property – namely a helicopter, and
desertion.”

Shit.

Miranda turns to look at him wide-eyed. One of the other defendants gives him a double thumbs up
from down the table.

“I was ill!” Ian hisses at her through the side of his lips.

“Court-martial proceedings against the defendant were dropped due to mitigating circumstances in
the case, so these do not constitute crimes per se, but we hold that these actions demonstrate the
accused’s impulsive nature and underscore his potential as a flight risk, particularly as he remained
AWOL for over a year after these events and only faced justice because he was apprehended by the
military police.”

“My client suffers from a serious mental health condition, namely bipolar one, with psychotic
features and has fought bravely to regain his health. His previous actions, as conceded by the
prosecution, were the product of his illness. He has turned his life around, with the help and support
of his family and community, and should not have his past held against him. He is compliant with,
but also dependent upon, the regime he follows to manage his disease. Sending him to prison would
likely jeopardize his health and could hinder his ability to participate in a trial. His place is in the
community, with access to the specialized resources he requires to maintain his health. Detaining him
is not in anyone’s best interest, including the United States government.”

“The prosecution recognizes the seriousness of the defendant’s condition and does not suggest
detention as a punitive measure; we would not request it unless absolutely certain of the danger of
flight that the accused represents. We applaud the determination that he has shown in his recovery,
but maintain that the behavioral evidence shows he may still abscond. He did not give himself up to
face the consequences of his actions in the military, once his condition stabilized. He was once
detained for kidnapping and child endangerment, after fleeing the state with Mr. Milkovich’s infant
son. The charges were dropped due to evidence that he was unwell, but the pattern remains. He still
transported a fugitive to Mexico at a time when he was supposed to be coping well. Whether this
was a calculated move or a result of his illness remains to be seen, but the behavior alone indicates
that he is either capable of flight when stable, or does not have his illness as well controlled as is
claimed. Both scenarios support our argument for detention. The federal prison system has the
resources to create individual care plans for mentally ill inmates and can supervise them more closely
for signs of deterioration. Awaiting trial will be a stressful experience regardless as to where the
defendant resides. We argue that earlier intervention may actually occur institutionally, despite the
higher stresses, than in the community where action relies more heavily on the self-awareness of the
patient. Finally, we would also like to point out that there is a danger that the accused may contact
Mr. Milkovich and relay information about the case and the extent of law enforcement’s knowledge
of his whereabouts, if released. The resources and cost required to monitor his communications while
at liberty are prohibitive and the public will be better served if he is detained, where this monitoring
occurs by default.”

The judge then spoke up.

“Thank you both for your arguments and rebuttals. You have stated your cases with nuance, but I
believe I have heard enough to determine that the defendant is, indeed, a flight risk. I am ordering
him remanded into the custody of the U.S. Marshal for pretrial detention. This case is adjourned for
pretrial hearings; attorneys please approach the bar to discuss scheduling. Court is dismissed.”

The gavel came down and with that it was over. Miranda laid a hand on Ian’s arm.
“I’m really sorry Ian, I tried my best. You’ll be assigned a counselor once you get to prison. Ask them to explain how privileged mail works and make sure you put me on your visitor and call list. You can write to me at any time and please keep me updated about your health and what support you’re receiving in there. I can advocate on your behalf. Good luck.”

The marshal comes to escort Ian out, so they both rise and move away from the table. As he’s being led out he can hear Fiona and Debbie crying, with Frannie mewling in response and his mind stutters, before going blank.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

T. W. Trevor.

The irony was not lost on Ian that, although his life was now a certified clusterfuck, his current address in the Loop is probably the most desirable he’ll ever have.

Returning from court, Ian is eventually led to the same cell he’d hoped he had vacated for good. It’s a shame he can’t see anything out of the frosted glass because he bets the view of downtown Chicago from his window is pretty good. As a house warming gift he gets his full compliment of prison jumpsuits, socks, boxers and shoes, with a mesh laundry bag to put it all in. Thankfully there is also a toothbrush and toothpaste this time. He’s also told his commissary account will be set up in the next few days and given a not very extensive list of items he can buy.

Over the next couple of days he slowly gleans more insight into prison and the routine of his new life. His first confusion comes from why he’s allowed to do fuck all. He gets a meal and his medication pushed through the hatch three times a day and that’s about it. An inmate pushing a cartload of books stops by on his first day and asks if he wants anything. Ian’s about to tell him to pick something for him, but then he spots Wuthering Heights nestled between the pink-spined romance novels and he can’t help himself. That turns out to be the highlight of his day and his cell door remains locked. If he didn’t know any better he’d swear he was in ‘the hole’.

And actually, it turns out that’s exactly where he is. When he meets his counselor on the second day, he explains that Ian is in ‘Administrative Detention’, being held until his ‘classification’ as a prisoner is complete and he can be moved to general population or another kind of unit. This gives Ian a little more hope that he might actually see the sun again, but he’s grateful for some initial solitude to process what’s going on and think about what he’s going to do when he has to interact with other inmates.

His solitude begins to morph to boredom on the third day. He therefore gets excited at the offer of an hour’s exercise time, until the guard insists he strip naked in his cell beforehand. “Standard procedure”, he informs Ian, peering through the circular holes in the steel door, while Ian spreads and coughs. Once he’s dressed he pushes his hands through the slot and is cuffed and escorted out of his cell to the ‘yard’, which turns out to be two cells knocked together to form a makeshift gym, consisting of nothing but a pull-up bar, some dumbbells and a janky looking exercise bike. He makes the most of it though and the time passes too quickly, before he’s having to strip naked again. As he’s wriggling back into his jumpsuit he asks about fetching his towel from his cell but is informed that:

“Today’s not your shower day.”

“Seriously?! I stink now!”

“Take a bird bath.”

“What?”
Ian gets his 10th eye-roll of the week.

“Use the sink in your cell.”

He does an eye-roll of his own but doesn’t complain. It works out ok though, even though he has to sacrifice one of his towels to mop up the water on the ground.

The night is not peaceful and the entire ‘pod’ is woken by the sound of screaming, banging and many raised voices. Like the rest of the inmates, Ian moseys over to his door to watch the commotion in the dim light. Several guards in protective gear are fitfully pushing and pulling a large man towards an open cell.

“C-COCK SUCKERS!” he screams out.

“FUCK TWATS!” his voice is surprisingly high for a man of his stature.

“I’m a kill you all. I’m gonna break into your homes and eat all your CUNT MUFFINS and barbecue sauce and start a fire of my own. Yeah, I’m gonna burn all your WANK DICK memories and pretty little ASSS WIPE cats real bad.”

The tirade continues for a while, even when the man’s left on his own, then starts back up again at random intervals, each time Ian’s drifting off to sleep. In the end he gets the idea to open up his mattress cover and gouge out some of the foam for makeshift earplugs and he’s able to sleep after that.

The fourth day is an ‘exciting’ one. It starts, after breakfast, with the offer of a shower. Ian really doesn’t see why he has to strip for this, considering he’s going to be naked anyway in a minute, presumably with a guard watching, so there’s not a lot of opportunity to stash or extract contraband from his ass. He doesn’t protest though and is led, handcuffed, to a metal cage containing a shower. Surprisingly, there is a shower curtain and the water is unexpectedly warm. It’s the best thing that’s happened to him all week.

Later in the day his commissary order arrives. Ian bought ramen noodles, candy, deodorant, shampoo, paper, pens and stamps but he gets an unwelcome surprise when the C.O. pulls out his items and promptly starts destroying them.

“This is procedure. While you’re still being classified you’re not allowed any kind of packaging or hard plastic.” He unwraps Ian’s noodles and candy and places them in styrofoam cups, then breaks the ballpoint pens open to retrieve the inner cartridges. Even the deodorant is not spared; it’s broken off the stick and crumbled into smaller blocks before being confined to another cup. The shampoo doesn’t materialize at all.

“Don’t have a good way to store it. Just ask for some when you need it and we’ll get you a cup. Once you’re classified you’ll get the actual bottle.”

Ian sighs and starts to chew on one of his candy bars. A few minutes later, once the guard has moved on, Ian hears a voice through the air vent above his sink.

“Hey yo, Gallagher! That’s your name right? This is Rico. I’m next door.”

“Hi Rico.”

“Welcome to the joint. You just get your commissary? Got any stamps you wanna trade? I’ll send you a gift over in my car.”
“Car?”

“You’ll see. First time in huh? You gonna have to learn how to fish.”

A moment later a tube of toothpaste tied to a piece of string shoots under Ian’s metal door. He flips the cap and finds the nozzle has been cut off, so that the opening is large enough to fit things in. Something is folded up inside. Ian pulls it out and smooths the creases from a 3x5 photo of a dark haired woman with her legs spread open. He’s careful not to make his retching sounds too loud.

“Hot eh? I’m your man for skin pics. They’ll cost you a book a piece, but this one’s free. Enjoy your solitude man, once you’ve got a cellie you won’t get no peace, you feel me?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Hey, save me your fruit and sugar packets. I’m making hooch. I’ll send you some if you hook me up.”

“Will do.”

The fifth day nothing happens until late in the afternoon. Ian’s got a visitor.

He’s stripped, then handcuffed and escorted to the elevator and transported to the eighth floor. There he’s diverted into a small visiting room set up similarly to the Cook County jail, to await his mystery visitor. It’s Trevor. He’s not sure if he’s pleasantly surprised or terrified. They’re behind glass again, so each settles and grasps the telephone receiver.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

Neither seems to know what to say after this. They both know that everything’s gone to shit.

“You holding up ok?”

“Yeah. I mean, they’ve got me in solitary, which isn’t fun, but I think it’s temporary. As far as I can tell I should be transferred to the general population soon.”

The conversation still isn’t flowing.

“What about you?”

“I’m ok. It’s been a seriously hectic week, but it could be worse.”

He looks tired - neither had expected Ian to be remanded.

“So… you come here often?”

Trevor does smile this time, the reference to their last conversation not eluding him.

“A few times, but Cook County’s definitely my home port.”

A few more beats of silence and Ian decides he needs to take the bull by the horns.

“Trev, why are you here?”

“I came to see you, obviously.”
“Obviously. But what do you expect? I’m not getting out of here anytime soon. Fact is I’m probably not getting out of here for a very long time.”

“That may not be true. I mean, you’ve not gone to trial yet. I didn’t know your record, but it sounds like you’ve had a lot of charges against you dismissed in the past. You’ve got a serious illness – they do understand that. Honestly, I’m more worried about how you’ll hold up in here before trial, than what will happen at it.”

Ian admires his optimism, but he knows it’s misplaced. The government clearly have a handle on his past and present. He knows it’ll be a hard sell to convince a jury that his disorder is at the root of this crime, yet again - because ultimately, he knows it’s not. And if he doesn’t believe it, he doubts anyone without a vested interest will.

“Trev, don’t waste your time here. I’m not getting out. My lawyer thinks I’m going to get 10 to 15 years. Then they’ll extradite me to Oklahoma for more charges. I’m fucked. Deep down I know you know it’s true.”

“I know it seems shit, but you’ve still got options. You think I’m going to just abandon you because you got thrown in here? That’s not what relationships are about. I don’t know what the future holds, Ian. I can’t say that I’ll never need to move on, but you’ve got to understand that you mean enough to me that I don’t mind ‘wasting my time’ on you. What kind of friend, let alone lover, would I be if I just fucked off the moment shit got hot? As soon as things got difficult?”

Ian brings a hand up to his face and rubs his burning eyes. He doesn’t deserve this. All he ever does is fuck things up and hurt people, and his punishment is having to watch those same people suffer further because they refuse to see him as he really is. Yeah Ian’s got his good qualities, but they’re outnumbered by his flaws. He doesn’t understand why people keep coming back to him, when he can’t return their gifts in kind.

“Let’s not forget why I’m in here. I earned this and I hurt you in the process. And I’m going to continue to hurt you. I’m not going to snitch on him for a plea. You understand that, right? Don’t do this to yourself Trevor.”

“I do. But we worked through this and I’ve moved on from it. I don’t expect you to ret-con your past for us. He made you who you are. But you turned back; you came back. That has to mean something!”

Ian puts the phone down on the metal bench in front of him and covers his eyes again. He can feel his heart breaking and he tries to take some deep breaths to steady himself, but they can’t stop the tears from forming in his eyes. He retrieves the receiver and looks him in the eye.

“I don’t love you Trevor.” His voice is cracking. “If you do, don’t do this to yourself. Don’t do this to me. Neither of us deserve this. Please.”

Trevor finally seems to break because his eyes start to swim. He doesn’t say anything, but doesn’t move away, just remains clinging to the receiver with his gaze unfocused on the bench before him. Eventually he lets out a resigned sigh and looks up to meet Ian’s eyes, nodding softly, almost tenderly, as he replaces the phone on the cradle and gets up to leave.

Ian remains fixed in place, the phone at his ear, even after Trevor’s gone. The supervising guard replaces the handset for him and brings Ian’s wrists together to cuff them, gently; clearly aware of what’s just gone down even if he couldn’t hear the words. He leads Ian out of the room and back towards the elevator, his right hand between Ian’s shoulder blades, pushing him forward slowly.
Ian’s prison schooling begins on Tuesday when he’s fetched from his cell after breakfast. He slots his tray and then his wrists through the hatch, in anticipation of being cuffed but, to his surprise, the guard waves him away and begins unlocking his door. He follows him to the elevator and is transported to a new floor – the ninth. Ian sees what must be the library through a window as he’s walked down a corridor with meeting rooms either side. A damp musk pervades the whole floor. There are other inmates milling around, walking in and out of rooms unescorted, so Ian figures he might be finally joining general population.

The guard leads him to the very last room, which turns out to be some sort of classroom. A woman is writing on a whiteboard and talking to an assortment of men seated at small tables throughout the room. The room has the same slit windows as his cell, but they’re twice as wide. One of the fluorescent light tubes is flickering and Ian finds himself drawn to it.

“Gallagher?” The woman moves some papers around her desk to locate a file, which she passes to him.

“Yes,”

“Please take a seat and fill out the forms in here.” She motions to an empty desk and hands him a pen. The plastic casing is intact - the smoking gun of his classification as low risk. He sits and opens the file as the woman resumes her writing. Inside the file is an introductory letter that has been photocopied so many times the white paper is speckled with grey flecks and the text is fuzzy. It informs Ian that, as a federal prisoner without a high school diploma, he is required to pass his GED, or complete 240 hours of study. The rest is surveys and forms to document his education. He’d been secretly hoping his EMT experience might get him a job in the infirmary, but at least he’ll have something to do with his time.

I wonder if Mickey got his?

One paper-bag spam lunch later and Ian is once again wrestling with the trigonometry he thought he’d left behind with his military career. The woman passes up and down the rows, talking to each inmate, everyone working from a different textbook and grade. At the end of the session a guard comes to meet Ian. He’s holding his laundry bag stuffed with his possessions.

“You’ve been classified as fit for general population. I’m going to take you to your pod now.”

Ian’s new home is on the 19th floor. It’s a similar layout to solitary except the sunken courtyard in the center of it all has actual amenities like a television and men are scattered about, playing cards and chatting leisurely. They barely give Ian a glance as he passes by.
The cell he’s led to already has an occupant. An older man in his early 50s, with salt-and-pepper hair, is lounging on the top bunk absorbed in a book. He’s well groomed and looks like his usual suit is made of wool chalk-stripe, not orange polyester. He nods at the C.O. who hands Ian his laundry bag and walks away without another word.

“James,”

“Ian.”

The room is the same size as his solitary cell except the bunk bed is pushed up against the far wall so there’s a little more floor space. Ian upends his laundry bag on the lower bunk and crouches down to pull an empty plastic tub out from under the bed to store his things. James watches him quietly, pretending to read his book as Ian folds his clothes.

“Oh good, you’re tidy. That’s always a relief.”

Ian doesn’t say anything because he’s busy trying to shake crumbled bits of deodorant from his clothes that have escaped his (now crushed) Styrofoam cup.

“Looks like you just got out of the SHU. Did you just come in or were you transferred from elsewhere? Here let me help you with that.”

He dismounts from his perch and goes rummaging in his own tub, before pulling out a plastic multivitamin bottle. He opens it and removes the remaining three pills before passing it to Ian.

“Food’s not great here. I’d recommend buying vitamins if you can afford it.”

“Thanks. Yeah I just got classified. I was remanded a week ago.”

He drops the remaining large deodorant lumps into the bottle, closes it and turns his attention back to his pile, where a square of paper catches his eye. He laughs slightly as he opens it and realizes what it is – his bed-warming gift from Rico. Ian had stashed it under the mattress to serve as the welcome committee for the cell’s next occupant, but apparently the C.O. who shook down his cell had decided they shouldn’t be parted. Clearly they turn a blind eye to some forms of contraband around here. James catches Ian’s eye, but turns away quickly, though he doesn’t attempt to hide his smirk.

“What?”

“Nothing really, I’m just amazed that one is still doing the rounds. It must be at least 10 years old by now.”

“Maybe they reprint them.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me. But if you can do that you’d think you could source some new material. Still, there’s something to be said for nostalgia. Do you want me to sell it for you? I know someone who might be interested in seeing it again.”

“Who says I want to let her go?”

“Seriously?”

Ian stiffens and stands upright. He’d hoped he’d make it a little longer than five minutes before he had to dodge the question of his sexuality, but apparently not.

“Come on, fronting is a form of disrespect as far as I’m concerned and cellies have to respect each
other. If you don’t want my help fine, but don’t insult my intelligence.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I saw you breaking up with your boyfriend in the visiting room the other day.”

Ian was not expecting that. He balls his fists and tenses his jaw, ready to strike if he needs to, but James doesn’t seem to be spoiling for a fight.

“Relax, I’m probably the most white-collar inmate in here. I went to my flaming nephew’s wedding and loved it. I used to enjoy brunch on a regular basis.”

Ian hopes the tolerance resume isn’t going to continue, but he unclenches his fists none-the-less.

“But I’d keep it on the down-low in general, if I were you. Attitudes can be a bit antiquated and once you’ve got a reputation as being turned out, everyone will view you as fair game, regardless as to your feelings on the matter.”

James’ gaze is a little pitying as he rakes his eyes over Ian’s body and features.

“Be really careful not to get into anyone’s debt. Even if you can repay them you may not get the choice in how. You an addict?”

“No.”

“Well don’t start, that’s the easiest way to fuck up. Do you have someone who can top up your commissary? You may not feel like eating ramen, but it’s basically currency here. There’s always going to be times you need some. You don’t want to have to hustle in here.”

Ian’s finished arranging his things and he makes his way, somewhat unconsciously, towards the window. The glass is not frosted here although he’s a little disappointed to discover that the room faces South, away from the best of the Chicago skyline.

“Might not be the best view, but it gets plenty of light without taller buildings around. And you see that parking garage?”

It’s directly below them, about seven stories in height.

“Always good for people watching if you’re bored. Most of the time it’s just guys hollering at their friends, but I’ve seen people doing semaphore, holding up signs, all kinds of things to communicate. Once there was even a woman holding a baby up to present to someone inside. She was screaming ‘This is your son!’ like something out of the Lion King. God I hate that movie. I must know every line in it, my kids were fucking obsessed with it.”

Ian is silent. He’s just spotted a restaurant across the street called ‘Mickey’s Chicken’. It almost feels like a personal insult, but he smiles anyway, a conflicted jolt shooting through his heart.

A loud buzzer suddenly erupts and the C.O. steps out of his watch room.

“Yard Time!”

“Finally! Have you been out yet?”

“No, there was just a shitty gym in the SHU.”

“You should go. It’s not your average prison yard.”
Ian’s intrigued and he follows the other men and guards congregating around the two elevators. He’s guessing there must be some kind of gymnasium in the basement, but they start moving up instead.

As the elevator doors open on the roof, a blast of hot, humid air hits his face. Ian steps into a holding cage where he can see the retreating orange backs of the last set of inmates on the yard, being shepherded down two fire escapes in the other corners. Once the doors are safely closed a C.O. comes and opens the gate and they’re released.

Ian realizes he’s holding his breath as he looks out at the skyline surrounding him. All sides of the yard are open, from the floor to about six feet in height, with vertical bars forming the only barrier against the drop. The sky too, is open, although topped by wire mesh. After so many days of sensory deprivation, the effect is positively vertiginous and he instinctively heads for the middle of the yard.

There’s a few soccer and basketballs lying around, but it’s a beautiful day and no-one seems much interested in running around in the heat. Instead, the men begin to strip out of their jumpsuits and lay down on the hard concrete, soaking up the rays. Ian follows their lead and gazes up at the sky, shielding his eyes from the sun as he watches the clouds scuttle by. It’s hot, but the elevation means there’s a healthy breeze moving through, keeping things wonderfully comfortable. For the first time in weeks Ian feels himself truly relax (which seems absurd under the circumstances), but he embraces the moment. This is what’s going to keep him going in here.

Soon though, his skin begins to prickle and he knows he’s going to have to get out of the sun if he doesn’t want to resemble a grapefruit in his uniform. He seeks the shade cast by the elevator housing and stares gingerly down at the 280ft drop beside him. He startles when he feels someone behind him. It’s James again.

“L’appel du vide, that’s what they call it.”

“Call what?”

“The call of the void – the urge to jump. It’s normal, some fucked up little remnant of our ancestral lemming brain. You’ll love it soon though; it’s the closest any of us get to feeling free around here. Even in the winter guys are itching to come up here and get a little shot of adrenaline; make sure they’re still alive.”

Ian’s not sure if the thought is comforting or not. It seems both tragic and darkly comic that his reason to live may soon be for the thrill of feeling death’s presence.

“Anyone ever do it? Jump I mean?”

“Don’t think so. There’s easier ways to off yourself than spending a year filing through your window bars. Anyone putting in that much effort has a reason to live. Some guys managed it - escape I mean, a few years ago though. Used a rope made of bed sheets and dental floss to climb down from the 17th floor.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, but apparently that was the easy part. Neither made it very long on the outside. It’s not easy to disappear, especially without connections.”

Ian doesn’t know what he can say to this and James is apparently happy with the conversation lapse,
content to be soaking up the life going on below him. Ian’s thoughts, of course, are elsewhere. As long as Mickey is free, he thinks he can take this. But if he were ever caught Ian’s reason for carrying on would be gone. He knows there’s no way the authorities would ever let them communicate, let alone see each other. Mickey needs to stay free – for both their sakes.

A whistle blows and the men begin slowly getting to their feet. Yard time is over. Ian and his cellmate move towards the nearest fire escape to take the stairs down a floor to catch the other elevator. The next cohort of men is emerging into the holding cage, and that’s when he sees him. A familiar face staring back, aiming his forefinger and thumb at Ian like a cocked gun and following through with a shooting motion.

*Oh fuck.*

Ian’s a dead man.

Chapter End Notes

There really is a 'Micky's Chicken' across from the MCC.
“Got to say Red, I didn’t have you pegged as a gangbanger.”

Ian should be annoyed that there’s another older man in his life calling him ‘Red’, but he’s currently too white to care much.

“Do I need to request a new cellie? You seem alright but I’m not getting myself caught in the crossfire of some prison politics.”

“Fuck. I don’t know. What am I going to do?”

“You manage to piss off the Latin Kings and you don’t know what to do? There’s only one thing you can do with a green light, idiot. Sign into protective custody and enjoy the rest of your time in solitary.”

They’ve arrived back on the 19th floor now and most of the men meander towards the televisions, but Ian makes a beeline for his cell. James isn’t far behind and he takes a seat, unbidden, on Ian’s bunk and watches him pace the room.

“I’ve a hard time believing you could fuck up so badly during one week in the SHU. This is personal, isn’t it? I don’t usually ask, but what exactly are you accused of? I think I got a right to know, if shit’s going down.”

Ian is trying hard to get his agitation under control enough to answer, but he’s feeling more and more lightheaded. His ears start to buzz as he breaks into a cold sweat and the room begins to spin. He fears he’s about to pass out and gropes for the legs of the bunk, but the sensation is replaced just as quickly by metallic saliva pooling in his mouth, as his jaw forces itself open involuntarily. Ian’s knees give way as he lunges for the toilet and revisits his spam sandwich lunch.

“Aw fuck! Drop and flush for Christ’s sake!”

“Whaa?”

Ian gingerly gets to his feet and starts trying to drink from the tap on the sink.

“Drop and flush! Anything that ends up in the toilet has to be flushed immediately, no exceptions! I don’t care if you’re in the middle of hurling, you should be flushing from the get go, several times for good measure. This is basic prison etiquette. Jesus, maybe you did just piss someone off real bad. And … hey! What did I just say??”

Ian has made the mistake of spitting his water out, into the sink. James runs a hand down his face in frustration.

“Everything, and I mean everything, that comes out of your body besides CO2, goes in the toilet. You need to spit – drop and flush; you need to fart – drop and flush; you need to cum (and I better
Ian’s got it together enough to flush the toilet now and he slides his body along the wall and presses his forehead against the cool metal of the cell door.

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“Good. You can make up for it by cleaning the sink and toilet with shampoo. You feel ok? If you need to settle your stomach I’ve got ginger ale you can have?”

“What’s the loan terms?”

This brings a smile to James’ face and he gets up and pulls his tub out from under the bed to retrieve the pop.

“Well at least you’re a quick learner. No charge, just replace it next commissary. And clean the sink. Now, you going to tell me what this is about?”

Ian takes a seat and a few gulps of pop. He rolls the can between his hands as he weighs up how much to say.

“It’s not a gang thing, it’s personal.”

James doesn’t prompt him further, but it’s clear he isn’t going to let it go either, so he continues.

“That man, Damon, he was my ex’s – not the guy you saw; another one – he was my ex’s cellie at Stateville. They broke out and we all went on the run together, but Damon – Damon was a fucking liability, so we ended up ditching him. I guess he’s pretty unhappy about it.”

James’ brow is wrinkled in thought.

“I remember reading about that. There I was telling you about jail-breaks when you’ve got plenty of stories of your own. So how’d you get caught?”

“Dunno about Damon. I didn’t even know I had a warrant out until I got arrested last week.”

“And your ex? What was his name?”

“Mickey. As far as I know he’s still out there. He better be.”

“I guess some people really do manage to disappear. So you weren’t with him when you were arrested? I guess not if he’s your ex.”

Ian was already looking at his feet, but he finds his attention is fixed on them more keenly now.

“No. I went as far as the border with him but turned back there.”

“Why?”

Ian knew the question was coming, but that doesn’t mean he has an answer for it. He never does. It’s too complicated and yet simplistic to sum up in words. Luckily he’s saved from further interrogation by the arrival of the pod’s C.O. with Ian’s evening cup of pills.

“Chow in five.”

Ian looks down at his rainbow assortment of drugs and realizes then that ‘lack of privacy’ in prison
doesn’t just refer to bodily functions. There doesn’t seem much point in beating around the bush; James already knows far more than he was comfortable sharing. He palms the pills into his mouth and knocks them back with a glug from his ginger ale.

“Crazy meds,” he shrugs. James nods at him in understanding and Ian realizes he’s inadvertently killed two birds with one stone, answering the border question to James’ satisfaction.

There’s movement in the common area now, as men start to shuffle out of cells and away from televisions to form a line. The elevator doors open and a C.O. and two surly looking inmates in hairnets step out, pulling a large stainless steel bain-marie behind them, which they set up in the middle of the room. Ian joins the back of the line as the lids are removed and the aroma of chili wafts towards him.

For the first time he can observe the men around him without seeming like he’s watching. There are around 40 in all, a fairly even mix of black, white and Latino. Some are heavily tattooed and clearly gang affiliates; one or two of the older men are distinctly portly, and the average age seems a lot higher than at Cook County. No one seems particularly interested in him, but he eyes them carefully, for any signs they may have picked up on Damon’s gesture as they left the yard.

He follows James to an empty table, not yet ready to try to make inroads with any of the other men. Chili is not what he would have wanted, given his anxious state, but he knows he’s got to eat. James pushes the food around his plate, coating the rice in sauce but making no attempt to actually swallow anything. It appears that chili is not his favorite either. Ian sneaks another glance over his shoulder and it doesn’t escape James’ notice.

“You can relax you know, you’ve probably got a few days before shit hits the fan. Seriously. I only saw Damon because I practically tripped over you when you decided to petrify, I doubt anyone else looked back.”

Ian’s still casting about so James sighs and resorts to more direct measures, jabbing Ian’s hand with his fork.

“Hey, eyes down OK? All you’re going to do is make people think there’s something suspicious about you. I can’t believe I’m having to say this to someone half my age but – be cool, alright?”

Ian knows he’s right. He focuses on his plate and wills himself to take a bite, but he still can’t bring himself to open his mouth. James isn’t eating either, but is much less hesitant about the talking.

“Look maybe I can help you out? Do you have any friends or connections in here? I can introduce you to people if not.”

For the first time, Ian eyes him a little suspiciously.

“What does that entail?”

“For you? Nothing. I’ll get a commission if you make a deal, you don’t owe me anything directly.”

“What kind of deal?”

James rolls his eyes.

“Do I seriously have to spell everything out for you? For protection.”

“Yeah, I know that. But how would I pay? Do people actually put their lives on the line for ramen?”
“Maybe in Cook County, but not here. There’s a lot more bureaucracy inherent in the federal system.”

“Meaning?”

“Your family is going to have to start making foreign wire transfers.”

For the first time that day, maybe even since he was arrested, Ian laughs.

“Jesus, not a fucking chance.”

“You estranged?”

“No, it’s just I’m from the South Side. My inheritance from my mother was a pound of meth. And then we had to pay three grand to secretly dig her up because it turned out there was more in the casket and we were that badly in debt! Trust me, they don’t have that kind of money.”

Ian knows he’s totally entered too-much-information territory and that his laughter is a little unhinged, but he can’t help himself. The idea has him tickled. He shovels a forkful of chili in his mouth in an attempt to control his giggles. He’s a little proud at finally shocking James with something other than his gauche prison manners too.

“They could do something else, maybe money mules? It’s very safe – even if you get caught it’s easy to talk your way out of. There are so many scam artists out there the feds don’t question it when people fall ‘prey’ to them.”

“No, I can’t ask them to do that. All we ever do is get sucked into each others' drama and it needs to stop. I have to fix this on my own.”

“Well there is one way, but you won’t like it.”

“Join a gang or something?”

“There’s always that too. You’ve got an Irish last name – The Brand would lap that up, but uh, you’ve got to take a blood oath. I’d think very carefully about the consequences of that. No, I think the smarter thing would be to use what God gave you.”

“I don’t- ”

“You need to find Daddy.”

Ian probably should’ve seen it coming, but he was hoping for some other solution. He forces another forkful of chili into his mouth to make the burn a little more literal.

“I know it’s distasteful- ” (Ian really hopes that pun was not intended) “-but you’ve got leverage this way. Far better to be a queen than a punk in prison - you’re rare enough you can pick your man; find someone you’re attracted to and make sure he won’t pimp you out to the rest of his crew.”

It doesn’t sound like much of a sweetener to Ian’s ears, but he can see James’ point. He might be a bitch, but at least he’d be (sort of) untouchable.

“But you need to decide pretty soon – or else Daddy may find you instead.”

Ian doesn’t think he can handle any more chili. He shoves his plate aside and looks up at the dusty, concrete ceiling.
“Maybe I should just sign into protective custody. Fuck this politics bullshit!”

“You can still do that, but the PC label follows you. Even if you move to another facility you’ll still have to go to the SHU. I dunno how long a stretch you’re looking at, but chances are you’ll regret it sooner or later. Plus guys on the uh, crazy meds, don’t tend to fare too well. I don’t know about you, but it seems pretty clear to me which is the lesser evil.”

Ian’s done some pretty degrading things in his life. In all honesty being someone’s kid wouldn’t be the worst of it, but he’s tired of always having shitty options. Every time he thinks things can’t get worse, they always seem to. He opts to distract himself before his thoughts can take a darker turn.

“What about you?” he asks James.

“What about me?”

“I don’t know anything about you. You’re not exactly The Hulk, how do you stay so comfortable here? Is your name really Angelo and you’re in the Mob or something?”

“Giacomo,”

“Huh?”

“It’s Giacomo – James, in Italian.”

“Wait, so you actually are- ”

“I never said that.”

James holds his gaze intently. A moment later he lets a smile play around his lips.

“But seriously, I wouldn’t go around asking people about The Outfit; it’s indiscreet.”

“So…”

“I’m useful.”

“Meaning?”

“I run a laundromat. On the outside.”

“You can get stains out of anything?”

“Exactly. Businesses come and go in this town, but businessmen always need clean suits. My customers are loyal.”

An apparition of Fiona suddenly materializes in Ian’s mind’s eye. He imagines her running wet dollars through the dryer at Wendell’s before Stuffing wads of cash into the litter boxes of Etta’s cats. He’s sure James has subtler, less literal methods.

“My sister used to run a laundromat.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, she bought it from a crazy cat lady with dementia, who lived upstairs. Then my homeless dad hooked up with said lady and pretended to be her dead husband so he could stay there. It was all kinda awkward.”
“Sounds like it. You’ve got some good stories Red, I look forward to hearing more of them.”

James stands and Ian follows suit. He knows he’s not going to eat any more chili. They walk over to the bain-marie and slot their trays into the shelves below the serving pots.

“I think you should stay out here though, watch some TV or something. I know you’re new, but it’s best not to spend too much time in your cell. People will think you’re weak or have something to hide.”

Ian nods and quietly gravitates towards a crowd watching TV. There’s a baseball game on and everyone is so absorbed they don’t notice him taking a seat near the back. He tries to focus on the game – it’s a good one – but it’s hard to quiet the anxious thoughts racing through his head.

A couple of hours later Ian is back in his cell, failing to sleep, staring at the cinder block wall to his right. It feels like the longest day of all the long days he’s spent in prison, over an unfathomably long 10 days. Doesn’t mean he’ll sleep though.

Inevitably, given his current surroundings, he finds himself wondering what Mickey would do – what Mickey had done, when he found himself alone, facing a long stretch of time in a dangerous place.

Unfortunately, the answer that comes to mind is not a particularly pleasant one. Mickey had probably been Daddy, with a side gig as a Russian mafia enforcer. He was no-one’s bitch but Ian’s and he had the tattoo to prove it. Still, it was impressive that he’d managed to keep his status, even with another man’s name engraved on his chest. For the first time Ian recognizes quite what a grand gesture it was, under the circumstances.

Then again, Mickey hadn’t had the Latin Kings out for his blood. He wishes he were here now, to counsel and help him. Mickey was always good at scraping together a solution from the wreckage of rotten plans. He misses him. He touches his hand against the nearest brick, trying to imbibe it with the spirit of his thoughts. Hoping perhaps, that somehow they might be transmitted to that other soul. It feels cathartic at least.

*Take the plea deal Ian.*

*I can’t.*

*You can. Get behind the wheel and drive the damn car.*
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Do you guys want a prison slang glossary? I realize I’ve been using rather a lot of it ...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s six days later and Ian still hasn’t been shanked. He’s not complacent though. He’s been spending all his free time trying to get creative with tin cans, collecting magazines to wear as body armor and otherwise sizing people up to determine whether they:

a) want to kill him,
b) want to sleep with him.

Trying to find ‘Daddy’ in prison is not as easy as he’d imagined. Ian may never have really dated, but he’d always found it easy to determine if guys were into him. His days as a go-go boy had made him pretty damn good at spotting all the subtle manifestations of a flirty look. Prison seems to have thrown his gaydar off though. He’s not sure if it’s just that everyone behaves so differently, or if he’s still not very adept at identifying the ‘mostly-straight-but-hey-I’ve-got-needs’ guys among the ‘I’m-going-to-fuck-you-up-and-not-in-a-good-way’ men. They all seem to look at him the same way. Either way it’s making him paranoid.

Nevertheless, the federal government says he has to go to school, so Monday morning finds him back on the 9th floor working through the 11th grade, a few years late. The day is uneventful, right down to the spam sandwich lunches.

It couldn’t stay that way though. Walking down the corridor, back towards the elevator, Ian hears the kind of taunting he knows must be aimed at him.

“Hey, lookie what we got here!”

“Mmmm, that is some Grade A fresh fish right there.”

“I’m gonna butter that up.”

Ian squares his shoulders and turns around to see that – sure enough – three Hispanic men are blocking the corridor, making kissy faces at him.

“Don’t fuck with me.”

“Hey, don’t carp little fish, you’re in a big pond now.”

“I said, don’t fuck with me.”

Ian pulls his shiv down into his hand from where it’s been concealed in his sleeve. It’s a pretty crudely cut from a tin can lid, made more for slashing than stabbing, but at least it’s got a sharp edge.

A jeer rises from all three, in tandem.

“Hey, this fish is still alive.”
“He’s mack the knife!”

“Looks like it didn’t get beat hard enough when it got reeled in.”

“We gonna have to fix that.”

“I think we should fillet it, make it nice and tender.”

“It’s fil-ay, idiot.”

“Man, fuck you with your I-went-to-culinary-school bullshit!”

Their bickering is suspended by a shout to their left, from down the hall.

“This bitch is mine!”

He’s not sure why, but Ian was sure he would be killed by some anonymous convict acting on Damon’s orders; he didn’t expect that the man himself would show up. Ian draws back against the wall as Damon stops a few feet away from his tormentors. They posture a bit, as Damon sizes them up - before one of them shoots him a hand signal, which he returns.

“I didn’t realize you was brothers. You sharks gonna have to keep fishing for flounders though ‘cause I own this red snapper. Sorry amigos.”

The men exchange glances, silently debating whether to challenge Damon, who meets them at the pass.

“Hey, you got a problem – take it up with your chapter council. But I wouldn’t step to me, because my beads is all black.”

He smiles at them wickedly and they seem to shrink from him slightly.

“Amor de rey!”

“Amor de rey,” they return, as Damon shoos them away with flicks of his wrists.

He turns his attention back to Ian, who’s coiled himself against the wall in anticipation of pouncing or running – he’s not sure which yet. He raises his fists defensively, shiv wedged between his middle and ring fingers, ready to strike. Damon however has his head cocked at an angle, like a curious dog, trying to work out if this shit’s for real.

“The fuck is wrong with you?!”

“I’m not goin’ out like that!”

“Like what?”

“Without a fight.”

“You don’t have to. Those vatos was only messing with you anyway, tryin’ to shake you down for easy commissary pickings.”

“And you think I’m going to roll over for you?”

“Man put that shit away, you gonna get dragged to the SHU in a minute. Madre de Dios! I knew you was crazy, but I didn’t know you was stupid too!”
Damon steps forward and stretches an arm out, gesturing like a frustrated parent to a teen with contraband. Ian punches at him, but Damon is astonishingly quick, side stepping the blow and grabbing Ian’s wrist. Just as quickly, he releases it and ducks sideways under the arm as Ian tries to follow through with a left hook. Damon takes a step back and throws his hands in the air, looking around to see if any C.O.s are watching.

“Bitch, you tryin’ to cut me?!” he hisses. “The fuck I ever do to you?”

“You marked me on the fucking yard!”

Damon is momentarily lost for words, his face a mixture of confusion and disgust.

“I what? You mean I pointed at you? That’s what this is about? Homie, you been watching too many movies, this ain’t the fucking *Godfather*! I was just playin’ with you - nobody orders a hit like that.”

“That’s not what my cellie thinks.”

“Then he’s messing with you too.”

Damon pauses to look him up and down. Ian’s not letting go of the shiv, but he risks a quick glance around to check that the coast is indeed clear. He considers running for it but there doesn’t seem much point – there’s nowhere to hide and people would probably consider him fair game as a coward.

“You really think I wanna kill you?”

Ian only glares at him in response.

“Well that’s nice, but I got better things to do than spend the next few years in solitary for stabbing your weaselly ass.”

Ian lowers his arm a bit, but keeps a tight grip on his shiv, still staring intently at Damon as he considers his words.

“What are you even doing here? This is a federal prison.”

“Well, they couldn’t send me back to Stateville … oh, and I hit up a bank.”

*Of course you did.*

“And what, you just hang around in hallways waiting to help out damsels in distress? You think you’re fucking Robin Hood?”

“No, but a Robbin’ Hood maybe.”

Ian can’t believe he didn’t see that coming. He has to admit though, Damon’s quicker than he remembers. He’s not putting the shiv away just yet, but his grip on it relaxes.

“I saw you, through the window.”

Damon jerks his head sideways, motioning at the glass separating the library from the corridor.

“You were in the library?”

“Yes, I work there.”
Ian looks at him incredulously.

“Hey, don’t look at me like that. I like to read, okay?”

Damon laughs and slaps him on the back, making contact with the spine of one of the magazines Ian’s got stashed under his jumpsuit.

“The fuck is this?”

“Oh, uh, I made a stab vest out of National Geographics …”

“Why you gotta waste all them pretty pictures? You’re fucking paranoid.”

Suddenly, Damon grabs the scruff of his neck and Ian feels his slowly dissipating adrenaline surge back into his veins. Just as quickly though, Damon releases his grip and jumps back out of reach.

“Besides, you gotta protect ya neck!”

Damon’s laughing again. Ian tries to see the funny side, but he’s too fucking riled up.

“You gonna put that thing away now? Por favor?”

With one last wary look Ian tucks the shiv buck up his sleeve.

“Anyway, you just stick with me and you’ll be fine. You get any trouble, someone in your pod is fucking with you, you come to me ok? I can shut that shit down, no problem.”

“Err thanks Damon. I don’t know that I can pay you for it though.”

“You think I’m doing this outta the kindness of my heart mijo?”

“So I’m your bitch, basically?”

“Damn straight.”

Ian sighs heavily. Considering he was pretty sure he was going to be killed by Damon, he knows it could be worse, but he’s not looking forward to learning the ins and outs of prison sex.

“Do I really have to call you Daddy?”

Damon wrinkles up his nose.

“What? No, fuck that! You think I want my cellie’s sloppy seconds?”

“But, you said…”

“Cash rules everything around me. My commissary is off the hook! You feel me?”

“I don’t…?”

“You’re not as smart as you think Strawberry Shortcake.”

Ian grimaces at this new nickname but stays quiet. Damon rolls his eyes, knowing he’s going to have to elaborate again.

“Mickey.”
“Mickey?”

“Yeah, you know, that crazy motherfucker who busted outta prison just to find your uppity butt?”

_Uppity butt? That’s a lame-ass pun…_

“Wait, he’s paying you?”

“Apparently he’s still a crazy motherfucker. I told you not to drop that shit! We had a good thing going, us _tres delinquentes_, but I knew you were gonna be trouble the first time I see him making goo-goo eyes at you. I always tell him ‘bros before hos Mickey’, ‘_hakuna matata_’, but does he listen?!”

“Hey, it wasn’t my idea to ditch you! Mickey did it because of the heat you brought trying to rob that store.”

“Whatsoever, at least I got to drive my bitching Camaro off into the sunset, not some gay little pussy wagon.”

Perhaps Ian just has a death wish, but he can’t resist testing Damon a little more, to be sure he’s not going to jump him as soon as his back’s turned.

“Hey uh Damon, I gotta ask – did you and Mickey ever … you know?”

Bad idea. Damon’s face twists as his expression mutates from placid, to quizzical, through vengeful.

“Oh hell no! Here I am saving your ass from three hoodlums and this lil’ _puto_ wants to disrespect me asking about mine? I ain’t nobody’s bitch!”

“Err no, I didn’t mean it like that. Sorry. I was thinking more like … maybe he was yours?”

“Fuck off, you know Mickey’s a badass, he’d never let himself get turned out. He had plenty of bitches of his own.”

It’s not like Ian had never guessed that, but his face must have betrayed him slightly because Damon takes a moment to rub it in.

“I hate to break it to you esé, but he managed just fine without your handsome ass inside.”

“Okay, but you two were friends. I dunno, I thought maybe he felt safe enough with you to let his guard down, to be himself…”

Initially Damon smirks at him like he’s a simpleton – since when was Mickey ever anything _but_ himself? Slowly however, his lips start to pucker into a perfect ‘O’ of surprise as the revelation dawns on him.

“Mickey’s the _bottom_?!”

Chapter End Notes

Also I’m just gonna say now, I totally called it on the whole we’re-digging-up-Monica-
in-Season-8 thing :-)  
https://twitter.com/EmmaRoseKenney/status/886720797590433793
Ian’s still feeling rather shaky when he makes it back to the 19th floor and the safety of his cell. James, as ever, is reclining on his bed, nose in a book. Ian hovers by the door, unsure how much to tell him.

“I had a run in with Damon.”

That’s enough to get his attention. To his credit, James looks concerned as he hastily drops his book and sits up.

“Well you’re still walking, what happened? Did you have to stab him?”

“I did try a bit, at first, but he talked me down.”

“Talked you down to what? Shit, he didn’t rape you did he?”

“No. As a matter of fact he rescued me.”

“Rescued you, from whom? How many enemies do you have in here Red?”

“None now, apparently. Some guys were giving me shit and he came out of the library to chase them off. He said he’d only been joking around on the yard with that shooting thing.”

James looks unconvinced and a little worried that Ian apparently is.

“Yeah I know, I didn’t believe him at first either, but the more I think about it, the more I think he’s telling the truth. I know I’m not his favorite person, but he doesn’t seem to care too much about the ditching thing. Sounds like he actually had a better time without us in the end.”

James still looks like he doesn’t buy it and he speaks up after a few moments of pensive silence.

“You said he chased off some guys who were hassling you. Were they in his car?”

“What car? You mean the one he stole after Mickey and I ditched him?”

“No. God. If only there were Babel fish for fishes. His gang – were the guys he chased off Latin Kings too?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Be careful. It might be a ploy to get you to let your guard down.”

“How do you mean?”

“You sure that run in with those guys wasn’t a set up? Let him deliver you from your tormenters, so he can gain your trust?”

“I dunno, that seems awfully smart for Damon. He never struck me as the sharpest tool in the box. And why bother gaining my trust? He could’ve killed me then if he wanted to.”

“True, but maybe he doesn’t want to take the rap for it. Needs to get you to a quieter spot.”

“I suppose. He said Mickey was paying him to protect me though.”
“You got any proof? Any way to contact him independently?”

“No.”

“So keep your eyes open. Even if it’s true about Mickey, there’s nothing to stop him claiming that the money stopped flowing and that you owe him now.”

A sudden insight pops into Ian’s mind.

“You read a lot, James.”

“Gotta keep the cogs turning.”

“Why did you never tell me Damon works at the library?”

“Never seen him. Or at least, I haven’t seen him since I was made aware of his existence. I guess I must have seen him before, if it’s true about where he works. But I don’t really talk to anyone there, beyond pleasantries.”

Ian supposes that makes sense.

A loud buzzer overhead interrupts their conversation, as ever, demanding they make their way out of the cell for roll call.

James’ warning is playing on Ian’s mind. He thinks about it later when he’s basking on the concrete of the yard and as he pushes the food around his plate at dinner. He thinks about it while he watches the news and as he’s getting his ass handed to him playing checkers that evening. He thinks about it in bed, facing the wall, fingers pressed against his cinderblock, as has become his habit.

Perhaps it’s just wishful thinking - because Ian wants to believe, desperately; but something has him convinced that Damon’s telling the truth. And the relief that he’s safe pales in comparison to an even greater reassurance – Mickey knows where he is. And he still cares enough to want him safe.

It’s another few days before Ian sees Damon again and he arrives in an unexpected fashion, on the 19th floor, pushing a cartload of books. It’s James who spots him first as he’s gathering together his tomes for exchange.

“Looks like I’m going to get to size up Damon for myself.” He calls back to Ian, who’s trying to derive extra sustenance by making a tuna casserole out of commissary ingredients.

“What do you mean?”

“He’s on cart duty.”

“Cart duty?”

“Not everyone has elevator privileges, so they bring the library to you.”

Ian wanders over to the door and sticks his head out. Sure enough, Damon’s going cell to cell, handing out books, just like in the SHU. He looks up and grins at Ian as he approaches them.
“Hey Strawberry!”

“Are you really gonna keep on with that Strawberry Shortcake shit?”

“What have you got against fruit? I like fruit. I thought you’d like a fruity name.”

Even though Ian’s got his back to him, he can feel James rolling his eyes behind him. He’s not sure if Damon even realizes the crap that comes out of his mouth sometimes.

“Okay fine. You don’t want to be Strawberry, I’ll call you Shorty instead. Yo Shorty! It’s your birthday!”

Ian stands corrected. He definitely says that shit on purpose.

Damon meanwhile reaches into the cart for a thick, hardbound book and tosses the volume onto Ian’s bed, before bursting into song:

“Levántate de mañana, mira que ya amaneció.”

Ian gazes over at the title, then turns back in disgust.

“Really?”

“What? Most popular book in the federal prison system! There’s a waiting list for that shit.”

“Seriously? I thought it was about, like, teenage co-dependent vampires?”

“Whatever. I still think yours is a better love story though.”

Ian doesn’t know quite how to respond to that.

“When’s it due back?”

“Tomorrow, 5.30 sharp.”

“Tomorrow? How am I supposed…”

“Tomorrow, 5.30 sharp.”

Damon inclines his head slightly and Ian follows him, figuring he’ll explain the weird timing, but instead Damon lowers his voice, even after they’re out of earshot.

“That your cellie?”

“No, I just keep him around for decoration.”

“I don’t like him. He looks like a chomo.”

“A what?”

“A chomo. A kiddie fiddler, comprende?”

“What? No he’s like an accountant or something.”

“Doesn’t mean he doesn’t touch the children. What’s he charged with then?”

“I don’t know exactly. I think it’s some kind of racketeering. He wouldn’t be in general if he were a
sex offender though, would he? He’d have to go to PC.”

“I suppose.” But Damon still doesn’t look happy.

“You’ll tell me if he starts touching you? Giving you back rubs and candy?”

“Yes, jeez abuela!”

“Your first Spanish. I’m so proud mijo!”

Damon breaks out into a grin and starts to walk on, whistling as he pushes the cart. Ian returns to his cell and flops down on his bunk.

“Can you believe this shit? There’s actually a waiting list for this book?”

He’s sure James, as a man of refined taste, is sure to find it as stupid as he does – so the answer that floats down from the bunk above is a surprise.

“Hey don’t knock it. I wish someone loved me enough to buy me that book.”

“No. Not you too! What is it with these things?! Wait … did you say buy?”

“That volume’s not in general circulation, if you catch my drift.”

Ian’s silence confirms James’ suspicions.

“Jesus Red, you really are green, aren’t you? Open the book, bend the spine back all the way.”

Ian does as he’s told and out slips a very slim phone, concealed in the void of the hardcover’s spine.

“Don’t turn that on until it’s time. You don’t want it causing interference on the radios around here. I’ll stand watch for you by the door, but make sure you keep it down. It needs to sound like we’re having a conversation.”

Ian doesn’t know what to say to all this. His mind is swirling like a kaleidoscope. He’s thrilled. And terrified.

“And Red. Keep it clean, OK? I don’t want to hear you having sex over the phone in the afternoon.”

“I really don’t think…”

“Everyone’s got their delinquent habits. I don’t want to know what yours are.”

It’s the first little deflation of his bubble. Much as he’s loath to admit it, he knows this call is going to be awkward – he hadn’t factored in the extra embarrassment of his cellie having to listen to it all, as well.

Still, when he climbs into bed that night and touches his hand to the cinderblock, he’s elated to think he’ll have a much more direct connection to Mickey tomorrow. It’s only been, what, eight months since they last talked? It feels like a lifetime.

Ian can’t sleep that night. But for the first time since he went to prison it’s excitement, and not fear, that keeps him awake.
The nuclear glow of the phone takes Ian by surprise. He stares at it, distractedly, as it vibrates angrily in his hand. Silent - but enough to rattle his senses.

This is really happening.

“Ian?”

“Mickey?”

Ian exhales the breath he didn’t know he was holding, shakily. There’s so much he wants to ask - but he’s distracted by the sound of trumpets in the background.

“Is that … is that Mariachi music?”

“Banda.” Mickey corrects. “You remember where I am, right?”

Ian lets out another breath of relief. He can feel the cocked eyebrow and incredulous smirk on the other end.

“Yeah. I just didn’t expect it to be so … Mexican.”

Okay then.

“How’d you find me?”

“Iggy. He told Mandy, she told me.”

“Yeah but I saw Iggy in Cook County. How’d you know I was in the MCC?”

“We have this thing in Mexico – it’s called ‘The Internet’. You can look up prisoner information on it.”

It’s official - Mickey Milkovich can reduce him to some kind of primordial soup, incapable of rational thought or speech. Ian was leaning against the bed-post closest to the window, but he slides down to the floor and rests his head against the metal of the frame. He tries to gather his wits about him, as the silence between them grows more awkward.

“You okay in there? Getting any hassle? I can’t send you commissary money, but if you need anything just go to Damon. I’ll make sure it’s worth his while.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Damon’s looking out for me.”

“You getting your meds?”

“Of course. I’d probably be able to sue to get out, if I wasn’t.”

“Good. I’ve been worried about you.”

Ian sighs.
“Look, I know I was super resistant when I was first diagnosed, but I do understand how important they are. I hate the side effects sometimes, but the difference they’ve made has been pretty obvious. I’m still up and down, but it’s nowhere near as bad as it used to be.”

“Yeah, well you say you’ve got your shit together, but then I start hearing about how you’re disposing of bodies, getting into fights and winding up in jail? What am I meant to think? Sounds pretty manic to me.”

“Wait, disposing of bodies?! What are you talking about Mick?”

“Mandy told me. About your little phone call.”

“Oh. No, that wasn’t a disposal. We had to dig up Monica. It turns out Fi put about $20,000 worth of meth in her casket and we needed the money so …”

“Fucking Fiona.” They both let out a small chuckle.

“Wait, Monica’s dead?”

“Yeah she died, umm, the day I left you. If I believed in it I’d say it was karmic retribution.”

“Shit man, I’m sorry. I mean, I didn’t like her – all she ever seemed to do was hurt you, but I know you loved her.”

Ian’s voice has a little croak to it.

“Thanks.”

“What happened, did she OD?”

“Brain aneurysm actually. Who’d have thought eh?”

“Huh.” They lapse into stillness.

“I’m doing okay in here, really. I’m getting all my meds and they seem to be working. I know all that stuff sounds bad, but it wasn’t bipolar behind it.”

Mickey is mulling over his words. Ian kind of resents that he’s clearly weighing whether or not to believe him; but given their history, he can’t say he blames him.

“Well keep your head down anyway, Damon can’t be there all the time – and for God’s sake, stay away from the Aryan Brotherhood. The last thing we need is fuckin’ Terry finding out you’re in there.”

“Why would they tell Terry?”

“You seriously never look at my dad’s tattoos?”

“Not high on my priority list with him. I was usually trying to avoid getting killed.”

“Well he’s a fully paid up member, so if he wants you dead he only has to say. I’m hoping the fact that he hasn’t tried anything since he last got out means you’re not high on his list either, but still, be respectful. If he starts hearing about some red-headed faggot with an attitude problem, he might start to put two and two together and take advantage of the situation.”

“So he’s still out then?”
“I guess. It’s not like I’m going to all the family reunions though is it? Anyway, it doesn’t really matter. You do The Brand’s business inside and out, so he’ll still be visiting. Always scan the room before you go in, just in case he’s there too.”

A note of weariness and frustration has crept into Mickey’s voice.

“Fuck! This isn’t how things were supposed to turn out!”

“Come on Mick, when have things ever gone the way they were supposed to with us?”

“Yeah, I guess. Maybe the first time, but then again I wasn’t expecting you to turn up with that fucking tire iron.”

Ian snorts.

“Like you were expecting me at all!”

“Why d’you think I stole that gun?”

“Seriously? You did that to lure me to your house? But you didn’t think I’d bring something to defend myself?”

“Aww shit.”

“What?”

“Time to ‘fess up I guess.”

“To what?”

“Mickey?”

“I knew Ian. That you were gay.”

“You knew I was gay? Wait, what? You mean you scared the shit out of me and beat the crap out of Lip even though you knew I wouldn’t have touched your sister?! The fuck Mickey?”

“Nah man, I meant it then, I really was gonna kill you. But then I heard you begging Mandy, by the side of our house. I was just about to fly out the back door and start shit, when I heard you confessing. And I realized you were just as scared as I was.”

Ian is lost for words.

“Sorry. I knew you had this romantic notion that it was all magic and fate and I didn’t want to ruin it. I always planned to get you naked, just didn’t expect to have to pry a deadly weapon out of your hands first. But it was good foreplay, huh?”

“Fuck…”

“Yeah, sorry Cinderella. A mental mind-fuck can be nice though, right?”

“I can’t … that was … fucking clever Mick.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You’ve always been smart you know?”
“Thanks.”

“So why’d you do such a stupid fucking thing as busting out of prison?”

Mickey’s voice is still soft from the compliment, so the stinging barb of Ian’s riposte catches him off guard.

“Hey, that’s not fair! I was doing fifteen fucking years! I didn’t exactly have a lot of options.”

“You always have options.”

“What was I supposed to do? I took the plea deal; there was no way to appeal. Yeah it was a shitty one, I realize that now, but it’s not my fault my piece-of-shit defender was incompetent. He just told me it was the best I was going to get and I signed.”

“You never should have been tried for attempted murder in the first place. Guilty pleas can be dropped if you weren’t advised properly, or charged right.”

“And who was going to pay for the lawyer to argue all that? The State won’t that’s for sure. It’s not like I had anyone bankrolling me.”

“There are organizations that can help; they do things pro bono.”

“Oh yeah, how well do you think my case would’ve gone down?

Dear ACLU,

I pled guilty to attempted murder, but I realize now that there has to be intent to kill to prove the charge. I never intended for that bitch to die - I was just going to knock her out with a few roofies, then hook her nipples up to a car battery and torture her for a bit. How was I supposed to know the cunt was popping other pills? I only put her in that box because I thought she was dead and I needed to hide the evidence. Clearly this is not attempted murder. Please use your severely limited resources to help me overturn this miscarriage of justice.

Sincerely yours,…”

“You were going to do what to Sammi’s nipples?!”

For the first and only time during the conversation, James’ attention is dragged away from the glass of their cell door.

“Hey don’t shout at me, it was your sister’s idea!”

“Fiona wanted … ”

“Not Fiona; Debbie.”

“Debbie was there?”

“Yeah, she’s creative huh? If I didn’t know any better I’d say she was a Milkovich. Should’ve seen her face when I told her Sammi was dead though! She totally freaked out. She didn’t tell you any of this?”

“No.”

“Huh. Maybe she thought you wouldn’t want to hear it, at the time.”

That hits Ian like a sucker punch, but he has to concede that it is very probably the truth.
“How is she anyway? What’d she name her kid? She was big as a house the last time I saw her, seemed kinda lost.”

“She’s doing okay; she named her Francis.”

“Francis, like, after Frank?”

“Yup.”

“Jesus.”

_Something is wrong here._

“Wait, she wasn’t pregnant when you went in.”

“She came to visit me once; thank me for not rolling on her to the cops. Matter of fact she was my only visitor that last year, unless you count the lawyer with Svetlana’s divorce papers.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well it’s a little late now to cry over spilled Milkovich. Honestly Ian, I wasn’t gonna make it eight years in there. Politics was getting serious and I wasn’t sure how long I could hold it all together. I was checking out, one way or another.”

“Don’t say that.”

“What, the truth hurt? I wouldn’t be the first. At least I had the brains to work out a better way. I knew it was a gamble whether or not you’d come with me, but I had nothing to loose. I was gonna be fucked - either way you look at it.”

Ian knows Mickey intends to lighten the mood with his jokes, but it has the opposite effect on him, finally loosening his tongue enough for a slew of his pent up thoughts to come crashing out, breath catching in his chest between bursts.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry okay? I’m sorry I never visited. I’m sorry I abandoned you. I tried so hard to forget, but I couldn’t. I know that now. But it was really hard trying to put my life back together again, trying to remember who I was – what was me, what was not me; what was drugs, what was disease. I honestly didn’t have a clue; I was just some fucking shadow. For so long I was so numb, so confused. I just … I don’t even know where to begin, how to explain, it’s so – ugh – complicated. I don’t know how to show you what I mean.”

There’s silence on the other end of the line, so Ian continues.

“I would have come back. It might’ve taken a while, but I was figuring it out. Slowly. I’m sorry. I know that wasn’t fair on you. I would’ve accepted it if you’d wanted nothing to do with me. But I needed to go through it on my own. Being with you, properly, it was so wrapped up with my illness. I loved you, but you were always keeping me at arms length. And then I got sick and you came back to me. It felt unreal, like it was all an illusion of the disease. Sometimes I thought you could only love me if I was sick and unavailable.”

There’s a short, sharp inhale on the other end of the line.

“I always loved you Ian. Right from the start. I’m sorry I was too afraid to show you until - until it was too late.”
“You don’t – Jesus, you don’t need to apologize! We’ve both fucked up so many times we’re well beyond the point of keeping score. I’m just - I’m just trying to show you what I was thinking. I know I was wrong. Everything I did was wrong and I don’t want you to excuse it, I just want you to understand why I thought I couldn’t have you in my life. I needed time to realize what was missing was you.”

“And suddenly you were there again. So yeah, it sped up the discovery process. I couldn’t believe I’d been so stupid. But I didn’t have time to absorb it either. All my doubts about my sanity, my identity, my ability to handle shit. It all came flooding back. I was scared. I couldn’t just stay in the moment and not be terrified about the future. Fuck Mick - I didn’t want to go to prison!”

They both snort ruefully at this and it cracks Ian’s voice.

“You were the only thing grounding me, but I’ve never been as strong as you. It wasn’t enough. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too. I’m the fucking reason you’re in there.”

“Shut up. This isn’t your fault. This isn’t even about you. You gave me plenty of outs – I chose my fate when I got into that car, and again when I got out.”

Ian lets out a resigned, yet desperate laugh.

“Jesus. Is this my rock bottom? I thought I’d already hit it before, but then I keep surprising myself. Do you think it can get worse?”

Mickey’s reply is soft, almost tender.

“That depends. What have they offered you?”

“Who?”

“The feds. They must be offering you something, you’re not the prize they’re after.”

“Nothing yet. But my lawyer thinks I’ll get a good plea if I cooperate with them.”

“Do it.”

“Fuck off, you know I’d never snitch.”

“I don’t care. You’re not meant to be in there. Do what you have to do to get out.”

“No. I can’t. I won’t.”

“I want you to. This is about more than just your pride. Your health’s at stake and you know it.”

“Come on Mick, think about what I’d have to do. They’re not gonna just want me to talk. They’ll use me to lure you into something. I’d probably have to testify against you in court.”

“Well thanks for giving me the heads up. I’ll know to turn down any birthday invites I get from you, from now on. You still need to do it, I won’t hold it against you.”

“Look I’ve had a lot of time to think about this. Even if you didn’t fall for them using me as bait, they’d still have me under surveillance once I got out. Neither of us will ever be able to stop looking over our shoulders.”
“And what, you think if you do the time they won’t tail you too?’’

“Maybe, but after all that time they’ll probably be less concerned with finding you and you’ll have had years to practice hiding.’’

“Ian, I warn you - if you don’t take that deal, I’m gonna turn myself in.’’

Silence.

“I’ll make sure releasing you is part of the bargin.’’

“For fuck’s sake! You can’t just swoop in to rescue me every time I screw up Mick. Please. I need to do this. I wasn’t there for you when you needed me. Now I can be. Let me do this for both of us. You’ve finally got your freedom; you can be who you are on your own terms.”

“You feel fucking free when I was in the can?’’

The spittle from those bitter words hangs in the air between them, but it’s Mickey who eventually breaks the silence with guttural howl.

“Argh. Motherfucker!’’

“What did you call me?!’’

“You bastard. You’re always goddamn right! You were right when you said I loved you; that I wanted to be with you. You were right about leaving me when you did and you were right about me coming out, even if you were a dick about it. I have to trust that, if you're not sick now, you’re right on this. But – Jesus – every time I feel you slipping through my fucking fingers …’’

That choke that Ian has heard far too many times forces them into silence once more. Tears have been threatening for some time now and they begin to roll down his cheeks, mutely. He knows Mickey’s digging the heel of a palm into his eyes, trying not to do the same. He wishes he’d allow himself that release for once.

“Just - just make sure you’re doing this for the right reasons, okay? Don’t be a fucking martyr Ian.’’

“I will. And don’t forget, as long as you’re out there there’ll still be the option of a plea for me. If things really go to shit, I’ve still got a way out. But I’m doing fine, honestly. I’m more worried about you. The feds know I went all the way to the border with you, I’m sure they must know the license plate of the car we used. Keep your head down. They’re probably looking for you just as hard as they ever were.’’

“Don’t worry. That car disappeared a long time ago.’’

“Yeah but even still …’’

“Look I’m not being stupid about things okay? I don’t wanna sound overconfident, but I think I’ve done a pretty good job of disappearing.”

“How can you be sure?’’

“Well, I’m not drinking margaritas in gabacho bars in Cancún, put it that way. And that’s where they’ll be looking for a blue-eyed güero that doesn’t speak Spanish.’’

“But you made it to the beach? Got to see the sea?’’
“Yeah.”

Ian lets out a wistful little sigh.

“What’s it like?”

“It’s beautiful.”

He pauses.

“But honestly? It’s kind of overrated. All that sand - gets stuck to my balls for days and everyone and their goat wants to sell me something. Nah man, turns out I need dust and dirt.”

Ian smiles at this description. Trust Mickey to be grumpy about the nicest place he’s ever been. He’s glad he’s found something – anything – that brings him peace though. They lapse into silence once more, and this time it feels like it might be for good. The image of that traffic barrier rising is looping over and over in Ian’s mind.

“I’m still pissed with you Ian.”

“I’m still pissed with me too. But thank you for this. Seeing you cross over into Mexico - it was both the best and the worst moment of my life. I honestly didn’t think I’d ever hear from you again.”

“I honestly didn’t think you’d fuck up so bad.”

“You always did see the best in me.”

“Likewise. Or else you’re just really fuckin’ stupid.”

“Always; at least when it comes to you. Take care of yourself. Please. I love you.”

There’s a long pause. Ian knows he’s got no right to be hanging on the end of the line awaiting a response – he should end it now and not push Mickey any further. But he’s rooted to the spot, almost completely dissociated and unable to move his hands - even if he wanted to.

“I love you too, Ian.”

Just like that, a rush of blood returns Ian to the present.

“And Ian?”

“Yeah?”

“Fuck you. Especially fuck you.”

With that, the connection is severed. Ian can’t think of a better parting shot for them. He slumps to the side and releases his grip on the phone, as his body takes great heaving gasps of air, like a fish out of water. He’s half sobbing, half laughing uncontrollably. He can feel the synapses snapping in his head, flailing around like branches in a storm.

James rounds the corner of the bed to investigate, just as Ian’s gasps start to morph in to hiccups. He retrieves the phone and quickly switches it off, before stashing it back in its hiding place.

“Think I’ll go return this for you.” He says slowly, to make sure Ian’s absorbed it. He glances back at the door, before dropping to his knees again and gently rolling Ian into the recovery position.
“Try not to choke on your tongue while I’m gone, okay kid?”

With one last look of concern, he leaves Ian to it.

Chapter End Notes

And so Part I draws to a close. Sorry it's a bitter-sweet ending, but when have they ever had anything but? Stay tuned for Part II (AKA Season 9) soon!

P.S. If you're not as nosy as the feds and haven't checked out Ian and Mickey's 'pussy wagon' license plate yet, I suggest you do. I'm a big fan of all the visual Easter eggs someone in the props department sneaks in :-)

P.P.S. If it is not clear from the ending, Ian is not having a panic attack - he's experiencing what is delightfully referred to as 'emotional incontinence'. Although it can be a feature of mood episodes in bipolar (hence the term manic/maniacal laughter), most people will probably experience it once or twice in their lives, for example as 'reefer madness', when 'overstimulated'. If this is still confusing the hell out of you, Allie Brosh has a really good depiction of it in 'Depression Part 2' of Hyperbole and a Half (with the corn). And if you haven't read Hyperbole and a Half - Get thee to a nunn'ry! Essentially, the brain sort of short circuits and you end up feeling very blank and comfortably numb after. My pet theory is that it's basically a milder version of the seizures induced by ECT. It definitely has an endogenous basis as it's also seen in stroke victims, TBI, ALS, MS etc. So if it starts happening regularly and out of the blue, go get it checked! Today's PSA was brought to you by the ACLU - Because Freedom Can't Protect Itself.

TL;DR I am not implying that Ian has been catapulted into catatonic mania by the conversation, just that his ability to regulate his emotions is (understandably) a bit off.
Part II

Chapter Summary

I'm upping the rating on this to Explicit because Part II will be both heavier and sexier. It's no more intense than anything you've seen on Shameless, but well - interpret that as you will. I do use trigger warnings (though not for language - including slurs), but it's not something I'm particularly versed in, so if you want something added let me know.

Chapter Notes

This takes place three months or so after the last chapter.

T.W. Depression and a mention of self harm - not graphic.

It starts with the stomach flu.

The authorities aren’t sure how the virus got there – probably in the food service, though they can’t be sure – but it arrives on the 19th floor and spreads like wildfire though Ian’s pod. Their floor is put on lockdown to contain its spread, but that doesn’t stop its march from cell to cell within the quarantine. Even James is forced to kneel before the steel throne and Ian invariably follows suit a few days later.

A week after he stops vomiting, the lockdown is lifted - but Ian still can’t get out of bed. His limbs are leaden and a crushing fatigue has taken root in his marrow. At first he thinks he just needs to sleep because he’s still recovering from his purge; he can’t get up because his body is weak. But James is up and about in half the time it’s taking a man half his age.

The first Monday after the quarantine is lifted Ian drags himself down to the 9th floor for class, but he can’t concentrate and the other inmates eye his spacy expression with suspicion. They know why he’s not been around and Ian finds himself being escorted back to his floor ‘out of an abundance of caution’. It’s a relief to crawl back under the covers because then he doesn’t have to think. And thinking makes him feel like he’s drowning in molasses, desperately trying to wade to a non-existent bubble of goo-free clarity.

By Wednesday afternoon, when James returns from work duty to find Ian still asleep in Monday’s clothes, he knows what’s up. He tosses the newspaper he’s been carrying at Ian’s head and starts shaking his legs to wake him up. Ian flails around half-heartedly, the newspaper easily suppressing his attempts to free himself.

“Leave me alone.”

“Nope.”

“Please, I just need to sleep.”
“You know that’s not going to help you.”

“I don’t care. I’m so tired.”

“You’re not going to get any less tired unless you fight it.”

“I am. Can’t you see I’m trying?”

“I believe you. But it’s time for a change in tactics.”

James takes a seat on the bunk and pulls the newspaper back so he can see Ian’s face.

“Things move slowly here, you can’t wait until you hit the bottom to get help. You need something left in the tank if you’re going to make it to the surface.”

Ian says nothing, barely finding the motivation to look James in the eye.

“Just do a couple of things for me and I promise I’ll leave you alone for the rest of the day.”

“Ugh.”

“I’ll take that as a yes. I need to grab something - do what you have to do to get yourself sitting upright; I’ll be back in a minute.”

Ian’s brain starts to think of reasons why he shouldn’t, but even that’s a struggle. Something, somewhere inside of him realizes that it takes more energy to think than to do, so - somewhat unconsciously, Ian finds himself inching upwards, back scratching against the wall.

James is pleased with his progress when he returns and starts fishing in his tub for a pen.

“Read me the top article from the paper.”

“You must have read it already?”

“Need to get your brain working. It’ll wake you up.”

“It’s stupid.”

“That’s not what it says. Come on. Please? I’m illiterate.”

“Bullshit.”

“That’s not what it says either.”

If Ian had the energy to roll his eyes, he would, but he has to make do with an unimpressed look - which in truth is just what his face has been like for the last week or so. He lets out a resigned sigh, which James interprets as assent and places the paper in Ian’s hands. His eyes rove over the page, but they struggle to focus on the fine print.

“Try the headlines to start.”

Ian does as he’s told and drawls out the sentences in a flat monotone voice, tripping over words he’d usually have little difficulty with, but he manages.

“Good, now read the first article.”

“The print’s too small and my arms are too heavy to hold it closer.”
James thinks for a moment, before hauling his tub up from under the bed and placing it beside Ian.

“There, now you’ve got a desk to lean on."

Ian’s reached the point where he’s too weary to argue, so he drapes the newspaper on the lid and leans over it. Slowly, he reads about a disaster in a far-off country, where scores of people have died - although Ian can barely remember how by the time he’s reached the end. He certainly can’t remember the death toll, or what aid groups are rushing to the scene, when James quizzes him. But if he had the energy to introspect, he’d admit that he’s a little more alert than he had been.

James meanwhile has been busy writing on the paper he brought back and he places it on top of Ian’s ‘desk’ and nudges him to take hold of the pen.

“Sign here.”

“What’s this?”

“Thank you James for getting my brain working enough to ask that question. It’s a sick-call form. If the powers that be deem you worthy, you might see a doctor next week.”

“A week?”

“You got anything better to do in that time?”

Ian skims over the form picking out phrases like: ‘Bipolar’, ‘depressed’ and ‘sinking fast’. He knows that James is right. He signs at the bottom and pushes away the pen, paper and tub.

“Will you leave me alone now? Please?”

“Why don’t you try coming out for rec? It’s a mild day, sitting in the sun might do you some good.”

“I can’t.”

“You can.”

“Please, no. It’s just … you won’t understand, it’s stupid.”

“What’s wrong?”

“There’s too many people. I don’t want them to look at me. To see me.”

“You don’t need to feel ashamed. No-one will care if you’re depressed.”

“I know, but it doesn’t feel like that. I just don’t want to be around anyone.”

“Will you at least think about a shower? You’re getting a bit fragrant and you can do that without anyone around.”

“I’ll try, but uh, I need some time to work up to it.”

At that moment the buzzer goes off for roll call.

“Looks like you’re going to have to get up, at any rate.”

James extends a hand, which Ian grudgingly accepts and pulls himself upright. He slouches out of the cell and holds himself up by leaning against the door as their inmate numbers are read out. Then
the call for yard time goes up and everyone except Ian heads for the elevator. He breathes a sigh of relief as the doors close, finally alone, save for the pod’s C.O. watching him through the control room glass. Although everything within him screams to return to bed, Ian pushes himself to take advantage of his upstanding stature and gathers his shower things.

The warm water is a relief, although he has to work very hard not to give into the desire to sit down on the cruddy floor. Normally his intrinsically hygienic nature would balk at the possibility, but today the prospect of letting his body flop on the cool tiles and be battered by the rain seems - not pleasurable, but satisfying somehow. He knows he'd never be able to get back up though, if he let himself, so he settles for pressing his head against the wall in front and letting the water flow down his face and into his mouth. An urge to bash his head against it suddenly rears, but he manages to trample the thought down, gripping on the cold water pipe until his breathing slows. He’s suddenly very grateful that he can take his time in here – he doesn’t think he could manage this at all if he knew there were other people outside waiting their turn.

After a much-longer-than-necessary soak he traipses back to his cell, applies deodorant and puts on fresh underclothes. The yearning for bed is growing ever stronger, but he gathers the last of his resolve to brush his teeth and take a shit, finally collapsing back into bed as the sounds of men returning from recreation fill the pod.

“Good job Red.”

Ian hears it just as he’s falling asleep, and even in his current state of self-loathing, he knows James means it sincerely.
In the end, Ian only has to wait three days for medical attention. On Saturday morning he’s escorted down to the 7th floor, to a waiting room of sorts, where half a dozen men in jumpsuits are lounging in plastic chairs. In the corner, a metal cage houses a chained man wearing a spit hood - no doubt a visitor from the SHU. Through windows on either side of the hallway he can see what looks like several dental chairs in one room and a couple of hospital beds in another.

Ian’s still too lethargic to wonder further about BOP medical treatment and he stares into space until he’s finally roused by the sound of his prisoner number being called loudly – probably for the third or fourth time. He hauls himself upright and presents himself to the C.O., who inspects the plastic ID card attached to Ian’s jumpsuit pocket, before opening the door to an office he’s been guarding.

The middle-aged man within motions for him to take a seat in the chair opposite his desk, without giving Ian much of a look. The windowless room is pretty spartan, by office standards. There’s the usual array of medical charts and diagrams on the wall, but not much in the way of paraphernalia, besides a blood pressure monitor and some medical books. He also notes that both chairs and the desk are bolted to the floor.

The man finishes typing some notes on his computer before turning to Ian and repeating his name and inmate number.

“So Ian, you’re here for …” he pauses, clicking a few times with his mouse - presumably retrieving Ian’s record on the computer.

“… depression. How long have you been depressed for?”

Ian tries to speak but, having said nothing to anyone all day, a raspy croak is all that comes out. He hastily clears his throat.

“I, um, I guess about two weeks.”

“Two weeks? That’s not very long. Have you been depressed before?”

“Yes, a few times.”

“When was the last time?”

“At the beginning of the year.” He pauses before adding: “My mom died.”

The man begins typing while he continues to question Ian, though his eyes are on the computer screen.

“Were you incarcerated then?”
“No, I’ve been in about four months or so.”

“And you believe what you experienced then was depression, not just grief?”

“No I … I’m sure grief triggered it, but it wasn’t just that.”

“Could you describe your symptoms for me?”

“Well, more than anything I’m just tired. Like really, really tired. I feel like I’m dragging weights around and I’m sleeping a lot, 10 to 12 hours everyday, but it’s not enough. And I can’t think straight - my mind is so slow that I can’t concentrate.”

“But you’re not feeling sad? Crying a lot? Or angry?”

“Not really. It’s sort of like … it’ll sound weird but I feel half numb, half pained, all at the same time. Like I want to cry, but my body can’t remember how to do it. Everything seems vast and overwhelming, but completely empty too. Sorry, that probably doesn’t make much sense.”

“No actually, that’s a good way to describe it.” For the first time, the man actually looks directly at Ian, even though it seems to be mostly to size him up.

“Are you thinking about suicide?”

“Not really. I mean, I just feel too tired to work out how to do it, you know? I suppose if my cell was on fire I’d probably be happy to lie there and let it take me, but I wouldn’t be the one to start it.”

“So you do think about suicide then?”

“I guess I think about death? Doesn’t everyone though?”

“To a certain extent, but it’s not usually to welcome it.”

There’s a pause as the man assesses Ian once again.

“What about hurting yourself? Have you done that in the past? Do you want to do it now?”

“I don’t think so.” But Ian says the words so slowly that the man arches an eyebrow in doubt.

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“I burnt myself once. When I was very numb - just to try to feel something. It didn’t really work though; I learnt that lesson. Sometimes I wish I could have a lobotomy or something, so I didn’t have to deal with my head - but again, I don’t have the motivation to do anything.”

He pauses, desperately willing the rusty cogs in his head to turn enough for him to say something coherent.

“I guess what I’m saying is it doesn’t feel compulsive. I get the thoughts and they’re appealing, but it doesn’t feel like I need to follow through because it’s just more pain right? I’m not really feeling enough to appreciate the variety.”

“What about other people? Do you want to hurt them?”

“God no. Even if someone started on me I probably wouldn’t put up a fight. I’m a fucking vegetable right now.”
“What about your cellie? Do you get along with him? Does he know you’re depressed?”

“Yeah he’s fine. I don’t know if he’s ever been through it, but he understands that I’m depressed - doesn’t give me hassle about it.”

“Good. Well I’m satisfied for now that you’re not in imminent danger, but you need to keep an eye on those thoughts. I’m going to put some restrictions on your access to sharps though, until you’re feeling better. Electric shavers only and no metal items from the commissary.” He starts typing while Ian comes to terms with the fact that he won’t be drinking pop anytime soon. Not that he cares.

“Are you taking any medication for this?”

“Like, for depression specifically?”

He nods.

“No.”

“Okay, we’ll start you out on 20mg of fluoxetine. If you don’t have any problems we’ll up it to 40mg next week.”

“I thought I wasn’t meant to take SSRIs if I’m bipolar?”

“You’re bipolar?” He glances at his screen again. “Ah yes, I see now. Well you’re on a mood stabilizer and an antipsychotic, so it should be okay. Ideally I’d try you on an atypical anti-depressant like bupropion, but BOP rules state you have to fail 3 SSRIs first so …” He shrugs his shoulders and pushes some buttons. The printer whirs and Ian is presented with a long list of side effects.

“Be particularly alert for any increase in your suicidal or self-harm thoughts; they can get worse before they get better. Unfortunately we are between psychiatrists at the moment, so I will book you in for a follow-up in two weeks with the doctor.” He nods at the C.O. through the office window and stands, indicating that their meeting is over.

“You’re not a doctor?”

“Physician’s Assistant. We’re cheaper. I’m allowed to prescribe and everything though, don’t worry.”

“Yeah I know. I um, I used to be an EMT.”

The C.O. ushers him out of the room at this point, already reading the next number off his clipboard as he does so. Ian heads towards the elevator and waits patiently for it to arrive, scanning over his medication handout:

“… akathisia, anorgasmia, anxiety, chills, confusion, diarrhea, erectile dysfunction, fever, hives, hypomania, increased thirst, insomnia, migraine, nausea, night sweats, racing heartbeat, seizures, tremor, trouble breathing, weight gain, weight loss, yawning …”

Sounds pretty typical of most of the drugs he takes.

The C.O. operating the elevator punches in Ian’s floor and pretty soon he’s back where he started, on the 19th floor. He starts to walk towards his cell, but he’s stopped by a familiar face pushing a book cart around.

“Hey Shorty!”
Damon waves him over and Ian knows better than to ignore him.

“Your cellie says you aint doin’ so good?”

“Yeah, I just came back from sick call.”

“You get any good pills?”

“Nah, just Prozac.”

“Damn, no Wellbutrin?”

“No, he said I couldn’t have that ‘til I’d tried three SSRIs.”

“Yeah, they been cracking down on Welly. Price is getting up there with actual blow! I can still sell that Prozac for ya if you wanna cheek it though.”

“There’s a market for it?”

“Not huge, but it helps with the Molly comedown. Plus some peeps just gotta take something.”

“Huh. Well I think I’ll see if it actually works first but, uh, thanks.”

“Hey, you’re crazy – what antipsychotic you get? Quetiapine?”

“No, Ziprasidone.”

“Fuck. Suzie–Q is hot right now but I can’t get a steady supply.”

“Why would anyone want to take an antipsychotic if they didn’t have to?”

Damon shrugs nonchalantly.

“Some guys say it’s like horse, but all it did was make me sleepy. Oh but I had this crazy dream – there was this beautiful mamacita with these huge titties and I buried my face in them but then they turned into eyes and her belly button was her nose and her coochie changed into a mouth and it was trying to bite my dick off so I ran away but I couldn’t because it turns out I was on a planet with really strong gravity and I was wearing a big space suit so I had to shoot it with my laser guns instead.”

“Right. All I get is not psychotic. And diarrhea.”

“Sucks to be you man.”

He claps him on the back jocularly, but then runs his hand along it and clasps Ian’s bicep, as he lowers his voice.

“Hey, should I be worried about you? You gonna try and exit through the back door? I don’t want to have to make that call to Mickey.”

Hearing that name aloud startles Ian a bit, but he recovers his composure quickly enough.

“No, I’m okay. I’ve been through this a few times before. I’m too tired to figure out how to make a noose.”

Damon, for once, seems taken aback by his frankness. But it’s also enough to get him off his back,
“Well you need anything, you come to me and I’ll help you out. Except jerking it; I aint gonna help you jerk it. Are you jerking it enough?”

“I’m not really in the mood.”

“Well there’s your problem! It’s like one of your five-a-day. You gotta get your vitamins and minerals and rocks off to be healthy! Can’t nobody be depressed when they’re coming, homie.”

Damon’s face breaks out into a divine grin as he contemplates his new calling as the Masturbation Messiah.

“I’ll uh, keep that in mind. Thanks.”

It’s probably a reflection on just how desperate Ian is to feel better that he actually puts Damon’s advice to work that afternoon, when James is out on the yard. Except he really isn’t in the mood, so he has to put what little imagination he has left to use. But his generic spank-bank images aren’t working and (even worse) Damon’s smug face keeps floating into view, which makes him want to wipe that look off it, which reminds him of the time Mickey told him to go do yoga while they fucked in the car, which was the last time they fucked, which – oh.

Soon Ian finds himself with his pillow over his face, trying to suppress the sound of his sobs. It’s not the release Damon had intended for him, but it’s something, at least.

Chapter End Notes

So, anyone want to speculate over this? :-)

https://twitter.com/cameronmonaghan/status/903762123108622336

Or is everyone just too done with Canon Cameron?

*******

Update 2018: I probably would’ve enjoyed S8 a lot more if they’d made Ian the Masturbation Messiah, rather than the Gay Jesus. :-/

(I came up with that name before seeing Cameron’s tweet BTW).
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

60mg of Prozac is enough to return Ian to a state of ‘Walking Wounded’.

Enough energy and brainpower to finally take and pass the GED.

Enough emotion to enjoy what passes for Christmas spirit in prison: making paper chains and snowflakes to decorate the pod; swag bags full of junk food given to each inmate as a gift; turkey leg and stuffing with all the trimmings on the day - even toasting it afterwards with a little jailhouse hooch.

Enough resolve to make the most of his family visit, munching on a Snickers bar from the vending machine with Franny on his lap. They laughed and joked and caught Ian up on all the South Side gossip, carefully tiptoeing around the subject of his plea deal and trial.

Enough kindness not to beat himself up about the tears he knew would be shed as soon as he left the room.

Enough optimism to believe that their group photo, taken in front of a sunset painted on the concrete wall, won’t be the first of many.

But he still feels as if he’s on the outside looking in; not quite connected to his world. He supposes it’s natural enough, really. The anniversary of it has come and gone, so it makes sense that he wouldn’t be feeling great about where he finds himself a year later. Still, he can’t shake a gnawing, restless feeling that’s been growing within him; like he’s an animal at a zoo pacing up and down in front of a glass wall. That’s what prison does to people right? This must be the process of becoming institutionalized.

The Physician’s Assistant is pleased with his progress when he visits at the end of the month. He’s confident that with a little more time the drugs will return him to euthymia.

“It takes up to 6 weeks to get the full effect from a drug and we only went up to 60mg three weeks ago – give it a bit longer and I’m sure you’ll feel better. Are you going to any of the therapy groups?”

“No – my counselor told me about them and everything, but they don’t seem that helpful.”

“How so?”

“Well it’s all AA, NA, anger management stuff. Those aren’t really my issues. I’d feel weird going and talking about myself when I can’t relate. Is there any way to get individual therapy? Or at least a group that’s more about bipolar?”

“Probably not. You’re only a Care Level 2 inmate, so you’d have to be seriously ill. And honestly, as a pre-trial detainee the BOP are going to want to spend as little money on you as possible.”
“Yeah, I guess that makes sense. I suppose I’m just getting a little antsy in here.”

“Do you want to hurt anyone?”

“What? No I told you, I don’t have anger issues. I just feel like I have ants in my pants you know? Like, to the point where my skin seems kind of itchy and crawly sometimes.”

“Interesting. Is this only when you’re lying down? Or at night?”

“No – I … I’m not sure. It comes and goes; I have no idea if it’s at particular times. It’s not something I’ve really thought about, to be honest.”

“What you’re describing can be a side effect of medications – antipsychotics in particular. Have you had any other issues with ziprasidone?”

“No. Not really. I get diarrhea when I don’t take it with food, but that’s about it.”

“Hmmmm, maybe we should dial it back a bit and see if that improves things.”

“Should I try a different one?”

“I’m not allowed to give you quetiapine, so that’s out. We could put you on risperidone or olanzapine, but if you’re having a reaction to one chances are you’ll have it with all of them. It’s more a case of finding the right dose. We definitely don’t want to resort to the typical antipsychotics though, they’re even worse for this kind of thing.”

“Yeah I’ve already been on risperidone, it slowed me down too much and gave me muscle aches. What about the Prozac?”

“Well, as I said, I think you should give it a little longer. But if you’re still dragging we can up the dose to 80mg. Ideally I’d start you on a little Wellbutrin as well, but I’m not allowed to prescribe it as an adjunct to other drugs in here. Let’s see how this goes and we’ll check-in in another two weeks.”

The New Year gifts Ian another welcome boost in energy. He returns to working out for the first time in months and finally feels a bit more in tune with his surroundings. It’s like coming up for air. The catharsis he felt by touching his brick and sending his thoughts to Mickey returns. When he was depressed it had seemed like a sad joke - but now he could almost believe that, wherever he is, Mickey is getting the message.

It’s not entirely good news though. Now that he’s passed his GED Ian doesn’t have class to keep him busy and, due to the prison’s layout and limited facilities, there aren’t a lot of jobs to go around. Since the vast majority of inmates are pre-trial there’s a lot of turnover, but Ian’s at the bottom of the list, so (like many men in his pod) he has to find other ways to occupy his time.

At first he follows James’ example and tries to immerse himself in books but, in all honesty, he’s never been a bookworm. He likes reading one from time to time, but the idea of doing it all day, every day doesn’t fill him with joy. And the books he does borrow don’t seem to grab him the way they should (although he’s probably just making poor choices) and his mind wanders off too regularly for him to follow the story.
Sometimes he heads to the library just to shoot the shit with Damon, but he’s grating on Ian’s nerves more than ever. In short bursts he’s hilarious, but too much time together makes Ian feel like the walls are closing in. He must be channeling the spirit of that road trip down to Texas, where his anxiety rose with every passing mile. Damon’s degree of obnoxiousness had appeared directly correlated then and he supposed a similar thing was happening now, as his trial date loomed ever nearer.

He also resented the fact that Damon was Mickey’s eyes and ears in here and, while he knew he meant well, that same frustration he’d felt when he was first diagnosed was beginning to surface. He could never be completely at ease with him, knowing he was analyzing his every move for signs of – what? Interest? Danger? He doesn’t know exactly, but the knowledge that ultimately Damon’s loyalty lies with Mickey, not him, puts him on edge around him.

Even unobtrusive James was starting to annoy him. Every time he makes a slightly paternalistic suggestion Ian has to swallow the urge to do something correspondingly childish.

Inevitably, the easiest way to occupy his mind turns out to be television. Sports are king and one of the pod’s televisions is always showing it, but the middle of the day timeslot means his interest in what’s on can be hit or miss. He develops a new appreciation for soccer, but still can’t get his head around golf. On days like that he sometimes moves to the Spanish language TV and the guys are usually kind enough to put the subtitles on so he can follow along with whatever telenovela they’re watching. He doesn’t even enjoy them, but he likes to imagine that Mickey might be watching exactly the same thing, drinking a beer next to him and laughing at the stupid dramatic sound effects.

One part of his depression that he hasn’t managed to shake is his dislike of crowds. He’s never really put in the effort to make inroads with the other inmates, although he’s always careful to acknowledge them. Perhaps his guard is up unnecessarily high, but his fear of being attacked - first by Latin Kings and now by the Aryan Brotherhood (thanks Mickey) - has never really left him and he continues to eye his surroundings with suspicion. Add to that the constant turnover of pre-trial detainees and Ian has his excuses for not being more sociable. More often than not, he chooses the TV with the least amount of people watching, which invariably means CSPAN. He may die of boredom before he ever makes it to trial.

And that crawly skin thing. Now that he’s been made aware of it he can’t help noticing it, especially at night when it wakes him up and he spends the next few hours rolling around in his bunk trying to get comfortable. Tensing his muscles brings relief, but it’s very temporary. More often than not he finds himself flopping around like a fish, even biting on his plastic mattress to try to find some kind of release, until James starts complaining about the noise. Eventually he learns to get up and do stretching exercises, like a ghetto yogi, before sleep overwhelms him again.

Working out helps too and Ian’s quickly regaining the muscle he lost during his depression. But with limited access to facilities he’s reduced to burpees and running circles around the sunken rec. area of the pod most of the time.

He relays his complaints to the PA on their next meeting, but he still doesn’t seem too concerned.

“Well it’s great that you’re back to exercising – it’s so important for regulating your mood, especially in a place like this. I’ll see if I can get you marked down for an extra session in the gym each week as a medical need.”
“Thanks, I appreciate that. The crawling skin is so annoying though.”

“Is it getting worse?”

“I’m honestly not sure. It might be, but I’m also so much more aware of it now.”

“Yeah, focusing on it can definitely make it worse. I know it’s not easy, but try to distract your mind. I’ll give you a print out of some breathing exercises that can help calm you too. How are you feeling otherwise? Have your emotions and motivation returned?”

“Yeah, I’m so much more with it now. My energy is back too.”

“But you’re not too good right? Not feeling euphoric about being in prison?”

“Nope, I still hate it here.”

“Great, I’m glad the Prozac appears to be working. We’ll keep it at the current level for now. You’ll need to stay on it for at least another six months, to make sure the depression doesn’t recur. We’ll step down the ziprasidone again though, to try to get that uncomfortable sensation under control. See you in two weeks!”

That night, awake once again in the early hours and feeling like he wants to take his skin off with a cheese grater, he abandons pressing his hand against his brick in favor of his forehead. More than ever, he needs to feel connected. To sense Mickey’s presence. He was the only one who was ever able to soothe his anxiety and he never taught Ian how. Once he was gone Ian had relied on Ativan, but he’s not allowed those drugs now that he’s in prison. He doesn’t know what he’s doing, what he’s expecting - he just knows he needs a sign.

“I miss you,” escapes his lips without him even thinking it.

“Help me Mick.”

The concrete under his forehead is warm, radiating heat. Soon his body is inundated with it and he finally relaxes under his own weight, relief flooding his senses.

He’s still there. He’s still listening.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this is one is rather medical and not that interesting. It is relevant to the story and I guess I also want to illustrate quite what a crap-shot it can be with trying to balance meds.
Chapter 19

It takes Ian a while to piece together exactly what it is that’s been bothering him. Some fear lurking in the shadows that he can’t quite name, becomes clear as day when he receives a routine letter from his lawyer. It’s the very ordinariness of it that finally allows the pieces of the puzzle to fall into place and he sits there reading and re-reading it again for signs of any hidden clues.

The lack of an offer of a plea deal after several months had struck Ian as odd. He’s adamant that he won’t take it, but he still expected one to be made. The Feds must know that he’s their best chance of locating Mickey right? He’d been looking forward to throwing it back in their faces.

But they’d been quiet – too quiet. And while his lawyer continually reassured him that things were moving behind the scenes, Ian was becoming increasingly skeptical. She always said that a complicated case like this would take a lot of time and bargaining to flesh out a deal, but Ian had yet to meet with, or be questioned by anyone. How could they be bargaining if they don’t even know what he has to say?

He realizes then, that there’s not going to be a deal, that there was never any intention of making a deal because the Feds knew he wouldn’t snitch. Instead they’re gathering what intelligence they can from his activities in prison. He recoils in fear when he thinks about the conversations he’s had with Damon – Shit, maybe this whole thing is part of Damon's plea deal?!

He could have been wearing a wire the whole time and Ian would never have known. He’d always thought it was strange that the two of them had ended up in the same prison and are able to interact with each other, despite being in different pods.

*That call to Mickey must have been tapped. SHIT!*

It may have been months ago, but Mickey must still be wiring commissary money to Damon. He needs to get a message to him, to warn him, but how? He thinks of Mandy but he knows his outgoing calls and letters are being read so he needs to think of a code - some way to alert her without arousing the suspicions of the Feds.

*Fuck, I’m not smart enough for this!*

He considers writing to his lawyer, but decides against it. He knows attorney-client mail is supposed to be privileged, but at this point he seriously doubts that’s the case. He doesn’t think she’s in on it, but he can’t risk feeding her any more information. The intelligence they gain might not be admissible in court, but it could still be enough to hurt Mickey.

He’s been pacing up and down in his cell for what feels like hours when James returns from his work shift looking unusually drained. Ian briefly considers telling James what he’s discovered – he’s probably got the brains and resources to smuggle a message out, but concludes he needs to keep this as close to his chest as he can. Ultimately he probably can’t trust anyone in here, so he’s going to have to try and hide his secret.

“That’s a very slow method if you’re trying to escape.”

The line catches Ian off guard.

“What?”

James nods in his direction.
“Pacing back and forth dragging your hand against the wall. It’ll take you about a thousand years to wear a hole through it. You could probably do it with tin cans in about 200 though.”

Truthfully, Ian hadn’t even realized his hand had been scraping along the wall.

“What’s got you so agitated?”

“Nothing really, I just want to get out on the yard.”

“In this weather? Not gonna happen, it’s blizzarding out there.”

“I know, hence the pacing.”

“Well there’s better ways to burn off energy, why don’t you go and do some exercises in the rec area? I’m really whacked and could do with a little lie down.”

Ian eyes him suspiciously but makes his way out of the cell, quietly removing his letter from his lawyer as he goes. He needs to find a way to destroy it. He settles for the showers, shredding it into the smallest pieces he can and stuffing sections down the drain of each cubicle. He figures that even if they’re found, the water and soap will render what remains illegible.

Of course, as soon as he steps back into the main part of the pod he runs into the person he least wants to see right now.

“Shorty! How’s it going?!”

*Stupid snitching Damon with his stupid smarmy face, pushing that stupid squeaky book cart. It even sounds like a pig.*

Ian can’t believe he didn’t realize Damon was squealing until now – the evidence was right in front of him this whole time! Thankfully he’s rewarded for his observations with another flash of insight.

*Of course! The cart! It’s so fucking simple! Okay Ian be cool, be cool. You can do this.*

“Yeah fine I guess. Not much has happened since I last saw you.”

He bobs up and down on his toes in an earnest attempt to appear placid, but Damon just gives him a strange look.

“You gotten hooked on *Señora Acero* yet? It’s what everyone in my pod is watching. I know you said you thought the *novelas* were kinda silly, but this one’s badass!”

“No, uh I’ve not seen that one yet, I’ll have to check it out.”

Ian’s running his fingers along the spines of the books, checking their titles carefully for anything that seems significant. Who knows what might be lurking within?

“You after something to read? I can recommend if you like?”

*Shit. Should I say yes? Is it a trick?*

“Oh uh, sure, why not?”

“Well, you like crime? I got some good mystery thrillers. Or how about spies? You like James Bond and shit like that?”
He pulls out a John le Carré volume and places it in Ian’s hands, who starts to thumb through it rapidly, scanning for anything suspicious.

*It’s got to be bugged somehow, maybe in the spine like the phone was.*

In his haste and excitement he fumbles it and retrieves the tome quickly, fingers shaking visibly.

“Hey holmes, you get into someone’s crack stash or something? Why you so antsy? You wired?”

“What?! No! How dare – I’m not a fucking snitch!”

The word resonates around the pod like a dog whistle. Ian hadn’t said it loudly, but the whole room suddenly quiets, eyes swiveling in anticipation of what is about to go down. Luckily for Ian, Damon is struck by a debilitating bout of laughter that leaves him doubled over on his cart, gasping for air. Kneeling, he brings his hands together in a prayerful position and casts his watering eyes to heaven.

“Lord have mercy! I finally understand what you see in this son of a bitch Mykhailo. He’s so godamned funny!”

Ian would be angry if he wasn’t so fucking nervous right now.

“Hey you started it! You’re giving me spy books and calling me Sherlock Holmes then asking if I’m wired! What am I supposed to think?”

Unfortunately, rather than bolstering Ian’s position, his argument only serves to induce a fresh bout of the giggles in Damon.

“Ho – ho – Holmes? Oh my God, you’re the whitest *wedoo* I ever met! I said homes, like *homie* man - not some motherfucker in tweed! How do you come up with this shit?”

A few inmates, reassured that a brawl doesn’t look imminent, start to approach the cart to return their books. Ian’s had about all the Damon he can take for the moment, so he slots the book back roughly and turns towards his cell, when another thought strikes him.

*Damon can’t be there all the time … but the other inmates can. They must be recording their observations in the books then giving them to Damon!*

He grabs the book an elderly gentleman was proffering for return.

“You know what, I think I’ll take this one actually. I always wanted to read about … *Healthy Living for a Healthy Bowel.*”

Damon cocks an eyebrow in amusement but doesn’t try to dissuade him.

“Well you did say you’d been having trouble sleeping, I guess this might help. But hang on a sec., I gotta stamp it.”

He opens the front cover and stamps the paper taped to it with a date next week. Ian watches carefully, but he can’t see any evidence of electronics. He supposes there might be a microchip hidden somewhere though.

Ian snatches back the book and, with a brief wave over his shoulder, trots back to the privacy of his cell. Sitting cross legged on the floor he rips off the dustcover and bends the spine back all the way, shaking the book and, when nothing falls out, bangs it on the ground to try to dislodge whatever’s been hidden in it.
Of course he’d forgotten all about James.

“Hey Red, I really wasn’t kidding about needing a lie down. Can you go do that somewhere else please? It’s bad enough you’re keeping me up half the night with your fidgeting, why you gotta do it during the day too?”

“Ah shit, sorry. Just give me a minute and I’ll be out of your hair.”

He gets up and stands by the door, trying to look through the glass at an angle so that he won’t be seen.

“Who are you hiding from?”

“Oh uh, just Damon. Had enough of him for one day.”

“So you’re going to torture a library book? Seems pretty passive-aggressive.”

But Ian isn’t listening.

“Hey, you hear that?”

“What?”

“Like a really high-pitched hum. Electrical noise or something.”

“No.”

“I think - I think it’s coming from the air vent.”

Ian climbs up on the toilet and squints into the grate above it.

“I hope you’re going to clean that, now you’ve got your shoes all over it.”

“Yeah, it’s definitely coming from in here. Come listen.”

“Jesus, you really aren’t going to give me any fucking peace are you?”

James grumbles as he hauls himself upright and over to the unit to press his ear against the grate.

“I don’t hear anything.”

“You sure? It’s pretty distinct to me.”

James shrugs his shoulders.

“It may be an age thing. You loose your ability to hear high frequency sounds as you get older. Has it always been there?”

“No, I’ve only just noticed it.”

“Hmmm. Maybe they’re having problems with the HVAC system? Anyway, since you’re determined to drive me crazy, I’m gonna remove myself from the picture and go take a shower. For the love of God, please clean the toilet and be gone by the time I get back, or I’m going to beat your ass. Seriously. I don’t look it, but I’m a good boxer.”

He shuffles around gathering up his stuff and heads out the door, but not before picking up a book of his own. That draws Ian’s attention, and as soon as the door shuts Ian’s sneaking over to it to watch
Sure enough, James is walking towards Damon, towel over his shoulder and arm outstretched to offer the book. How could he have known he was out there? They exchange a few words, but Ian can’t decipher them so he slinks away. If there’s some kind of electrical device in the vent he needs to get as far away from it as possible. It’s probably just an audio bug because he didn’t see a light for a camera, but just to be safe he slides sideways along the wall, at an angle that wouldn’t be visible. He settles on the floor again and resumes his inspection of the book. He really can’t see anything in the spine’s void, so he flicks through the pages looking for anything of interest. There’s some underlining here and there and a few notes in the margins, but Ian doesn’t know what he’s looking for. He’s sure there’s some significance, but he doesn’t hold the key to crack the code.

Frustrated, he tosses the book to one side and looks around the cell. His eyes come to rest on the toilet. He’s supposed to clean it. Ian grabs his shampoo and a washcloth and squats down beside it, wiping away his shoe marks. He and James alternate on who cleans it each day, but despite their efforts the smell of piss still manages to cling to it persistently and he doesn’t know why.

**URINE!**

Hanging out with Damon does have its uses and one of them is that Ian’s picked up a lot of penitentiary tricks of the trade. He’s now pretty adept at whipping up his own meals with the meagerest of rations and even knows how to make a ‘fifi’ – a sex toy fashioned from a latex glove and a towel (Damon had insisted he learn). However, it was another of his disgusting tidbits that was now racing through Ian’s mind on repeat: you can use urine like invisible ink to write hidden messages.

He scrambles back to the book and lifts it to his nose, inhaling deeply. He’s not sure what it smells of exactly – kind of musty, but not necessarily from ammonia. He flicks to another section and breaths it in again with similar results.

“What are you doing?”

James has returned from his shower, his hair neatly combed and slicked back, but still in his shower shoes.

“Oh, actually, you know what? Don’t tell me. I think I’ve had enough Ian adventures for one day. Thanks for cleaning the toilet though, one less shitty thing for me to do. The fucking shower drains are backed up and I’ve been up to my ankles in other men’s hairy jizz water for the last 10 minutes. So please, will you continue on your helpful streak and let me take my nap now?”

“That’s a sure thing, I’ll just grab some stuff.” Ian reaches for his book along with some pens and paper, as James collapses onto his bunk with a relieved sigh. Just as he’s heading out the door though, the loud buzzer goes off overhead for roll call and a murderous “Fucking Hell!” follows him out.
Ian had to wait a few days for his commissary order to come through. Despite being all too aware of the other inmates whispering about him, he tried his best to appear oblivious so that their suspicions wouldn’t be raised further. It was not fun.

His heightened awareness of electrical noise is irritating the fuck out of him. He wants to scream at every humming strip-light, fuzzy radio and flickering television. But even with these items silenced there’s still the constant drone of static in his head. He thinks that if he had access to a melon baller, he’d crack open his skull and used it to scoop out the offending grey matter. He never knew it was possible to feel this uncomfortable in your own skin. It doesn’t help that it feels as if every molecule in his body is vibrating - but not as one. They’re anarchic, jostling each other in a perverse demonstration of Brownian motion.

He hates his meds.

Ian’s buzzing around the pod like a bee – no a fucking hornet, just trying to control his agitation when his mind finally turns a cog in the right direction.

Meth.

That was the last time he felt like this. But he’s not high right? It’s not quite as intense as it was in the club, but his mind is certainly racing. Could they be drugging him, maybe with a low dose? It would explain why he’s having so much trouble sleeping. He’s never felt withdrawal symptoms, so they’d have to be doing it at regular intervals – like at the pill line.

Ian resolves to cheek his meds that evening and prepare for the mother of all comedowns tonight.

Soon the commissary cart arrives and he runs forward excitedly to receive his coveted baby oil, plus various sundry items. Ian scurries back to his cell to stash them before James returns.

Then finally, finally, the rest of the men head to the elevator to go to the gym and Ian hangs back, desperate to be alone. He hops onto his bunk, thrilled at being able to talk to Mickey at last. He presses his head against the brick and transmits his thoughts, telling him his realization about the meth and his commissary order.

Soon I’ll know; soon I’ll be able to beat them at their own game.

He feels the growing warmth in the cement against his skin, so he opens his eyes and pulls back enough to watch the mortar surrounding it glow brightly as his message is relayed.

At least I’ve got one line of communication they’ll never know about. They’ll never catch him, as long as I can talk to him.

Then he puts the next step of his plan into action. Grabbing a large book, his legal pad and pens, plus a can of pop, he leaves the cell and spreads them out on one of the tables nearby. He sits there
reading long enough for the C.O. in the control room to take notice of him, then knocks the open can
to the floor.

“Aw shit.”

He walks over and knocks on the one-way glass to rouse the C.O.

“Hey um, I knocked over my pop, I’m gonna need a mop.”

The C.O. grumbles at being dragged away from his computer, but he gets up and locks the door
before moving towards the off-limits utility cupboard.

Ian jerks his head over his shoulder and calls out: “I’m gonna go get my shampoo to clean it.” and
the C.O. doesn’t question it.

Trying his best to look casual, he opens the cell next to his own and slips inside. He knows he only
has seconds, so he glances around and thankfully spots what he’s looking for immediately. He grabs
the top book from a stack sitting on the metal desk and waltzes out, pulling his bottle of shampoo
from his waistband as he goes. The bored C.O. is pushing a bucket on wheels with a mop towards
him and doesn’t notice as Ian sets the book down beside his own.

“Thanks, I’ll be quick.”

Leaving the mop with the C.O. he lifts the bucket and walks to the cell on the other side of his own,
opening the door nonchalantly and turning the tap to the sink on. He finds a large plastic cup nearby
and leaves it to fill, while he looks around for more books. He spies two relatively small ones he
thinks he can hide in his jumpsuit and, after emptying another cup’s worth into the bucket, grabs
them and stuffs them down his pants. After the fourth fill he wipes the cup and the sink down and
checks to make sure he hasn’t disturbed anything. It looks okay, so he picks up the bucket and walks
out.

The C.O. has been busy throwing paper towels down to absorb most of the mess, so all Ian has to do
is soap and rinse the floor. It takes all of a minute and, after wringing the mop out, passes it back to
the C.O. and picks up the shampoo and bucket. This time he goes to his own cell and tosses the
hidden books aside as soon as the door closes, before pouring the dirty water out into the toilet and
flushing. The C.O. then takes the bucket and Ian resettles in his spot, drinking the remains of his pop
as he skims one of the books.

When he feels enough time has passed he gets up and tosses his can, then wanders over to a TV and
has a casual flick through the channels. Pretending nothing has caught his eye Ian returns to his table
and gathers his books up before heading back to his cell - the C.O. hopefully none the wiser.

Once inside he goes about hiding the books by wrapping them in his clean clothes in his tub, then
grabs his shower things and heads out again. He feels giddy under the warm water, satisfied that his
plan is coming together. The liquid begins to pool around his ankles though, so he cuts it short as
soon as he can.

I guess I really did block the showers.

Ian lies awake for what feels like hours waiting for James’ snores to hit a regular and definite rhythm,
so that he knows he’s deeply asleep. Finally convinced, he crawls out of bed and carefully pulls his
tub out from under the bed and unwraps his cloth bundles, revealing their hidden bounty.

It had cost him six packs of mackerel to get a kitchen guy to smuggle him two plastic pots of
applesauce, but he knows it’ll be worth it. Ian has already cleaned them out, so he sets to work filling
them with baby oil. Next he threads the cotton string he’s horded through a hole in the foil lid and
allows it to sit and soak up the oil. He does the same for the other pot, then wraps some foil around
the top of the string to form a wick and also stop it from sliding down into the oil.

Finally, Ian gathers the books around him and pulls out a AA battery. He peels the protective paper
near the negative terminal back to expose more metal, then touches one end of a strip of foil to the
spot and the other to the flat face. This short circuits the battery and causes the foil catch light,
providing him with enough fire to light each of the makeshift oil lamps. He’s ready to begin.

The thing about writing messages in urine is that they can only be seen once you heat the paper up.
Ian flicks to a few pages in his stolen books that he’d marked as looking particularly promising and
begins to hold each over the flame. He’s not sure exactly how long he needs to do it to make the
words appear, so he waits until the underside of the page starts to blacken, then moves it away. Once
or twice an edge catches fire, but he’s able to quickly stub it out and continue his experiments.
Finally something promising seems to take form, so he-

“THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?”

James jumps down from his bunk in one fell swoop and barrels towards a frozen Ian. He’s stiffened
in surprise so completely that he doesn’t even notice that the book he’s holding is now well alight,
and he barely moves before a sucker punch sends him flat on his back. James does actually know
how to throw a punch.

James picks up the flaming book and tosses it towards the toilet, but misses and knocks the sauce
containers while he’s at it, slicking the other books with oil and igniting a real fire in the process.

“FUCK!” he shouts again, making the decision to go after his projectile first. Ian drags himself
upright a bit and tries to stamp on the mess, but he’s only wearing socks and sweatpants, so all he
succeeds in doing is spreading the oil around and getting his clothes soaked in it. James returns and
grabs the blanket from Ian’s bed and uses it to scoop up the burning books, then dumps the whole
pyre in the toilet. There’s an angry hissing of steam and the fire is not extinguished instantly due to
the size of the bundle, but at least it’s contained in a non-flammable spot.

The alarm on the wall starts to wail and it’s at this point that Ian looks down and realizes he’s now
what’s on fire. Before he can do anything though, he’s tackled by James and forced to the floor
again.

“FUCKING HELL IAN!” James screams as he grapples with the struggling man beneath him.
Surprisingly dexterously, he twists one of Ian’s arms up behind his back, forcing him into submission
and leveraging Ian into rolling over onto his stomach.

“I’m going to teach you a fucking lesson!” James hisses into his ear and before Ian can even fathom what that means he feels his pants and boxers being forced down
his legs. He starts to wriggle again but James uses his other hand to pin his neck to the ground,
pressing Ian’s face hard into the concrete and using his body weight to subdue his legs.

“Jesus Christ, hold still, you’re making this harder than it needs to be.”

Ian’s not sure if he’s still on fire, but it doesn’t really matter when he hears James whisper: “At least
the baby oil makes things easy.” He starts to flop desperately like a fish, trying to buck James off his back, but a tremendous blow to the back of the head stills him. Ian doesn’t know if he actually passes out or not, but the first sensation he recognizes after is one of intense nausea and of drunken rocking, followed by ringing in his ears. While trying to remember how to move, a voice begins to materialize and Ian takes a moment to recognize it as his own. He’s babbling and his brain is unable to reconcile the words with their meanings, but James’ response lands strong and clear:

“Who’s going to believe you? You’re fucking crazy!”

Finally Ian’s legs remember what they’re meant to be doing. He can’t get to his feet because his pants have been pulled down, but he can still rock back to his knees then swiftly fling himself sideways hard enough to send them both crashing into the wall. Ian braces his shoulders to cushion the impact somewhat, but James takes the full force of his and some of Ian’s bodyweight. It’s enough to get him to loosen his grip on Ian’s arms and he lunges forward, scrabbling at his pants as he goes, trying to pull them up.

Then there’s a hissing sound and they both start to cough and splutter. Ian claws at his face as his eyes begin to burn. The next moment the cell door is wrenched open and shadowy figures rush the room, pushing them both up against the wall with Perspex shields. Ian screams in agony, but James instantly calms and puts his hands on his head and an extra guard moves to cover Ian.

“Stop Resisting! STOP RESISTING!”

“He must be off his meds or something. He tried to set the cell on fire and I had to stop him.” James says as he allows himself to be cuffed.

“You’re the ones who keep dosing me with meth! I know all about your plan to get me to snitch!”

Ian’s still struggling, even with his face pinned against the wall, but he sees the look and then nod the other officers give each other. He knew he was right and he knows what’s going to happen next when he feels the jab to his neck. He concentrates on getting the words out before he looses consciousness.

“He tried – he-tried-rape…”
Chapter 21

The first time Ian wakes he’s in a hospital bed. He feels claustrophobic and seasick, but when he tries to roll over onto his stomach he can’t because he’s strapped to the gurney by restraints. His movement alerts a nurse, who pulls back the curtains surrounding the bed, and Ian sees a hallway with plastic chairs through the window in front of him. He’s still in the MCC. As he becomes more aware of his surroundings he also comprehends that the source of his claustrophobia is the spit hood he’s wearing. His eyes and lips feel raw and his throat is as parched as a desert.

“How are you feeling?” she asks.

“Water,” is all Ian can croak out.

She moves round to his side and pushes a button on the bed to move it into a sitting position.

“Will you promise me you’re not going to try to bite me?”

Ian’s a little taken aback by the question, but he nods and she peels the spit hood back part way, so that his nose and mouth are exposed. Then she guides a tube with a bite valve towards his mouth and Ian chomps down, gratefully sucking the liquid until he begins to cough. Using the little slack he has with his wrist restraints he leans further forward and she claps him hard on the back several times as he inhales deeply.

“Can you breathe okay?”

Ian coughs a few more times for good measure, but nods and she’s kind enough to remove the hood completely.

“I feel like shit.”

“I’m not surprised, you took a big hit of tear gas and ketamine. You vomited a lot, I thought we were going to have to intubate you.”

Ian notices that his head feels clammy and realizes that his hair is wet. They must have showered him too.

Suddenly there’s a groaning from the next bed and the nurse scurries over to attend to the man. A rush of adrenaline hits Ian as his memories start to return and he registers who must be lying next to him.

“Where’s James?! Keep him away from me! He’s going to kill me!”

He struggles against his restraints even as his EMT training tells him it’s futile.

At this point a C.O., that Ian hadn’t observed, springs up from his chair in the corner and strides forward.

“Calm yourself! You’re in no danger, but if you keep struggling we’ll have to restrain you further.”

“But he’s right there!” Ian motions with his head towards the bed and it’s then that he locks eyes with a shining pair visible under the crook of the nurse’s arm. His fear surges higher when he sees that James is not restrained either.

“He tried to rape me! He’s going to kill me as soon as you leave the room!”
“You really think that old guy is going to hurt you?”

“He’s not old! He’s like 55! He’s my cellie; I know how sneaky he is. He fooled me too!”

The nurse and the officer exchange looks.

“Inmate, how old are you?” he asks, addressing the man in the other bed.

“76.”

“Are you going to try to murder this man?”

“Not likely. Don’t have the strength no more, with this shitty heart. I could talk to a friend though, if he wants.”

“Thank you, but that won’t be necessary. Also, I don’t intend to leave either of you alone, so don’t expect any murder on my watch.”

The nurse comes back to Ian, pulling the curtain into place as she does so, so that his view of the other bed is obscured.

“Ian, you’ve had a rough night. You’ve got some burns to your legs and we’re monitoring you for a concussion; you need to relax and trust us.”

“How can I, when you keep dosing me with meth?”

“With meth?”

“So that I’ll talk too much to Damon. I know he’s spying on me as part of his plea deal.”

The C.O. is holding his arms crossed over his chest, trying not to laugh.

“If the Bureau of Prisons was dosing every prisoner they wanted to prosecute with meth, we’d be full of nothing but tweakers talking about the Illuminati. Trust me – no one in here is getting free meth.”

“But it’s true – it’s just like when I’ve used it on the outside! I need to move around and I’m crawling out of my skin.”

The nurse reviews his chart for a few moments, flipping through the pages and pointing one or two things out to the C.O.

“You sound very uncomfortable Ian, you may be having some problems with the medicines you take. Let me give you something to help you relax.”

“What kind of thing?”

“Ativan.”

“I don’t trust you.”

“Ian, if we really are dosing you with meth, this’ll make you feel better. And if we aren’t it’ll make you relax anyway. You don’t have much to lose here.”

“I don’t want it.”
The nurse looks over to the C.O. who nods.

“I’ll sign off on it.”

She moves around to Ian’s side and prepares a syringe. This makes him more agitated and he pulls at his wrist cuffs, even though he knows it’s pointless because he’s got an IV in his arm.

“I DON’T WANT IT!”

But she injects the fluid into a port on the line anyway, before rapidly stepping out of Ian’s range and returning to his chart to amend it.

“I think he needs some haldol too.” she says to the C.O.

“I agree. No one who’s faking it turns down benzos.”

She disappears for a minute and returns with some forms and a vial, from which she draws a dose with a new syringe.

“I told you, I DON’T WANT ANY OF THIS!”

“I’m sorry Ian, but you’re not capable consent right now. This is an emergency and what we’re doing is legal.”

She deftly injects the drug into Ian’s line while remaining as far away from him as possible, although it doesn’t occur to him to spit at her anyway.

Ian can already feel his body relaxing from the first injection. He knows the combination of the two will probably send him to sleep pretty fast. His throat still feels like the Sahara though, so he asks for water again. The C.O. and nurse look at one another uneasily, clearly not trusting him anymore.

“I won’t bite.”

But the nurse walks away instead, although she returns a second later wearing a Perspex head visor. She then repeats the procedure with the water line and Ian drinks deeply, trying to quench his thirst. He shakes his head when he’s done and then lays back as the nurse returns his bed to a recumbent position.

“The doctor will be here in the morning, try to relax into it – don’t fight the sedation. You need to rest.”

He’s still frightened James is coming for him, but all sees for the next few minutes before he succumbs to sleep, is the two people at the foot of his bed filling out paperwork.

The next time Ian wakes he’s cold. His body is heavy, but rubbery and his head feels like it’s full of water, sloshing around in a bathtub. It takes him a few moments to understand that he’s being shaken. Blearily he forces his eyes open and tries to focus, but everything is still swimming in fog.

“Ian? Ian can you hear me?”

There’s a hand on his shoulder, shaking him.

“Can you help me sit him up?”
The world starts to tilt, although Ian still doesn’t really know which way is up. Something icy cold is now pressing against his calves and he tries again to raise his heavy eyelids.

“Ian, are you there?”

There’s someone directly in front of him – a woman, he realizes, as his brain starts to process the words. She’s tapping his left cheek incessantly. Slowly things start to come into focus as Ian regains his lucidity. The woman looks familiar, although he still can’t place her.

“Ian it’s me, Miranda. Do you remember? I’m your attorney.”

Ian can’t quite remember how to talk but he meets her eyes and lets his head loll in the best imitation of a nod he can give.

“Do you remember where you are? What happened?”

“There was a fire. I – what day is it?”

“It’s Friday. It happened last night.”

Ian’s throat has closed up again. He coughs out a ‘water’ and the C.O. that he’s only just noticed is next to him reaches over for a bottle. He opens it then proffers it, but Ian doesn’t immediately discern that his arms are inside the strange tent-like garment covering his body. He wriggles one of his arms through a hole by his shoulder and drinks deeply.

He takes the time to look around at his surroundings. He’s in a cell, but there’s no bed or desk, just a steel toilet/sink unit in the corner. The cold thing on his calves is a concrete ledge he’s sitting on, just a few inches off the ground. There’s an orangey glow coming from the slit window, so it must be night. He’s naked, save for the stiff, quilted thing he’s wrapped in, secured to his body with big Velcro patches on the side and over the shoulders. A cold draught is billowing around his legs, so he tries to push the fabric down between his thighs to shield them and protect his modesty.

“The hell is this thing?”

“It’s a safety smock – for your own protection,” the C.O. answers.

“My own protection from what?”

“So you can’t hurt yourself.” Miranda replies gently.

It takes a minute for his brain to catch up to the words, but slowly their significance and his surroundings sink in. He’s on suicide watch.

“I’m cold.”

“I know. When we came in you were all curled up with your arms and legs inside, like a turtle.”

She turns to the C.O.: “I’d like to have a privileged talk with my client now. Could you see if you can find him a blanket too?”

He nods and leaves without a further word, taking the bottle cap with him. Ian brings his hand up and runs it over his face, then back over his head. There are some very tender spots.

“Ian I’m here because the authorities want to send you to get emergency psychiatric care. The doctor thinks you’re psychotic and having a manic episode.”
“I don’t feel manic,” Ian slurs out.

“You’ve had a few doses of haldol and a lot of sedatives, so I imagine not. They don’t have the facilities here to help you properly, but they can’t transfer you against your will without a court order.”

Ian’s brain is still creeping along as he tries to follow her point.

“So you’re here because…”

“I’m here to explain what your options are and what will happen in each scenario.”

“And they are…”

“You can voluntarily consent to treatment, or you can refuse.”

“Where will they take me?”

“To Cook County, initially, for the emergency treatment. They have a hospital there. After that I don’t know, but probably to another facility for more specialized care. I don’t think you’ll come back here, you have more complex needs than they can handle.”

“And if I won’t go?”

“There will be a hearing to determine whether you’re competent to decline treatment. It would probably be Monday at the earliest. I can represent you, or you can represent yourself, if you wish. You’ll stay here until then.”

“Are they going to keep drugging me?”

“I don’t think so, unless you get agitated again. They were within their rights initially, but you’re aware enough now that I would feel comfortable advocating against it, if that’s what you want. Again, they can overrule it, if they can prove it’s an emergency, but otherwise they need to get a court order.”

“But they’ll drug me if I go to the hospital?”

“Have you been admitted for mania before?”

“Yeah, once, voluntarily.”

“Well I imagine it will be similar, although still in a correctional environment. You can still refuse treatment if you go, but again there will be a hearing to determine competency.”

Ian is quiet for a few minutes as he tries to turn the information over in his mind, excruciatingly slowly.

“I just don’t want them to drug me anymore. They keep dosing me with meth and I feel horrible. I want to climb out of my skin.”

“How do you feel now? I’m sure it’s not great, but do you feel better than before?”

“Sort of, it’s a different kind of awful at least. My skin has stopped crawling.”

“I think the sedatives are helping, even if you’re foggy now. Can I be honest with you Ian? I’m not making a judgment on whether it’s true, but setting your cell on fire, accusing the guards of drugging
you with meth; I think you have very little chance of passing a competency screening if you allege things like that. And if you do pass, you’ll likely face disciplinary action for the fire and fighting with your cell-mate.”

“WELL WHAT THE FUCK WAS I SUPPOSED TO DO?”

His sudden outburst takes her by surprise and she scrambles backwards in alarm, eyes darting to the red panic button by the door.

“I – sorry – I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to scare you! I would never hurt you.”

She quickly regains her composure, but remains sitting where she is, out of Ian’s reach.

“I’m still just so confused and pissed about what happened, the idea of having to take the blame is…”

“Let me make sure I understand you correctly. Are you saying it was your cell-mate who started the fire?”

“No, well, sort of. He knocked over the lamps and that’s what really set it going. But I’d never let him rape me without putting up a fight.”

“Your cell-mate tried to assault you?”

“Yeah, he was so angry about the fire he wanted revenge. But I got away and then they rushed the room.”

She looks at him long and hard and Ian has the distinct impression that she’s sizing him up, unsure of his truthfulness. He hates that James’ prophesy may prove true.

“That does cast a new light on things. We’ll need to talk with the disciplinary board about it before you face any sanctions hearings. But it doesn’t alter the immediate issue – are you going to go to the hospital willingly?”

“I, ugh. I don’t know. I’m so tired and heavy. Can I sleep on it? I don’t want to decide when I’m all fuzzy and sedated.”

“Of course. But be aware that you may not be as clear headed as you think, once the sedation wears off. I’ll tell them it’s a no for now and get things rolling for a treatment hearing. You can change your mind and sign the paperwork at any time.”

The guard has returned and is watching them through the window.

“Are we done for now?” she asks and Ian nods, so she motions to the guard to come in. He’s holding a plastic food tray and has a large blanket draped over the other arm. He places the tray in front of Ian and drops the blanket on the bed ledge. It’s made of the same stiff material as his smock.

“The hell is this?” Ian asks in disgust, as he pokes a cold cuboid mass on the tray - the only item on it.

“Nutraloaf,” the guard replies. “It’s the only thing we’re allowed to feed you in here. It meets all your nutritional needs without being a safety hazard.”

Despite the fact that Ian hasn’t eaten in 24 hours, he’s not hungry, and he doesn’t think he’s about to start with that. Besides, he’s still suspicious that they may be trying to dose him.
“I don’t want it.”

The guard is extremely unsurprised by his response and picks up the tray again, motioning for Miranda to join him.

“Think about it,” she calls to Ian as she gets up and walks away.

The door clangs shut behind her and Ian immediately sets to work cocooning himself, as best he can, with the blanket.

Five minutes later the light in his cell goes off and the only visible illumination is from the red light next to the camera that’s mounted on the ceiling. There’s no doubt they’re watching him now.
The third time Ian wakes he’s exactly where he was before. He’s more alert now, and with that comes the disappointment of realizing that it hasn’t all been a strange dream. He really is on suicide watch in a federal prison. Worse still, as the remaining heaviness and fog lifts, he becomes aware of that familiar creeping in his bones. It’s mild, for the moment, but bound to increase as the residual sedatives filter from his system.

He pushes the blanket back and rolls awkwardly to his feet. The camera light provides enough eerie illumination for him to find the toilet, but he has to untape his smock to free his cock, as it’s too bulky and stiff to hitch up around his hips. It’s still dark outside and he has no idea how long he’s been asleep. He paces the cell a little while, walking off the itch he’s beginning to feel in his limbs as he tries to remember everything that’s happened in the past 24+ hours. He really doesn’t know what to make of it. Miranda was right about one thing - his mind isn’t clearer. It’s not swampy; he doesn’t feel sedated - but that clarity of conviction he’d had is gone.

His brain starts to whir through various scenes and conversations from the recent past; barely registering one before another replaces it. Eventually though, a question manages to break through the cacophony – is he going to the hospital? He can’t help but remember his last inpatient stay and the horrible daze that had surrounded the episode. This would surely be worse as an inmate, with no family to return to at the end. But one desire looms larger than his fears - getting out of the MCC. At this point all he wants is to get as far away as possible from this cell, the stupid smock, James. He doesn’t care if it means he gets moved downstate once his treatment’s over. Will he be safe there? He can’t say. Maybe, since Cook County is a state rather than federal institution. Maybe not. He certainly doesn’t feel safe here though.

An inconvenient observation then floats to the surface. He hasn’t taken any pills in at least 36 hours, but the uncomfortable feeling is only just returning. He knows they’ve drugged him with something several times, but he hasn’t seen it since he was in the infirmary. He didn’t touch the food they offered and he saw the guard open his bottle of water. Maybe they’ve been sneaking in to inject him, but that seems difficult without any sedation. Ian concedes that perhaps the itch’s return is a consequence of the drugs wearing off rather than because of them. Which begs the question - have they really been dosing him with meth all this time? His theory that had once felt viscerally real now had a few holes that he couldn’t unsee.

Ian gathers his resolve and starts to wave his arms in an exaggerated fashion at the camera. He hopes someone in the control room is watching, because he feels like the crazy idiot they must assume he is. He calls out once or twice for good measure and soon hears the clang of metal on metal, as doors are opened. Then the hatch on his door drops down, so Ian starts to speak.

“I uh, I want to go to the hospital. I’m consenting to treatment.”

The C.O. walks away without another word, but returns with some papers and the skinny internal cartridge of a ballpoint pen. There’s no toilet paper for Ian to grip it with, so his writing looks shaky, but he signs and slides the pen and paper back through the hatch anyway.

“It might take a few hours to arrange transport; I’d try to get some more sleep. You want anything to eat or drink?”

“Yeah, please.”

Another minute later a block of Nutraloaf and a bottle of water are slid through the hatch.
“Cap,” the guard motions at Ian as he unscrews the lid, and he hands it over. The block of food looks as bad as it did the first time around, but he’s finally hungry enough to eat it. It’s awful - he doesn’t understand how something so bland can be so unpleasant, but it is. Something about the texture, perhaps.

There’s one final indignity waiting for Ian.

A few hours later voices and the rattling sound of a gurney being pushed, alert him that his ride to Cook County is probably here. Sure enough, the door clangs when the lock slowly opens and Ian pushes himself upright and squints as the light overhead is switched on. His heart then sinks almost as quickly – of course this is what would happen. Sue recognizes him in the same instant and whips her head away, as if she’s seen something terrible. The C.O. seems to notice the reaction as he steps towards Ian, but he blocks her view and gives her time to school her features.

“This crew is here to transfer you to Cermak hospital at Cook County. You will be put into leg and wrist restraints for your own safety - please don’t struggle. If you resist I will be forced to use proportionate measures. Do you understand?”

Ian’s throat has closed up from thirst and shock, so he just nods his head and reaches for his water bottle to take a swig.

“Do you need to use the bathroom? It’s not a long transfer, but you’ll probably remain on the gurney during intake, which may take some time.”

Ian nods again and gets up to walk towards the toilet, cheeks burning with embarrassment. The crew turn to face the other wall, but the C.O. remains watching Ian intently as he urinates.

“Remove the smock.”

“Huh?”

“You’ll be given a gown for the transfer.”

Ian does as he’s told and pulls the rest of the Velcro tabs apart so that it falls to the ground.

“Show me your hands… arms up… soles of feet… open wide… lift your tongue… flip your lip… other lip… lift your genitals… bend over… cough… again… thank you. Put this on.”

He hands Ian a paper gown, the kind that’s open at the back.

“Can you get onto the gurney okay?”

“Yeah.”

He hops up then settles back, as Sue gently drapes a polyester blanket over him. He notices the other member of the crew for the first time now - a sandy haired man even younger than Ian. His replacement, no doubt. He seems a little nervous as he attaches the restraints and laces up the strap across Ian’s chest incorrectly. Sue smiles when he points this out.

Then the four of them head to the elevator and take it down to the underground parking bay, where Ian is loaded into the ambulance. The C.O. climbs into the back and the young EMT goes to join
him, but Sue stops him.

“You drive Adrian, I’ve got this.”

He looks relieved as he trots around to the cab and starts the engine.

Ian shuts his eyes and wills this to be over quickly. It’s still dark and the windows out are small, so it’s not like there’s a view for him to enjoy anyway. His creeping skin is beginning to annoy him though and he flexes his hands and feet, trying to move his muscles enough to ameliorate the sensation.

“You okay inmate?”

“Yeah, just my skin crawling.”

“Could you give him a sedative? Not too much mind you, he needs to be able to go through processing.”

Sue nods mutely and prepares a syringe. Ian doesn’t object this time as she injects it into his bicep. Then she pats the area with a cotton ball and slaps a brightly colored Band-Aid on the spot – the kind they usually save for kids. For the first time in days Ian breaks out into a smile and it proves infectious.

Sue then quietly places a hand on Ian’s shoulder and squeezes it.

“You’ll get through this Ian, you will. I know how strong you are.”

Ian can’t grasp her hand, so he inclines his head to rest it against her arm instead.

“Do you remember what I always told you?” she asks.

“Fuck Prom?”

She lets out a snort that morphs half way to a sob, so it takes her a moment to reply.

“You’ve got my number.”

The next few days pass in a rather foggy haze. He’s started on high doses of the drugs he hates, which make him feel fuzzy and sleepy and then dead inside. Out with Lamotrigine, in with Lithium. No more Prozac. More Haldol. Then more Ziprazidone. Interviews. Blood draws. Nutraloaf. More interviews. Therapy.

After two days he’s taken off of suicide watch, given taupe scrubs and placed in a cell with another man. Rather than bunk beds there are two singles in the room, each bolted to the floor, with those raised slats for attaching restraints around the edges. His cellie is a hulking black man. Ian considers asking to go back on suicide watch, so wary is he about having another cellie, but the man seems lost in his own world. When Ian enters the room he’s sitting upright on his bed, hiding under the blanket.

“Night Time!” he cries out, before swiftly pulling it off his face.

“Day Time!” he shouts, then pulls the blanket back over him.
“… Night Time!”
“… Day Time!”
“… Night Time!”
“… Day Time!”

“What are you doing?” the C.O. introducing them asks.

“Havin’ a game of MOTHERFUCKING Night-Time Day-Time! You wanna play C-C-COCKSUCKER?”

“No, I’m alright; I’ve got things to do.”

He flips through Ian’s chart as he directs him to the free bed and hands over the rest of Ian’s allocated clothes and toiletries.

“Oh, says here you’re a pyromaniac too Ian. You two should get along great!” He winks comically at him before pulling the door shut. Luckily the drugs mean Ian wants to sleep most of the time and his cellie shows no interest in disturbing him.

After four days he’s called into the guard’s office as he’s waiting in line for dinner in the rec room.

“Ian Gallagher?”

Ian nods warily in response.

“You’re going to be transferred tomorrow morning to a new facility. It’ll be a 6am wake up, be ready to leave by 7.”

“Where am I going?”

“BOP haven’t confirmed yet. It’ll be to a Care level 3 or 4 facility though, nearest ones are in Rochester, MN; Terre Haute, IN or Springfield, MO.”

“There’s nothing in Illinois?”

“Not at that level in the fed. That’s why you’re here in the first place.”

He probably shouldn’t be shocked; Ian had expected that he would be moved out of Chicago. He just didn’t expect it to be quite so far.

He’s still groggy the next morning when the lights go up - so much so that he doesn’t make it to breakfast, only just managing to get himself up and dressed when a C.O. arrives to remove him. He’s marched through a labyrinth of passages beneath the complex until they emerge into the same processing unit Ian entered 6 or 7 months ago and he’s stuck into a bullpen with many other men. Nothing has changed in that time and he waits around for another hour until his name is called and he’s taken to a room to be strip-searched.

“Where am I going?” he asks the guard inspecting his genitals disinterestedly.
“Courthouse,” is the response and it’s enough to cause him to stiffen up rather then bend over as instructed.

“What? No, I’m supposed to be moved somewhere else.”

“You going to Stateville?”

“No, uh, I don’t think so. I’m fed.”

“Fed? What are you doing in Cook County?”

“I was in the hospital.”

“Cough. Again.”

Then the guard turns around and leaves Ian in the room naked, wondering what on earth’s going to happen next. About 15 minutes later he returns with Ian’s clothes and a bunch of papers.

“Looks like someone in processing screwed up. Didn’t get your papers submitted in time. You’re not going anywhere today.”

This comes as a relief to Ian until he hears the next line.

“Your bed’s already been reallocated though, so we’ll have to put you in the SHU.”

The SHU turns out to be suicide watch again and Ian spends another very uncomfortable night in a safety smock on the cold concrete floor, trying to digest Nutraloaf and listening to the screams of other prisoners. For once he’s grateful that his new drug regime makes him so numb and drowsy.

The wake up the next morning is even earlier and Ian’s sent to the bullpens in his smock. The other inmates give him a wide berth, assuming his status as a suicide case means he’s about to pull a sharpened toothbrush out of his ass and stab them all. This time at least, the C.O.s seem to remember who he is and there’s no attempt to send him off to the courthouse. After the other men have been ushered out he’s removed and searched, then presented with another paper gown.

“How long am I gonna be traveling for? Do I really have to wear this?”

“Ask the marshal when he gets here. You can’t take Cook County property and you didn’t arrive in clothes so …”

Soon a marshal arrives, looking harassed.

“This him?” he asks a C.O. who nods in response.

Ian is cuffed around his ankles and his wrists and tethered to a long belly chain. The marshal grimaces as he passes it around the back of Ian’s open gown muttering: “It’s too early for this shit.”

Ian agrees and doesn’t try to protest the abrasive treatment. After signing some paperwork he’s marched to the loading bay and unceremoniously prodded into a plain looking, white minivan. It’s empty, so Ian asks where they’re going as his seatbelt is buckled.

“MCC,” says the marshal, taking a deep swig from his coffee.
“No! I can’t go back there. I’m supposed to go somewhere else. They said I wouldn’t go back!”

Ian feels panic steadily rising in his gut, despite the best efforts of the drugs, but it’s clear the marshal doesn’t care.

“Not my problem. Take it up with receiving; I just do the courthouse run.”

And with that they’re off. It’s still dark, but at least this time Ian has a good view of the lights of Chicago, as they approach the Loop. Pulling into the loading bay, Ian peers up at the building he’d hoped he’d left behind forever. Back into the elevator and up to the 5th floor, where the marshal hands him and his paperwork over to a C.O. without another word. The man walks him to a room to unshackle and strip search him, again leaving him naked and alone without explanation.

The wait this time is longer, probably half an hour and Ian is beginning to worry they’ve forgotten him. When the door finally reopens the C.O. is carrying another safety smock and looking at his paperwork.

“You want the good news, or the bad news?”

He doesn’t wait for Ian’s response.

“You’ve been classed as an urgent transfer, so you won’t have to experience diesel therapy. Bad news is it might take a while to get a direct bus, so you’re going back on suicide watch.”

He tosses the smock at Ian, who knows the drill by now.

“How long for?”

The C.O. just shrugs his shoulders.

“Could be today, could be a week, could be three. No one really knows how the transport system routes work. You just get on a bus and eventually end up where you’re supposed to. Be thankful you get to wait it out in a cell, instead of being shuttled all over the country. People travel thousands of miles for weeks just to get somewhere a few hundred miles away.”

In the end, Ian doesn’t have to wait very long at all. He’s roused in what feels like the middle of the night by a C.O. and delivered to the receiving floor once again. He feels heavily sedated and can barely keep his eyes open, though he realizes why as he is pushed past the office and into a bullpen. The clock on the wall says it’s 2am.

There’s no-one else in there, so he curls up on the wooden bench and drifts off to sleep. With time it gradually starts to fill up and Ian feels increasingly nervous that he might be locked in there with James, or someone from his former pod. Thankfully though, he’s not spotted anyone he knows by the time he’s called to be stripped searched, and at the end of it he’s relieved to be given clothes for the first time in days - some blue pants, a grey t-shirt and sweatshirt and blue canvas shoes.

In another bullpen with about 30 other men, they’re shackled with fetters and a chain and taken in groups down to the loading bay and put onto a bus - the men quickly separating by race. Ian manages to get a window seat and he’s grateful because he knows there’s no way he’ll stay awake for all of this and he doesn’t want to get punched for drooling on some guy’s shoulder.
The bus looks like it might have been a Greyhound once, but the padded seats have been replaced with plastic and there are grills over the windows. There’s no seatbelts either, as Ian discovers when they hit the on-ramp for the I-90 at speed and he begins to slide around in his chair. The next moment he finds himself pinned to the wall by the much larger man beside him, as they change direction and the center of gravity shifts. He immediately understands why it would be unpleasant to be transported like this for any length of time.

Soon they’re passing the South Side and Ian can make out the freight yards near his house. He wonders how long it’ll be until he’ll next see it, but quickly tramples that fear down, trying not to worry about the rest of the Gallaghers even as he sends a thought their way, imagining them snug in their beds.

After a while the rocking motion becomes hypnotic and Ian falls asleep, not waking again until the bus starts to slide around again coming off the freeway like a rocket. It’s still dark and seems like they’re in the middle of no-where, although lights in the distance suggest there’s a town nearby. Then they see floodlights and the bus pulls through barbed-wired gates into a compound. Ian sees a sign stating ‘Jerome Combs Detention Center’, but that doesn’t tell him much.

A C.O. in the jump-seat in the front starts calling out names, but Ian's isn’t among them. The cited men stand and slowly shuffle off the bus and once the grill to the cage is shut some of the remaining men jump up and try to take some of the more desirable spots, further from the open toilet at the back. Ian swaps with the large man next to him, on the condition that he won’t get beat if his head lolls onto his shoulder. They wait about half an hour for new arrivals, so the C.O.s push bag lunches through the hatch for breakfast - Spam actually tastes wonderful after several days of Nutraloaf.

Soon they’re off again, back onto the freeway for another hour, before another abrupt exit wakes Ian. They’re in a town this time and they pull up in front of a small building – the Ford County Jail. There’s no barbed wire this time and no-one’s let off. Instead the few remaining seats are taken by two inmates in county uniforms that come aboard.

“Where the hell are we?” Ian wonders aloud.

“Bumblefuck,” is the response from the man next to him.

Another hour or so later and they pull up to a sprawling prison complex. This must be it, Ian thinks as he sees the huge Illinois Department of Corrections sign. There’s a full loading bay this time and the majority of men’s names are called, but Ian’s still not one of them. The sun is coming up now and he gazes across the flat land, partly covered by snow, glinting pink in the low angle light. It’s a fairly long wait and Ian takes advantage of the now empty seat beside him to stretch out a little and raise his ankles. They’re already becoming uncomfortable from the blood pooling in them, due to the constriction of his ankles by the fetters.

When they eventually start up again, with a new busload of convicts, Ian takes the window seat and watches the scenery for more clues about his destination.

He doesn’t have to wait long. Within a minute or two of leaving, a small ‘Indiana’ sign flashes past and Ian finally knows where he’s headed. He doesn’t remember a huge amount of his manic road trip and the landscape looked quite different in summer, but soon he spies a familiar looking gas station and his fears are confirmed.

An hour later they pull into a huge complex and Ian’s name is finally called.

As has become routine, after an hour or two of waiting Ian is unsurprised to be given a smock when he’s strip searched during his intake. For lunch he’s given Nutraloaf, confirming that it’s not limited
to the Illinois institutions of the Bureau of Prisons.

That night in bed, waiting for his evening meds to take effect, he realizes he’s never felt so alone in his life.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

This one is long and didactic in tone, but hopefully it will explain some of what went down in the last few chapters and give you a better understanding of what psychosis can feel like.

Let me know if you want a glossary of medications or medical terms, or anything like that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ian startles from his sleep ineffectually, adrenaline jolting his body awake - but his mind takes longer to surface. He has the distinct impression of being dragged bodily from the depths of some deep, dark ocean upwards, towards air and consciousness. Slowly, his confusion begins to dissipate and he’s able to focus on the form in front of him.

A man is standing over him. He’s wearing chinos with a shirt and sweater, a clipboard tucked under his arm.

“Ian Gallagher?”

“Yeah?”

“Looks like you’re still getting used to the new drugs.”

“What time is it?”

“11am.”

The door opens and a C.O. enters carrying a metal stool, which he places in the center of the room. The man thanks him and settles down on it.

“I’m Dr Morgan, part of the psychiatric team here.”

Ian doesn’t say anything, but shuffles backwards to the wall and starts to push himself upright against it. He pulls the blanket over his smock so that the man doesn’t have to look at his balls.

“So, Ian. I’ve read over your file. I gather you were diagnosed with bipolar before you entered the corrections system, is that correct?”

He nods, but doesn’t elaborate.

“Do you think that’s accurate?”

“Like ... did I have it before prison, or um, do I think I’m bipolar?”

“The second one.”

“Well, I guess?”
“You don’t sound too sure?”

“I just … no-one’s ever asked me that before. I don’t really know how to answer.”

“It’s not a trick question.”

“Do you think it’s something else?”

“Not necessarily, but I want to know what you think.”

“I suppose, yeah. I didn’t for a while, but things have gone haywire enough times that I know … I know there’s something … wrong with me. And the meds did seem to help, sometimes anyway. But then they took so long to work I wondered if maybe they’d changed me, rather than the disease.”

“And these recent issues, what do you think went on there?”

Ian raises an eyebrow at this, his stupefied brain still struggling to grasp the significance of this strange line of questioning.

“I don’t really know. Isn’t that your job?”

“Sure, but I want to hear how you experienced it. That may change my ideas. Just tell me what you remember, when things changed, how your body and your mind felt – things like that.”

He casts his mind back and wonders where to begin.

“I suppose it started when I got sick; physically sick. The stomach flu was going around and I caught it, but I didn’t bounce back after a few days like everyone else - I stayed fatigued and slow. So, I don’t know if I had depression as well, or if it turned into depression, or what, but it certainly felt like it.”

“If you had vomiting and diarrhea for a few days it’s unlikely you’ll have absorbed the chemicals in your medications. That, plus the environment, an overloaded immune system and being physically fatigued could all act as triggers. You mostly experienced physical and cognitive problems during this bout, is that correct?”

“Yeah I just slowed right down, completely. My mind, my body, everything. I was sleeping all the time.”

“We call this cluster of symptoms ‘atypical depression’ as opposed to ‘melancholic’. Despite the name it’s actually very common, especially among people with bipolar disorder.”

“I think one of my doctors told me that, a few years back.”

The man turns back to his chart and runs his pen down the page.

“Okay, so after a few weeks you went to sick call and it looks like the doctor prescribed Prozac. How did that work for you? Did you have side effects? How long did it take until you felt better?”

“It didn’t really do much to begin with. I was a little nauseous for a few days and I got a headache, but I don’t know if that was the drug, or maybe another bug.”

“Did it do anything to your sleep?”

“Not really. I was still sleeping loads.”
“So when did you start to feel better? Can you remember the dose?”

“He bumped it up to 40mg after a week and then I think I went up to 60 because it still wasn’t doing anything. I did start to feel a bit better after that. It was around Christmas time, so I guess it was four weeks? But maybe I was just feeling better because it was Christmas?”

“I see from the notes, that the doctor also lowered your dose of Ziprasidone. Why was that?”

“I started to feel kind of uncomfortable, as I started to get better – mostly in my legs but it could be all over. Sort of like my skin was crawling, but it was also deeper. It’s, um, really hard to describe. The PA thought it was a side effect of the Ziprasidone, so he lowered the dose.”

“And it looks like he did it a second time a few weeks later. How were you feeling by then?”

“Much better, like energy and mood wise. But I was also pretty bored. I passed my GED just before Christmas, so after that I didn’t have anything to do. There weren’t any jobs available.”

“And presumably your skin was still crawling when he lowered the dose again.”

“Yeah.”

“Did it get better after that?”

“No. Things deteriorated fairly quickly, but that feeling was always there. It’s only been since they started drugging me heavily that it’s stopped.”

“When you say drugging you heavily, you mean since you started the new regime when you went to the hospital?”

Ian gestures towards his droopy eyelids.

“Isn’t that obvious? Although, when I was sedated for a day or two before I left the MCC it wasn’t there, but that’s not very surprising. I did feel it once all the benzos wore off though.”

“And was that feeling there all the time, or did it come and go? Was it worse when you were sitting or lying down? Did it keep you awake at night?”

“It came and went, but maybe it’s partly that I was more aware of it sometimes? It definitely woke me up at night, I used to do stretches and that would help. In the day I did a lot of jogging and just tried to move around.”

“So you didn’t have it all the time, but it wasn’t just at night or when you were relaxed? You might feel it during the day while you were walking about and doing things?”

“Sort of, I didn’t really notice it when I walked, that’s why I would do it. But I would if I was watching TV or reading or something.”

“So it made you restless? You moved around because of it – not the other way around? You don’t think overexertion was perhaps making your muscles uncomfortable?”

“No, I definitely wasn’t doing anything too crazy exercise wise. I’d only just started working out again because I hadn’t had the energy before.”

“How long was it between your last appointment and the fire in your cell?”

“Um, I think about 10 days-ish?”
“And you were experiencing the crawling sensation all that time?”

“I think so…”

“Sorry, I know this is repetitive, but it’s important. Did you notice anything else that was unusual in that time? How was your energy? Did all that pacing around tire you out?”

“Not really. I felt better than I had in months but that’s not really saying much.”

“You didn’t feel euphoric?”

“Fuck no.”

“Sad?”

“No really.”

“Angry?”

“No … I suppose I was irritable, but I wasn’t lashing out or anything. That feeling was so annoying any one would be. I felt like I wanted to shave my skin off with a cheese grater.”

The man smiles at that.

“I’ve heard that one before, believe it or not.”

“Seriously? I’m not crazy?”

“Well, it depends on your definition, but your experience isn’t as weird as you think. How about your mind, was that buzzing or racing?”

“Maybe … I remember I couldn’t concentrate much, but I was so bored too. I had nothing to do but read or watch tv.”

“So, do you think boredom made it difficult to concentrate, or the other way around?”

“I don’t know.”

“Okay. Let’s look at something else.”

He starts flicking through the pages attached to his clipboard.

“Ah yes. There’s a note here from a nurse who treated you. She said you were claiming that the authorities were secretly drugging you with meth. What was that all about?”

“I … don’t know what I was thinking really.”

“Don’t be embarrassed, I’ve heard way kookier things than that. What was your reasoning for it? Your thought process can tell us a lot about the functioning of your brain at the time, if you can remember.”

“I only thought of it on the day … the day it all kicked off. I remembered that I’d had a bad time with meth once and it felt pretty similar. I was picking at myself because I was so uncomfortable. I’d wanted to crawl out of my skin, like an insect or a reptile or something. And I was so agitated and claustrophobic too, like I was a bottle of pop that had been shaken up but not released. Almost like I could feel the bubbles rising in my brain.”
“Nice similes.”

“What?”

“Don’t mind me. Why did you think the authorities were giving you meth?”

“So I would act all crazy and talk too much.”

“To whom exactly? And about what? Oh, I should mention, this is privileged information, we can’t use it against you. It’s not snitching.”

Ian’s still quiet, so the man tries again.

“Why don’t you just tell me what you’re comfortable with? Be vague if you want, but don’t make anything up – that risks confusing things further.”

“I was worried people were spying on me. Making notes in books and passing them on to … others. So they could use the information in a plea deal.”

“And why would they want to spy on you? Why would their observations be useful?”

Ian’s quiet again and this time he folds his arms across his chest to indicate he’s not going to talk.

“Okay, let’s try this a different way. What I’m trying to understand is - were your fears grounded in reality? Were they logical? Did you have any evidence about the notes? You don’t have to tell me details but try to remember if your thoughts made sense then and if they still make sense now.”

It takes Ian a long time to answer. His memories of the time are strange - half shrouded in fog and half in stark relief. He feels like he’s working with soapy hands, trying to untangle a mass of slippery threads that are impenetrably knotty in places, while others slide through his fingers.

“I think … I think it started out reasonably. Everyone said my case was ripe for a plea deal, but months and months went by and nothing ever happened. I was never even questioned. So I just felt like something was … off, you know?”

The man nods his head as he scribbles notes, but he doesn’t try to stop him. Ian picks his next words very carefully.

“I got this cellie who just seemed too … nice. I’ve never been in before, so I was really expecting the worst. And then I ran into someone who I thought had a problem with me from … stuff that went down before I came in, but he didn’t seem to care. So at first I was very careful, because I thought this was some kind of trap, or scam, especially because they knew I hadn’t done time. But nothing ever happened and eventually I relaxed around them, for the most part. But I was always kind of expecting the other shoe to drop.”

“And then suddenly, it all sort of came together. It made sense, like I could finally see the wood for the trees. They were nice because they were gathering data on me to give to the feds. Because the feds knew I wouldn’t snitch about … things, so they were trying to get information out of me by keeping me in prison and having others watch me.”

“I won’t ask if you have information the feds would want, but do you think it’s reasonable that they could’ve gotten that information from monitoring you?”

“Yes.”
He pauses.

“But maybe the ways I thought they were getting information don’t make as much sense.”

“Can you elaborate?”

“Well, the idea that everyone on the pod was in on it. That they were all watching me and making notes. Realistically, there’s nothing to learn from me just going about my day. I thought my cell was bugged. I guess that could’ve been true. And when I stole their library books and couldn’t find any notes, I figured they must’ve written them in urine. That’s how the fire started. I made some oil lamps to heat up the pages to expose them and then … and then my cellie attacked me because … yeah.”

He’s not going further on that subject.

“Well I don’t want to fuel your paranoia, but the urine thing is actually true – it’s been done before, but it’s not a refined process. We’re talking soaking q-tips to write a name or a word or two, not detailed observations. Anything else I should know?”

“What do you mean?”

“Ideas or thoughts you had at the time that maybe don’t seem to make as much sense now as they did then?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t be shy. Trust me I have genuinely heard it all. Nothing you’ve said so far is anywhere near my top 100 strangest ideas.”

“I had this brick in my cell. I um, felt that by touching it I could send messages to my … family.”

“A sort of telepathic phone line or something? Could you hear their voices if you listened?”

“No, it was more like email, or a text or something. Again, it didn’t start out weird. It was just a way to unload my feelings. I’d think of something and touch my hand to the brick to let it out. I didn’t think it was going anywhere - it was a release at the end of the day. It was … cathartic.”

“That’s normal enough. How did it change?”

“It started to feel more real? Does that make sense? Actually, no, first I got depressed and I stopped doing it. It felt stupid and hollow. But when I started coming out of that it became satisfying again, almost too satisfying and somehow I began to feel like they really were getting the message. Initially it was just that they’d know that I was thinking of them, but then it kind of slid into believing they could hear the actual words. As if it was a direct line.”

“But you never heard them answer?”

“No but uh, I definitely hallucinated a bit. It started with feeling like the brick was getting hot – that was how I knew the message was being transmitted. I guess initially it was just my forehead warming it up; I switched from touching with my hand to my head so I could get um, better signal. But by the end it definitely felt unnaturally hot. And on the last day, I saw the brick glow.”

“I saw another note in your records that while you were in the infirmary after the fire, you were convinced that your cell mate was in the bed next to you. Do you remember that? Did you physically see him, or did you just sense that he was there?”
“I saw him. I mean, his face was obscured, so I couldn’t see all of it, but I was sure it was him. You’re going to tell me it wasn’t, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, the nurse made sure to check his records. Completely different man and rather different in age and appearance.”

“Fuck.”

Ian closes his eyes and lets the final confirmation that he’s a certified nutcase wash over him. The psychiatrist seems to sense his thoughts.

“I know that this all feels shocking if you haven’t experienced psychosis as florid as this, but try to take comfort from the fact that you can learn to understand it better and recognize it early. You have very good insight into your condition. We have to work much harder with a lot of patients to get them to grasp why these things are not real. You’ve seen what a slippery slope it can be – there’s nothing about your initial thoughts and fears that are abnormal, it’s just that they snowball into something altogether different. And by the time they get there, your mind is too compromised to detect it. Now that you know your senses and thought processes can become impaired you’ll be more alert to the warning signs and learn how to nip it in the bud. It’s a skill called reality testing – initially you’re going to feel like you can’t trust your feelings or senses at all, but eventually you’ll learn to recognize what’s truly you and what is something else. You’re already doing it if you notice when you’re sleeping more or less as a warning sign for a mood episode – it’s the same process, just slightly different symptoms.”

He opens his eyes, but they must be full of skepticism because the man continues.

“Think of it this way: you’ll never lay awake at night wondering if you should quit your job or if you’ll have enough money to retire, like the average Joe, because that stuff is small fry – eventually you’ll know yourself well enough that you won’t have those kinds of doubts. It just takes a while to get to that point and you’re going to feel very lost before you do.”

Ian tries to absorb this life-lesson-cum-pep-talk-cum-instruction manual, but it’s all rather overwhelming.

“It just felt so real, you know? Like viscerally real. Everything was clear and obvious at the time and now it just feels like, what? Mud? Brine?”

“Murky?”

“Yes! It all seemed to make sense, even though I can see how stupid it looks now. I still remember how it felt, how solid it was.”

“Well, so do dreams, when you’re asleep inside them. And by the way, that meth delusion was actually pretty clever.”

“Really?”

“Well, the notion that you were getting free meth – that was clearly delusional. But your idea that meth explained the uncomfortable feeling was actually a sharp observation.”

“Wait, I don’t understand?”

“Anti-psychotics can have side effects we term extrapyramidal symptoms. There’s a variety of them but one, called akathisia causes very uncomfortable sensations like skin crawling, agitation and inner restlessness. Sound familiar?”
Ian nods slowly, half suspiciously.

“That’s why your antipsychotic medication was lowered, as it’s a common problem. The issue is that antipsychotics aren’t the only drug that can cause it: it’s also been reported in SSRIs, tricyclics, beta-blockers and … amphetamines. Basically anything that messes with the serotonin systems in your head. So your recognition that it felt similar to when you were on meth was probably spot on – it just wasn’t meth causing it this time.”

“So, what did?”

“It’s very hard to say. Unfortunately we don’t really understand the mechanism underlying it, so we can’t know if other drugs operate in a different way from antipsychotics, but give the same result. Or if the end points are actually the same, or just feel similar. What I will say is that in your case I suspect the Ziprasidone wasn’t to blame. You’d been on a reasonably high dose without issue in the past and your problem only started when another drug was added, which means the new one was probably to blame. Unfortunately, it isn’t a well-known symptom in general, and if it is, it’s usually assumed antipsychotics are to blame because that’s what it’s been classically documented in. I’m not surprised your PA didn’t catch that the SSRI could’ve been responsible; many wouldn’t recognize it at all.”

“So, by lowering my dose it didn’t stop the problem and I just got crazy instead.”

“Indeed, although I don’t think that’s the only thing that’s gone on. SSRIs, especially Prozac, are well known for causing a switch to mania in bipolar patients. They can be used for depression, but it has to be done carefully. You were on Lamictal as a mood stabilizer right?”

“Yeah.”

“That one’s not so great at suppressing mania. It’s fine if you’re largely stable, but once the train’s out of control it’s not as effective at applying the breaks. That and an SSRI, with lowered antipsychotics, spell trouble. You really need to be on lithium.”

Ian lets out a sigh upon hearing that and folds his arms.

“I hate lithium. The whole reason I swapped it out for Lamictal was because I couldn’t feel a thing.”

“I know it can be difficult. I’m sure you’ve been round the pharmacological carousel, but a combination of the two with some extra antipsychotics might do the trick. I think you’re going to always need it somewhere in the mix though.”

“So you’re saying this was all caused by my meds getting out of whack? I just needed an adjustment?”

The man takes the opportunity to reposition himself, sighing deeply as he does so. Ian braces for more bad news.

“Unfortunately, it may not be that simple. There are several other conditions that can cause similar symptoms, without any drug influence. One is called Restless Legs Syndrome – it’s typically confined to the legs at night, at rest, but there are reports of it occurring during the day or in the arms. So, it’s not clear if it’s quite the same thing as akathisia or just presents similarly. And it’s often treated with beta-blockers, which can induce – akathisia. You see the problem here?”

Ian nods.

“And unfortunately, a very similar type of sensation is also seen in mixed bouts of bipolar, even in
people who are unmedicated. Do you know about these episodes?”

“It’s where you’re manic and depressed at the same time, right?”

“Essentially, but there can also be a degree of blending of symptoms. And the features of each pole present don’t have to be mood related - they could be physical too. It often presents as a very angry (but anxious) irritable period with racing thoughts, paranoia, boredom, agitation and suicidal or violent impulses. People often report that they feel very uncomfortable in their own skin, as if they want to climb out of it – so again, you may have been experiencing a manic episode with mixed features, rather than a drug reaction.”

Ian sighs and tips his head back against the wall.

“I don’t think I’m ever going to understand my brain.”

“You will, eventually. It’ll take some playing around with your meds to see if they’re the culprits, but if they aren’t, at least now you have a pretty clear signal that things are going off the rails, if you start to feel like that again. And we can give you drugs to take the edge off, if it reoccurs.”

“I fucking hate it. I can still feel the ghost of it in my bones if I think back to it. It was like every atom in my body was fighting its neighbors.”

He knocks his head gently against the concrete wall and wilts a bit.

“Why am I so fucked up? It’s not fair. My life is a disaster, my head doesn’t work and I’m looking at a long stretch in prison.”

“Are you suicidal?”

“No. Ugh. I know you have to ask that, but it’s getting pretty old. If you keep me on suicide watch much longer I may be though. I’m just frustrated, but I can’t actually feel it because I’m dead inside at the same time. But that’s probably just the lithium talking.”

“Well we’re going to keep watching you, but I hope to be able to transfer you to the SHU in another day or two. You’ll have to go through recategorization because of the violence you exhibited, but we’ll be advocating on your behalf, as that incident clearly occurred during a period of psychosis. If I remember correctly, you didn’t have any other disciplinary notes on your file, so I’m optimistic you’ll make it back into general population at the end of it. You wouldn’t have been transferred to a facility with this level of psychiatric resources if the BOP didn’t believe you were ill either, so I don’t think you’ve got anything to worry about.”

He scribbles a further note on his clipboard and dots the ending with a flourish from his pen.

“My time here is up and my stomach tells me it’s lunch time, so I’ll leave you for now. Unfortunately you’ll be seeing a lot more of me, especially over the coming week or two. Good luck, but I really do think things are going to get a lot better for you soon. Thank you for your time Ian.”

Ian really doesn’t know what to say to that. He feels like he should be getting up and showing him out of his cell like the polite soul this deluded psychiatrist thinks he is, but the man is too quick for him anyway and he opens the door himself, dragging the metal stool with him.

A moment later it opens again and a C.O. enters, bearing Ian’s lunch of Nutraloaf. Again. He’s discovered that Indiana loaf does actually taste different to Illinois loaf, but somehow that doesn’t manage to make it better or worse, just a different kind of nothing.
Unexpectedly, a smile starts to creep over Ian’s face as he feels what might be a twinge of satisfaction and amusement. He’s found the perfect metaphor for lithium – Nutraloaf.

Chapter End Notes

Is it bad that I am proud of myself for sneaking ‘cum’ in there twice without it being sexual?
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s 10 long days until Ian’s finally released into the general population. The pod he’s sent to is triangular, just like the MCC, but massive in comparison. Everything is concrete and the sound ricochets off the walls so that there’s always a reverberation of noise around the place. It can be difficult to place where a sound is coming from and Ian’s caught out more than once in his dozy state.

There are two tiers of cells forming the perimeter of the wing, with a central concrete guard station and a series of huge televisions dangling above it. Watching them involves craning the neck so far back it’s painful and Ian suspects their positioning may be deliberate. However, prisoner ingenuity is such that most of the men just lie on the floor, with their heads propped up on laundry bags. When popular shows are on it looks like there’s a huge Middle School sleepover in progress - the men lay out on blankets, eat junk food and talk trash each other while braiding hair.

When Ian first arrives at his cell it’s empty, although the presence of other items assure him that it won’t stay that way. He’s surprised to find a large plastic bag with paperwork taped to it, on the unused bunk (the top this time). It’s an inventory of items and upon tearing it open, Ian is delighted to find an assortment of commissary purchases, paperwork and a few magazines – his remaining belongings from the MCC. He had assumed he would never see them again, especially after the fire, so he gratefully rips into the first candy bar he’s had in weeks. Among the paperwork is a note stating his commissary balance; it’s gone up significantly from what he remembers. It’s fairly quiet on the pod at the moment (Ian imagines most of the men are on work duty), so he takes the opportunity to visit the telephones in the communal area. After punching in his ID number and access pin, he’s informed that he has five voice messages. Each is from Fiona: the first a generic “How’s it going?” check-in, then an increasingly desperate series of “Where are you?” It’s the middle of the day, so he tries her cell number. A few minutes later, after the series of messages about monitoring of calls and charges, the line connects and he hears a breathless: “Ian?!?”

“Hey,” he croaks out, before screaming deafens him.

“LIP! LIP! IT’S IAN! OH MY GOD IAN, WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN? WE’VE BEEN SO WORRIED! WE WERE TOLD THERE WAS A FIRE AND YOU’D BEEN TAKEN TO THE HOSPITAL - AND THEN NOTHING.”

The sound on the other end of the line becomes somewhat tinny and washed out and he guesses he’s been put on speakerphone. He can hear clanging and crashing in the background too, so he assumes they must be at Patsy’s. Then he hears his brother’s voice.

“Ian, what the fuck happened? Were you in the ICU or something? We couldn’t find you in the BOP system and when we called the hospitals no-one had you listed.”

“Hang on, let’s take this in the office. Stay on the line okay Ian? Have you got enough money for this? I hoped maybe you’d run out and that was why you couldn’t call, but we still didn’t hear anything after I topped up your commissary.”

“I saw that Fi, thanks. I only just got access to my account again.”

“So what happened? Are you okay? Do you need anything else?”
“I’m okay. The fire wasn’t that serious, I just got some superficial burns.”

“Oh thank God, we were so scared when they said hospital.”

He braces himself for the awkwardness he knows is about to follow.

“It was the psychiatric hospital.”

There’s a pause.

“Oh Ian. What happened? Why didn’t they tell us?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t there very long and got moved around a lot. Maybe they didn’t consider it a real emergency?”

“Are you okay? I’m so sorry you had to go through all that on your own.”

“Yeah, I’m okay. I’m still getting used to the new drugs so I’m not really the life of the party, but I’ll adjust, I guess.”

“So…”

“Uh, well I guess it was basically a problem with my meds. When I got depressed they put me on Prozac. Then I started getting this feeling like my skin was crawling, which they thought was a side effect of my antipsychotic, so they lowered my dose of those. But the combination of that and the Prozac kinda catapulted me to the other side.”

“Wow, it’s crazy that you can go through all that so quickly. You seemed fine the last time we saw you.”

“Yeah, you kind of caught me in the middle, when the depression was lifting but things hadn’t gone haywire yet. I didn’t know anything was wrong either.”

“Wait, so you were depressed before Christmas? Ian why didn’t you tell us?!?”

“I dunno, I just … I didn’t see the point I guess? I was just trying to keep it together enough to not get worse. Everything was overwhelming.”

“But we’re your family. You’re supposed to tell us things like that! How can we help you otherwise?”

“I … I mean … you couldn’t really help. I’m in prison. I didn’t want to worry you.”

“Well you failed there!” Fiona chuckles a little, but when Ian doesn’t she backtracks a little.

“We could have visited more often, called more. We’d have been there for you if you’d told us.”

“Honestly, it wouldn’t have helped. I just sort of turned into a vegetable. I wouldn’t have had anything to say; it would’ve just been more pressure.”

“Pressure? We love you Ian, we want to help you feel better. We wouldn’t have forced you to be cheerful or anything.”

“No … I meant more …”

“Fiona I think he means that it was too tiring. Right?”
“Yeah, even just like, thinking. Everything was so exhausting. I didn’t have the energy to see or do anything with anyone. I wasn’t sad really, you know? So seeing you wouldn’t have made me feel better.”

“And your saying it wasn’t personal, right Ian?”

“Yeah, exactly. Sorry, I didn’t mean to make it sound that way. The new meds – I’m still having memory problems. I can’t seem to get my words out right sometimes.”

“So this fire, what happened? You hallucinate a bunch of smoking hot firemen and get overheated?”

He can hear the two of them chuckling in the background, but Ian’s not really capable of laughter right now. He’s had to explain what went down to doctor after doctor after doctor and it still doesn’t come easily. He really wishes he didn’t have to tell his family too.

“It … it’s stupid. It was truly stupid, but at the time I really believed it.”

“Believed what?”

“I thought the other inmates were spying on me. Writing secret notes in library books and passing them on to the librarian to get a plea deal.”

He hadn’t told them who the librarian was - initially because he had wanted them to know as little about his trip with Mickey as possible, and then because he didn’t want anyone to know he still had a means of contacting him.

“So, you had a book burning party?”

“Uh, not quite. I made some oil lamps. I thought the messages would show up if I heated the pages, but my cellie knocked them over and the books caught light and then my clothes and then, well, yeah.”

“I thought your cellie was smart? You back on speaking terms yet?”

“Umm… no. I haven’t seen him since.”

“Damn, did he get burnt?”

“No, uh, we brawled. And then the guards tear gassed the cell and sedated me and I woke up in the infirmary.”

“Holy shit Ian! Guess he learned not to mess with a Gallagher though.”

Ian really wants them to drop this line of questioning, so he forces himself to snort a bit at the joke.

“Heh, yeah I guess.”

“So, I suppose if you’ve got commissary access you’re back in general pop. too? Can we come visit you again?”

“Yeah I think so, but um, it’s not that simple anymore.”

“You on disciplinary measures or something?”

“No. They said I needed to go someplace with better resources. For my mental health.”
“So … you’re not in the MCC anymore? Are you still in the hospital?”

“No, another prison, but they have a specialist psych team here.”

“Ian, where are you?”

“USP Terre Haute. In uh, Indiana.”

Initially there’s silence on the other end of the line, but then Ian’s surprised to hear laughter coming from one of them.

“Fucking hell Ian, you just can’t stay away, can you?”

Just as inexplicably, Ian himself starts to shake and for the first time in weeks he finds that he’s actually laughing.

“So, it is ok for us to come, right? We should be able to do it as a day trip, but we’ll need to plan a little more carefully.”

“Sure, I’ll find out what out what day visiting is. I don’t know if I need to set up a new list or if they’ll transfer my old one.”

“Okay, well let us know. I’m just so fucking relieved to hear your voice. We were so worried. I’m sure the last couple of weeks haven’t been easy for you either, but stay strong - hopefully things will get better soon. I can’t wait to see you again.”

“Me too Ian. Take care all right? And no fighting with your new cellie.”

“Yeah, I’ll behave.”

“We love you. See you soon!”

“I love you too, say hi to everyone for me.”

“We will, bye!”

Ian doesn’t hang up the receiver once he hears the line disconnect, but twirls it round in a circle, dangling it from the chord. He thinks it went okay? They took the news about his new location well, anyway.

He hears the buzzer go off overhead and looks at his recently returned watch. He doesn’t know the routine here yet, but he figures it might signal the end of the work shift. He finally replaces the handset on the cradle and doubles back to his cell using the numbers on the wall as a guide, because he’s so unfamiliar with the place.

Clothes have now appeared on his bunk, presumably delivered while he was on the phone. The uniform is different to what he’s used to – khaki pants and button down shirts (with snaps) and even a belt. There are lockers rather than tubs for storage and he starts to stack his meager possessions in the one that doesn’t have a lock on it.

Once he’s done he looks around the cell for any clues about his new cellie. There’s not much to go on, as almost everything personal is probably locked away, but he notes a bible, radio and framed photograph on one of the desks. He picks it up to get a better look and automatically smiles at the image of a beautiful Latina woman holding a seriously photogenic girl of about four, who’s clutching a toy dog. They’re in front of a fireplace and Ian can see candles and tinsel behind them, so he
figures it must have been taken this past Christmas.

“Hey! Why you touching my shit?”

Ian almost drops the photo frame as he startles at the outburst, but he manages his fumble and quickly sets it back down on the desk. The muscular man barreling towards him has a shaved head and a variety of tattoos snaking up his neck and down his arms.

“Shit, I’m sorry. I wasn’t even thinking.”

“Damn right you weren’t. I catch you looking at my wife like that again we’re gonna have problems.”

“I’m really sorry, I didn’t mean any disrespect. I just thought it was a nice photo – they look so happy.”

Ian considers coming out, but decides to hold off unless it’s clear he’s got no other options. Luckily his response softens the man a bit and a wistful smile threatens to erupt on his face.

“Yeah, they are. My little girl loves Christmas. She’s still talking about that dog, every week she tells me what banjo’s been doing; how he’s still not house trained and that he eats too many cookies so she had to take him to the vet. She’s got a wild imagination.”

This time the proud smile does escape, and it’s every bit as beaming as the ones in the photo.

“How ‘bout you? You got kids?”

“Nah, just a lot of siblings.”

Ian opens his locker and rummages around in his paperwork until he finds the group photo of his family that was taken at Christmas and presents it to the man.

“Damn, you weren’t kidding. No cousins in there?”

“Nope, well Frannie – the baby there – she’s my niece, but everyone else is a sibling. My mom’s dead and my dad’s a drunk, so they’re all I’ve got.”

“I hear that. Your mom must’ve been a good one though, if she adopted.”

“I – what?”

“That kid – he’s black.”

“Oh! Yeah Liam, he is actually my brother, well half-brother, but only because my dad isn’t really my dad – he’s technically my uncle.”

His new cellie raises his eyebrows at this.

“So…”

“So, he’s actually my mom and dad’s offspring. Obviously we never believed that, especially because she couldn’t really remember the summer when he was conceived, but they had a DNA test done and he is actually Frank’s! Something about dormant genetics or something, I don’t really know how it works.”

The man seems unconvinced but doesn’t look interested in pressing it either.
“He’s doing really well; we’re all so proud of him. He got a scholarship to this fancy private school and he wants to be an author when he grows up.”

“Hey, that’s great!”

“Yeah, we’re hoping he’ll be the one to escape our neighborhood - although my brother Carl’s doing pretty good too. He went to juvie, but then he got into a military school and it’s really turned him around.”

“Guess it’s got to work for some people, right?”

“Yeah, kinda had the opposite effect on me.”

“You were military?”

“Only briefly. I crashed and burned out of basic pretty literally.”

“Ha ha, no shit? So did I. Tried it as a way to get out, but it became pretty clear, pretty quick, that the military life wasn’t for me. So I headed back to the streets and here I am, property of the United States Government, again.”

He pauses to look at his watch.

“Hey I gotta get changed for yard, you coming?”

“Oh, no. I don’t have my sweatpants or shoes yet. I need to get a commissary order through. When’s chow though?”

“In an hour and a half. You new here?”

“Yeah, I just went through classification again. I came from Chicago and I don’t have all my stuff yet. Think I’ll take a shower instead.”

“Ah ok. Well I guess I’ll see you later then. Didn’t catch your name though?”

“It’s Ian.”

“Ian, I’m Jason. Oh, and heads up – the showers on the upper tier are for Blacks. The lower ones are white and Hispanic.”

“Thanks. When’s visiting?”

“Saturday, Sunday, Monday, 8 to 3.”

Ian feels around in his locker and pulls out his shower items, which thankfully survived the MCC. Down on the lower tier the showers are very busy with all the men returning from their jobs and rushing to hit the yard, so Ian lets a few men cut ahead to build some goodwill.

Returning to his cell, he finds it empty again, although he can’t help but notice that the radio, bible and picture frame have all disappeared from the desk – no doubt safely ensconced in his cellie’s locker. Ian’s only been in general for an hour and he’s already pissed someone off. He resolves to buy an extra candy bar that week as a peace offering.

Once he’s changed his clothes he flops down on his bunk and starts reading over his new commissary list. It’s much more extensive than the MCC’s and Ian grows quietly excited at the prospect of being able to buy ice-cream - so much so that he’s startled when he hears his name being
called. There’s a C.O. standing in the doorway watching him.

“Ian Gallagher?” he asks again.

“Yeah?”

“You got a visit.”

“Huh?”

This earns him his first eye roll of general population and the guard repeats his statement deliberately slowly.

“But it’s after 3 – and not a visiting day.”

Now the C.O.’s arms are crossed.

“I’m glad you’ve been reading the orientation handbook. Doesn’t matter.”

He jerks his head out the door to indicate that Ian should follow him, but he still hesitates, prompting a long sigh of frustration from the man.

“It’s not a trap. Legal conference. The law never sleeps.”

That still sounds ominous to Ian but he slides down off the bunk, although he freezes as he sees the C.O. shut the door.

“I have to search you first. It’s out of hours so it’s taking place in the SHU visiting room and that means you’ve got to be searched and cuffed.” He displays the belly chain and fetters he’s been holding, as if that should somehow reassure Ian.

“Come on. Unless you’re turning down the visit.”

Still a little hesitant, Ian strips out of his uniform. Thankfully, the C.O. is quick and in a few moments Ian is shuffling out of the pod and through a maze of corridors, as the guard pushes him forward.

Then a door is buzzed open and Ian is pushed inside pretty abruptly - enough to make him stumble slightly.

It’s a small room with three visiting booths that have telephones for talking. And it’s just as well, as Ian has not one, but three visitors. In the center booth is a man in a suit that Ian doesn’t recognize; to his left is his attorney, Miranda, and in the last spot – him.

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your patience.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Reality testing – that was the phrase Dr Morgan had used. It seemed simple enough at the time, but now that he’s here, how is he supposed to know what is real and what is not? It’s not like he can pinch himself, as in a dream. Ian knows he’s not asleep, but whether he’s seeing things is another matter.

His hair is long again. He’s clean-shaven this time, but his cheeks are ruddy and even a little tanned. Sandblasted or weather-beaten in a way that’s entirely new to Ian. The hoody and dark jeans are in character enough, but there’s one disarming feature that catches Ian’s eye as he watches the man fiddle with his fingers. The tattoos are gone. A faint greyish trace remains, but they’ve definitely been removed and that’s an oddly specific discrepancy for a hallucination.

There’s a tapping to his left now and the man in the suit is motioning for him to take a seat on the stool in the middle booth. Ian glides towards it without dropping his gaze - until he sits and the screen to the right of him blocks his view. Now he’s blinkered, only able to see the man in front of him, so he picks up the handset but doesn’t say anything.

“Ian Gallagher?”

He nods.

“Please be advised that this conversation is considered privileged by the Bureau of Prisons and is not being monitored. However, it will still be recorded for use by the US Marshall service and may therefore be used as evidence in court. Please confirm for the record that your legal counsel is present.”

Ian nods dumbly, before realizing he needs to actually talk.

“Yes, um, I do. I have my lawyer here.”

“Any conversation between yourself and your lawyer will be fully privileged. Please use the booth to your left if you want to consult with them - that line is not being recorded. If you wish for full confidentiality, please ask and we will leave the room to allow you time with your attorney. You will still be under visual surveillance. Do you understand these conditions?”

“Yes, I do.”

“You are under no obligation to remain in the room and may terminate this meeting at any time. Likewise, remaining present does not construe assent to any offer made, nor any proof of coercion, acceptance or admission of guilt, unless stated unambiguously and witnessed by your legal counsel. Do you understand?”

“I do.”
“You are under no obligation to answer any questions put to you, but anything you say may be recorded and can and will be used against you in a court of law, do you understand?”

“I do.”

“Please state for the record your full name and birthdate.”

“Ian Clayton Gallagher; May 11, 1996.”

“Can I take it that you recognize the other people present in the room?”

“Yes.”

“My name is Deputy Marshal Hansen. I am here on behalf of the Office of the United States Attorney for Northern Illinois, regarding your case in “United States v. Gallagher”. The US Attorney is prepared to offer a clemency deal, in return for your free testimony in an upcoming federal case. Specifically, they are willing to dismiss the pending charges of harboring a fugitive and, in cooperation with the Attorney General of Oklahoma, void any remaining extradition warrants in your name within their jurisdiction. Your existing criminal record, consisting of a misdemeanor battery conviction, will stand.”

“In exchange you will be legally required to testify for the prosecution and may be placed under monitoring or surveillance. Failure to testify will result in the revocation of your freedom and the reinstatement of the charges you currently face. Do you understand these terms?”

“Yeah.”

“Before we proceed further I must ask that you sign some paperwork. This is a confidentiality agreement between yourself and the government. It means that, even if you decide against taking up an offer made to you, no part of this conversation or information given to you may be repeated outside of this room, with very few exceptions. Do you understand?”

“Mmmhmm. I mean, yes.”

“Will you sign the paperwork, or do you wish to terminate the meeting? Learning more about the case does not oblige you to testify, but you will be bound by the terms of the confidentiality agreement. Breaking it will result in further charges being brought against you. How do you wish to proceed?”

“I’ll sign the papers.”

“Good.”

There’s a little pause now as the man gets up and walks to the heavy steel door behind him. He sticks his head out and passes some papers to someone outside before settling down on his chair again.

“The papers should be with you shortly. If you wish to confer with your attorney about their content feel free to do so. She has her own copy and has had a chance to read the text.”

Ian’s mind however is on the head on the other side of the metal partition to his right.

The same C.O. who marched Ian to the visiting room now enters on Ian’s side of the glass and sets a bunch of papers down on the ledge before leaving just as suddenly. They have those sticky arrow notes that show where Ian is supposed to sign and initial. He flicks through the pages quickly, but nothing in particular catches his eye. Feeling wary, he slides his feet to the left, then shuffles in that
direction so that he’s facing his lawyer in her booth. Quickly she retrieves the phone and waits for Ian to speak.

“So, um, should I sign this?”

“Are you at all interested in this deal?”

“I … guess.”

“Then sign it. It’s to cover their backsides in case you leak information about the case. I’m not too familiar with it, but I doubt that’s something you’d be interested in doing.”

“Is it really him?”

“Who?”

“You know who.”

“I haven’t said a word to him, but he looks like the photo in your file.”

“So I’m not imagining it?”

Her face suddenly crumples a little, as she realizes what he’s been asking her.

“No Ian. And you look much better. I’m sorry I haven’t been in touch - as you can imagine, I’ve been quite busy behind the scenes. But let me know if you’re not understanding things; if you need more time or anything. I’ve been reading your progress notes and it looks like you’re recovering well but I’m sure you’re still feeling those new drugs.”

He mouths a ‘thanks’ at her and hangs up the phone, sidling back over to the middle seat and picking up the pen that’s been left with him. He makes sure the marshal can see him sign and waits a moment to pick up the phone, until after the C.O. returns and takes back the documents.

“Thank you for your co-operation Ian. The case we wish you to testify in is one that the Department of Justice has been carefully cultivating for some time, in order to obtain the best possible outcome for the prosecution. Exceptional incentives are therefore being offered, in exchanged for robust, sworn, testimony leading to the trial and conviction of Terry Milkovich.”

Ian inhales sharply at the mention of that name and the utility the government sees in him starts to become clear.

“As one of several crucial witnesses you would testify for extended periods of time, be cross examined by some of the best counsel available and generally placed under great emotional and psychological stress. By accepting this deal you would be absolving the government of responsibility for harm that may be done to your mental and physical wellbeing as a result of these stressors.

The Department of Justice also recognizes that the sensitivity of a case such as this means that testifying may entail some risk to your person, or those of your family. Therefore the Office of Enforcement Operations has approved your placement in the Witness Security Program. Involvement is optional and you would have the choice to vacate the scheme at any time. More concrete details will be given to you in due course. We recommend that, at a minimum, you join for the pre-trial period and until your testimony is complete.”

He pauses and Ian takes the opportunity to crane his head backwards to see if he can see around the partition. The marshal taps impatiently on the glass in response.
“I don’t need an instant response and encourage you to talk things over further with your lawyer, but I do need you to give confirmation that you understand the offer that is being made to you and that you understand the basic risks and benefits inherent to the scheme.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Alright, I’ll give you two some time to talk it over then.”

The Marshal hangs up the phone and stands, nodding at the C.O. behind the door to open it. Ian begins his shuffle to the left to talk to Miranda, but to his surprise she’s also up and on her way out of the room. He sits himself back down on the stool and swallows hard as the seat opposite is filled once more.

They eye each other somewhat warily. Ian’s sure that, if the irony of this scene isn’t lost on him in his brain’s addled state, it certainly won’t have escaped Mickey’s notice. In unison they lift the receivers.

“Hey,”

“Hey.”

There’s awkward silence for a minute and Ian braces himself for whatever wisecrack is coming his way, but Mickey’s still frozen. Surprising even himself, Ian makes the first move.

“So, uh, karma – it’s a real bitch right?”

Again, Mickey says nothing, just looks at him distantly. Slowly however, the fingers on his free hand twitch and he presses their tips up against the glass.

Ian’s breath catches in his throat and he’s lost as to whether to laugh or cry. An ugly snort is what escapes and Mickey pulls his fingers back, looking unsure, but it at least moves him to speak.

“It doesn’t matter Ian.”

It’s Ian’s turn to lapse into silence, swallowing down the stomach acid that’s rising in his throat and threatening to erupt into his mouth. It burns.

“How’re you feeling?”

“I’ve been better.”

Ian doesn’t even mean it as a joke, it’s just what came out of his mouth, but at least it gets Mickey to crack a smile.

“I’m pretty dozy, honestly. But it’s getting easier.”

“Good.”

They go silent again and Ian wonders if they’re going to run out of time just staring at each other, so he summons his resolve to say what’s on his mind.

“I told you, I … asked you not to do this.”

To his surprise, Mickey smiles broadly and finally seems to relax into his seat.

“Heh, you know it impresses me that, no matter how much they drug you, they still can’t beat that
Gallagher arrogance out of you.”

This response registers as somewhat surprising to Ian and he swallows down another mouthful of bile. His expression remains neutral however, so Mickey elaborates.

“See, I didn’t do this just for you. It’s been in the works a while, long before I heard about you getting fucked up. And you’ve got choices: you can stay here, if you want, or testify and head back home when it’s done. But I’m doing this, completely. I’ve disappeared before and I know I can do it again - so if you want to disappear too, this is your only chance.”

Ian lets the significance of those words sink in.

“Do I though, really? I mean do I have choices? How can I go home if I testify? They wouldn’t be offering witness protection if it was safe.”

“Well, I won’t say it’s without risk, but I guess you haven’t heard much about the case. It’s just family stuff, things that you witnessed … it wouldn’t be like you were snitching on anything organized; nothin’ that anyone else cares about outside of the Milkoviches.”

“I still don’t understand. Why are they willing to do all these things just to get Terry sent away? Between us we probably owe as much time as he does.”

“Ah, well that’s the clever part. You’re right, we’re just small fry here; normally they’d let us rot. But Terry … Terry knows things. The feds wanna stitch him up real good so that they can get him to roll. Maybe it’s on The Brand, The Outfit, who knows? I’ll say one thing for that asshole - he always made sure we didn’t know too much.”

“It still seems … weird.”

“Look, I don’t know why they think they can - Terry’s got plenty of friends on the inside and prison’s pretty much his home away from home. They must have something on him that will make his time uncomfortable enough that he’d snitch. Point is, it don’t matter if he does or doesn’t – long as we co-operate we’ve got get-out-of-jail-free cards.”

“But what if the trial collapses? Won’t he come after us?”

“That’s why they’re offering witness security.”

“But he could still come after my family.”

“Maybe, but it’s pretty unlikely the trial would collapse. They don’t invest this kinda time and money unless they’re certain they’re gonna win. Plus, going after your family would kind of seal his own fate.”

“Yeah, but still. Couldn’t he just arrange something from behind bars? You said it yourself – he knows things.”

“So you better hope he rolls. Like I said, they wouldn’t put all this money in if they weren’t sure they could get a conviction and then get something useful out of him. And no-one will do his bidding if he turns snitch. Having said that, they’re deliberately keeping the prosecution personal so you won’t be seen as jeopardizing anyone else’s interests, even if he don’t turn. You’d be a victim. Believe it or not most folks aren’t keen on taking out people who’ve been wronged. It’s strictly business for them. Don’t think you’d be in any real danger, let alone your family. But it’s a risk, I ain’t gonna lie.”

“And if he does snitch – can’t he just cut his own deal and then come after me?”
“I doubt they’d let him out. If he goes down on everything they’re aiming for he’s gonna be gone a long time. It’d be a hard sell getting him out, given his record. Best he can probably hope for is a very cushy cell and commissary, in PC.”

“What about during the trial?”

“They’ll be keeping tabs on him. I’d guess he’d get pre-trial detention and if not they’ll still be tracking him. I mean, they are me.”

He takes the moment to swing his left leg up onto the concrete ledge in front of him and hitch up his pant leg, pulling down a white sock to reveal an ankle-monitoring bracelet.

“See, I’m only a witness but they got me under house arrest most days. They won’t let Terry have much of a leash.”

“So, what? You’re just living at home? When did you come back? Where’s Terry?”

“Oh yeah, I forget you haven’t been on the South Side lately either. Place is fucking boarded up! Mandy’s long gone, Iggy’s in jail and no-one knows where the fuck Colin is.”

“And your dad?”

Mickey’s feet are still up on the counter and he leans back in his chair and crosses his arms behind his head, cradling his neck with his free hand as he stretches out leisurely.

“I don’t know, probably shacked up with some junkie whore somewhere? The feds aren’t gonna to tell me, I’m a liability. But I’m sure they’ve got eyes on him. He doesn’t know this is coming. Yet.”

“So where are you staying?”

“At the Y. Get to hang out with all the boys.”

He flashes a devilish grin at Ian, but he’s unmoved. That breaks Mickey’s repose and he drops his feet to the floor and squares up to Ian from the other side of the glass, elbows leaning on the ledge.

“Seriously? Nothing? Those meds are still doing a number on you, aren’t they?”

“It needs to actually be funny.”

“Pfff. Not my fault you can’t recognize quality material when you see it.”

That gets a little twitch of a smile and Mickey snorts in satisfaction.

“So what have you been doing? You look like a hobo. Again.”

“Nah, you’ve gotta take this deal if you wanna hear those stories. And go easy on me, I only got extradited like, three days ago.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I got to fly on an airplane and everything. They give you free nuts in these stupid little bags and drinks onboard. Can’t get used to American pop though, that stuff fucking sucks after Joya.”

There’s a knocking on the widow of the visiting room and Mickey looks back quickly.

“Looks like we gotta wrap this up.” But he starts to fidget with his fingers instead.
“So…”

“So… if you join, you’ll get a new identity, a clean slate and some cash to help you get set up. It’s not like in the movies with agents with guns on the roof and guys hiding in the bushes. Well, maybe if you go cruising it might be, but otherwise… Anyway, you can still be an EMT; they’ll get your license and education transferred into the new name. You get a clean credit history and you can still see your family – *occasionally*. It’s complicated, not gonna lie. They have to fly all over the place just to meet up in some shit motel in the middle of nowhere. You can’t go back to Chicago and you can’t just swing by for a drink. But you can still see them and talk to them.”

“Do I get to choose where I go?”

“If you ask, yeah – and it’s not stupid.”

“Where are you going?”

“Not allowed to tell you that.”

“Ever?”

“Not while you’re in here, no. And not if you don’t join the program too.”

“What about Damon?”

This question catches Mickey by surprise.

“What about Damon?”

“Doesn’t he get something? I mean … I know that sounds weird, that’s not what I meant. What I’m trying to say is, will he still be prosecuted for busting out? Are they gonna make us testify against him? I’d feel bad for him getting sent down if we get off.”

“Eh, I think they’ll probably drop the case. They can’t make us talk if we’re in witness protection already, it’d blow their cover. Besides, having an escape conviction’s a badge of pride for a guy like Damon. He’ll probably plead guilty just to get it.”

“All that extra time though.”

“Ian, Damon’s doing triple-life, you knew that right?”

The surprise on Ian’s face tells him otherwise.

“I’m pretty sure I called him a Mexican-Banger-Hitman-Motherfucker; what part of that didn’t you understand?”

“I guess the bit where you weren’t joking.”

“You can keep his commissary stocked from now on. He’ll like that.”

The tapping on the window is more insistent this time.

“Aight. I gotta go. Think about it.”

With barely a backward glance he replaces the handset and strides out of the room, holding the door open for Ian’s lawyer, who’s apparently up next. Ian’s almost taken aback by the abruptness of it all, still holding the receiver in his left hand. But he supposes it was never going to be any other way
given the setting and the circumstance. He still can barely believe that this is real, let alone worry about Mickey’s tone.

Miranda jerks her head to the side, indicating that he should move over to the left hand booth with the confidential line. He’s become used to her calm, gentle approach with him, so he’s shocked that she speaks first - and not to ask him how he’s feeling.

“Ian for God’s sake – take this deal.”

“Aren’t you going to like, take me through it?”

“Do you have any actual questions?”

“I – I mean, not right now but still …”

“You don’t have to decide right now. In fact it’s better if you don’t seem super enthusiastic. But I’ll tell you what’s going to happen if you don’t. This deal is only good until you go to trial - if it gets that far they can’t quietly drop the charges and if you’re not cooperating they’re not going to want to either. Let me remind you that they do want to make someone pay for the embarrassment caused by the escape, especially since they can’t do that with Mickey now.”

Ian starts peering absentmindedly around the partition at the mention of that name, trying to see if he can spot him through the door window. He’s brought back to the present by Miranda’s impatient knocking on the glass.

“Ian, focus. Look, I know it may not have been clear all the time, but I’ve spent an awful lot of hours on this case behind the scenes. I kept getting stalled and running up against brick walls when I was trying to negotiate a plea, for reasons that are now clear. But it means I have a good grasp of the evidence and it’s pretty damning against you. They have CCTV footage of you in multiple locations with Mickey and Damon. There’s film of that gas station you robbed.”

“I didn’t! It was fucking Damon getting all trigger-happy. All I wanted was a Kind bar – to buy a Kind bar.”

“Forget about the stupid Kind bar. My point is there’s no use saying you weren’t there and it’ll be very hard to argue that you were under duress. Your only approach is to invoke your mental health. You’ll still get convicted, because there’s no evidence you were psychotic, but you can probably have the sentence lightened if the judge believes you were manic. Problem is, they’re going to subpoena your medical records and find there’s no evidence of that at the time either. You weren’t hospitalized; you didn’t change your meds. Unless you can provide some witnesses to swear that you were unwell, perhaps that they treated you at home once you came back, you’re not going to be able to do much to convince the judge to go easy on you. And if they don’t believe your witnesses that leaves them open to charges of perjury. You need to think long and hard here about risks and balances.”

By this point Ian is looking at his toes like a scolded child.

“I know this isn’t easy for you; you’ve got a lot of contradictory forces pulling you in every direction and you’ve been through a lot recently. But try to be logical about it and focus on what you want your future to look like.”

She taps on the window again to get him to look at her.

“Have you got enough phone money to call me?”
“Yeah.”

“Okay. I’m going back to Chicago tonight, but call me when you’re ready and I’ll set up a privileged phone conference for us to go through the deal bit by bit. We can talk some more about the Witness Security Program too. They’ll give you a copy of the paperwork to take with you – read through it in the mean time and try to get the gist of it. Don’t sign anything without me here in person; I’m going to want to go through it and make sure I’m happy with the final version, if you decide to do it.”

She steals a look at her watch and grimaces.

“Listen, I really have to go, I’m sorry this was rushed. Call me if you need anything okay? And maybe talk the basics of this over with your psychiatrist? Be vague obviously, but they might be able to walk you through some of the different pressures you’ll be facing, depending on what you decide.”

Without another word she hangs up the phone and walks towards the door, which opens for her. Ian peers his head around the partition again, trying to catch a glimpse of Mickey through the door, but he can’t see anything.

He’s still holding the phone when the C.O. comes in on his side to take him out.

Chapter End Notes

Ian has no chill.

So, I know there's another fic out there where they testify against Terry. I deliberately haven't read that one (or at least only enough to be sure that was where they were going) so that it wouldn't influence my ideas. If there does end up being any overlap, I swear it's just coincidence.
Ian could’ve sworn his tank top was black. He was sure it was another one he was wearing that night, but here he is, staring at a familiar teal tee. It smells awful, a rancid mix of sweat and mildew, but he puts it on anyway.

Once he’s dressed the marshal (‘Hansen’, he reminds Ian – apparently they’re not intimate enough for first names) enters the room and motions for Ian to take a seat. He’s holding a bunch of electrical equipment.

“Gallagher, this is a GPS ankle monitor. It’s to remain on your body at all times. If you try to tamper with it, it will send an alarm, if you cut the strap it will send an alarm. Don’t try to use a GPS or cellular jammer, it will send an alarm. Don’t even think about covering it in tinfoil – it will send an alarm. Is this clear so far?”

Ian nods his head, but doesn’t say anything. The marshal picks up a black box the size of a hardback book.

“When you’re at home your position is relayed by radio waves to this transmitter, rather than using GPS. We also recommend you bring it with you if you’ll be somewhere indoors, or traveling in an enclosed place, like the L or a car, for a long period of time. It will transmit your location when GPS is not available, so long as there is cell coverage. Do not try to tamper with it or an alarm will be triggered. It has a battery, but it’s only good for a few hours, so keep it plugged in whenever you can. The ankle monitor itself needs to be charged for at least one hour a day at the wall too. If you disconnect the plug the charge will not hold and you’ll have to start again. You can view the battery remaining by pushing this button on the side here – there are five bars that light up, each representing 20%, but I wouldn’t let it drop below 40% if I were you, as these things aren’t wholly accurate. Pull your sock up please.”

“Up?”

“Yeah, we fit them over the sock so that they have a little give.”

Ian does as he’s told and the band is strapped snugly around Ian’s right ankle.

“This is a relatively advanced monitor - besides using GPS it has cellular capability. This way we can speak directly to you should we need to – you’ll feel it vibrating and then the speaker will activate to tell you there’s a call. You can also contact us in an emergency by holding the button down for 5 seconds. Be aware that the monitor also contains a microphone; you should assume that your conversations may be monitored at any time.”

*Oh good. Something to feel paranoid about, again.*

“You’re spying on me? Listening to everything I say?”

Hansen sighs and leans back in his chair.

“I thought your lawyer went over this with you – about your legal duties as a witness?”

“Well yeah, I mean - I understand I’m not supposed to talk about the case with anyone. But that
doesn’t mean you get to spy on everything I do.”

“Actually, we can. As soon as you signed that paperwork you became the fed’s bitch, for want of a better word. And I’m the hustler stuck with keeping you all in line. Don’t make my job harder than it needs to be and you won’t be hearing from me too often.”

Ian juts his chin out in a note of defiance, but in his heart he knows there’s not much he can do about it now that the thing’s on his ankle.

“We’ve invested a lot of time and funds in this trial – it’s in everyone’s best interests that it works out. If it collapses because of a dereliction of duty on your part, you’re going to be right back in here – except you’ll be a certified snitch too. The whole case rests upon witness statements and those statements are only effective if the jury believes them to be credible. We’re already having to work hard to convince the court that you’re reliable, don’t jeopardize that by doing something stupid. And I’m not just talking about discussing the case. You’re a criminal who’s gotten out of prison through unearned means. Any whiff of criminal activity once you’re out is going to destroy your credibility, so don’t go masterminding any bank heists or whatever it is you do between stints in the can.”

Ian rolls his eyes and re-crosses his arms in annoyance.

“I was an EMT before I went in. Stop talking about me like I’m trash.”

“I don’t care if you’re the Pope himself, keep your nose clean, so the defense has no reason to challenge your motivations for testifying. Are we clear on this?”

Ian’s still annoyed, but he nods his head mutely then stares off to the side to make it clear that he’s not going to challenge it further.

“Okay, well, as a result of the speaker and microphone features, this device has reduced water resistance. It is not waterproof and should not be submerged, ever. That means no swimming and you can’t put it in the bath, you’ll have to dangle your leg out. It should be okay in the shower, but try not to keep it directly under the water jet.”

He pauses to draw breath and then fishes around in his briefcase for some papers.

“What else? From 6pm today you’ll be under house arrest until further notice. You may not leave your home, or interact with people connected to the case without my permission. If you manage to maintain these rules for several weeks we will look into relaxing the terms you’re bound by. You will be sequestered during the trial to ensure no-one has access to you and so that you cannot interact with other witnesses. This will be maintained for the duration of the trial, regardless as to how long it lasts. You may not tell anyone, beyond your immediate family, the true reason for your return home. We recommend you explain that you were released on medical furlough, pre trial, and that you are under house arrest for that reason. You may not tell your family any details about the case – only enough for them to understand why you may enter the witness security program and what risk, if any, there may be when the trail goes to court. They can expect to be visited by marshals or other representatives of the federal government over the next few months and may be asked to sign confidentiality agreements. Any questions?”

Ian shakes his head curtly, more out of habit than any real antagonism.

“Alright, I’m going to need you to sign these forms to acknowledge that you understand the interim arrangements and the responsibilities you have for this governmental property.”

He slides the paperwork over and Ian looks through it before signing over the last bit of his non-
“Thank you. Here’s a leaflet that describes the meaning of the various lights, vibrations or sounds that the unit may emit. Memorize it so that you know what to do when they happen. There’s also some care guidelines and FAQs on there. I will be over to your house in the next couple of days to talk further; I’ll hand you back to the C.O.s now. Don’t forget about your 6pm curfew.”

Without another word he picks up his bag and walks out the door, as the C.O. who’d been waiting for him enters.

“Okay, Ian. Here is your valuables bag – please check it against the list and then sign here to acknowledge that you’ve received everything.”

Peering into the paper envelope Ian sees his belt, wallet, phone, watch and shoelaces for the first time in months. He pulls out his wallet and flips through the cards. Everything seems to be there, but he can’t remember exactly what he had, if he’s honest.

“Here is $132.58 in cash – the balance of your commissary account. We’ve also provided a bus ticket for you back to Chicago. It’s a few miles into town and there’s no public transport, so we’ll arrange a taxi to get you there, if you need it. Sign here.”

“Thanks, have you got a charger I can use – to get some juice in my phone?”

“I’m sure we can probably find something. We’ve also removed your personal items from your cell and inventoried them. Please sign here to acknowledge that the list is correct. These will be mailed to your forwarding address in the next few days.”

Ian pulls his laces out from the envelope and works on doing up his boots. It’s awkward with his right one, as the ankle monitor can’t be hitched high enough on his shin to close the shoe up and it definitely won’t go over the boot. He elects to thread it as far as he can then wraps the rest of the lace around his ankle, to stop the boot coming off. It looks stupid with the other one done all the way up, but Ian’s not too bothered by what people will think at this point.

“Could you give me your driver’s license? I need to check it against your paperwork.”

Ian extracts it and the C.O. removes it and the paperwork from the room, leaving him on his own. Ian instantly freezes up at the realization that he’s been left unguarded and has to fight down the impulse to run. He distracts himself by putting on his belt and wonders what would actually happen if he tried to escape now – one step from the finish line.

A few minutes later the C.O. returns and hands him back his license.

“Here’s your to-go bag.”

He pushes a brown paper bag towards Ian, who opens it curiously. There’s a sandwich (spam no doubt), an orange, potato chips, water, some basic toiletries and a few vials of pills. There’s also more paperwork for him to sign. When he’s done that the C.O. motions at him to stand and follow him.

He leads Ian down a corridor and around a corner to a metal door. The C.O. waves to someone in the control room to his right and he’s buzzed through. There’s another metal door up ahead which they pass through again and on the other side Ian walks out into a sort of waiting room filled with plastic chairs bolted to the ground and a smattering of people – women and children amongst them.

“Okay, you’re free to go.” The C.O. says.
Ian turns around to look at him with a slightly bewildered expression that causes the man to laugh.

“Jesus, you’ve only been here a few weeks! You look like a man who’s done twenty years! Get going and don’t come back!”

For a moment Ian just stares blankly ahead, wondering what the hell he’s supposed to do next. Then he starts to remember that the guy had said something about a taxi. The man’s already gone, but there’s a window at the control room where people are lining up at to speak with a C.O., so Ian turns towards it. Somehow he doesn’t notice anyone around him until they’re right beside him, and Ian has to stifle his prison instincts yet again, if he wants to ever see the outside of this building. He flinches away from the milky arms and takes a step back, knocking into the woman ahead of him in the line.

“Hey,” comes a familiar voice.

“Fuck, you scared me!”

The older woman he’s backed into tuts in disapproval at his language, so Ian apologizes quickly, whilst trying to move out of range of her handbag.

“What are you doing here?”

“What d’ya think dumbass? I’ve come to take you home.”

“I thought we weren’t allowed any contact?”

“After 6pm, yeah. So hurry up Cinderella.”

“I… no I … they gave me a bus ticket. I was gonna take the bus back.”

“Dressed like that? You’re gonna fucking freeze.”

It’s at this point Ian realizes that Mickey’s holding a parka. The tutting lady is about to start up again, but her face softens a little when she sees what’s in Mickey’s outstretched arm.

Ian is still looking at him skeptically. It’s not that he doesn’t want to see Mickey, but he’s so overwhelmed by everything that’s happened today he doesn’t think he can process anything else. He’s terrified.

Mickey seems a little hurt and surprised at the frosty reception, but he pushes the bundle up against Ian’s chest, regardless.

“You went in in the summer - it’s fucking snowing out. At least take the coat.”

Ian nods mutely and pulls it on, whispering an almost silent “thanks,” under his breath.

“Seriously though, let me give you a ride. I cleared it with Hansen – it’s fine.”

Ian has taken to looking at his shoes so Mickey stoops a little and twists his neck around so that he can make eye contact with him.

“Come on man, we need to talk.”

Ian lets out a sigh, but he stiffens upright and nods out a terse “okay.” Then he feels a hand between his shoulder blades as Mickey steers him round towards the exit and he realizes it’s the first time they’ve touched in more than a year.
They head out past the security point, setting off the metal detectors as they go, but no-one cares because they’re on their way out.

Mickey leads the way through the car park, where it is indeed snowing. Ian’s expecting to see Mickey’s old banger, so he’s surprised when he stops beside a shiny, distinctly compact and practical car.

“This is yours?” he asks in disbelief.

“Rental,” Mickey shrugs, and gets in. The interior has that unique new car smell and Ian guesses it can’t have been used more than a few times.

“It doesn’t seem very you.”

“Yeah, well, contrary to popular opinion, witness security doesn’t pay all that good. I got the cheapest thing I could find.”

“It’s still a lot nicer than anything I’ve ever owned.”

“I told you, it’s a rental; I don’t really need a car staying in Lakeview.”

“You’re living on the North Side?”

“Not allowed on the South Side,” he shrugs.

Ian looks around and spots that there’s a charger in the cigarette lighter port.

“Can I use this?”

“Knock yourself out.” Mickey says, starting the engine.

Ian fishes around in his ‘go’ bag and pulls out his phone. Once it’s started charging he leans back in his seat and tries not to think about the last time he was driving back to Chicago from Terre Haute with Mickey – wearing the same goddamn tank top.

Chapter End Notes

Holy crap, I’ve been writing this for a year now! I thought for sure I’d be done by now, but my brain had other plans.
Chapter 27

T.W. Depiction of a panic attack and discussion of Ian's attempted rape - not graphic.

Ian manages to keep his cool for a few minutes, but before long they're driving through downtown Terre Haute - and then Ian spots the plaza where his desperate flight from the police with Yevgeny took place. He feels the panic beginning to rise in his chest and he casts around desperately, looking for a distraction. He spots a pack of cigarettes in the void in front of the gear-box and gratefully snatches them up, along with a lighter. He’s still fumbling with the packaging, when Mickey swipes them out of his hand and throws them down into the footwell.

“Hey I-”

“No smoking in the car.”

“But I – what?”

“No Smiling In The Car.” Mickey raises his eyebrows and enunciates every word slowly, to ensure that the message is getting through.

“Really?!”

“They charge like a $200 cleaning fee if you smoke. I can’t afford your jittery ass.”

“Mick please! I’m really fucking panicking here.”

“So give me a second to pull over, then you can smoke the whole pack.”

“No. Don’t. Just. Not here, okay. Can we please get out of this fucking town?!”

Mickey seems to connect the dots then and he takes the next turning to the left, crossing over the river and quickly passing through the remaining blocks of houses, out into open fields on a rural route. Ian has his head down in the footwell. He’s very quiet, but his white-knuckled grip on the door handle to his right indicates that he’s anything but calm.

Mickey pulls over in the first passing place he sees that’s out of sight of the town and quickly kills the engine. Then he picks up the cigarettes and moves around to Ian’s door and wrenches it open.

“Ian, y’all right?”

A moan is all he gets in response.

“Come on man, just walk a few feet and you can have a smoke.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. Too much adrenaline now. I’ll puke.”

“Well I fucking need one now. Also, no puking in the car either.”
Ian smiles ever so slightly at this and allows Mickey to put his arm around him and haul him upright. After that Ian’s able to wobble over to the edge of the embankment and slump down on his own. Mickey joins him and lights up a cigarette, but he keeps a couple of feet between them and holds his smoke downwind so Ian won’t smell it. They spend a couple of minutes in silence looking out at the frozen cornfields, the golden stubble of last year’s stalks poking up through the snow. Before long, the sweat Ian broke out in chills him and he starts to shiver from the cold wind.

“I need to lie down.” Ian whispers as he slowly gets to his feet. He opens one of the rear doors and crawls into the back seat. Mickey doesn’t follow immediately and tries to drag his cigarette out as long as he can, to give Ian a little space. When he does re-enter the car, he gets into the driver’s seat and looks in the rear-view mirror. Ian’s managed to fit his whole body in by sprawling out with his head against the right door and his feet pressed along the top of the left window.

“This okay?” Mickey asks. He doesn’t get a response initially, but he sees that the color is slowly returning to Ian’s previously ashen face and when he glances back again Ian makes eye contact through the mirror.

“I’m sorry Mick, I didn’t mean to scare you. I know that must’ve seemed strange but—”

Mickey cuts him off.

“It’s okay Ian – really. I know what happened.”

Neither of them say anything after that, so Ian shuts his eyes and concentrates on his breathing. After a few minutes he reopens them and looks up again. Mickey’s looking out ahead, hands draped over the top of the wheel and picking at his nails.

“I feel like you’re my fucking shrink now.”

Mickey looks back in the mirror and smiles.

“Why’s that?”

“Because I’m laid out on a stupid couch while you sit in a chair with your back to me, waiting for me to tell you about my dreams, or some crap.”

“Freudian shit, you mean? Ain’t I meant to tell you it’s all about dicks and that you want to give it to your mother? How does that work if you’re gay? Are you supposed to fuck your dad instead? I might have to take you back to prison, because anyone who wants to bone Frank should be locked up.”

Ian manages a little smile but doesn’t say anything.

“Did they really make you do psychoanalysis in there? Seems like a waste of time – all anyone would dream about is being free and it’s not hard to see why.”

“They had a specialist psych team there, so they let me try one or two sessions of it. It wasn’t about dreams really, just like, relationships and dynamics. I wasn’t really into it.”

“What’d you learn?”

“That I’m an idiot who doesn’t know my own mind.”

“Eh, yeah that’s pretty accurate. But you’ve got potential. And I think anyone’d struggle if they were in your shoes.”
“Maybe.”

Mickey grows a little quiet at this and looks back again.

“I … I get it now, Ian, a little bit. What it’s like.”

Ian doesn’t say anything and Mickey breaks their eye contact to look out through the windshield, but continues.

“I had a hard time in Mexico, after a while. I couldn’t escape this feeling that I was being swept out to sea. After a while I stopped caring and tried to drown myself with alcohol instead. And it didn’t work because I realized I was drinking to try to feel something, not to numb the pain, y’know? I started to believe I’d never loved you.”

He chuckles then, but it’s high pitched and breathless, as if he’d stifled a sob instead.

“That shit is hard. Really, really hard. I dunno how I made it out. Not sure I could again.”

“You would. You’re stronger than me and I’m still here. Although I made a pretty good go of it this time.”

“I heard you lit your cell on fire, swallowed a canister of tear gas and they still had to drug you. That’s an advanced convict move – proud of you Gallagher.”

Mickey finally looks back at the mirror, but it’s Ian’s turn to look away, although he does have a slightly shy smirk on his face that Mickey doesn’t miss.

“I think it’s been talked up a bit. It wasn’t that big a fire, just a few books, a blanket. My pants.”

“Haha, liar, liar …”

Ian isn’t smiling anymore though. He shifts his position a bit and pushes his face into the rear seatback, to further avert his eyes.

“What? If you say it wasn’t that big I believe you. Honest.”

Ian starts to feel the adrenaline returning and he swallows down hard, squeezing his eyes shut.

“No, it’s … it’s not that.”

“Huh?”

Ian concentrates on his breathing and tries to keep his mind running smoothly.

“What … what did they tell you happened that night?”

“Well, just that you started a fire and brawled with your cellie. Then they’d had to sedate you, but you agreed to emergency treatment in the end, so they sent you to Cook County. That you’d probably had a manic episode.”

“Yeah, it’s true.”

Mickey is scrutinizing what he can see of Ian’s face in the mirror and he waits a minute before probing.

“But that’s not everything is it? Something else went down.”
Ian shows no response to his question, so he presses once more.

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

It takes a moment, but Ian lets out a quiet “No.” from the back seat.

“Okay. I guess we should get going anyway. You want to stay back there or are you gonna come up front again?”

A heavy sigh escapes Ian, but he rolls his head back towards Mickey.

“Yeah, I’ll come around.”

Ian collapses his long legs to his chest and pushes himself upright with an elbow, then reaches out and opens the door to his right. A moment later he’s settling back into the passenger seat, so Mickey readjusts the mirror and starts the engine. He’s indicating, waiting for a car to pass so he can merge, when Ian suddenly thumps the dashboard with both his fists and screams out:

“FFFUUUUUUCCCCCKKKKK!”

Mickey whips his head back over his left shoulder, assuming that Ian was saving them from certain death because he missed something in his blind spot – but there’s nothing there.

“FUCKING HELL IAN, WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT FOR?”

But Ian is already half way out of the car, having opened the door of Mickey’s precious rental with a swift kick. Mickey pulls a little to the right to get out of the way of traffic and hastily kills the engine. Ian is barreling back along the embankment with his hands stuffed in his pockets, but he stops when he gets to a telephone pole and starts kicking it ferociously instead.

“AAARRGHHH FUCK, FUCK, FUCK, FUCK.” He screams with every jab of his foot.

“Jesus Christ Ian, I swear you’re going to kill me one of these days.”

Mickey seizes him from behind, his hands grasping at Ian’s biceps, but Ian shrugs him off and continues to kick, so he decides to let him get it out of his system; whatever it is. He finally has to intervene though, when Ian goes to head-butt the pole.

“Alright killer, rein it in.”

Mickey tries to make his voice soothing, given that Ian’s struggling in his head-lock, but Ian’s still fuming and he attempts to wriggle out of it by tucking his chin in. Mickey of course is wise to such moves and simply slides his body around to reposition his grip.

“Don’t try to play this game with me Ian. I will win. You have no fucking idea.”

“Fuck you!” comes Ian’s muffled retort.

Mickey rolls his eyes before suddenly kicking Ian’s giraffe legs out from under him and pulling him down by his neck – although he’s careful to make sure Ian lands squarely on his back in the gravel.

“What the - ?” Ian wheezes out, somewhat winded by his fall. Mickey’s on his knees, elbow in the middle of Ian’s chest from pushing him down.

“Just … just breathe, alright Ian?”
Ian finally acquiesces and begins to cough instead, rolling over onto his side, away from Mickey. But when he stops and returns to his back, there are tear tracks running down each cheek.

“The fuck happened Ian?”

“My cellie tried to rape me.”

Mickey leans back on his haunches and looks around blindly. For all he knows there could be cops pulling over right now to arrest them, but he wouldn’t see them. In the end he slumps forward himself, bowing his head and then rolling to the side so that he’s prostrate too, perpendicular to Ian, with their heads almost touching. He heaves out a long sigh.

“That’s not the worst part.”

“Holy shit Ian.”

“I don’t know if it actually happened.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t know if it actually happened. I was psychotic at the time - delusional, I had visual hallucinations. My pants were on fire. Maybe I just misunderstood.”

“How the hell can that be misunderstood?!”

“It’s not … it’s hard to explain. You wouldn’t understand, if you haven’t experienced it.”

“I can try.”

Ian groans a bit, but finally lets his body uncoil. He opens his eyes and stares up at the steel grey sky. Despite the obvious differences, it reminds him of last summer and the days he spent sunbathing on the roof of the MCC - the only part of the place he doesn’t mind remembering.

“You have to understand how real it feels, it looks, it sounds. Your ideas are convincing, clear, visceral – as solid as you are, right here.”

Ian snorts.

“Well, maybe that’s not the best example. I’m still not totally convinced you’re real.”

Mickey takes the opportunity to punch Ian’s arm.

“Fucking real, dickhead.”

“Okay. But people think it’s all hazy and it’s not – it’s not dream-like at all. Actually... yes it’s totally dream-like, but not the way you feel in the morning when you’re trying to remember as you’re waking up. It’s how you feel when you’re inside them, asleep. Most of the time nothing makes sense and when you’re awake you can see how weird and stupid it is. But when you’re in the middle of it you never doubt it, because your brain isn’t working the way it does when you’re awake. Those parts are shut down for maintenance and there’re detours in place. You’re literally firing on different cylinders and it’s the same thing when I’m psychotic. My brain is working differently, using different roads, and I can’t recognize it because those navigating parts aren’t working. Unless I lucid dream. D’you know what that is?”

“Nope.”
“Have you ever realized you were dreaming, in the middle of one? Maybe in a nightmare where you suddenly understood you could escape by waking up?”

“Nope, and I’d’ve had a much better childhood if I did.”

“Well some people realize, but usually they wake up as soon as they do. I can’t do that – there’s no way to just snap out of psychosis. But people can train themselves to stay in their dreams, once they become aware, and then they can manipulate the dream into doing what they want. That’s what I have to learn to do, to recognize that it’s not real and learn how to navigate within it – figure out what can be trusted and what can’t.”

“AAah, it’s that Inception shit!”

“Yeah, but without the dream sharing. Otherwise everyone would be crazy.”

“I don’t wanna sound mean, but that’s actually, like, pretty cool.”

“Yeah, in theory. In real life it fucking sucks.”

They’re silent for a minute or two, still staring up at the sky. Ian can feel his frustration building again and he grabs and releases handfuls of gravel to center himself.

“It’s not … it’s not even that I don’t know for sure what happened that’s so bad, so frustrating. It’s something he said, or at least something I heard him say: “Who’s going to believe you? You’re fucking crazy!” And it’s true, I am crazy. And even I don’t believe myself! It’s bad enough when other people doubt you, but how can you live if you don’t know your own truth?”

Ian lifts a hand and pulls it down his face, groaning all the while.

“I don’t know who I am Mick. I feel as lost as I did the last time we were driving back from this fucking town.”

“Have you been listening to yourself for the last hour, dumbass? Yeah, you’re crazy, but there’s no way you’d be saying things like this back then. You’ve grown – exponentially. We both have; you just can’t see it yet.”

Their tête-à-tête is interrupted however, by the sound of crunching gravel.

“Ah fuck.”

Chapter End Notes

Personally, I think I know what happened to Ian that night, but I hope you understand why it is ambiguous.
Points for anyone who can work out what town this takes place in. There's a little artistic license taken, so don't rely 100% on the details given, but it's generally accurate.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ian looks up to see a dark sedan slowly passing them, pulling up beside their abandoned car on the embankment. Both men get to their feet as swiftly as they can and start wiping the gravel and snow from their coats, trying not to look suspicious.

“What are you two doing?” calls a voice from the car.

“He was feeling sick, so we pulled over. Had to get some air.”

“How stupid do you think I am, Mickey?”

Ian can hear him, but he can’t see the man until he’s hauled himself, somewhat slowly, out of the car. It’s Hansen.

“It’s true!” Mickey throws his hands in the air in exasperation.

“He’s been out for all of an hour and you’re already in a fight? All you had to do was take him home!”

“I told you, he was gonna puke in the car! I wasn’t going to pay to clean that shit!”

“You know I can hear you if I want to, right? Vomiting doesn’t explain why I’m hearing Ian screaming ‘FUCK’, banging noises, or why you two are lying on the ground!”

Mickey bites his lip and stifles his laughter just long enough to cock an eyebrow and flash a devilish grin at his handler.

“Well…”

“Shut up, asshole.” Hansen swats at an imaginary fly and quickly turns away, as if trying to escape from the visual he’s just conjured.

“Yeah, he gives it to me good and hard and I fuckin’ like it!” Mickey throws in a hip thrust for good measure, but Ian plants a firm hand on his shoulder to still him.

“Mick…”

He then addresses Hansen.

“It’s true – I mean, it’s true about the air. I was having a panic attack and freaking out, so we pulled over. Then I got out and started kicking that telephone pole over there because I was so frustrated. That’s what all the noise was. Mickey just tackled me to get me on the ground and calm me down.”

Mickey gesticulates back and forth between himself and Ian.
“See? No blood! No way would our faces look this good if we were fighting.”

Hansen rolls his eyes to that, but seems convinced.

“Okay, just get moving again, please? For two people who’re supposed to draw as little attention to themselves as possible, you’re failing miserably. I’m sure a Highway Patrol car’ll turn up any minute.”

“Yeah? Well that’s your problem.”

“Just get in the car already!”

“Come on Mick.” Ian gives a little tug to his arm and sets off back towards their car.

“6pm!” Hansen shouts after them, before getting back into his own vehicle.

Mickey starts the engine and pulls back onto the road, forgetting to check his blind-spot once again.

“Fucking prick,” he murmurs under his breath.

“He’s just doing his job.”

“Doesn’t matter. I hate all pigs.”

“He’s a fed, not a cop.”

“They’re all the same.”

“Still thinking like a fugitive, huh?”

“Ugh, just thinking about all the times I’ve had to swallow my pride and kiss corrupt cop ass so I wouldn’t get found out. I hate playing the long game.”

Ian decides not to look too deeply into those comments. He wriggles in his seat, then leans his head against the window and looks out at the landscape. After a few minutes of quiet, Mickey glances over his way once or twice.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. I mean, no. But I will be. I’m still so overwhelmed.”

“Doesn’t surprise me. Anyone would be. You must be hungry though.”

“Not really. If I had an appetite, I’ve lost it. Plus they gave me a lunch to go.” Ian nudges his paper bag with his toe to demonstrate.

“Come on man. I know you don’t want that bologna sandwich they’ll have given you. Let’s get some real eats.”

Ian doesn’t say anything so Mickey throws in a sweetener.

“I’m buying?”

“Like I said, I’m not hungry. But if you want to stop and eat, go for it. I guess we’ve got time.”

Ian’s back to gazing distantly out the window. Mickey tries to respect the silence, but he can’t resist peeking over once or twice and he’s rewarded when he catches a smirk on Ian’s face.
“What?” he asks.

“Oh. It’s nothing.”

“Come on.”

“I can tell you’ve never done time in the fed.”

“Oh?”

“It’s a spam sandwich. Everyone knows bologna is for those soft guys in the state system.”

Mickey inhales in mock indignation.

“Excuse me?! Fresh fish Ian Gallagher is trying to out-convict me? Bitch please, I’d own your punk ass every time.”

Ian’s smiling in spite of himself now.

“You know, for you Mick, I’d make an exception.”

They lapse back into silence, but it’s the comfortable kind now.

“Where the hell are we anyway?” Ian asks, after a few more minutes of meandering around fields.

“Honestly? No idea. Figure as long as we keep heading vaguely northeast we’ll hit the freeway eventually. Don’t care, so long as it’s pissing off Hansen.”

Ian looks in the side mirror to see that, sure enough the dark sedan is following them at a discreet distance – although it’s hard to miss, being the only other car on the flat, open, single-lane road.

“Are we even in Illinois though? It’s only a few miles from Terre Haute to the state line, but I haven’t seen any signs.”

“Eh, Hansen hasn’t tried to run us off the road yet, so I figure we must be doing something right.”

Their slow progress on the perfectly straight roads continues, as they alternate turning left, then right, at each crossroads, to keep their heading. Eventually, Ian begins to wonder if they’re trapped in some personification of a country music song, but then the road suddenly straightens – as if it’s finally made up its mind that it wants to cross the fields rather then skirt them. This good omen is reinforced as the road gradually widens to two lanes and the number of houses they’re seeing increases. Then they’re abruptly released from their Midwestern purgatory as they start to pass blocks of houses, churches and schools, making it clear they’ve reached some kind of civilization. They know they’ve arrived in the middle of it all when they see a huge, imposing Romanesque building, much more ornate than anything else around it, taking up a whole block.

“What the hell is that? A church?”

“Nah, looks like the county court to me. Wouldn’t want to do time here though; the grander the court house, the shitter the jail.”

They cruise Main Street and Mickey spots a sign for ‘BJ’s’ and insists they eat there. But BJ’s is closed, so they try the place down the block, which says it’s a café, but looks like a diner.

A bell tinkles overhead as they enter and they’re greeted by a cheery blonde teenager, who can’t be more than a junior in high school. She motions for them to take a seat at a table in a corner as she
brings over some laminated menus.

“Can I get you something to drink?”

“Coffee, uh, please.”

“Same.”

The bell rings again and Ian looks up to see Hansen entering. He blanks them completely and strides over to the main counter, to take a seat on one of the stools.

The café is very much a ‘mom and pop’ operation. The walls are covered in old class pictures from the local high school, but there’re also black and white photos of the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe slotted in here and there. A US flag, on a pole, stands sentinel in a corner. It’s pretty busy, considering it’s past the lunch-time rush and there seem to be an awful lot of decorations up too – silver and gold crepe streamers adorn the ceiling and red and white heart-shaped balloons are floating aimlessly around.

Slowly it begins to dawn on Ian what day it is.

“Mickey,” he stammers, “are we … are we on a date?!”

“You tell me Gallagher.”

Mickey doesn’t look up from his menu, but his huge smile gives him away.

“Holy shit,” Ian whispers.

Ian feels his body uncoiling again, as his first laughter in God-knows-how-long spasms its way through his lungs and throat in fitful spurts. He slumps a little in his chair as he relaxes.

Mickey reaches his left hand across the table and covers Ian’s right.

“Feels good, don’t it?”

He retracts it a moment later as the waitress arrives with the coffee pot, but she’s smirking all the while as she pretends not to notice. She thinks they’re cute.

“Have you decided what you’d like to eat?”

“Yeah uh, I’ll have the 12oz T-bone. Blue.”

“I’m very sorry sir, we’re not allowed to do that.”

Mickey rolls his eyes and mutters something under his breath that might be Spanish, before picking up his menu and passing it over to the waitress.

“Fine, just as close to screaming as you can make it.”

“And for you sir?!”

Ian still hasn’t looked at his menu.

“Um, same. But well-done.”

Mickey shoots a look of undisguised disgust his way, as Ian hands over his menu.
“Fucking pussy,” he hisses at him, as soon as the waitress is out of earshot.

“Come on, I’m institutionalized. You gotta give me time to adjust!”

Mickey scratches at his chin with his thumb as if debating whether to do so, but his smile is indulgent, so Ian continues.

“Besides, you promised me Sizzler.”

Mickey, who had been in the process of unfolding his napkin, abruptly throws it down on the table and feigns pulling his chair back to leave.

“It’s got utensils! What more do you want? Balloons?”

“It’s perfect Mick. It’s got you.”

“Uuuuggghhh.” Mickey bangs his forehead on the table, gently, in exasperation. “So fuckin’ cheesy man.”

“I did try you know,” he tells Ian, once he’s able to look him in the eyes again. “They’re all gone! No Sizzlers left east of the Rockies. I thought about getting you a Sizzla album instead, but I figured he might be a bit homophobic for your taste. And for the record – I’m not Mick anymore.”

“What should I be calling you then?”

“Daddy?”

“Fuck off.”

“Okay, okay. It’s Mike now.”

“Mike?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s kind of dumb.”

“Why?”

“Well, no offense, but if I were trying to track down someone who’s name used to be Mick, I’d probably start by looking for Michaels.”

“Who said anything about Michael?”

Ian leans back in his chair and tries to work out if Mickey’s playing with him.

“So it’s just Mike - not short for anything?”

“No, just not Michael. Well sort of, but not quite.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“Michelangelo.”

“Michelangelo?!”

“What, you think I can’t pass for Italian-American?”
“Well, maybe; but it’s weird.”

“Any weirder than Mykhailo?”

“Yeah, I guess you’ve got me there.”

“Speaking of which…” Mickey reaches around to the back pocket of his jeans and pulls out his wallet. “… I’ve got something for you.”

He tosses a card across the table and Ian picks it up curiously. It’s an Indiana driver’s license, but it’s got Ian’s DMV image on it. Then he sees the name.

“CURTIS?!”

“Shhhh!” Mickey hushes him.

“Of all the names in the world, you made me fucking Curtis?!”

“Hey, come on now. They had to get it done in a hurry and it needed to be something you’d remember and answer to easily. You’ve had a lot of practice being Curtis – seemed like the obvious choice.”

“Yeah I get it, but ugh, I hate that name. Reminds me of everything I left behind.”

“Look, it’s not set in stone or anything, you can change it if you want, eventually. But if you wanna come see where I’m at you can’t be leaving a paper trail as Ian.”

Ian flips the license over and back, then tilts it around in the light to see the holograms on the surface.

“It looks real.”

“That’s because it is real. New social, new credit record, everything. They don’t fuck about.”


“Did you- did you combine our last names? And you had the audacity to call me cheesy! Jesus Mick.”

To Ian’s immense satisfaction, he sees a full-blooded pink flush creeping up Mickey’s neck and spilling over his cheeks. It’s so rare a sight – at least when due to self-consciousness.

“Like I said, I had to come up with something you’d remember – quickly. And I believe that’s called a portmanteau.”

“A portmanteau? Have you heard yourself recently?! Where the fuck are these words coming from?”

“Eh, I kept learning all these words in Spanish and realizing I didn’t know what the English ones meant. Had to get a fucking dictionary.”

“You have to get a French one too?”

All Ian receives is a middle finger in return.

Their steaks are here. Mickey seems satisfied with the bloodiness of his, so they spend a few minutes
in silence chewing their cud-chewers. Ian, who swore he wasn’t all that hungry, ends up devouring his in half the time it takes Mickey and that gives him time to think some more about his unexpected circumstances.

“So how does this work?”

“Hmmm?”

“The relocation thing. Did you choose where you’re going? Do you have a plan or are you just gonna go west and hope life’s peaceful there, or what? Where’s your new Mexico?”

“New Mexico.”

“Haha, really?”

“Yup.”

“Why there?”

“I’ve got contacts. Can do business from the other side of the border.”

“Isn’t it risky keeping up with people you knew from before? What about your new identity?”

“It’s not that new. Don’t forget, I was a fugitive. No-one ever knew me as Mickey down there. I’m just bringing my Mexican identity back across the border.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

The waitress comes to collect their plates and asks if they want anything for dessert. Ian looks hungrily over at the counter, where an assortment of pies are displayed behind plexiglass, but Mickey is looking at his watch.

“Uh, no, we need to get going. Can I just have the check?”

Ian tries his best not to look disappointed and scoops up his new license to put it in his wallet. He spots Hansen waving the waitress over as soon as she’s left their table, no doubt getting his own check. Ian notices he’s been eating pie.

“So anyway…” Mickey says, waving his hand in front of Ian’s eyes to focus his attention back on him. “…as long as you behave yourself at home for a couple of weeks, they’ll let you come down and visit me for a few days. It’s gotta be before Terry gets arrested. Once all that breaks they’ll probably make it so we can’t have any contact unless it’s with lawyers. So… think about it, okay?”

Ian still has his neck craned in the direction of the counter and Mickey knows why.

“You want fucking pie, don’t you?”

“I don’t know about ‘fucking’ pie, but yeah,” he answers a little sheepishly.

Mickey rolls his eyes, but gets to his feet and goes after the waitress. She brings it to the table in a styrofoam box, along with their check. Ian opens it immediately and sets to work with his fingers, while Mickey gets out his wallet. Ian’s eyes grow a little wide though, when, instead of pulling out cash, Mickey hands over a credit card instead. Once Ian’s managed to swallow his giant mouthful of pastry and the waitress has left, he grins up at him with a goofy smile.

“I take it it’s good then?” says Mickey, with a hint of jealousy in his voice.
“Yeah. But Mick, you’ve got a credit card – a real one that you didn’t steal out of someone’s mailbox, right?!”

“Not a very good one, but yeah. Gotta take advantage of that clean record; build my credit.”

“I’m not sure I’m ever going to get used to Mike. He seems like such a stand-up guy.”

“He’s pretty good lying down too.”

“His jokes are lame though.”

They head out after that – Hansen following directly behind them as they all pile out the door.

“That pie was great wasn’t it?” Ian says to him - but all he gets is a terse “6pm,” in return as Hansen walks towards his car, a few spaces from their own.

Three and a bit hours later, they’re pulling up outside a familiar house on the South Side, with a few minutes to spare. Several lights are on inside and it looks like nothing has changed in the time Ian’s been away. He’s both apprehensive and excited.

“Want to come in?”

Mickey laughs.

“As much as I would love to see Fiona’s reaction, it’s better if no-one knows if I’m back. Best keep it all happy; it’s gonna be enough of a shock seeing you.”

“I guess.”

“But seriously, get going, you’ve got like two minutes to go – even if Hansen can see you from down the block.”

Ian gropes around in the footwell for his paper bag and shrugs off his coat.

“Nah, keep it.”

“They’ll ask how I got it. Besides, I’ve got plenty of winter clothes; you’re the one starting from scratch.”

Mickey doesn’t protest further, so Ian opens the door and steps out – but there’s an awkward pause between them as he holds it open, despite not knowing what he’s waiting for, or what he wants to say. Finally Mickey leans across the seat and looks up at him.

“Think about it.”

Ian nods mutely and pushes the door closed, then jogs across the street to escape the cold as quick as he can. Behind him he hears the sound of the car pulling away as he’s fishing out his keys; he hopes the locks haven’t changed. However, the door opens with a smooth click, so he braces himself for screaming as he steps over the threshold and back into a familiar world.
"Roses are red,
Violets are blue,
You're under my skin man,
The fuck can I do?"

This chapter is my Valentine's gift to you!
Have a good one, even if it just means stuffing your face with discounted chocolates on the 15th.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

This takes place a few weeks after the last chapter (Ian behaved).

Again, points for anyone who can work out what town Mickey's living in.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ian would never admit it, but in truth he’s a little afraid of flying.

It’s probably just because he’s never been on a plane before (or because his only experience with helicopters was so disastrous), but given how far he’s going out of his comfort zone anyway, he opts to take the train to New Mexico. He knows it’ll be long and slow and possibly boring, but the prospect of a couple of days staring out a window at the evolving landscape appeals to him. He needs time away from everyone to process his thoughts and the lack of phone and data reception provide the excuse to cut the cord.

The trip is long, almost 50 hours, but he gets the solitude he wanted. His first neighbor is a talker, so he escapes to the viewing car after a few hours to read a book and have a beer. He goes to the dining car when his time is called and is seated at a booth with an elderly couple from Texas who make earnest small talk with him. By the time he returns to his seat, in Missouri, his talker has been replaced by a family of Old Order Mennonites (not Amish, he is corrected), who are already settling in for the night. In the morning they offer him some apple cake for breakfast and Ian thinks it might be the most delicious thing he’s ever eaten.

In San Antonio, that evening, there is a five hour layover while train carriages are uncoupled and recoupled, so Ian leaves his stuff onboard and sets out to explore, quickly discovering a bar called ‘The Alibi’ which he knows he has to visit as soon as he sees it. It’s a friendly place and before he knows it it’s 2am and closing time, so he wanders back to the train. He has no trouble sleeping in his reclining chair that night.

The next day he starts to get nervous as they’re approaching El Paso, because he knows it won’t be long now. It’s only been a few weeks since he saw Mickey, but the last few months have been so overwhelming he’s not sure if he’s thrilled or terrified at the prospect. What lies ahead for both of them is so intimidating, but Ian tries to calm himself with the reassurance that this trip will make his course clear. At least this time everyone’s cards are on the table - he realizes that may be a first for them.

At first, when he steps off the train, Ian thinks there must be some kind of mistake. There’s no platform for a start; he is let down in the middle of a road crossing the tracks. There’s no building, just an open-sided metal hut with a bench in it, about 50 feet from the rails. In fact the only indication that the conductor isn’t fucking with him is a small metal Amtrak sign with the station name on it.

There’s not a soul around, so he jumps when he finds Mickey only a few feet away and rapidly closing, arms outstretched to gather him into a hug. His mind relaxes as soon as he’s pulled into that strong embrace though, and they lean into each other and hold on a little too tightly for it to be strictly platonic.
“Sorry man, I was on the other side of the train, didn’t know which side they’d let you down on.”

“Jesus, look at you!” Ian whispers as they pull apart. Mickey’s wearing a fucking cowboy hat; he’s not sure he’s ever seen him wear a hat. Not just that but boots as well - black ostrich skin ones, and a big piteado belt.

“What? Gotta blend in.”

“Those boots though.”

“Hey, trust me, these are understated. You should be thankful they’re not pointy. Seriously, I’ve seen things Ian. That guarachero shit just won’t die.”

Ian clearly has no idea what he’s talking about, so Mickey slaps him on the back to try to snap him out of his shell shock and picks up his bag, steering him over to a pick-up truck on the other side of the tracks.

“Listen, I’ve got to do some business stuff, the train was kinda late. Do you wanna come with me or look around the town?”

“There’s a town?”

Mickey laughs.

“Yeah, there’s a town. It’s shit though, except for the taquerias. Oh, but there is a Pride event.”

“Pride, like gay pride?! Not a bunch of lions running loose?”

“I like the second idea better, should see if they can put it on the program. But no, gay pride - all 10 fags in the county turn out. Figure we got a pretty good shot at making Mr & Miss 2018.”

“Fuck off. I’m not wearing a dress.”

“Ian, at this point, I got more drag experience than you do.”

They ride out into the desert on county roads, kicking up dust as they go. It’s not a sand dune type of place, but the soil is parched and blanched white. Ian sees gnarled green bushes and shrubs interspersed with yuccas and the occasional cactus. The land is flat and vast, with little punctuating it besides the occasional isolated house and some hills that rise sharply from the ground in the middle distance. They cross a bridge over an apparent river, but it’s bone dry. Ian smiles as he sees an actual tumbleweed blowing around the side of the road.

As they approach the hills the shrubbery starts to get a little taller and lusher with the increase in altitude. Here and there, Ian see cows dotting the slopes. They turn off the road and onto a gravel track leading to a small compound. There’s a small corral nearby and a man walking towards the main house. Mickey honks his horn to get his attention and he turns around and redirects towards the truck.

“Hey, Mike!”

“‘Sup Nesto?”

“You get a chance to think about that offer?”

“Yeah I had a look. It’s gonna be a tougher job than I thought.”
“Well I’ve heard good things about you. Jesus says you’re creative.”

“I can do it, but it’s going to take longer, probably a few weeks more, so the price will go up.”

“Same rate though?”

“Yeah and still half down, the rest plus expenses on delivery.”

“Okay, we got a deal.”

Ernesto walks away towards the house and returns a few minutes later clutching an envelope of healthy girth that he hands to Mickey. He peaks inside and seems satisfied with the amount, so leans over Ian to stash it in the glove box, before starting the truck and turning out of the compound.

“Gotta make a run to the border now.”

Ian eyes him slightly uneasily.

“How far is it?"

“Twenty miles or so. Shouldn’t take too long.”

“What are we doing?”

“Gonna pick up Bonnie.”

“Bonnie?”

“Yeah man, she’s my best mule.”

“Is she American? Doesn’t sound very Mexican.”

Mickey chuckles at this.

“Nah, she’s Juaníta. Juaní for short, but everyone made fun of my accent so I just said ‘fuck it’ and started calling her Bonnie instead. She don’t mind.”

“What’s she packing?”

“Nothing, it’s just her.”

Ian has a hard time believing that. Mickey seems to sense this and he glances over to look him in the eye.

“Seriously. Look I owe her, all right? She saved my life. There’s no way I’m leaving her behind.”

A few minutes later Mickey gets a call. Fishing out his cell he proceeds to have a conversation in what sounds like fluent Spanish. Apparently it’s not good news though because he sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose before rubbing his eyes, the way he always did when stressed.

Ian’s pretty surprised and it must show on his face because he’s getting side-eye now.

“What?”

“You speak Spanish.”

“Some, yeah. You remember where I was, right?” Mickey is smirking affectionately at Ian like he’s a
simpleton.

“ Sounds like more than some to me. I mean, you weren’t there that long – it’s impressive.”

“ Definitely not fluent - just the important stuff.”

Ian’s still got a skeptical eyebrow raised so he continues.

“ Trust me, I’m more pocho than paisa.”

“I have no idea what that means.”

“It means no Mexican would think I’m Mexican.”

They drive quietly for a few minutes, a comfortable silence between them, before a small town comes into view.

“Listen, we’re gonna have to make a quick detour. Bonnie’s being held at the border. Need to get someone to cross over to negotiate.”

“Held up? I thought you said it was just her?”

“It is. This is just that damn national entrepreneurial spirit in action.”

Ian is clearly lost again, so he elaborates.

“I just need to grease a few palms and they’ll release her. It’ll be fine.”

To Ian’s surprise they pull up at the side of an elementary school and a kid of 9 or 10 comes running over to Ian’s window.

“Hola Mike!”

“Hey Curtis, open that envelope in the glove box and give $500 to José.”

Ian gives him a dirty look for using his stage name, but he does as he’s told and José runs off towards a yellow school bus on the other side of the yard.

“Why are we trusting a fourth grader with $500?”

“I know him, he’s the son of a friend. He’s a good kid and smart too. He won’t give them any more than he has to.”

“Wait, he’s the negotiator? I thought you were just giving it to him to transport. Can he even cross the border on his own?”

Mickey’s looking at him like he’s stupid, again.

“Where do you think he lives? Where do you think that bus is going? Trust me, they never bother to search the kids.”

The bus moves off and they follow at a distance behind, out of town. A couple of miles later they pull into a gravel lot by a wall. There’s a small shack marked ‘Duty Free’ at one end and a large border patrol building at the other. In the middle is a gap in the wall wide enough for two vehicles to pass through and small hut to the side housing an agent. Beyond this Ian can see brightly painted stucco houses, in contrast to the desolation on this side of the fence. The kids have gotten off the bus
and are walking across the border, waving goodbye and exchanging high-fives with the agent in the hut, apparently part of their daily ritual.

“Oh man, it’s like, right there!” Ian is admiring the hand-painted signs advertising discount dental work and Coca-Cola on the other side.

“Yup.”

“Why don’t you go over to get her?”

“Can’t. The bomb on my ankle’ll explode. Had to get special dispensation from Hansen to even get this close.” He looks a little sad or wistful.

“You miss it there?”

“Sometimes. It was a pretty mixed experience for me. I miss some stuff, but it’s not so different here. Plus I can watch Rosario Tijeras on Univision.”

He still seems pretty quiet though and it suddenly dawns on Ian that he’s probably thinking about the last time they were this close to the border. He reaches out and surrounds Mickey’s hand on the steering wheel, squeezing it gently and running his thumb along the skin on the back. He feels him relax a little, even as his own discomfit starts to rise.

“Mick, I gotta ask.”

“Hmm?”

“What exactly do you do for money out here?”

Mickey pauses for a moment, biting his lower lip, seemingly weighing how much to tell him.

“I’m in the horse business.”

Ian lets out a little sigh and relaxes his grip on Mickey’s hand, even as the latter pulls it away anyway and starts fiddling with his nails, before glancing back at Ian.

“Hey, don’t give me that look alright. It’s not like I could enroll in college to train to be an accountant out there. I had to do something with a little less oversight.”

“Yeah, but that? Couldn’t you have tried something else?”

“I tried plenty of things. This is what I’m good at.”

Ian juts his chin out a little. He doesn’t doubt how hard it must have been for Mickey to survive out there, but continuing after he’s back, now that he’s got a clean slate and a fresh start is so disappointing.

Mickey is still watching him closely.

“Whatever man, take it or leave it. Anyway, it’s time to go.”

He pushes open his door and starts moving swiftly towards the border. Ian follows behind him after a moment, jogging with his head down to avoid the dust. When he reaches him he looks up and sees José crossing the border, with something distinctly four-legged following behind.

His jaw drops to the floor. Meanwhile, Mickey has the biggest, cockiest grin Ian thinks he’s ever
seen on him.

“Wait, Bonnie’s a horse?”

“That look like a horse to you Gallagher?”

“Uhh.”

“Horses are fucking … neurotic, flighty things. Nah, Bonnie’s a mule - got more balls than any man I ever met.” He smirks as he quietly looks Ian up and down, but it doesn’t matter because he’s still speechless.

_Holy Shit._

Ian’s instincts take over then and his arm flails out, punching Mickey hard in the bicep.

“Oww,” he snorts, but dodges out of reach, all but doubled-over laughing.

“You asshole! I thought you were smuggling heroin!”

Mickey swears he’s going to get it together, he swears he’s gonna stop laughing. But then he looks at Ian again and … nope.

Ian rolls his eyes and goes for a kick in the shins this time, which is only a glancing blow because Mickey’s still too damn fast and he sweeps a leg around between Ian’s and pulls it out from under him, causing Ian to buckle at the knees.

“There! That’s what you get!” Mickey cackles, but he wraps an arm around Ian’s waist to steady him and they both melt into the touch.

“Anyway, consider that payback for that time you made me think we were gonna rob a bank in Texas. Way to make me feel like a little bitch huh? Really drove home the point that you ‘had your shit together’ and that this,” – he sweeps a hand down his body in gesture, “wasn’t you anymore.”

The venom in his words surprises them both and Mickey’s triumphant grin turns sheepish.

“Mick, you know I didn’t mean that about you, it was just-”

“-circumstance, yeah I know. But it’s always been that way – all I do is try to jump the hurdles and all you do is move the fucking goal posts, so I’ll never be acceptable. And now I’m Mike who’s never been in trouble with the law and it’s still not enough. You always underestimate me Ian, and it hurts.”

Ian’s breath is lodged firmly in his throat by this point, but he’s spared any further skewering by the arrival of José, who’s fishing out the remains of Mickey’s bribe from his pocket.

“You get a receipt, kid?”

He nods and pulls out a balled-up piece of paper.

“They give receipts for bribes?”

“It gets marked as an ‘inspection fee’ or something.”

He checks the remaining cash against the receipt then hands the kid $50, who grins a little evilly. Ian is suddenly reminded of Carl at a similar age.
Bonnie meanwhile is making her presence known by stamping a hoof and letting out a bizarre noise that sounds a bit like a hacksaw in use. Mickey absentmindedly wraps an arm around, under her chin, and scratches by her ear. She leans into him until he stops and turns around, whereupon she lifts her head higher and starts chewing on the hair on the back of his head.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” He swats her mouth away and puts a hand on her shoulders, before taking a lunge forward and kicking up; swinging up and over onto her back in one smooth motion.

Ian is immensely turned on.

“So, you’ve done it? You’ve gone straight?”

“Nah, still a fuckin’ fairy.”

Ian hangs his head and rubs his eyes wearily, trying to hide his smile.

“You know what I mean. You’re like The Horse Whisperer now, or something?”

“Seriously?! Here I’ve been steeling myself for a lifetime of Brokeback Mountain jokes, but no, Ian Gallagher goes with the fuckin’ Horse Whisperer.”

Should’ve known he’d think of something even gayer.

“A lifetime huh?”

Ugh, I walked into that. He almost blushes.

“Yeah, a lifetime. That not fucking obvious by now?”

Ian smiles sweetly and gazes up at Mickey (a novelty in itself). He reaches out and strokes the back of his left thigh, as the rest of him is too high up to reach. Then he steps back and turns his attention to the front end of Mickey’s mount.

“So, you’re this Bonnie I’ve been hearing about eh? Nice to meet you.”

Ian stretches his arm out to rub above her nose, but in one quick motion she swings her head towards him and promptly nips his forearm. Ian yanks it away in alarm and appeals to Mickey, his eyes full of reproach.

“Oww. She fucking bit me!”

But Mickey’s already laughing and it’s clear who’s side he’s on.

“Careful man, she’s a jealous bitch.”

With that he nudges her in the sides with his boots and they trot off towards the border patrol building. Ian never thought there’d be a day he’d be glad to see Mickey Milkovich riding a bitch named Bonnie bareback.
Cowboy Mickey - You're welcome.

I'm having a bad neuralgia flare up at the moment that is causing me a lot of pain and I'm also adjusting to some new meds, both of which are making it difficult to concentrate. Luckily I wrote this chapter months ago, so I'm able to make an update this week, but I can't promise when the next one will be. Hopefully not more than 2-3 weeks, but please be patient with me! There's good stuff to come ;-)
Ian’s quiet skepticism about how they were going to fit a mule into the back of a pick-up is dismissed when Mickey returns from the border patrol building alone, but with a stack of paperwork. She has to remain in quarantine for three days; something he probably should have guessed.

He gives Mickey enough time to get settled and start the engine, but as soon as they move off and start heading north, Ian begins his interrogation.

“Okay, so who the fuck is Mike?”

“Whaddya mean?”

“You’re trying to tell me that Mickey Milkovich, who never had a pet, who probably tortured animals as a child, is now a horse lover? Who the fuck is Mike and what have you done with Mickey?”

Mickey takes his time, lighting up a cigarette and rolling the window down, chuckling all the while.

“Come on man, that’s not fair – I only killed rats and I didn’t even like it. And I did have pets.”

“You’re lying. Mandy was always complaining how you never had any growing up, but eventually she realized it was for the best.”

“Yeah, well maybe Mandy didn’t know about mine.”

Ian looks at him strangely.

“Don’t laugh okay, I had to be a little creative. I saw this tv show once about a flea circus; it was going on about how you could get them to jump through fire and shit. We had enough lice and bed bugs floating around I didn’t wanna add fleas to the mix, but I figured crickets were basically giant fleas that you didn’t have to feed with blood. So every summer I’d get a big box and round up some crickets, then build obstacle courses and train them to do stuff. I got pretty good at corralling them – like little horses. Plus it kept me out of the house and away from Terry, so…”

“Are you shitting me?”

“Guess you’ll never know.” Mickey gives him an equally ambiguous look to go with his answer.

Ian shakes his head and tries to recover his train of thought.

“Okay, anyway… what was that deal you made? It looked like a good chunk of change.”

“It’s to break a horse.”

“Not a mule?”
“No, a horse, although to be honest Bonnie does half the work. Mules are so much smarter than horses, so she puts 'em in their place before they really understanding what’s going on. So when I turn up and she falls in line they start to do the same. Plus mules don’t bolt like horses, so if I do things that would scare a horse and she don’t react they take notice. I mean, slowly, because they’re stupid, but it helps. Course, she doesn’t really think I’m in charge – we’re a team – but horses need an alpha, so she pretends I’m the boss.”

“And where do you do this? Have you got a place yet?”

“Nope, I’m working them on a guy’s ranch. But land’s pretty cheap around here; hopefully it won’t take too long to get my own place.”

It’s at this point that Ian notices something he inexplicably missed on the ride down (probably because he was too busy staring at Mickey).

“What the hell is that?” he asks, nodding towards Mickey’s side of the car. They’re rapidly approaching some colorful, twisted metal spires by the side of the road. At their base psychedelic patterns have been painted onto wooden boards and dozens of mirrors hang from them, shimmering in the sun. Beyond that he can see what look like glinting, tan sand dunes, and big adobe-like buildings, studded with colorful glass in similar swirling patterns.

“Hippies,” is Mickey’s simple reply.

“Hippies?”

“Yeah, they’re the only thing that grows in the desert.”

“Is it like a commune then?”

“I guess. They call those houses earthships - build them out of mud, tires, beer cans and glass bottles, real cheap. Hard to keep the scorpions and snakes out though.”

“They’re so cool though. They look like something that crazy Spanish guy would build. Why don’t you live there? I bet they’d help you make one and they’ve probably got a well and electricity all set up. It’d be really cheap!”

“I ain’t living in a fucking hobbit-hole.”

“Why not, you’re the right height?”

Mickey shuts him down with a middle finger, but Ian looks like he’s seen ‘the light’, so he glances a little uneasily over at the compound, hoping this isn’t an idea that’s going to take root in Ian’s mind.

*If he stays*, he reminds himself.

“So … what do you do for fun around here? It must be so boring, especially after growing up in Chicago.”

“Growing up on the South Side; it’s not the same.”

“Yeah, but still, there’s so much to do in the city – art galleries, museums, stores, restaurants.”

“How many of those art galleries, museums, stores and restaurants you go to, huh?”

He’s got Ian there.
“I mean … I went to the aquarium once with school.”

“Oh, now think back to when we lived together – what’d we do for fun then?”

This brings a smile to Ian’s face.

“Fuck, mostly.”

“Oh-huh,”

“Then I guess play video games, watch Netflix, barbecue, go to the Alibi…”

“See? Not so different here, ‘cept I’m less likely to get shot. Long as you can live without getting your ego pawed by pervs in Boystown you’ll be fine.”

“It just looks so empty.”

“I like empty; first time I felt like I could breathe in years was in the backwoods of Mexico.”

“Did you travel a lot then?”

“Yeah, pretty much all the time. Don’t think I stayed in one spot longer than a month or two.”

“Huh.” Ian’s not sure why, but he’d assumed Mickey would’ve spent as much time as possible lazing on a beach drinking tequila. That’s what he’d said right? “The beach … us.” And just as quickly, he has his explanation – he probably stayed away from anything that reminded him of what could’ve been.

Ian feels shitty again.

“Well, I guess being in the desert you’ll never be cold again, at least.”

“Well, it snows here. Not a lot, but a few times a year. I know it don’t look it, but we’re more than 4000ft above sea level. Not enough to join the mile high club though.” He winks at Ian, who rolls his eyes, but smiles.

“And there’s hot springs for keepin’ warm.”

That piques Ian’s interest.

“Hot springs?”

“Yup, a whole bunch of them in the hills to the north. And there’s vineyards all around town. I hear the geology’s pretty cool too, if you wanna get your rocks off.”

“You gotta lay off these jokes, they’re terrible. Besides, that was always my gig.”

“Just try’na make you feel at home.”

That makes Ian’s belly do a little flip and it’s compounded by the unabashedly sweet look on Mickey’s face. How did he ever get so lucky? And how is Mickey still looking at him like that, after all they’ve been through?

“Town’s nickname is even New Chicago.”

“Really? You’re not playing with me again?”
"No, for real. When they built the second transcontinental railroad the two ends of it met here. The owners were so sure it was gonna be a success they called the town New Chicago. Didn’t quite work out that way though,” he chuckles.

“Anyway, we can go for a hike tomorrow; show you round the good parts. You up for it?”

“Uh, yeah I guess. It’ll be nice to stretch my legs – I’ve been stuck in the damn house for the last month.”

“Fiona winding you up?”

“A little,” Ian smiles.

“Betcha don’t have a hat though, right?”

“Nope.”

“Yeah, you’re gonna die. We’ll have to get you one.”

When they finally reach the town, Mickey pulls up outside a wooden building advertising western wear, as the sun is starting to go down. There’s a life-size concrete cow and horse outside and Ian smiles at them, wondering how many hundreds of times they’ve been ridden by drunks heading home after the bars close. Inside Mickey makes a beeline for the hats at the back and Ian quickly realizes that he will not be getting a baseball cap. There are rows upon rows of cowboy hats in every shade of brown, black and grey.

Ian plucks a particularly oversized one from the shelf and tries it on, pretending to draw a pistol from his waist and shooting at the mirror, even as the brim slides down over his eyes. He goes to put it back, but catches sight of the price tag as he does so.

“Holy shit, this hat costs $500!”

“Yeah well, it’s 100% beaver.”

“That sounds like an overcompensating strip club.”

“Something you know nothing about, hmm? It’s too big anyway, you gotta find a style that suits you.”

“Long as I don’t have to wear a sombrero, I’m good.”

“What’s wrong with sombreros?”

“I … you don’t actually … have one?”

“Hell yeah I own a sombrero, what self respecting charro doesn’t? I mean a real one; not some oversized straw bullshit people eat nachos out of.”

Ian’s face is one half disgust, one half bewilderment.

“Seriously man, don’t insult the sombrero. I’ve already taken two bullets for you, I don’t want to
have to take a third.”

“Oh come on - yeah, it was unfortunate Ned’s wife shot you in the ass, but taunting Kash was your own damn fault.”

The teenage sales assistant hovers nervously behind them.

“Can I, uh, help you?”

“Yeah, Quick Draw McGraw here needs a hat.”

“What kind of work? Roping? Cutting?”

“Nothing, it just needs to keep the sun off his face so I don’t have to listen to the drama queen bitch about sunburn.”

Luckily the kid seems to have an eye for what he’s doing and, after determining Ian’s size, the third hat he selects turns out to be the one. Tan with a sloping crown, it’s a retro style – but Ian doesn’t have to know that.

“Mmm, suits you Red,” Mickey says with a click of his tongue, as he gives Ian a hungry once over.

“Don’t he look good?” he asks the assistant.

“It uh, looks functionally appropriate.”

“Make sure it’s tight enough in the headband; it gets windy around here.”

“Oh, so you’re not just … passing through?”

“Nope. So you’d better get used to it.”

Ian can’t help but let a little smirk play around his lips.

They follow the assistant over to the cash register and Mickey pulls out his wallet.

“You sure about this? I can get it?”

“It’s fine, you’ve got pretty cheap taste. Dinner’s on you though.”

As they wander out of the store, Ian pulls off the tag and plants his new purchase on his head. But he pauses before opening his door to the truck and looks across the roof at Mickey.

“Hey uh, Mick? Don’t call me Red, all right? I … don’t like it.”

He gets a quizzical look, but Mickey seems to understand the emotion in his eyes.

“Sure,” he nods.

They drive around town so that Mickey can show Ian the dining choices – which are limited. They end up in a little taco joint that barely counts as a restaurant, with a few plastic tables and chairs and a television blaring a soccer match in a corner. It’s packed though.
They order from the blackboard above their heads at the counter, Ian getting a *carne asada* burrito and Mickey opting for the *barbacoa* tacos. Ian’s knowledge of Mexican food is exhausted however, when the cashier asks him: “Red or green?”

“Oh, uh, red please.”

“Green.”

“And to drink?”

“Coke.”

“Horchata.”

They take a seat as they wait for their order and Ian examines the half-a-dozen hot-sauce bottles on the side with great interest. Mickey has his fingers interlaced, resting placidly in front of him and it reminds Ian of something he’s been meaning to ask.

“Hey, uh, what happened to your finger tats?”

“Hmm?” It takes Mickey a second to return from whatever daydream he’d been in – or perhaps he was just watching the soccer.

“Oh, yeah, I got ‘em taken off at a laser place in Mexico City.”

“How come?”

“Too distinctive. How many cowboys you seen with FUCK U – UP on their knuckles? Plus it was one less way for the feds to trace me.”

“How did they find you in the end?”

“They didn’t; I found them.”

“You went to them?! How did you know they’d offer you a deal?”

“Mandy. She’s the one you’ve got to thank for all this, so you’d better fucking grovel when it’s done. You owe her big time – ‘specially for that grave robbing shit you pulled.”

“You would’ve done the same for two pounds of meth.”

“Whatever. Anyway, the feds approached her first about testifying at the trial and she figured out it might be a way to get us both back. She brokered the whole thing really.”

“You seen her since you got back?”

“Yeah.”

“How’s she doing?”

“Can’t tell you. No contact between witnesses right? But yeah, she’s good.” His smile is proud, so Ian is content not to push it further.
“So you really went to Mexico and just thought, fuck it, I’m gonna be a cowboy? I thought for sure you’d be some cartel kingpin by now – I mean, it’s all you’ve ever known.”

“You wanna know the easiest way to end up dead in Mexico? Try to make a move in narco territory as a gringo Americano. You can’t just stroll up and ask to start working a corner. Even a cholo like Damon would be seen as a plant. You gotta know the right people, the language, the culture; plus the territory is shifting all the time. Too risky man.”

“So you tried going straight?”

“Fell into it, more like.”

“Literally?”

“More or less. I got into a fight on my first day - a guy who happened to be a Lucha Libre promoter liked what he saw and offered me a go at it. So I did.”

“Wait, you were a luchador? That’s fucking awesome! Why’d you stop?”

“Started getting a bit too much attention. ‘FUCK-U UP’ kinda became my catch phrase and I figured it was only a matter of time before someone put two and two together. Doubt my manager would’ve sold me out, but I still wonder if he ever got a call from the feds.”

“Oh man, that must’ve sucked – it sounds like your ideal job.”

“Honestly? I was over it, my heart wasn’t in it anymore. They got a replacement for me though, so somewhere out there my alter-ego is still kicking ass.”

“I can’t imagine you ever not being up for a fight.”

“As I’ve said, things got pretty dark for me. And it got worse. We toured a lot so I just took my earnings one day and stayed in the town we were in, drinking. Burned through it pretty quick too.”

“Shit Mick.” Ian slides his foot around enough to hook an ankle around Mickey’s, under the table.

“It’s how I found Bonnie though. Woke up in a pen with the hangover from hell and that bitch chewin’ on my hair.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

“Some guy mucking out the stalls told me she must like me because she wasn’t stomping on me. Turns out I was round the back of a Lienzo Charro, the stadium where they do Mexican rodeos. We used to play a lot of venues like that as the entertainment act, so I’d seen a fair bit of charrería by then. He said she’d been brought in for the Jineteo de Yegua event – basically a bucking bronc, but she was getting sent for slaughter because she didn’t score well. Bonnie can buck better than anyone, but mules don’t jump like horses, they don’t have the same rhythm, don’t even have the same anatomy. So people try to ride her like a horse and get pissed when she don’t respond like one.”

“I thought you just hang on for dear life with a bucking horse?”

“There’s some of that, but you gotta try and get ‘em to move a certain way to get the style points.”

“Anyway, the guy bet me a bottle of tequila I couldn’t stay on her for 5 seconds. I had no idea what the fuck I was doing, but all that training in the ring must’ve stuck because I won. And then I puked everywhere. But it was funny, we just kinda clicked. I guess because I didn’t know anything about
“Only you would make that kind of wager and actually come out on top.”

“Well, then I went and did something really stupid when the truck came to take her away – I bought her, which was pretty much the end of my cash. I think she knew, because after that she accepted me pretty fast for an animal that was basically unbroken. They let me stay and sleep in the barn, so long as I paid my way by shoveling enough shit. The other guys teased me and said she’d fallen in love and I guess it was kinda true because before long I was riding her, badly, but still. They taught me the basics, but really it was the wrestling that made it work – balancing on ropes, reading body language, learning how to fall, it all helped me out big time.”

“See I wouldn’t believe a word of this if I hadn’t actually seen Bonnie in the flesh. How’d you stay afloat though? Shoveling shit doesn’t sound that lucrative.”

“I entered the next charreada and made some money betting on myself. Cleaned up good. There’s another event called El Paso de la Muerte where you chase a wild horse ‘round, then jump on to it from your own and ride it ‘til it stops. Bonnie liked to chase the horses in the paddocks and I spent a long time leaping off ropes in the ring, so between us we had the skills – then I had two events to bet on. Eventually people noticed and started paying me to break other horses in. We traveled to competitions in other towns, made more contacts – definitely wasn’t raking it in, but it was enough once I stopped drinking a pint of tequila every day. Plus I was eating nothing but beans and tamales and sleeping on hay.”

“This is crazy, you sound like that guy…what’s his name? Pancho?”

“Like – Pancho Villa?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“I mean, I wouldn’t say I was a revolutionary.”

“But he rode a mule right? While chasing windmills?”

“You’re talking about fucking Don Quixote aren’t you?”

“Yeah!”

“That’s not even Mexican. And his name was Sancho.”

“Close enough.”

“I guess it fits. The rational, long suffering short guy, chasing after the crazy guy who likes to talk a lot of shit.”

Their orders are up. Mickey goes to the counter to retrieve them. He starts on his hungrily, while Ian douses his plate in hot sauce and, apparently unsatisfied with Mickey’s level of spice, pours it all over his remaining tacos as well.

“The fuck Ian?!”

“Come on, you’ve been living in Mexico, you must love this stuff!”

“It’s plenty hot as it is! Slathering that shit on is what tourists on spring break do, to prove they’re not gay. Look at the label, it’s not even made in Mexico.”
“You’ve gone soft on me.”

“Fuck off!”

He still eats them though.

Chapter End Notes

Personally I would totally love to live in an Earthship.
Also, this is now officially the longest thing I've ever written - not sure if that's a good thing or not?
And I know this is all wildly unrealistic, but let me have my muley fantasy fun!
After dinner they hit up a bar near Mickey’s motel, but his 9pm curfew means it’s not a wild session. The motel is on the edge of town – a U shaped double-decker of the most generic kind, right down to the flickering neon lights spelling out the name. It doesn’t have a pool, but that’s okay since neither is allowed to swim (and Ian still doesn’t know if Mickey can). Ian fishes around in his bag while Mickey pushes the door open and gropes for the lights.

“I need to plug my transmitter in, the battery’s almost dead.”

“Mine’s over there by the TV. Think there’s another socket.”

Ian finds his charging chord and inserts it into the spare slot. He smiles at the two blacktransmitters sat side-by side; their twin delinquent status symbols.

Mickey has kicked off his boots and is moving things around in the mini fridge, trying to accommodate the six-pack of beer he had in his truck.

“So, this is it, home sweet home – for now anyway.”

Mickey’s eyes fall on the single king-size bed and he lifts an arm and scratches at the back of his neck awkwardly.

“You uh … you want me to get you a rollaway, or something?”

Ian closes the gap in two steps.

“Shut up Mick.”

Their teeth clash because he moves in a little too quickly and Mickey is cackling under his breath before he’s even hit the bed, but he goes quiet once he’s smothered by Ian’s warm bodyweight.

“That’s the worst fucking idea you’ve ever had!”

Ian eases off a bit and scoots back, but only to push Mickey further up on the bed, so that his legs are no longer dangling over the edge. He crawls back on, pushing one knee between Mickey’s crotch and straddling a leg as he leans down and kisses him again, like he’s been longing to do for weeks – years even.

Mickey’s arms start to rove over Ian’s back, feeling for the hem of his t-shirt until they can slide under to the hot skin beneath. His hands are rougher than they used to be. They pull apart for a moment, to let Ian take his shirt off, but catch each other’s eyes first and Ian goes right back to the kiss – because he can see that nothing’s changed; that some things never will.

Ian’s fingers grope for Mickey’s shirt buttons (because he’s a cowboy now and apparently cowboys
only wear button-downs). He feels Mickey stiffen beneath him, so he pulls back so he can see what he’s actually doing, but soon understands why.

It had been cold when they went on the run. Ian didn’t question why Mickey kept most of his clothes on for the few quick fucks they’d had in Chicago, or on the way down to Mexico, but now he realizes that there was more to it than that.

The infamous tattoo is not that recognizable, but it hasn’t been lasered off either. Instead, scar tissue has resorbed much of the ink in raised sections, leaving only illegible blots of black in a random pattern where the skin wasn’t corrupted. Ian sucks in air involuntarily, as he runs his thumb tenderly over the ridges.

“Actually, this is the worst idea you’ve ever had.” But he lies down gently next to him, wraps his left arm around his torso, kisses his hair and breathes in his scent.

“You were right.”

“Hmmm?” Ian mumbles, from within his inky haven.

“It was fuckin’ infected.”

“Jesus.”

Ian can tell this is a touchy subject for him, but he hasn’t flinched away yet, so he takes the opportunity to slide his right arm under Mickey’s neck and over his shoulder to meet his other hand, cradling him.

“It got pretty bad. I didn’t wanna get busted for it, if I didn’t have to, so I waited ‘til it was real nasty to go to the infirmary. Got shipped straight to the hospital.”

“You get tested?”

“Yeah, I was lucky; only caught septicemia. Been more careful since.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?!?” Mickey snorts bitterly. Ian kisses his temple.

“I’m sorry that you felt you had to do it, to make me stay. That it was the only thing left to try. That I didn’t understand what it meant; how dangerous it was.”

“Ian Gallagher; always under my skin – now the scar tissue over my heart. Was easier once I accepted it that way. Still feel like an idiot though.”

Ian does what feels natural and drops his arms, sliding around so that he’s back on top. Then he drops a few quiet kisses onto the bumps, before running his fingers over them again.

“At least now I’ll have this, to remind me. When I’m depressed and I can’t feel anything – can’t feel your love, can’t feel my own; I’ll be able to feel this.”

Mickey looks up at Ian, then shifts his weight around so that he can prop himself up on his elbows and kiss him once again. When Ian eventually pulls back though, he’s got a mischievous look in his eyes.

“Let me make it up to you.”
Mickey lets his head loll back as Ian drops one final kiss on his chest before he inches down, moving backwards off the bed. He makes quick work of Mickey’s belt and buttons and before long his hands are all over his, hips, ass and thighs, prizing Mickey’s cock out from his boxers and tugging it gently once or twice before he lowers his head and takes Mickey’s in his mouth. Mickey relaxes back onto the bed and closes his eyes. He allows his hands to wander blindly in search of Ian’s hair and, when he finds it, chords his fingers though it as his body uncoils and breaths for what feels like the first time in a long time. He’s long past the point of being jealous about where Ian learned those skills. Ian’s arm that isn’t propping himself up starts to rove around and he squeezes one of Mickey’s cheeks as he moves towards his asshole. He swallows around the cock before sliding off for a moment to ask: “You want me to prep you?”

Mickey laughs a little awkwardly.

“Honestly? I’m not gonna last.”

“That’s kinda of the point. Where d’you keep your stuff?”

“Top drawer, right bed-side table.”

Ian takes the opportunity to finally pull his t-shirt off, then crawls back up the bed and stretches out diagonally to reach the drawer. Mickey has ideas of his own though and begins unbuttoning Ian’s jeans, distracting him from his task.

“You’re not making this very ea– ooh.”

Mickey already has Ian’s cock in hand and is sliding the other down over his ass to grab a handful.

“I know what I want.”

He drops it, for a moment, to quickly slide his own pants the rest of the way down and kick them off the bed, throwing his shirt and socks after them. Then he grabs for Ian’s boxers and jeans and tugs them down further with one hand as the other goes back to work, gently running his thumb over Ian’s slit to milk enough liquid to lubricate his grip, as he gazes devilishly up at him. Mickey continues the familiar motions on Ian’s cock as he attempts to pull the jeans down lower, switching to pushing with his feet when he can’t reach any lower. He begins to encounter resistance though and, after pushing a few times and still not succeeding in sliding them off Ian’s legs, abandons his ministrations to see what the problem is.

“You’re still wearing your boots? Who the fuck wears shoes in a fucking hotel room?!”

“You didn’t really give me a chance to take them off!”

Mickey slaps Ian’s ass as punishment, then flips himself 180° so that his head and hands are down at the source of the problem. He rapidly unlaces the boots and pulls them off, before aggressively tugging the jeans down, trying to peel them over Ian’s ankles. They still won’t come off though.

“You and your stupid skinny jeans,” he grunts angrily as he pulls harder, freeing Ian’s left leg – but the right still won’t budge.

“It’s the monitor, the fabric gets bunched up on it if you try to peel it that way. Start from the cuff.”
Ian takes the opportunity to tickle the bottom of Mickey’s foot and gets a toe-jab in the ribs in return. He switches to running his hands up and down his legs soothingly, but Mickey’s still grumbling and slaps the bulge on Ian’s ankle in annoyance as he shucks the fabric back up Ian’s leg to get at the cuff.

A few seconds later, when Mickey is finally making progress sliding the cuff over Ian’s foot, they both feel the dreaded vibrations of their monitors and Mickey growls in annoyance as Hansen’s voice fills the room.

“Are you two fucking or fighting?”

“Fuck off Hansen!” Mickey shouts at Ian’s ankle.

“Fuck me for giving a shit, you prick!”

Luckily that ends the call and Mickey frees Ian’s right leg with a final yank, tossing the jeans off the bed in disgust.

“Well that’s killed the mood.”

“I think I know how we can fix it.”

Ian shuffles down the bed so that his knees drape over the edge, and wiggles his hips at him in invitation.

“Stay down there, but scoot your ass up here, I wanna bite it.”

Mickey smirks up at him as he realizes what he’s proposing.

“A’ight, but I’m going on top. That sperm whale of yours’ll choke me otherwise.”

“Of course.”

“Hey uh, Moby Dick need a sheath, Ahab?”

“Nah, he’s clean, I promise.”

Mickey straddles him then backs up slowly, allowing Ian to enjoy the truly glorious sight of Mickey’s alabaster ass approaching him. Ian’s true to his word too, and as soon as it’s in reach he chomps down into the marshmallowy skin. Mickey takes that as his signal to start sucking, so he drops his head and takes the top of Ian’s cock into his mouth, tracing the grooves around it with his tongue, before slowly working his way down the shaft, easing himself into the job. Ian kisses and then rubs his fingers over the indentation his teeth have left, but gets an impatient thrusting in his face in return.

“Whoa boy,” Ian whispers – but he lays back and pulls Mickey’s ass gently down toward him, before he can get a complaint about his choice of words.

Ian licks and sucks gently at Mickey’s perineum upward until his tongue is skirting over the asshole – which earns him a shiver. He teases a little longer, kissing and lapping around the entrance, before he flexes his tongue and begins to burrow in, alternating between probing and sucking. He enjoys the feeling of Mickey’s sphincter contracting against his tongue, involuntarily trying to force him out, when he knows from Mickey’s muffled moans that his desire is for anything but. Soon he’s humming along too because Mickey really starts to go to town on him and Ian can’t help bucking his hips a bit, as Mickey teases the sweet spot on his frenulum. He ups the ante by licking his left index
finger and plunging it in, using it to lever his tongue in deeper by giving the muscles something else to work against. Ian alternates the speed he works his tongue and finger so that they’re out of sync, then he adds a second finger to the mix and scissors inside until Mickey’s pushing down so hard on his face that he can barely breathe. He’s left slightly bereft though, when he feels Mickey suddenly disengage from his cock – if only to moan out a long “fuuuuucck,” when Ian slides his fingers around so that he can run them over his prostate.

“I wasn’t kidding, you know, I’m really not gonna last if you keep doing that.”

Ian pushes up on Mickey’s buttocks to give him enough space to make his words recognizable.

“So don’t last; you’ve got another three days to do that.”

“Fine, but I’m taking you with me.”

Ian thinks that sweeter words have never been spoken.

Mickey swallows down hard and redoubles his efforts, making Ian fear he may well be the first to crack. He pushes Mickey’s ass away again, but only for a moment so that he can lick his right palm, before his tongue takes up its former position. Then he reaches around and slides his slicked up hand up and down Mickey’s dick, the saliva mixing with his pre-cum to form an efficient lubricant. He coordinates his hand movements with his tongue, probing and sliding at the same time, until he can feel Mickey’s thighs trembling around him. Mickey just about manages stay focused and works the part of Ian’s shaft that he can’t swallow with his right hand, but Ian won’t be outdone and he brings one of his long, left fingers back into play, massaging Mickey’s prostate in a way that isn’t sustainable. Mickey groans desperately around Ian’s cock as his thighs seize and the next second Ian feels him spilling over in his hand, cum dripping down onto his chest in warm dollops. Mickey gamely tries to keep going, even though he’s suffering a serious case of jelly legs, but a miscalculated thrust takes him by surprise and he gags. The resulting spasm and break in rhythm is enough to pull Ian unexpectedly over the edge and, while Mickey tries to contain it, the need to cough is greater and Ian ends up shooting most of his load around, rather than in, Mickey’s mouth.

“Bastard,” Mickey sputters as he falls forward, collapsing with his head between Ian’s legs, gasping for air. As soon as he’s able to, Ian wriggles out from under him, grabs the tissues from the nightstand and then scoots down to the bottom of the bed so that they’re facing each other again. He rubs Mickey’s still heaving back in concern.

“You okay?”

“Fuck yes,” comes the truly breathless reply.

“I think I waterboarded you.”

Ian tries to wipe the cum from around Mickey’s nostrils and mouth but Mickey lifts a shaking arm and grabs Ian’s neck, pulling him in for a deep, sticky kiss. When they let go it’s only for a moment, so that Ian can wrap his arms around Mickey and pull him into his chest as they immediately fall asleep - still on top of the covers at the wrong end of the bed, legs intertwined and ankle monitors touching.

Chapter End Notes
Please don't hate me for the tattoo. :-s
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry it has been so long. Ian and Mickey were very tired after that last orgasm!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mickey startles awake and jerks away from Ian, creating a disgusting sound as their sticky torsos peel apart. Ian moans blearily, clearly still half asleep, as Mickey starts to come to his senses.

“Fuck it’s cold in here!”

Ian gropes around and tries to pull him back in, but Mickey rolls away instead, tripping over his jelly legs as he moves towards the window.

“AC’s still on.”

Mickey kneels in front of the unit under the window and starts fiddling with the knobs to stem the flow - then resorts to smacking it when it won’t do what he wants. Ian rolls onto his back, yawns and scratches his belly.

“How long were we asleep?”

“Fuck knows. It’s still dark, at least.”

Mickey gives up on the AC and walks to the bathroom instead. A moment later Ian hears the sounds of urination, followed by splashing water. A familiar itch is growing, but he really doesn’t want to get dressed. The room smells stale, but he knows by now not to second guess these things with Mickey.

“Hey, can I smoke in here?”

Please, please, please.

“Yeah, but crack the window. The ashtray’s over there too.”

Ian gets up and rummages around in his jacket pocket for his cigarettes and lighter, then makes his way over to the window. He spots the ashtray on the sill, so he kneels down and drapes the gauzy curtain over his head and opens the window. The AC is still blowing cold on his belly (if less aggressively), so after he’s had a drag or two he spends a moment looking at the buttons, before quickly deducing Mickey’s mistake. The unit makes a clunking noise as it shuts down and Ian can finally hear the crickets chirping as he breaths in the night air through the fly screen.

“You fixed it?”

“Mmmhmm.”

Mickey pads over to the window and then kneels to join him, batting the curtain away in annoyance as he reaches for Ian’s cigarette.
“You ever do anything patiently?”

“You waited around for you to come to your senses?”

“I wouldn’t really call busting out of prison a patient maneuver. It’s not like I didn’t wait a long time for you too.”

“It’s true.”

They pause and Mickey takes another drag, before handing the cigarette over. The sound of the crickets reminds Ian of something.

“Did you really have a flea circus made of crickets?”

“Not telling.”

Mickey reaches for the cigarette pack, but Ian snatches it back quickly.

“Nope, not until you ‘fess up. I’m gonna go out there and grab a few and I wanna see you make them dance!”

“Fuck off. Besides, all you’re gonna do is get the cops called on your ass when the neighbors see a naked guy with an ankle monitor running around in circles.”

Ian smiles at him and Mickey takes the opportunity to grab the cigarette.

“You really did, didn’t you?”

Mickey blows a smoke ring back in his face in response, then stubs the butt out in the ashtray. He shivers involuntarily.

“Still so fucking cold in here.”

“So let’s get under the covers.”

Ian wanders over to the bed and climbs in, but Mickey makes a detour to the fridge.

“I’m kinda hungry, you want something? Or a beer?” he asks, rummaging through the shelves.

“Nah, better to sleep with a sober cannibal, am I right?”

“What exactly are you proposing?!” Mickey asks, although he keeps his head down in the fridge. Things are going as well as he could’ve hoped, but he’s still nervous. He really wants to take the edge off, but he’s not gonna push it, so he takes a few deep breaths of the cold air and grabs a half empty tin of peanuts instead.

“You keep nuts in the fridge?” Ian asks, as Mickey crawls over the covers and slips in.

“Yeah, so?”

“It’s just weird.”

“You’re weird.” Mickey shoves a handful of nuts into his mouth, but the silence that follows is palpable. It’s the domesticity of the scene, Mickey realizes. It’s one thing when you’re getting your ass eat like a cheap whore in an even cheaper motel, but now it’s more like they’re prom dates sitting in a bed for the first time, waiting for the other to make the first move. Not that he knows what that
feels like.

They’ve been torn apart so many times, they’ve forgotten how to live together.

It’s Ian who makes the first move – but not in Mickey’s direction. He suddenly sits bolt upright and freezes, like a cat, before leaping out of the bed and racing towards the bathroom.

Mickey’s confusion is short lived.

“Jesus Christ, you and your fucking hot sauce. I told you to lay off that shit.”

“Fuck off!”

Mickey is pleased to hear that there’s a sheepish note in that retort.

“Fucking frat boy,” Mickey drolls, when Ian makes his reappearance and quietly slips back under the covers.

“Don’t give me that shit. Remember when you got wasted at Kev’s birthday and came home and I had to deal with you and Yevgeny at the same time? He puked, and that made you puke and then he pooped all over the bath when I was trying to get you into it to clean you up. Who had to clean and then bleach the whole fucking bathroom before Svetlana got back, hmmm?”

Mickey doesn’t have a comeback to that, but Ian quickly realizes it’s not because he’s got him beat.

“How’s she doing?” he finally asks, after a long pause.

“Good, I think. They live with Kev and V, and the twins. They’re in a relationship – of sorts.”

“She happy?”

“I … guess. You never really know with Svet. I think she stole the Alibi from them at some point, but they seem to have worked it out. I’m not really in the loop anymore though, with prison, and everything.”

“I hope she’s good. They deserve to be happy.”

He’s looking dead ahead, so Ian takes hold of Mickey’s chin and forces him to turn his head and meet his eyes.

“So do we.”

Mickey looks at him sadly, so Ian wraps an arm around his back to pull him closer, then leans in and kisses him, pushing him into the pillows and tangling their legs as it deepens.

Mickey’s still for a moment, but he finally snakes his arm up between Ian’s shoulder blades and grasps at the back of his neck, drawing them even closer. It turns the kiss softer, needier; trying to express what they still can’t say.

Soon though, another emotion is growing between them (as inevitably as their erections). Their breathing speeds up, their tongues probe deeper and teeth are dragged over lips before Ian’s hand slides south and hitches Mickey’s thigh up, while the latter grabs at Ian’s ass and eventually growls out: “I want you.”

Ian pulls back just far enough to rub his nose up against Mickey’s for a moment then pushes him back into the pillows rather more forcefully. He rolls over to the side and finally opens Mickey’s
bedside table drawer, to reveal lube, condoms and – a dried ear of corn. Dumbstruck, he picks it up by the leaves and dangles it in front of Mickey.

“Is this – is this what I think it is?!”

Mickey reddens a little, but looks at him defiantly.

“Hey don’t judge me, you know how many sex shops there are in rural Mexico that will sell a guy a dildo? Besides, I like the ridges.”

“It doesn’t seem very … hygienic.”

“I use a condom, I’m not an animal!”

Ian glances at it again and he can kind of see his point, unorthodox though it is.

“You want me to use it on you?”

“Novelty’s kinda worn off. I’d rather have what you’re packing.”

He shuffles closer and takes hold of Ian’s erection, skimming his thumb over the slit - as if his point wasn’t already abundantly clear. Ian snatches at the lube.

“C’mere,” he whispers as he squirts a generous amount onto his dick for Mickey to play with, then coats his index and middle finger and reaches around to tease Mickey’s hole. He’s still relaxed and somewhat slick, but Ian knows there’s a big difference in size between his tongue and his cock.

Mickey runs a tight fist up and down Ian’s shaft, but they’re too close together for him to really move it effectively, so he sneaks his left arm around and surprises Ian by running his fingers over his asshole, gently probing at the entrance and causing Ian to temporarily loose his concentration as he draws in a ragged breath.

“You like that huh? Or too soon?”

“Mmmm, no, it’s good. But not too much. Just tease me,” Ian whispers in his ear, then he uses his left hand to tip Mickey’s chin up and draw him into a kiss. Their ministrations become less coordinated as they focus on the taste of each other, but although Ian’s in heaven he knows Mickey hasn’t been prepped enough – and he can’t reach far enough in their current position.

“Hey, get on your knees.”

Mickey obliges by quickly flipping over on all fours to present his bottom, but that wasn’t what Ian had in mind.

“No, not like that. Just your knees, facing me.” Ian pushes himself upright against the headboard and motions towards his lap. Mickey smiles and turns around to straddle him, bracing his arms above Ian’s head on the wall. Ian adds a little more lube to his fingers, then reaches up between Mickey’s legs and starts to play with his opening. Once he’s gently slid two fingers in he pulls Mickey hips towards him with his other hand and eases his cock into his mouth. He teases his tongue along the bottom of the shaft, and Mickey lets out the first moan of pleasure as he starts to rock very gently back and forth. Ian tries to time his finger motions to match Mickey’s thrusts, while pushing against the contractions of his sphincter. A hand drops down from the wall and starts to mess with Ian’s hair, until a harder tug causes Ian to cease.

“I need it. I need you.”
Ian withdraws his mouth and then fingers as Mickey slides down the wall; marble skin already flushed pink. Ian gives him a moment to catch his breath by shuffling down the bed and squeezing some extra lube onto his dick. Then he stretches out and folds his hands behind his head.

“I’m all yours.”

Mickey shuffles around on top, hand gripping Ian’s slicked up cock and teasing the tip around his opening, searching for the best angle. He feeds the first inch in slowly, exhaling as he relaxes the muscles. Once the burn has settled he bears down while pushing in a little further until he’s sure the angle is right. Then he relaxes, sinks down on his haunches and lets the reverse peristalsis do its job. His eyes flutter closed as he enjoys the feeling of finally, finally being filled up with the cock he’s missed almost as much as its owner. Ian lets out a quiet moan and snakes his arms around to grab Mickey’s cheeks - one in each hand, while Mickey rests his hands on Ian’s stomach. After a moment he opens he opens his eyes and shifts his weight around in anticipation of starting to move, but he catches a twinkle in Ian’s eye and realizes what he’s thinking.

“Don’t. Don’t say it! I swear to God I won’t do it, if you say it!”

“Oh come on! It’s too perfect not to!”

“You’re a fucking embarrassment.”

“Ride—”

Ian’s mouth is stopped before he can finish, as Mickey drops down and kisses the cheesy motherfucker. Ian smiles beneath him and takes the opportunity to gently buck his hips, sliding a few inches in and out of him. Then he props himself up on his elbows to get a better angle and begins to move a little more energetically. Mickey drops his right arm down onto the bed, to support his weight but keeps the left cradling Ian’s head, running his thumb through his hair and over the skin behind his ear. He starts to move up and down in time with Ian’s thrusts and, as his body fully relaxes, breaks the kiss, sits up and arches his back as they pick up speed. The posture forces his dick downwards and he enjoys the friction of it rubbing against the hairs on Ian’s belly. Ian takes a moment to drink in the sight above him, but soon starts to feel left out, since both his arms are supporting his weight.

“Hang on,” he whispers as he stops and then carefully inches backwards. He pushes up against the headboard, shoves a pillow behind him and settles back into a recumbent sitting position. Finally his hands are free to rove wherever he wants and he takes advantage, digging his fingers into Mickey’s hips and ass, reminding himself of just how soft and pliant his skin is. Mickey presses an arm against the headboard and starts moving again, using the leverage to grind harder, working Ian’s cock at an angle that makes him a little nervous. It seems to be hitting the spot though because Mickey’s eyes glaze over and before long they’re shut, allowing Ian to stare at his blissed out expression, unabashedly. Mickey always had the best sex faces. Watching him now, lips quivering, cheeks flushed, mask falling away, Ian wonders how he could have ever wanted anything else.

As if reading his mind, Mickey’s eyes open and he smirks down at him.

“That feel good?”

“Mmmm.”

“It looks like it feels good.”

Ian removes one of his hands from Mickey’s ass and slides it up his back, so that he can grip the top
of his shoulder and apply greater force to his thrusts. He pulls him closer and teases his tongue over each of Mickey’s nipples in turn, nipping and then sucking at the erect nubbins. He almost snickers at the little moan that follows. But then he’s being pushed back into the pillows as Mickey drops his weight down onto him and hooks an arm across his shoulder, bucking his hips harder in act of retaliation that means it’s Ian’s time to moan.

Their grip on each other becomes increasingly tight as they move up and down in time, foreheads pressed together. Mickey is hunched over, so Ian takes advantage of the easy access to his penis to stroke it with his free hand. He feels the quiver move through Mickey as his breath hitches and he exhales deeply.

“Grab my ass.” Mickey orders. So Ian does what he’s told, but instead of removing his hand from Mickey’s dick, he releases his shoulder instead. Mickey looks at him quizzically, but Ian just whispers in his ear “Go.”

Mickey straightens up, so that he has full control of the movement and Ian wraps his arm across his lower back to get a better grip (while still squeezing the requisite cheek) and concentrates on matching his hand strokes to his thrusts. He gazes upwards and watches him fall apart.

Floating upwards, busting out of his old skin, Mickey finally feels fucking free.

Chapter End Notes

Ride ’em Cowboy!

PSA: Mickey is a pro, don't try to follow his lead. Always use anal toys that are attached to something or have a large flange at the bottom, or else you risk a trip to the ER when they get swallowed up by your ass. Corn cobs do not meet these criteria.
Also, match your lube to your use - silicone works best for anal, but it can damage toys, so use water based lube for those. Never use petroleum products (Vaseline) with condoms, they'll spit.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

T.W.: This has got a snake in it. Like an actual snake, not a dick (although there’s some of that too). It’s not scary, but I know some people don’t like to even acknowledge they exist, so if this is you (hi mom!) leave out the middle (and definitely everywhere around the word ‘thwack’). It’s cute though, you’ll miss out if you don’t read it. Well, not cute for the snake - the snake dies a horrible painful death, but cute for Gallavich.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Light is creeping into the room when Ian wakes. He’s spread out like a starfish, hogging the bed like he always used to - Mickey’s confined to the left edge, sleeping on his stomach with his arm up and crooked, nose nuzzled into it the way Ian remembers. Did he always look this peaceful? He realizes slowly that this is the first time they’ve shared an actual bed in, what? Three and a half years? More? Even longer if you count how long it’s been since they had a double. It seems like a lifetime ago that he was filling the Milkovich house with suitcases and snatching babies. A sudden pain hits him in the chest as he wonders if the reason Mickey looks so peaceful is because it’s the first time he’s slept like that in years.

He studies Mickey’s face in the low-angle light. He can see where deep creases are starting to form around his eyes and his cheeks are flushed from exposure to the wind and sun, accentuating those freckles that he likes to deny are there. He’s definitely aged in the last few years, but it suits him. Ian doubts he’ll weather as well.

Carefully Ian makes his way to the bathroom. He gets some water and takes a leak, managing to stop himself just before he hits the lever, not wanting to wake Mickey. It’s going to take a while to break that drop and flush habit.

Tiptoeing back into the room he sees Mickey hasn’t stirred. The orange light now rising through the sheer curtains catches his eye and he sneaks over to the window, kneels naked on the poly carpet and drapes the gauzy fabric over and behind his head to see the sunrise.

It’s the first time he’s seen the place in daylight. They’re at the back of the motel and the largely unoccupied lot gives way to open desert speckled with shrubs, with jagged hills at a distance. It’s not the red sandstone mesas Ian imagines when he thinks of New Mexico, but it’s beautiful none the less.

He watches the sun inch higher as the shadows of the creosotes and mesquite start to shrink, before movement catches his eye. There’s a speckled bird hopping around the parking lot, flapping its wings and almost turning cartwheels. He’s sure he’s seen one before, but definitely not in Chicago. It was probably on a documentary or something, but it takes his brain a long time to retrieve the information. A roadrunner - that was it. He looks around for a coyote, thinking it might make his day if he could get a picture of both together. Liam would fucking love that. That’s when he understands what the bird in a flap about. There’s a snake trying to warm up on the black asphalt in the first rays of the sun. Ian can’t see it too well, but he thinks it must be a rattlesnake by the way it’s coiled with its head raised, ready to strike. The roadrunner is darting in and out of its range, almost seeming to taunt it before dancing away again.
As fast as lightning the bird grabs the snake by the jaws and slams its body to the ground. The crunching noise sends an involuntary shudder through Ian’s bones, but then he’s distracted by a sudden snake attack of his own. The mesh curtain is trying to burrow into his ear, propelled by something hard and fleshy and distinctly … pungent. Ian snaps around to swat it away, but Mickey’s too fast for him, cackling and darting out of reach.

“Ewww Mick, what the fuck?!”

“What? You don’t like my huevos rancheros in the morning?”

Ian can’t see his face clearly through the curtain, but he’s pretty sure Mickey’s grin could be described as ‘shit eating’.

What a dick move.

“Whatever, serves you right for watching too much fucking sunrise porn.”

Mickey drops down beside him and shuffles under the curtain on his knees to join him, morning wood pressing up against the air conditioning unit under the window. He folds his arms on the sill and puts his head down, but he’s not looking out at the view, preferring to let his gaze linger on Ian, coppery hair ablaze from the low sun. Ian drags his attention away from the carnage in the parking lot to smirk over at Mickey.

“Who’s the one watching sunrise porn now huh?”

Mickey smiles and inches closer, left hand running up through the hair on Ian’s neck and cupping his head to pull him a little closer. He places a lingering, tender kiss on his right temple and Ian shivers a bit as he shuts his eyes and feels warmth and light bloom in his chest. He’d have liked to stay in that moment forever except…

THWAK!

A particularly brutal and wet sounding smackdown draws both their attention to the parking lot, where the roadrunner is attempting to slurp down its now bloody meal like spaghetti.

“Awesome! Those things are badass motherfuckers.”

Mickey is staring delightedly at the rattlesnake guts glistening in the sun.

“You know, people think they can do that because they have immunity to snake venom, but they actually don’t, they’re just fucking ninja dinosaurs.”

Mickey smiles at Ian with a look of childish enthusiasm he doesn’t get to see often enough. The feeling in Ian’s chest swells further, despite the weird fodder stoking his fire. He can feel his eyes begin to water a little as he reaches for Mickey’s waist.

“Fuck I missed you.”

It’s only a whisper by the time he croaks it out, pulling Mickey in and kissing his stupid face. It’s sweet and chaste, despite Mickey’s (now leaking) boner poking at his thigh. Ian doesn’t care though because he’s so fucking giddy, grinning dementedly as they pull apart.
“You okay? You’re looking a bit … special,” Mickey asks, his face a mixture of amusement and concern. Mostly amusement.

“Yeah. Yeah I’m okay,” Ian replies, still high as a fucking kite.

“Okay then.” Mickey pauses, preserving this hilarious expression for the memory banks. He starts to make a move but Ian’s arms shoot out, seizing him by both shoulders.

“I love you, Mick.”

Mickey knows he should be melting into a sentimental puddle at this, but he just can’t take Ian seriously with that weird orgasm face he’s plastered on. Plus Mickey’s been feeling the love all night; he doesn’t need to hear it to know. He wishes they could stay in this motel room forever. Perhaps the answer to all relationship issues is just getting a big enough bed? That and some sunrise gore porn. He lifts his hands and cups Ian’s cheeks, kissing him briefly on the lips.

“I love you too Ian.” He searches his eyes.

“But I need a fucking shower!” And with that he ducks under the curtain and heads towards the bathroom.

Ian huffs out a laugh and turns back to the parking lot. The roadrunner is cleaning up the last of the entrails, moving slowly as if it might have overindulged. Why is life so weird like this sometimes? It doesn’t seem fair that he’s going to have to tell the grandkids that the moment he realized he couldn’t live without Mickey Milkovich was watching a snake and a bird in a fucking mortal combat beatdown.

“Ian!” Mickey bellows from the bathroom.

“Get your damn firecrotch in here!”

Chapter End Notes

For the record, I actually really love herps and felt pretty guilty doing that to the poor snake (who was just trying to get his morning buzz going), but it died so that Gallavich might live, so you know … YOLO, circle of life, carpe diem, RIP and all that shit. (Also, if it isn't clear - that is accurate behavior for a roadrunner [which is also the state bird of New Mexico - how I got the idea]. I don't just spend my time imagining how to kill snakes in nasty ways!)

That’s the end of Part II.
Stay tuned for Part III (AKA Season 10) soon!
I apologize for the long wait, yet again. Once it became clear in July that Mickey was coming back, it became very difficult for me to write, knowing that I might soon know how Shameless wrapped Gallavich up.

In the end, I think it would be very easy to merge what's about to happen here, with the endgame we were given - even though S9 Ian is a far less sympathetic or self aware character than he was even in S7 (which is what I've been working with). And you certainly don't just roll on a cartel and spend a little time in general pop. - so if you want to take elements from this and use them to extrapolate what is happening to Ian and Mickey since we last saw them, be my guest.

So all that to say, perhaps I shouldn't be asking if this is 'Still a Better Ending than Shameless?' Should I change the title, given that the competition is over and they're not exactly comparable anyway?

One more time.
One more time and then he can get the fuck out of Dodge, for good.

Mickey scowls at the skyscrapers rising like Lego blocks from downtown, as the plane circles the South Side preparing to land. The smarter part of him says to look away, but he still ends up running his finger over the window, tracing the lines of familiar avenues and parks. Homing in. Waiting for the city to chew him up and spit him out again. He squishes an ant-sized truck on South Halsted under his thumb and turns away.

Hansen meets him at Midway and doesn’t even greet him, just gestures silently at him to hand over his phone and, once it’s switched off, leads the way out of the airport. It’s not until they’re pulling out of the parking lot in Hansen’s generic-looking sedan that he finally starts the conversation.

“The State's Attorney needs to know – are you a dead set on watching the whole trial? They need to finalize the witness order.”

“Yeah.”

“You know that means you’ll go first? There’s no other way you can watch the other witnesses.”

“I need to do it.”

“I know it’s your right as a victim, but you’re an important witness. If you’ve seen the others speak, you can’t be recalled for more testimony. If there’s some discrepancy between accounts or-”

“There won’t be discrepancies. We’re not lying.”
“It’s not always that simple, people remember things differently, questions come up later. Your credibility could be jeopardized and there will be no way for you to come back and defend yourself.”

“My credibility is fucked anyway – that’s all you guys talk about. My entire cross-examination is gonna be nothing but ‘why should anybody believe this piece of shit?’ You really think they’re gonna come up with an argument they never thought of in the last six months AFTER I’m dismissed?”

“I’m saying it’s a gamble – it’s always better to have your less problematic witnesses first. If you want to maximize the chances of your dad going down for good, it would be wise to waive your victim’s rights here.”

“Doesn’t matter what happens, he’s going down either way.”

Hansen slams on the breaks and pulls hard to the right, narrowly avoiding getting rear-ended by the car behind. A chorus of honking begins and the guy who’d nearly crashed rolls down his window and starts screaming obscenities, but Hansen merely flicks his siren switch and the cars quickly move on.

“For the last fucking time Mickey – you can’t threaten to kill your dad in front of me! I never heard that and you never said it! And you better not say it in front of the judge or I will kill you.”

Mickey crosses his arms and sucks on his bottom lip like a petulant child, before giving in.

“Okay, okay. Jeez, all I meant was that there’s no way they won’t convict. Even if the jury doesn’t like me they can’t hate Mandy.”

“That’s a better answer.”

“But I’m still going first.”

“I’ll let the SA’s office know. I guess they could get the psychiatrist to sign off on it; say it’s important for your recovery process that you get to witness it all. I know they’re in a good mood at the moment – they got all the evidence they wanted admitted, so they’re going in in a strong position.”

Hansen flicks the siren button again and merges back into traffic.

“Here’s how it’s going to work. Any time you’re not with me, another marshal, a lawyer, etc. you’re confined to your hotel room. Most days we’ll bring you dinner and lunch; we’ll eat breakfast together on the way to court. Don’t speak to me until after my second cup of coffee. If you want to go to the gym, out for a cigarette, for a walk etc. you’ve got to have someone with you. I can bring you books, games, DVDs, whatever, but don’t take advantage. And definitely don’t test me. If you try anything with your ankle monitor we’ll be putting you in PC in the Cook County Jail, so you might as well behave and enjoy your hotel room. You’re not allowed a phone, Internet access, or communication with any other witnesses. You also can’t see anyone unconnected to the trial without my permission. Once a week you’re allowed a moderately priced excursion for a few hours. This could be to a sporting event, an exhibition, a concert etc. Let me know at least a week in advance so that it can be properly vetted. There’s no guarantee it will be approved. And I’ll be chaperoning you, so bear that in mind – you don’t want to put me in a bad mood.”

“Bad mood? You’re always in a bad mood.”

“No I’m not.”
“You are. You’re about as much fun as a fucking girl.”

“You just don’t know how to work me right.”

“Was that a gay joke? I don’t even know what that was.”

“Was it funny?”

“No.”

“Then it wasn’t a gay joke.”

“Whatever.”

“Anyway – tomorrow you’ll have an orientation at the Leighton Courthouse. You can’t bring any electronics-”

“Seriously?! You think I don’t know every fucking inch of 26th and Cal? Spent more time there than in high school.”

“It’s a security orientation. Escape routes, protocol, things like that.”

“I figured you just stick me in Kevlar and hope no-one gets a head shot?”

“To some extent, but we’ve got a reputation to uphold. No-one has ever been killed in the program and I don’t want to be the one to break that streak. Anyway, luckily for you the circus is in town because of that killer-cop trial, so security is tight anyway. Just keep a low profile and everything will be fine. There probably won’t be much media to deal with either, since they’re so distracted.”

“Why would anyone give a shit about Terry’s trial?”

“In general? Whenever there’s word that Witness Security is involved it piques the media’s interest. And then there’s the human angle. People love to read about a tragedy; especially one with a happy ending.”

“Happy ending?”

“Sure – overcoming adversity, facing demons, living your truth; it’s powerful stuff.”

“You’re talking about me?”

“You, your sister, Ian – all of you.”

“No-one gives a shit about us.”

“You’d be surprised. The SA isn’t going after Terry just because we’re giving them the resources they need – they do actually care about the case and getting justice for you. Showing other criminals like your dad that they will prosecute.”

“If they really cared they’d’ve done something 10 years ago, instead of slapping him on the wrist each time.”

“I guess I can’t argue with that. I’m sure you’ve been failed more times than you can count.”

Mickey just gazes up at the skyline in response.
“I know it’s too late to make up for it but, I dunno, maybe take comfort in the fact that there are other Mickey Milkoviches out there, who might realize that they can live the life they want too.”

Mickey snorts.

“What, witness security? Snitching is not much to aspire to.”

“You’re not snitching – you’re telling the truth. I hope one day you can understand that. Anyway, you had to strike a deal because you fucked up your life trying to murder someone and then breaking out of prison. But before that you got what you wanted, right? You got to live your life in the open, with the people you loved.”

“Yeah.”

“So maybe for the next kid it’ll be a little different.”

Mickey is out of words. He stares out the window instead, trying to get his bearings as they drive through one of those hipster neighborhoods he’s always avoided like the plague. He’s surprised though, when they pull into a vacant lot used for parking, next to a 1930s block advertising a ‘bijou hotel experience’.

“This is where we’re staying?”

“You know how prevalent bed bugs are in Chicago hotels? I don’t get paid enough to get bit by those fuckers. This place is vetted and low profile.”

“You didn’t care about bed bugs in New Mexico. I had to move rooms three times.”

“I didn’t have to stay there.”

“Asshole.”

They enter the deserted lobby, which has no desk, but a series of computer kiosks instead. Hansen strides over and taps in a code and the machine spits out several plastic key cards.

“Room 304, I’m next door in 306.” Hansen states, as he passes one of them over to Mickey.

“We’re here for a week and then we’re moving on.” He inclines his head towards the elevators and moves off.

“There’s vending machines for juice, coffee etc. down here, you just swipe your card. We’ll get some actual food on the way to the courthouse each morning.”

They stand in silence as the elevator moves upwards slowly. Some kind of ethnic music that sounds like pots and pans being banged together is playing, rather than the usual smooth jazz. The doors open onto what looks like a dimly lit alleyway. The brickwork of the walls has been exposed and covered in long graffiti murals that snake down the corridor. 304 is next to the emergency stair access – a detail that Mickey doubts is coincidence.

The room is pretty tiny – a queen size bed takes up much of the floor space, besides the bathroom, which is separated from the room only by frosted glass panels. However, Mickey is relieved to see a 50” television and Xbox covering an arty black and white image of the Chicago skyline, which lines the wall.

Hansen points to a door between the bathroom and bed.
“This door is to remain unlocked at all times – it leads into my room. Don’t use it unless you have to. As ever, I’ll be monitoring your whereabouts, so don’t think about sneaking out. Any questions?”

“Nah.”

“Okay, I’ll let you get settled in. I’ll be back in an hour or two to discuss dinner options. You’re confined to your room unless I’m with you, understood?”

He only grunts in return and Hansen steps out of the room without another word.

Mickey turns to his suitcase and hauls it up onto the rack in the cupboard, then unzips it. His suit is on top, hastily purchased from a Goodwill in El Paso, on his way to the airport. It’s badly wrinkled and he tries to smooth it out, before hanging it as best he can. His three shirts are even worse and he realizes quickly that he’s going to need an iron. He looks through the drawers but doesn’t find one, as memories swirl at the edge of his mind.

*You know how to use an iron?*

*Yeah, I mean, as a weapon.*

Fiona teaching him how to iron; an uneasy truce between them as they filled the down time between looking after Ian. He flops down on the bed and stares at the ceiling.

That particular chapter of his life, their life, seemed so long ago it was like watching a movie about someone else’s these days - even though he can still remember the oddly satisfying smell the cotton gave off as he pressed the iron down for the first time, smoothing out the creases in a way that he wished he could with Ian.

For the longest time he’d thought their wrinkles were circumstantial. An awful lot of them certainly were. Mickey had always moved through life like a bulldozer, and once he had something to live for he’d moved mountains to make sure they could be together. Ian was sick? He’d look after him. Sammi threatened their future? He got rid of her. Ian wouldn’t visit him in prison? He’d get out. But each time Ian would reject him and, while he may not have always had a lot of options, it had taken him a long time to understand the role that his impulsivity played in the outcome. And that wasn’t even counting all the times Ian had successfully reined him in.

And yet, he resented the fact that *yet again* Ian held all the power, emotionally, in this situation. Once upon a time, it had been the other way round – some of the things he’d said back then still made him cringe, even though he’d known he was full of shit as soon as the words were out of his mouth. But Mickey had also recognized that fear and shame and his self-preservation instincts were holding him back from the love he was capable of. So he had faced his fears when Ian had left him no choice. Ironically, those things that had so frustrated him in their early years were now Ian’s problems – the earnest, naïve teenager that had seen right through him had not been seen in many years. And each time Ian showed up, he would be a subtly different person – a slightly less recognizable version of the one who had gone before. Ian was at an age where he was practicing putting on different masks – whereas Mickey had had to learn how to take them off.

Each blow to Mickey’s heart had reiterated the only thing in life he’d ever found to be true – that actions speak louder than words. Ian was only human. But so was Mickey. Could he still love him with the same ferocity he had in the past? When his heart hadn’t been trashed as many times? He doesn’t know.

When their circumstances were good, they were always in sync; they could go the distance. But when times got tough, Ian would bail. And things were about to get very rough indeed.
Ian is lounging in a rickety chair in the garden, smoking a cigarette and gazing up, watching the planes fly by. It’s late September but still hot and he’s determined to enjoy his last bit of sunshine before he’s forced indoors for the foreseeable future.

He had had high hopes for this summer. He needed to keep a low profile, of course, and his ankle monitor meant he wasn’t making any trips to the pool. But summer had always meant Gallagher shenanigans – of the good sort. Carl was home and the good weather meant Frank often slept outdoors, only returning home to raid the fridge. But it had been quieter than he could ever remember. Carl was working, Debbie was working, Lip was working, Fiona was working and Liam had won a scholarship to some fancy camp in rural Wisconsin. Most days he was left to babysit his niece - who was such a quiet, well-behaved child, he constantly wondered how she could be a Gallagher.

Witness security paid him a small stipend, so he didn’t feel like a burden, *per se*, but it was weird for him to be a ‘house-husband’ when he had been working solidly from the age of 12. Eventually Fiona had suggested helping out at her apartment building and he’d jumped at the chance to do something a little more physical than peek-a-boo. Once Hansen had vetted the building’s occupants, Ian had been let loose on all the DIY he could handle. It kept him busy and focused for a few weeks, but it was still unsettling how little he saw of his sister, considering she was living there. He had a key to her apartment and she’d insisted he help himself to whatever he wanted from the fridge over lunch, but it was rare that he’d actually bump into her before he had to head back to the Gallagher house for his evening curfew.

In the evening they passed like ships in the night. Someone was always working a night shift, someone always had a date and someone was always tired - often Ian.

He’d known before he went in that he was isolated. He’d never made much effort to socialize or make friends, because for so long his family were all he needed – and later they had been all he had room for, emotionally. But they were not the same family they were a year ago, when they were hustling to move that meth. They had gotten on without him just fine and, provided Fiona had truly learned her investment lesson, they would probably continue on without him just the way they had.

Soon enough though, his solitude is punctured by a wailing coming from a baby monitor perched on an upturned crate next to him. Nap time was over. He picks it up, along with his empty bottle, and moves back inside the house. Franny has stopped crying by the time he reaches her. She’s sitting up and makes grabby hands at him when he enters, but doesn’t say a word. She’s getting way too big for the crib and could easily escape from it, if she were a climber.

Her passivity worries Ian a little, if he’s honest. He’s not sure if it’s just her, or if being carted around from keeper to keeper has had an effect on her. He sits on the bed and moves her around, checking her diaper – although that doesn’t seem to be the issue. Debbie had tried to potty train her a few months back, with disastrous results, so she had a reprieve until the next time Debs was focused enough to try. He lays her in his lap and she burrows into him, searching for comfort. He realizes then that nap time wasn’t over yet; she had just been lonely. He waits for her to drift off again, then lifts her floppy body into the crib and tucks her in.

As he smiles down at her though, he feels a vice tightening around his heart as he imagines her
bewilderment when he’s gone tomorrow. Who knows how long it will be before he sees her again? The guilt is familiar and Yevgeny’s face swims before his eyes, even as he tries to suppress it. Being kept away from him in the immediate aftermath of his manic roadtrip had broken his heart, but Svet had eventually softened and let him back in, once he had been taking meds and she didn’t have Mickey for support. But Ian couldn’t do it. Everything that kid did – the way he looked at him, chewed his food, laughed – reminded him of Mickey. That kid was a Milkovich through and through and being around him was torture, at a time when he was doing everything he could to convince himself that Milkoviches were the last thing in the world he ought to be around.

Yevgeny didn’t deserve that though and his hurt and confusion around Ian had been evident, the few times that Ian had helped Svet out. That was pure Milkovich too and had cemented Ian’s decision to cut them out. And for that reason the Yevgeny who floated before him, judging him, would forever be a one year old – even though Ian knew he was now four. Because when Ian had finally plucked up the courage to go round to Kev and V’s to see him, he was stiffly informed that no-one knew where they were – that Svet had just up and vanished one night, leaving behind a set of keys and the deed to the Alibi, six months earlier. Ian had been strangely bereft. He hadn’t seen either of them in years, but the finality of the situation made him feel cheated, even though he had been the one who had left them in limbo all that time. He wasn’t sure he would ever understand himself.

He checks on Franny one more time, then quietly exits the room, heading down the hall to his old bedroom and glancing at the nearly-packed suitcase on his bed. Ian had relatively few belongings these days. Fiona had gathered up most of his things and put them in the attic, when it was clear he wasn’t getting out on bail anytime soon. When he returned home he had pulled it all out, but ended up tossing most of it. It was funny how quickly certain facets of his life had become irrelevant – all of his ROTC stuff that Carl hadn’t commandeered, EMT coursework, the Queer Theory books Trevor had given him. Ian had undergone yet another metamorphosis; this time into a snitch. And snitches lived out of suitcases while they waited to testify. Prison had gotten him used to not having much, so packing his life into one bag was not difficult. What was difficult was walking away from his family and not knowing when he would see them again. He needed something to remind him of why he was doing this. And that something was perched on top of his chest of drawers, gathering dust in this alien environment. Ian picks up his hat and gives it a good brush down, flipping it over to clean along the inner band. There’s still some white New Mexico dust trapped in there, from when his hat had gone cartwheeling across the scrub, knocked from his head by a wind as strong as Mickey had promised. He throws it down on top and zips the case shut.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

TW: Dissociative episode.

I wrestled forever with this one, including whether to cut it in half because it got so long. Hopefully it was worth it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The call comes late Friday morning, right as he’s in the middle of a Halo mission. Jury selection is all but complete, so opening statements will start after lunch.

Mickey procrastinates getting dressed for as long as possible, but he’s also lost his concentration, so before long he’s wound himself up in a little bundle of self-hatred for being unable to complete his mission, while also not getting dressed. He finally forces himself into his suit, without showering, and quickly tries to mold his greasy hair into some kind of respectable style.

Hansen gives only the curtest of knocks before he comes striding through the door connecting their rooms and Mickey is sure he’s going to get caught with his dick in hand one of these days, given how little he has to do with his time. This time though he’s in the bathroom and he steps out to see Hansen tossing what look to be a couple of condoms onto his bed.

“Here, you’ll need these.”

On closer inspection, they turn out to be nicotine patches. Mickey scratches at his arm instinctively.

“No gum huh?”

“Chewing in Court is uncouth. And I hear the judge on this case is a real bitch about cigarette breaks, so it’s best to assume you won’t be getting any.” He mirrors Mickey’s scratching.

“I’ll be honest; I’m already wearing two.”

“I didn’t know you smoked?”

“I vape.”

Of course you do.

Mickey gropes around in the mess of his stuff covering the surface of the bedside table and finds his wallet to stow them in. But he looks up to see Hansen giving him a critical once over.

“That’s your suit?”

“No, it’s yours.”

“We’re going to have to get you to a tailor this weekend.”

“Jesus, is there anything about me you’re not going to turn your nose up about?”

“It doesn’t fit you at all. Someone your height can’t get away with just buying something off the rail.
It looks like the only time you wear a suit is for court appearances.”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

“Do you know who ends up on Chicago Juries? Old white men and church-going black women. Your whole job here is to get them to see you as more than the waste of space your record would suggest you are – don’t feed into what their prejudices tell them to expect. Be polite, show emotion and act like a victim, not a thug.”

“We’ll I’m still f*cked for this afternoon.”

“No you’re not, you’re not on display yet. Just put on whatever feels comfortable, so long as it’s not eye-catching – we’re going to be slipping in the back rows to hear the arguments. I don’t expect you to take the stand until Monday.”

That comes as something of a relief to Mickey.

“I’ll give you another five to get ready. But we really need to go after that.”

Half an hour later they are pulling up in front of the imposing deco building that Mickey hates even more than the sprawling corrections complex beside it. The familiar stony figures representing law, justice, liberty, truth, peace, love and other bullshit gaze down on him, judging him the same way they have every other time he’s been there. What is new to him however, is driving through the traffic barrier next to the building, into a private, fenced parking lot.

“This area isn’t secure, so we need to be quick.” Hansen says, pulling a nylon bag out of the glove box.

“Stick anything electronic in here and give me your right ankle.”

Mickey cocks an eyebrow, but twists and drapes his leg over the gear-shift. Hansen quickly removes his ankle monitor and then takes the bag back.

“New policy – we have to remove them for court appearances, in case anyone is using a Stingray device. Well, anyone besides us. That bag is a Faraday cage – it stops data being taken or wiped from the devices.”

“Yeah I know. Mandy used to shoplift with one of them. Hers was just a load of tinfoil and duct tape though. Ghetto physics.”

Hansen looks unimpressed with this Milkovich family tidbit, but it saves him having to explain the principle in any greater detail.

“Alright, remember what we discussed. Keep your head down and follow my lead. And don’t get cocky with security – the aim is to get you through as quickly as possible because it’s the weakest point.”

“Got it.”

They get out of the car and move swiftly towards the building, Hansen following uncomfortably closely behind, up to the glass atrium that serves as the secured ingress to the courthouse. The
entrance from the parking lot is reserved for those with access, so the security line is short and the checks perfunctory. Mickey gets a pat down and sent through the metal detector, but Hansen is merely waved through, despite his gun.

Although Mickey was cocksure about his knowing every inch of the courthouse, his orientation had proven that this was not quite the case. Hansen slides his keycard into an elevator around the corner, reserved for staff and law enforcement and they take it up two floors to a section of the building that is not open to the public. From there he steers him into a small windowless witness room, furnished with a few fabric chairs, who’s stuffing is poking through holes in the upholstery – a testament to the number of nervy people who have inhabited the room at one time or another. An out-of-service coffee machine stands in a corner, but there are at least a few water bottles hanging around and Mickey grabs one gratefully.

Thankfully the awkward wait is not too long and a clerk of the court soon sticks their head in to say that the court is about to return to session. Hansen leads Mickey back out into the public areas, just in time to see the last stragglers entering the courtroom. They follow them in and take a seat in the last row, Hansen at the very end of the bench, nearest the door and Mickey beside him.

The room is familiar, one of the original marble and mahogany courtrooms that hasn’t been modernized. He thinks the last time he was here was when Colin had had his burglary sentencing, way back when he and Ian had just started fucking around. That Mickey could never have imagined the circumstances under which he would next find himself in this room and his heart gives a funny lurch, half wanting to laugh and half wanting to cry about everything that had happened in-between.

There’s a reasonably large crowd and Mickey instinctively sinks down in the bench, not wanting to be recognized. He can make out his uncle Ronnie a few rows up, on the defendant’s side of the aisle, but he isn’t looking around – in fact he’s slumped in the bench somewhat, in what might be a semi-drunken stupor. Otherwise he doesn’t see much in the way of family or acquaintances. There’s a single Aryan Brotherhood representative, clearly demarcated by his tattoos, but it’s not the show of support or intimidation Mickey was expecting. He guesses they might be saving that for when he takes the stand. There look to be one or two reporters up front and what must be law students behind them, pouring over photocopied pages marked up with highlighter. There’s one guy in a camo jacket covered in military patches, who looks like he might be a bit of a loose cannon and another who is definitely homeless, that Mickey can smell from the other side of the courtroom.

But as they rise for the judge, the man who’s the reason he’s here becomes visible and Mickey’s eyes bore into his back. He’s wearing his old court suit, which now hangs a little limply on his frame. He’s thinner than Mickey remembers and his skin is somewhat grayish, as if he’s not seen the sun in a while. He guesses then that they’re keeping Terry in solitary – maybe buttering him up a little, to give him a taste of what’s to come.

Still, his posture is upright and defiant and Mickey can see the top of that familiar eagle tattoo poking up over his shirt collar. It’s clear that he’s not been broken and the realization makes Mickey queasy.

They sit, while the DA’s representative rises, to start his opening statement.

He’s a young and attractive blonde man, with a confident air and what seems to be a flair for the dramatic, as he paces up and down before the jury, holding each of their gaze for a moment, before he sweeps his arm around in gesture and addresses both the public and the bench.

“Family.

"It’s a simple word, with a far more complex meaning. I’d bet there are few words out there that can conjure up so many different thoughts and emotions in people. It will have a different significance for each of you. Many of you will say that it is sacred; that blood is thicker than water. Others perhaps,
that you can’t live with or without them. Whatever your views, I think we can all agree that family has a huge affect on all of us, not just because we inherit our genes through them, but also that they mold and influence us in every facet of our lives: the way we view the world, our morality, our personalities themselves – in ways we may still be discovering or understanding, as we get older.

"This court-case, at its heart, is the trial of a family. Just as you are asked to withhold judgment and listen impartially to the facts of the case, so must you put aside your own feelings as to what a family should be. As you listen to descriptions of the events that make up this trial, do not be tempted to impose your own definition of family onto the Milkoviches. Do not allow yourself to weigh the evidence on the basis of what you would have done in similar circumstances, or what you think is right. You must only consider the evidence through the eyes of the victims that you will meet over the next few days. Are their words or actions credible, given what you will learn about their upbringing and values?

"On paper, some of these individuals are not very likeable. In the dock, they may still not be very sympathetic. But the prosecution argues that such behavior is learned and represents a legacy of abuse, which continues to influence the actions and attitudes of the adult Milkovich children. And the abuse they have been subjected to is shocking.

"The defense will try to convince you that these events did not take place – that they are fabrications cooked up to gain revenge on a parent, who even they admit, was less of a father than a jailer. That what they stand to gain far outweighs what they might loose by testifying in court. But we argue quite the opposite – that people subject to abuse are also frightened into staying silent for fear of the repercussions. That long after the period when their father could physically threaten them into submission, he continues to instill fear, due to the sheer terror these witnesses experienced as children.

"And so we say, no matter how many years after the fact it comes, if you believe these witnesses, you must convict Terry Milkovich. Convict him of the aggravated sexual assault, aggravated battery and aggravated unlawful restraint of his minor son. Convict him of the sexual assault and impregnation of his minor daughter. And convict him of –”

Mickey’s dissociation is instantaneous; his body starts to float and spin because his brain cannot process what his eyes are showing him. Sound is quickly replaced by a deafening ringing in his ears, followed by the roar of rushing blood - the two combining to form a hypnotic, syncopated beat in his head. He knows that he is moving, but he cannot feel it; he is flying instead. His vision is as though he is underwater, completely out of focus and consisting of nothing but colorful orbs. They change from browns and blues and whites to yellow and greens and soon he feels less like he’s flying than falling down, down, down - to where he doesn’t know. Next he becomes aware of the sound of his breathing, the harsh wheezing sound matching the rushing in his ears, but he’s still falling, faster now, as his head starts to catch up to his body. Then he is jolted violently to the side and he slams back into himself, as if he’s hit a wall. A crack of pain ricochets through him as he hits the ground, finally becoming aware of the hot breath on his face as he struggles to choke down air through his constricted windpipe.

He still can’t see straight, but he can hear the screaming and feel the familiar cold caress of metal on his skin.

“-THINK-”

“-IDIOT-”

“-LUCKY-”
He begins to cough involuntarily, violently, and the pressure on his windpipe is removed, although he remains pinned by a shoulder and a knee to his stomach. Slowly his eyes start to clear and he finally understands that it is Hansen above him, one hand digging into his shoulder, the other pressing his gun into the side of Mickey’s head.

He’s in a stairwell. One of the emergency ones, judging by the poor yellow-green lighting. He can hear banging noises as more feet descend from above him.

“I GOT IT.” Hansen calls out, as two other marshals come into sight, guns also trained on him. Mickey remembers then that he’s not wearing Kevlar today.

“Lift your arms.”

Hansen releases the pressure on his shoulder so that he can comply and when he’s raised them above his head another Marshal comes and cuffs him, rolling him onto his side and forcing his arms down behind his back.

“Okay, now sit up slowly. Push yourself up against the wall.”

“He’s bleeding,”

Hansen uses his free hand to run his fingers through Mickey’s hair and he winces when they graze a fresh gash he must have gotten as he fell.

“Who’s got a light?”

The third Marshal digs a small torch out of his pocket and shines it into Mickey’s hair.

“Looks pretty superficial.”

“Mickey look at me.” Hansen covers one of his eyes with his hand and then removes it, shining the light into his eye to test his pupil reaction.

“Reflexes look fine.”

“You good?” Mickey isn’t sure if the question is for him.

“Yeah, I got it. Tell Malcolm it’s under control.”

One of the marshals leaves, climbing back up the stairs, but the other stays with his gun still carefully trained on Mickey, as Hansen holsters his own and continues to check his head.

“You idiot. I thought you were smarter than this. Trying to do a runner without your monitor – you should’ve known you wouldn’t get far in a place like this.”

“I – what?” Mickey’s brain is still catching up to his other senses.

“Place is swarming with cops. It was fucking stupid. But you just couldn’t help yourself, could you?”

“No, I -” his head starts to swim again as it all comes flooding back. He realizes for the first time how wet his face is. Some of it is cold sweat, but the rest is tears and they begin to fall again because he can’t wipe them away.

“Mandy.” He croaks out, as he tries to turn his head away.
“Mandy?” Hansen repeats, as his scowl starts to straighten out.

“I didn’t know.”

“You didn’t know?”

“I SAID I DIDN’T FUCKING KNOW!” Anger flashes through him now and instantly fills his body with adrenaline. The second marshal instinctively repositions his grip and aim at Mickey’s torso, but Hansen is unfazed.

“So, you ran because of what you heard in the opening statement?”

“Yeah. I guess. I don’t even remember what I did.”

Hansen lets out a long sigh and rocks back on his heels.

“I want to believe you Mickey, I do – I know PTSD will do that to you. But how could you not know? Didn’t the DA question you about this?”

“I – no. Not like that. They asked me if Terry had ever done anything to her and – and I said no.” Another tear falls involuntarily and he tries to rub his face against his shoulder, but he can’t reach.

“I mean, he used to treat her like shit, but she was the baby, he never beat her the way he did us.” He snorts bitterly as the pieces of the puzzle start to come together in his mind.

“Of course. That was why everyone thought he would roll. He’s a fucking pedo. He’d be fucked if he went to prison for raping his daughter.” He knocks his head against the cement wall and has to seriously bite down on the urge to do it again harder, as a wave of self-loathing sweeps over him.

“I’m a fucking piece of shit. My little sister. I fucking failed my little sister.”

“And Ian never said anything?”

“Ian knows?!”

“Ian’s testifying about it.”

“FUCK.” He gives in to the urge now and bashes his head twice, before Hansen can stop him and pull him away from the wall.

“Quit it. You’re helping no-one that way.”

“WHO FUCKING CARES? I’VE FUCKED EVERYTHING UP ANYWAY!”

“Oh it’s not over yet. You’re still going to testify on Monday.”

“The fuck I am. You’re sending me back to prison; I ain’t going back a snitch.”

“You’re not going back to prison, so long as you pull your head out of your ass and do what’s right.”

“What’s the point? They’ll just call Mandy a liar if I say I didn’t know.”

“I’m sure the DA has some kind of strategy. If they’re keeping things on a need-to-know basis they’re trying to keep your testimonies clean – make it clear the witnesses aren’t talking to each other. If you’re all colluding, it would be weird for you not to know about it. Contradiction is good sometimes.”
“Well I know about it now!”

“It doesn’t matter. Just say that on Monday. You made enough of a racket running out; the jury will
know you’re not lying.”

The second marshal is still keeping a firm grip on his pistol, stealing quick glances up and down the
stairwell and looking increasingly agitated.

“You really believe this guy?” he asks Hansen, somewhat incredulously.

“Unfortunately. But I’m gonna feel a lot better when he’s got his monitor back on.”

“This place isn’t secure.”

“You’re right. Let’s move.”

They each grab one of Mickey’s arms and haul him upright. The second marshal finally holsters his
gun, but they both keep a tight grip on him and frog-march him down the stairs and out into a marble
lined corridor on the ground floor. From there they move through security, setting off the metal
detectors as they push him through, out into the same fenced off parking lot that they arrived in.

The second marshal helps Mickey settle into the car and fastens his seatbelt, while Hansen opens his
bag and removes the electronics pouch. He gets down on the ground by the car and refits the ankle
monitor, as the second marshal pins Mickey’s shoulders to the seat. He doesn’t remove the pressure
until Hansen has settled himself down in the driver’s seat and given him the signal to shut the door as
he starts the engine.

“You’re keeping me in cuffs?”

“Yup,”

“Really?”

“Still don’t entirely trust you. And maybe because you’ve just filled my weekend with paperwork.”

“You’re such a little bitch.”

“I’m also hungry. Let’s go to McDonald’s.”

“McDonald’s?! There’s a fuckin’ Popeyes right across the street!”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t have a drive-thru. Believe me, I checked.”

The drive of a few blocks gives Mickey the chance to get his heavy breathing under control, even as
his indignity at being trussed increases. Being mid-afternoon, there isn’t a line when they pull up to
the drive-thru speaker.

“Okay, you’ve got 10 bucks. What’ll it be?”

“Double-quarter-pounder-with-cheese meal, with coke, extra barbeque sauce, an apple pie and a
McFlurry with M&Ms.”

“That’s too much.”

“The hell it is – it’s $9.87.”
Hansen looks unconvinced but he puts in his own, more modest order and drives up to the collection window. The woman inside does a double-take when she sees that Mickey is bloody and handcuffed, but she passes the food over regardless, which Hansen places into a grumbling Mickey’s lap. He then does a double-take of his own as he adds up the check and realizes that Mickey had been right about the price.

“This counts as torture – I hope you know.”

“Relax, it’s not far to the hotel. It’s not safe to just pull up and eat. I’ll let you out once you’re back in your room.”

Thankfully, this wasn’t an exaggeration, and Mickey only has to smell his meal for a few more minutes before they’re pulling into the lot. The lobby is deserted, as usual, and Mickey doesn’t kick up a fuss as Hansen steers him by one arm over to the elevator and back to their floor.

Once they’re back in his room Hansen is good to his word and unlocks the cuffs, then hands over Mickey’s meal bag as a peace offering, as the latter massages his wrists.

Unbidden Hansen pulls the chair out from the desk and takes a seat, leaving Mickey to sit on the bed. They eat in hungry silence, Mickey eyeing him angrily over the top of his burger. He’s just about to tell him to get the hell out, when Hansen opens his mouth first.

“You had a big shock today; maybe you should see the DA’s counselor?”

Mickey sighs and puts his food down, instantly losing his appetite.

“Is there any point? I’m just gonna get freaked again on Monday.”

“You know things are probably going to get worse before they get better, right?”

“So give me those sleeping pills for a few days. I’ll live.”

Unfortunately Hansen isn’t taking he hint and he puts his feet up on the end of the bed and leans back in the chair instead.

“I really think you should try and process this before you go to court on Monday. You don’t want to sound confused when you’re testifying.”

“I know fuck-all about what happened. Of course I’m gonna be confused.

Mickey pushes his burger further away.

“I’m just pissed I didn’t know. Sad even, that she didn’t trust me.”

“Why do you think she didn’t tell you?”

He glares at Hansen for a moment, hoping he’ll back down on the questioning, but he just smiles back placidly and Mickey’s too tired to fight.

“Ugh … I guess because she knew I would’ve killed the bastard. Yeah, she wouldn’t want him dead – wouldn’t have wanted to deal with a body either.”

“Maybe she just didn’t want you to go to prison? Or see you throw your life away over him?”

“It – yeah, that might be true too. Not that I lasted long. My life was always gonna be over before it began. I guess stocking my commissary for 30 years would’ve been a burden though.”
“Money’s usually a factor in domestic abuse too – people are afraid to leave because they don’t have enough to support themselves.”

“Terry always hid the money. We would’ve gotten that out of him first though.”

“He probably made most of it too though, right?”

“And spent it all on speedballs and hookers.”

Mickey realizes then that he’s going to be stuck in this conversation for the long haul. He pulls his right leg protectively up to his chest, but figures he might as well be honest.

“I should’ve guessed. I know how young our mom was.”

“How old was she?”

“13, when she had me.”

“Jesus.”

“I dunno why I never made the connection. Maybe because I was still so young when she died. Everyone seems like an adult at that age, especially your parents.”

He digs in the McDonalds bag and pulls out his McFlurry and starts poking at it with the plastic spoon.

“But I let Mandy down and it’s killing me. And it’s killing me that Ian never told me either.”

“If she didn’t want you to know though…”

“I know, but it’s just one more thing on the list of shit he’s never told me. I hate thinking about how much I don’t know about him; what he got up to without me. This just drives it home again.”

“Does it matter, in the end? This is all your dad’s fault, ultimately. Deflecting anger onto Ian is what he’d want you to do.”

“He’d want something far worse than that.”

Hansen looks at him pensively.

“Do you still hear him, in your head?”

“I – what?”

“Your dad – do you still hear his voice?”

“I mean … I don’t hear him, hear him.”

“But you know it’s him. His words.”

“Sometimes. Yeah.”

“It’s funny how it can come out of nowhere. Like a flashback, really.”

Mickey attends to his ice-cream with more intensity now, uncomfortable with the especially intimate turn the conversation has taken.
“I saw the blood drain from your face today, just looking at him. Before anyone had even said a word. You still fear him.”

Mickey remains silent.

“I won’t pretend I had an upbringing like yours, but my dad was still a mean old son-of-a-bitch. It took seeing him as a cancer-ridden, broken old man to make me realize that 95% of his power was in my head.”

“You’ve got me in witness security – I’d say it’s pretty clear the danger is not \textit{all in my head},” Mickey snarls.

“Fair point. But still - don’t let him drag you back to your childhood. You escaped. And more than that you outgrew it. You need to remember that, when you’re up there. Because all you’re going to be able to see is him staring at you. And that’s intimidating. Are you prepared for that?”

“No. But what am I gonna do? It’s coming. I’ll deal once it’s over.”

“You don’t want to have another deer in the headlights moment like today. And I don’t want to be stuck dealing with the after effects because you punched the judge, or got shot, or made the jury cry.”

“I’m not a fucking idiot, come on.”

Hansen throws his hands in the air in surrender.

“Alright. You’re right. I’m sorry I’m being hard on you. You and Ian … when I got assigned this job I thought you two – especially you – were going to be a fucking nightmare. And, while you’ve screwed my weekend, I’ve been waiting for things to go sideways for a while. So, I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions today. I’m sorry about that cut. And that my homophobia is making me even more of an asshole than usual.”

Mickey doesn’t know exactly how to process those words. He realizes then that he may never have heard an apology in his life. Especially one aimed his way.

Even more inexplicably, Hansen in grinning at him now.

“Listen, I’m not supposed to know this, but is it true, what I was told? About what happened when you came out? I heard that you and your dad beat the crap out of each other and then when you were getting arrested you humped a cop’s car while screaming about how much you love taking it in the ass?”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, the next time you see him, if you’re afraid to look him in the eye – just remember the last time you held his gaze.”

“How the fuck do people even know about that?”

“Dashcam footage,” Hansen winks at him as he stuffs a few fries in his mouth.

“Jesus. They’re not gonna play that in court, are they?”

Hansen just shrugs his shoulders.

“No idea. If it’s relevant they might. You’re missing the point here though. You won – a long time
ago. Don’t grant him a rematch.”

He fishes around in the bottom of his box but doesn’t succeed in snagging any more fries, so he removes his feet from the bed instead.

Mickey’s appetite still hasn’t returned.

“Let me know if you want some swabs or something for that cut. We want it as unnoticeable as possible by Monday,” Hansen says as he packs his trash into his food bag and begins moving towards the door to his room.

“Hey, are you actually gonna eat that?” he asks, pointing at the rapidly melting McFlurry, which Mickey pulls protectively into his chest.

“Okay, fine, whatever. Don’t forget we’re moving tomorrow though. I need you packed and ready to go by 11am.”

But he gives Mickey’s shoulder a proud squeeze and pat as he passes.

Chapter End Notes

So, I guess I spoke too soon on the whole Shameless-being-over thing. The game is afoot once again!

I’m terrified.
Monday morning sees Mickey back in the witness room, in his newly altered suit, adding to the holes in his chair’s upholstery. He didn’t eat anything for breakfast and is feeling increasingly queasy, as the smell of Hansen’s egg McMuffin wafts his way. He tugs at his collar, trying to loosen the knot at his throat, while still covering up the fact that his top button is undone. Two minutes of constriction when he’d done it up had told him that there was no way he’d get through his testimonial without passing out.

After fifteen minutes of nervous fidgeting, he is almost relieved when the bailiff finally comes to fetch them. They’re led out of the room and around a different corner than before, stepping through a door at the back of the courtroom and into the noise and light. The bailiff directs him into the witness box, as Hansen strides off to one of the largely unoccupied benches. Mickey’s heart is hammering in his chest and he gazes upwards at the judge, not quite ready to face his father yet.

“Mikhailo Aleksandr Milkovich?” the bailiff asks, as he extends a bible for Mickey to touch.

“Yes.”

“Raise your right hand. Do you solemnly swear that you will tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?”

“I do.”

The man moves away then and Mickey takes his seat. There’s nowhere for him to turn now, so he steels himself and looks up.

Terry’s stare is as expected. Hard and glowering, with a little uptick to his nose and lip, as if smelling something unpleasant. The lock eyes for a few seconds, Mickey determined not to blink, though still trying to keep his face somewhat blank. It’s the defense attorney that breaks the impasse, nudging Terry subtly in the ribs to reprimand him. Somewhat paradoxically, Mickey feels a faint smile flicker across his lips as he imagines Terry being coached on not looking murderous.

The same blonde man he’d seen on Friday, representing the State’s Attorney’s Office, stands and shuffles the sheaf of papers on his desk, before making eye contact with Mickey. He moves from his place at the prosecution’s table and comes to stand next to the jury box. Mickey turns his body and attention towards him as he’s been taught to do, so that he can only see Terry in the furthest reaches of his peripheral vision.

“Please state for the record your name and age.”

“Mikhailo Aleksandr Milkovich, age 24.”

“Now, normally this is the part where I would ask you what your job is, whether you have a wife...”
and kids, and generally try to paint you as a nice upstanding guy. But that’s not going to be possible in your case, is it?"

“No.”

“It’s my understanding that you are currently a participant in the federal government’s Witness Security Program, is that correct?”

“Yeah.”

“For the benefit of the jury, witness security is what many people erroneously call witness protection. It sounds like the federal government thinks your life may be at risk?”

For the first of many times, Terry’s lawyer gets to his feet.

“Objection, Your Honor – that is a gross insinuation.”

“That’s not a proper objection.” The SA’s man fires back.

“It’s irrelevant to the case, argumentative and leading.”

“The jury has a right to know why this witness is in WITSEC.”

“Then ask that - in its current form the question is unsuitable. The objection is sustained.”

The prosecutor doesn’t miss a beat.

“It’s unusual for the federal government to cooperate with the state on a case in this way. To be clear – have you ever worked as a government informant in any other capacity?”

“Never.”

“So your participation in the program stems only from your involvement with this case?”

“Yup.”

“It’s often the case that cooperating witnesses receive something other than simply protection - is that the case for you?”

“Yes.”

“Please tell us what you were offered in exchange for your testimony in this case.”

“I had my sentence in another case reduced and charges dropped on some outstanding stuff.”

“Did those charges relate to this case in any way?”

“No.”

“Could you give the jury a few more details of the charges?”

“I had an attempted murder conviction paroled and I was let off on charges of escaping from prison, aggravated robbery and grand larceny.”

“Those are some serious crimes you’ve committed.”

“Yes.”
“And the government was willing to dismiss them and pay for a new life you, just to have you testify against your father? It sounds like they really want to convict him?”

“Your Honor! Objection!”

“Sustained.”

“Alright, alright. The State seeks to enter into evidence People’s Exhibit B; a self-authenticating document.”

“Objections?”

“None, Your Honor.”

“This is the text of your agreement with the federal government. I’d like to draw the jury’s attention to the specific wording here—‘Free and complete testimony.’ This means that Mr. Milkovich’s deal is valid so long as he testifies truthfully. His deal is not dependent upon a conviction. If he is honest, but you vote to acquit he still gets to enjoy his new life. On the other hand, what happens if you lie, but the jury still convicts, Mr. Milkovich?”

“Back to the metal motel.”

“Yes indeed, if Mr. Milkovich is found to have perjured himself, his agreement will be torn up and he’ll be sent straight back to prison, no matter what the outcome of this trial is. So as you can see, he has a very strong incentive to tell the truth in this case.”

“Objection – this is bolstering the witness through his cooperation agreement; a prohibition under United States v. Edwards.”

This time the SA’s patience seems to wear thin and he strides up to the judge’s bench to start remonstrating. Terry’s defense lawyer isn’t far behind and Terry takes the opportunity to stare his son down while his attorney and the jury aren’t looking. Mickey instead turns his attention to the fight going down beside him.

“The Seventh Circuit Court has rejected Edwards. Additionally the defense’s attack on the credibility of this witness during their opening statement means that this material is admissible for rebuttal purposes under United States v. Delgado.”

“Delgado was a decision of the Eleventh Circuit.”

“It doesn’t matter that we’re in the seventh - both rulings are persuasive only, not binding. You’re the one who brought up federal law in the first place.”

“I’m going to follow the Seventh Circuit’s decision here.”

“It’s vouching for the witness too.”

“United States v. Dockran holds it’s not vouching to argue the witness has a reason to tell the truth – it’s not like I said it makes up for his other credibility issues.”

“He’s right. Overruled.”

Terry’s lawyer throws his hands up in frustration, but returns to his table, while the prosecuting attorney moves to his place by the jury box.

“We’ll talk some more about your past and your record later, but to begin with, I’d like to draw your
attention to People’s Exhibit A here, which I’ve been using to introduce the jury to the main figures in this case.” He points to a large poster resting on an easel next to him, containing photos imposed onto a diagram of a family tree.

“Hopefully the jury will be able to recognize yourself here, but could you identify this person over here for me?”

“That’s my sister Mandy. Amanda.”

“Is she in court today?”

He has a quick look around, but doesn’t spot her. In fact he doesn’t recognize anyone.

“No.”

“How about this person?”

“That’s my dad, Terry.” He shoots him an ugly look.

“Is he present?”

“Yes.”

“Could you point him out?”

“He’s there, at the defendant’s table.” He pokes an accusatory finger his way, for good measure.

“Let the record show that the witness has correctly identified the defendant.”

“And this person?”

The attorney points to his mother. They’ve had to scan an old, creased and overexposed 35mm photo that Mandy used to keep in her bedroom, of her smiling and cradling her. It hits him then how incredibly young she looks – no doubt a deliberate selection by the SA.

“My mom, Katy Doroshenko.”

“Not Milkovich?”

“No, they were never married.”

“Objection Your Honor!” The defense attorney gets to his feet, while the prosecutor rolls his eyes.

“These are not facts which have been established at trial.”

“The witness is competent to testify on matters of family history.”

“Overruled.”

Mickey expects to be questioned further, but the attorney quickly moves his finger onto another picture.

“This person?”

“Svetlana Yevgenivna; my ex-wife.”

“And here?”
“Yevgeny, my son.” His throat hitches and he quickly picks up the glass of water in front of him and takes a sip. They’ve used a recent photo and the four year old staring back looks exactly like him, but with blonde hair. There’s a little twinkle in the prosecutor’s eye, who looks pleased at this show of emotion on Mickey’s part.

“Are they here?”

“No.”

“Thank you. And finally…” He points to Ian, who’s off in no-man’s-land next to Svetlana, not tethered by any tree branches.

“Ian Gallagher.”

“And your relationship?”

“He’s my partner,” he slurs out, suddenly mortified that he doesn’t know if he should be answering in the past tense.

“I’m sorry Mr. Milkovich, could you repeat that?”

He steals a quick glance at Terry’s stony face and resolves that he’s not going to give him the satisfaction of thinking he’d fucked this up.

“He’s my partner. My boyfriend.”

“Thank you. Do you have other close family Mr. Milkovich?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a bunch of half siblings.”

“How are you related? Through your father or mother, or a mixture of both?”

“All through Terry.”

“And Amanda is your only full sibling? That you share a mother with?”

“Mandy, yeah.”

“Did you live with your half-siblings?”

“All of them at some point, except Molly.”

“Could you explain this to the jury in more detail?”

“Well Joey and Jamie are the oldest. They have the same mom. They’re more than 10 years older, so they were around when I was growing up, but they’re long gone now. Then Collin and Iggy come next. They have the same mom, but not the same as Joey and Jamie, or me. They came to live with us, with their mother, after my mom died.”

“Objection your honor, the fact of the witness’s mother’s death has not been established at trial.”

“Again, with the ‘witness is competent to testify on family matters.’ ”

“The fact of Ms. Doroshenko’s death is a central issue in this case – it should not be admitted purely on the basis of this biased witness’s testimony.”
“Regardless as to whether the woman in question is dead or not, we have proven that she is not available as a witness, as defined by rule 804.”

“804 relates to hearsay testimony – this evidence is not hearsay.”

The judge speaks up.

“Counsel, do you have other evidence, besides this witness’s testimony, that the woman is deceased?”

“We do, Your Honor.”

“Then I will admit it conditionally, subject to further verification. Overruled.”

The State’s representative turns back to Mickey.

“You were speaking about Colin and Iggy.”

“Yeah so – they’re close in age to us, so we grew up pretty tight.”

“You said that their mother came to live with you at some point. What was she like?”

“She was nice when she was sober; she treated us like her own. But she’d go on benders and disappear for weeks at a time, then longer as we got older.”

“Do you still have any contact with her?”

“Nah, I haven’t heard from her in years.”

“Any younger siblings?”

“Besides Mandy? Just Molly - and she lived with her mom in Milwaukee.”

“So, if we’ve understood correctly, your father has a total of seven children, through four different women?”

“That I know about, yeah.”

“Let’s talk about your sister Mandy. How far apart in age are you?”

“She’s about 18 months younger.”

“And would you say the two of you are close?”

“Some ways, yeah.”

“How so?”

“I mean – she’s my little sister. I’d have done anything for her growing up, even though we fought a lot too. But we haven’t seen that much of each other, the past couple years, because of everything that’s happened.”

“Did you use to tell each other everything? Keep each others’ secrets?”

Mickey fidgets a bit here, trying to get comfortable again in his chair.

“No. We … we were brought up never to ask too many questions; to never know too much. That
kept you safe. It wasn’t that we didn’t trust each other, but … I dunno. If no-one else knew, then it made it less real.”

“Mr. Milkovich, did your sister ever tell you that your father had assaulted her?”

Mickey takes a quick swig of water and looks down at his hands.

“No,” he mumbles.

“I’m sorry, could you repeat that a little louder?”

“No, she didn’t.”

“Did anyone else ever tell you what is alleged to have happened?”

“No.”

“Did you ever have any suspicions that something had gone on between them?”

“No.”

“Did you know about the incident before the charges were filed?”

“No.”

“When did you find out about it?”

“On Friday.” A murmur ripples through the jury box at this.

“I heard about it in the opening statements and … and I was so upset I had to get the— I had to get out. I ran out of the courtroom.” He gropes for the glass once again.

“So you had no idea that any of this had happened, before Friday?”

“I mean – I knew Mandy was testifying. But I thought it was about all the other stuff. I haven’t been allowed to talk to her in months.”

“When you say you’ve not been allowed to talk, you’re referring to the restrictions on communication between witnesses, that have been in place since the decision to charge your father was made, yes?”

“Yeah.”

“Objection – this is vouching for the witness again.”

“No, it’s not. I’m just explaining the process of witness sequestration for the jury. They may not be aware that witnesses are not allowed to communicate, in case it impacts their testimony.”

“Overruled.”

“Mr. Milkovich, these crimes against your sister are alleged to have taken place during September and October of 2011 – do you know where you were at that time?”

“I … I think I might have been in juvie then.”

The prosecutor returns to his desk and collects the next exhibit, a stapled stack of papers, which he brings over to the witness box.
“What is this document, Mr. Milkovich?”

“It’s a copy of my juvie record.”

“The State seeks to enter into the record People’s Exhibit C; a self-authenticating document.”

“Any objections?”

“None, Your Honor.”

“Just so that the jury are clear, by ‘juvie record’ the witness means his juvenile criminal record. Normally evidence such as this would be inadmissible in court, because it is too prejudicial to the witness, but we have chosen to waive this right in order to better illustrate the childhood experiences of this witness and his environment. Is there an entry there that covers the dates of the alleged offenses?”

Mickey flips the pages over to the last one, to find his final juvenile crime.

“Yeah, it says here I was in IYC St. Charles from September 10 2011 to June 3 2012.”

“Did your sister come visit you while you were there?”

“I think only once. She always hated visiting prisons.”

“So it was not unusual that she wouldn’t visit?”

“No. She always picked me up at the end though.”

“Would she keep in touch otherwise?”

“Sure, she’d send me stuff, top up my commissary. We’d talk on the phone sometimes.”

“Did it seem like she communicated any more or less, during that stint?”

“I think it was about the same, I don’t really remember.”

“Did you ever get the impression that something was wrong with her?”

“I don’t think so. I really don’t remember. To be honest, even if she was trying to hint at something, I don’t think I’d have picked it up because I was too busy trying to hide my own secret.”

“And what was your secret?”

“That I was gay.”

Mickey can’t help himself now and he steals a little glance to his left, to see what Terry’s reaction is, but he doesn’t bite. The man has better control over his anger than he remembers.

“Okay, I’d like to back up a little bit now. We talked briefly about Ian Gallagher and you said that he was your partner. Was he also your partner at the time of the alleged offenses against you and your sister?”

“Yeah, he’s been my only real relationship.”

“Objection. Nothing pending from the question.”

“Sustained.”
“Mr. Milkovich, try to limit yourself to answering only the question asked. So you were in a
relationship with Mr. Gallagher when these events occurred?”

“It … I don’t know if I can say it was a relationship then. We started out fu—. It was casual for a
long time. I was too scared for it to be anything more. But it evolved.”

“But you were only sleeping with him then?”

“Yes.”

“No-one else knew your secret?”

“I never told anyone. But a few people found out by accident. We er— got caught once or twice.”

“But your sister didn’t know?”

“She found out later. But she didn’t act like she knew at the time.”

“How did you meet Mr. Gallagher?”

“I kinda always knew him, just from being around the neighborhood, you know? He lived a few
streets over, I knew who he was. But he started hanging out with Mandy all of a sudden, when I was
16. They were pretending to date.”

“Pretending to date?”

“She was his beard. She basically covered for him in the neighborhood, so he could pretend to be
straight.”

“So your sister was aware that Mr. Gallagher was gay?”

“Yeah.”

“Given that your sister was seemingly supportive of Mr. Gallagher’s sexuality, why did you not tell
her about yours? Were you not aware that she knew about him?”

“No, I knew she knew. And I knew about Ian - I overheard him telling her. That’s how I got the
courage up to make a move on him.”

“So why did you not trust her with the same information about you?”

“Like I said before, we were raised not to tell. Never snitch, even if it’s your own crime. And I
wasn’t ready. I was still lying to myself then, trying to convince myself it was just a kink.”

“A kink?”

“A sexual kink, like uh, whips and chains and … stuff.”

“What about the rest of your family; would they have been supportive?”

“Iggy and Colin turned out to be okay with it, in the end. But that surprised me.”

“What about your father?”

“Not a chance in hell.”

“Was this an assumption on your part, or based on experience?”
“I saw him beat a guy blind, for looking at him twice - so yeah, I knew how homophobic he was.”

“Objection, Your Honor!”

The fear in the defense attorney’s eyes is real this time as he approaches the bench, alongside the prosecutor, and a furious whispering huddle coalesces.

“—this is character evidence inadmissible under rule 404.”

“The evidence is not entered to prove character but to demonstrate motive under 404(b). Counsel was given notice of our intent to use this information, pre-trail.”

“It’s still too prejudicial to my client – I move to strike under 403.”

“This information has significant probative value and the accused was convicted of the crime in question, so the risk of undue prejudice is lowered. The virulent homophobia expressed by the defendant in the commission of the act was a key element of the case and the basis for it being classed as a hate crime.”

“It’s still too prejudicial and it risks confusing the issue with the jury. They will not separate the question of motive from the assertion of propensity for violence.”

“I’m going to admit it, with an instruction to the jury.”

The two attorneys slink back to their respective tables as the judge turns to address the jury.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the evidence you are about to hear should be used only for determining if the accused had a motive for engaging in the assault he is alleged to have occasioned on his son. His conviction for that crime does not mean that he is more likely to have committed the crime in question - only that he may have demonstrated a similar motive in the past.”

“Thank you, Your Honor. So returning to your answer – you were witness to a violent beating your father gave to a man he believed to be a homosexual, for which he was subsequently convicted of a hate crime?”

“Yes.”

“So you were understandably anxious that he would not discover this fact about you?”

“That’s a statement, Your Honor. And the witness’s state of mind is not material to the crime.”

“Sustained.”

“Okay let’s drill down a bit deeper here – when did you first start sleeping with Mr. Gallagher?”

“November 2010.”

“And that continued all through the dates of the crimes in question?”

“There were gaps – I went to juvie twice, so I wasn’t around.”

“But you picked up where you left off, each time that you were released?”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s look at your juvie record again – It contains numerous shoplifting and burglary charges, as
well as one of assaulting a police officer. Why did you commit these crimes?”

“Because we needed things and the only way to get them was to steal. Or because I needed to get away from home.”

“You needed to get away from home?”

“Yeah. Ian and I got caught twice and I was scared of what my dad was going to do to me, if he found out, so I got myself locked up for a while each time.”

“Could you tell us which crimes that was your motivation for?”

“The last two. The last shoplifting conviction and the assault on the police officer.”

“I note that you immediately pled guilty to those crimes, whereas your previous convictions were either verdicts at trial or reached via a plea bargain. Why did you not prolong the process by going to trial?”

“I couldn’t risk making bail. I needed to be somewhere safe from the get-go.”

“Did your father find out about your secret that way?”

“No, although I didn’t know it at the time. All I knew was I had to get out of there.”

“So how did you and Mr. Gallagher conduct your relationship?”

“We’d hide. We worked in the same store for a while, so we’d go in the cold room, or the stock room. We hid in dugouts, or bleachers, abandoned buildings – anywhere we thought was safe.”

“Were you frightened?”

“Not terrified, but always on edge. We could never relax around each other completely.”

“And all this time your sister was pretending to date Ian, but she didn’t know about you?”

“By the time I got out of juvie the second time they’d ‘broken up’ because she’d started dating Ian’s brother – for real, I mean.”

“And was that also what your father believed?”

“Far as I know.”

“I’d like to pause here and remind the jury of exactly what constitutes the crimes we’re dealing with. A person is guilty of criminal sexual assault if they commit an act of sexual penetration and use force or threat of force, or know that the victim is unable to understand the nature of the act or is unable to give knowing consent, or is a family member of the victim, and the victim is under 18 years of age.

“The offense is considered aggravated if any of a number of factors are involved, but the pertinent ones in this case are being armed with a firearm, causing the victim bodily harm, or acting in a manner that threatens or endangers the life of the victim or any other person.

“Sexual penetration includes any contact, however slight, between the sex organ or anus of one person and an object, or the sex organ, mouth, or anus of another person – penetration itself is not actually necessary.

“A person commits aggravated battery if he or she knowingly and without legal justification, by any
means, causes bodily harm to an individual and uses a deadly weapon - other than by discharge of a firearm.

“A person commits the offense of aggravated unlawful restraint when he or she knowingly, and without legal authority, detains another while using a deadly weapon.

“Mr. Milkovich, how old were you when this assault happened?”

“I was 17.”

“And how old was Mr. Gallagher?”

“He was 16.”

“Tell me about the circumstances leading up to your assault.”

“Ian’s family had gotten into trouble with DCFS again and he’d been sent to a group home with his older brother Lip - the one Mandy was dating by then. My dad decided to take my brothers on a run out of town with him, so it was just going to be Mandy and me left at the house that weekend.”

“Was this a beer run?”

Mickey snorts.

“More like drugs and guns.”

“Objection - not material.”

“Sustained. I order the question and response stricken.”

“What exactly is your father’s job, Mr. Milkovich?”

“He’s a gangster.”

“Objection.”

“You can’t object just because you don’t like the answer!”

“It’s too prejudicial.”

“I agree, sustained. The jury must disregard the question and answer, but the defense must raise objections sooner and not wait for a prejudicial answer – for their client’s own sake.”

The prosecutor is growing increasingly annoyed, but he has one more card up his sleeve.

“Mr. Milkovich, who does your father work for?”

Mickey feels a weight drop into his stomach and his previously well controlled adrenaline gets kicked up a notch or two as he stares at him in disbelief.

“You said I wouldn’t have to answer that.”

He turns to the judge and remonstrates with him instead.

“They said in my deal I wouldn’t have to answer that.”

“My mistake, Your Honor. I retract the question.” But he’s looking awfully pleased with himself and
it suddenly hits Mickey that his fearful response was *exactly* what the attorney had wanted to elicit. Sneaky bastard - he likes this guy. The judge doesn’t though.

“Those questions were ruled inadmissible in discovery too, Mr. Howard. And I will hold you in contempt of court if you do not cease asking deliberately objectionable questions.”

“I apologize, Your Honor. So the rest of your family was out of town. What happened next?”

“I told Mandy to go spend the night with Lip so I’d have the house to myself. Then I invited Ian over.”

“Did you tell her why you wanted the house?”

“Sure, but I said it was a girl, obviously. I told her not to come back until 11am.”

“What happened then?”

“Ian came over at about 11pm and we spent the night together.”

“What did you do?”

Mickey raises his eyebrows quizzically.

“You sure the jury wants to hear all that?”

“Alright. Did you have sex?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you do anything else? Like sleep?”

Mickey chuckles.

“Yeah we slept a little.” His mind instantly takes him back and he smiles involuntarily at his memory of waking up naked in his little bed in the middle of the night, Ian wrapped around him like a boa constrictor. He’d been so overwhelmed by the feeling of being held by someone that he’d not been able to bring himself to push him off, even though the whole thing screamed G-A-Y at him in bright, flashing letters.

“Anything else?”

“We watched a film, drank some beers.”

“Can you remember what film?”

“Under Siege.”

“The Steven Seagal movie?”

“That’s the one.”

“Did anyone else see you there? A pizza delivery guy perhaps?”

“No. It was just us.”

“What happened the next morning?”
Mickey takes another sip of his water and steels himself for everything he knows is coming next.

“Ian woke up first. He went crashing around in the kitchen looking for food because he had to go to work that morning. I stayed in bed and dozed for a while ‘cause I didn’t have to get up.”

“Do you know what time this was?”

“He had to be at work by 8.30, but I dunno when he got up. Maybe an hour before?”

“When did you get up?”

“I don’t know exactly, but he was still there. He was sitting on the couch when I came through and he said he needed to get going.”

“What happened next?”

“I er … I asked him to use some anal beads on me, before he left.”

He feels the hairs on the back of his neck prickle now and he knows his dad’s eyes are boring into his back, but he keeps his gaze ahead and to the side, not wanting to make eye contact with him.

“You were naked?”

“Yeah, we were both still naked. Our clothes were on the floor there, where we’d left them the night before.”

“Did he do it?”

“No, he just kinda pushed me over to the couch, so we could have sex instead.”

“What happened next?”

“My dad walked through the front door.”

“The door wasn’t locked?”

“No. I know how stupid that sounds, but you gotta understand that we never locked the door. We were Milkoviches and everyone in the neighborhood knew what that meant. You’d have to have a death wish to even think about burglarizing our house. We didn’t have locks on our rooms either; you always had to keep as many escape routes open as possible. We were taught that locked doors were dangerous – that’s how it is in prison.”

“And the two of you were visible from the front door?”

“Yeah you can see that part of the room from the entrance.”

“So your dad came in—”

“—he came in and he shouted ‘What the Fuck?’ and then he lunged after Ian.”

“Why did he go for Ian?”

“I guess because he was closest. We both had our backs to him, but Ian was on top of me, so he moved away first. He was trying to get his underwear on. My dad punched him hard, straight in the nose, and forced him down onto the other couch, then kept hitting him.”
“Did he say anything else?”

“Yeah, he screamed ‘Mandy wasn’t enough for you?’ ”

“What did you do?”

“I grabbed my boxers and put them on and then I jumped onto his back and tried to pry him off Ian. I managed to get him off and we fell backwards onto the other couch. Then he started punching me instead.”

“What did Ian do?”

“He jumped up and started running, but my dad pulled his pistol from his pants and pointed it at him. Made him sit down again.”

“Where was he running to?”

“Objection – speculation.”

“Sustained.”

“And then what happened?”

“He hit me some more. I passed out at some point, but I’m not sure how long.”

“Did he say anything else?”

“Yeah he said ‘No son of mine is gonna be a goddamn AIDS monkey.’ Then he got on his cell and made a call.”

“Do you know to whom?”

“I didn’t. He just said ‘It’s Terry, send over the Russian.’ ”

“What did you take that to mean?”

“I thought Ian and me were dead. He was getting someone over to deal with it – I wasn’t sure if he was gonna do it and the other guy was just for clean up, or if the Russian was gonna do it all, but either way I figured there was no way we were getting out of there alive.”

“You believed then that your father was capable of murdering you, his own son?”

“Absolutely. I think he still is.”

“Objection. The witness is speculating as to the mind of the accused.”

“Sustained. Just the facts please, Mr. Milkovich.”

“What happened next?”

“He stopped pummeling us, but he kept his gun trained the whole time, as we sat in silence on the seats. I kept my eyes down. I couldn’t risk looking at Ian. Then Svetlana walked through the door.”

“To clarify here, by Svetlana you mean your ex-wife Svetlana Yevgenivna?”

“Yeah. I mean, I didn’t know that then. That was the first time I’d seen her.”
“How did you feel?”

“Relieved, honestly, at least initially. She didn’t look like she was going to be slitting our throats and chopping our bodies up into little pieces.”

“What did she look like?”

“Tired, beat up. Kinda frightened too. She kept her eyes on the ground. She clocked immediately what a dangerous situation it was.”

“What was she wearing?”

“A short dress and hooker heels.”

“Did you know why she was there?”

“Yeah I guessed pretty quick, but Terry said it anyway.”

“Which was?”

“I’m allowed to swear right? If it’s what he said?”

“You’ve already sworn several times.”

“Oh shit, really?”

“It’s okay, Mr. Milkovich. I know this is difficult, emotional stuff. Just take your time.”

“Well he said, ‘She’s gonna fuck the faggot out of you, son.’ Then he turned to her and said ‘Ride him ’til he likes it, suka.’ Suka means bitch in Russian, by the way.”

“What did she do?”

“She came over and pulled her dress off, then pulled my boxers down and climbed on top of me.”

“Did she say anything?”

“Not a word. The whole time.”

“Anything else?”

“He told Ian he had to watch.”

“Where was the gun all this time?”

“In his hand.”

“Pointed at you?”

“No, but he could’ve used it any time.”

“What did you do?”

“Initially? I just sat there. But I felt like I could finally look at Ian with her there – her body was kinda blocking Terry’s view. So I looked and I tried to keep eye contact but—” He inhales sharply and a wave of pain stops him in his tracks.
He’d been okay. He’d been okay when it was just the facts. But now it was about Ian. Him and Ian and everything that had transpired since that day, that moment. It was the turning point in their relationship when the scales had suddenly shifted and Mickey would forever be the one doing the chasing. It was the moment that he lost him. He grog for the water again.

“I— ”

“It’s okay.”

He pinches his nose and looks down at his feet, trying to get it back together.

“I tried to keep eye contact with him, to tell him how sorry I was. That I’d been so stupid. That I could never give him what he wanted. But that I loved him. You’re in a situation where you think you’re gonna die and things start crystallizing real fast.”

Another gulp of water. It’s the last in the glass.

“But he couldn’t take it. He looked away first. It was all too much for him and I knew then that I just had to get it over with. So I flipped her over onto her back and started pounding her. I couldn’t see anyone that way, I just focused on finishing.”

“By finishing, you mean ejaculating?”

“Yeah, I knew there was no way he was going to let any of us go until I’d done that. He even shoved a few fingers in her pussy after, to make sure.”

“Did you find the experience arousing?”

Mickey bristles at this.

“Fuck no. I was just doing what I had to do, to survive.”

“Some people would say – ‘He got an erection, he took an active role, he ejaculated – that can’t be rape.’”

“Some people have never seen what they can do with a gun pointed at their head.”

“Do you consider that you consented to the situation, at any time?”

“No.”

“Did you ever say no?”

“No. But what difference would that have made?”

“Do you think it’s possible that your father took your change to being a more active participant as proof of your consenting?”

He knew these questions were coming and he knows that they’re better coming from the SA’s office than on cross-examination from his father’s lawyer, but he still can’t stop his hands from trembling around his empty glass as he tries to get himself under control.

“Consent is not a word he understands or cares about. It didn’t matter whether I did, or didn’t, so long as I did what he said. It’s always been that way. He knew exactly what he was fu— ugh. He knew exactly what he was doing. I didn’t ask for this. And I didn’t ask to be pistol whipped or forced into marriage either,” he growls.
“Your Honor, perhaps this would be a good time to take a recess and give the witness some time to recuperate? I’d like to ask a few more questions about the immediate aftermath, but after that I feel a break is warranted.”

“As you wish.”

“Mr. Milkovich, I know this is difficult, but try to hold on a little longer - what happened after you had finished?”

“She started squirming a little under me and I tried to get up. I was in a lot of pain and it was kinda difficult to sit up. Once I was upright I just sat there. I didn’t even try to pull my boxers back on. Terry got up and he stuck his fingers in her, like I said, then he waved at the door with his gun and said ‘get out.’ ”

“Did he give her any money?”

“No.”

“Did she say anything?”

“No, she just grabbed her dress and tried to pull it over her head as she was heading for the door. She was outa there pretty fast.”

“Then what happened?”

“We all stayed where we were. He watched us for a minute or two, sizing us up – deciding what to do with us. I was scared he was still gonna kill us, but he finally asked Ian ‘Where’d you get that bloody nose?’ and Ian said ‘I got into a fight with a guy from my group home.’ Then he motioned to Ian’s clothes on the floor with his gun, so Ian picked them up and started dressing.”

“And the gun stayed in his hand?”

“Yeah, he had it resting on his knee, but it was pointed at him.”

“Then what happened?”

“Once he was dressed Terry told him to get out. He moved pretty fast, but he stopped before he got to the door, as if he was about to turn around. So Terry said: ‘If you look back, I’ll kill you.’ Ian went straight out the door after that. Then it was just us.”

“What did your father do, once you were alone?”

“He came over and stared down at me. I tried to keep my eyes on the floor but he screamed at me to look at him, so I did. Then he smacked me across the face with the gun again. He started shouting but I couldn’t hear that much ’cause my ears were ringing so bad. I knew what he was saying though – that if he ever caught us again we were both dead. Then he hit me one more time and stormed out the door.”

“What did you do next?”

“I tried to get up, but I was real dizzy, so I fell down on the floor on my hands and knees instead and puked everywhere. Then I just crawled to my room and into my bed.” He can still remember the tang of cigarettes and semen and Ian that had overwhelmed him as he passed out. He’d been in too much pain to cry.
“I fell asleep, or passed out, I’m not really sure which, but I woke up when I heard Mandy stomping around and screaming about the mess I’d left in the living room. She came storming into my room thinking I’d just been dumb and drunk, but she went quiet when she saw my face.”

“Did she ask what happened?”

“No, but I told her ‘Dad’s back,’ so she didn’t need to.”

“She didn’t probe further?”

“Like I keep saying – we were taught not to ask too many questions.”

“Was she concerned about you?”

“Yeah, but maybe not in a way you guys would understand. She cleaned me up and fixed the living room and made sure there was plenty of soup and painkillers in the house. And she was extra nice to dad to keep him sweet and out of my way.”

“Thank you Mr. Milkovich. Your Honor I’d like to leave it there, for a recess.”

“Considering the time left I am moving for an early, longer lunch instead. Court will reconvene at 1pm. Dismissed.”

The gavel comes down and Mickey’s focus is suddenly broken. All around him he hears chairs scraping and papers shuffling as the employees of the court stretch and move about. He looks around slowly and is shaken as he finds himself making eye contact with his father again. Incredibly, he’d forgotten he was there.

It’s not for long though because Hansen’s broad body soon blocks the view, as he strides towards the witness stand to collect Mickey. The prosecution’s attorney is right behind him and he claps Mickey on the shoulder.

“You’re doing great Mickey. Keep it up. Really, really good stuff.”

Mickey stands and Hansen starts prodding him out through the door he came in by, behind the stand, but he can’t help looking back over his shoulder, as if drawn by a magnet.

His father’s still seated there. Watching him.

Chapter End Notes

You've probably noticed this one was quite a bit longer than average (7000 words!), because so much dialogue is necessary. That's probably going to be the norm going forward, so be prepared for even slower updates :-S

That said, I feel like I have a critical mass of legal research behind me now, so my writing may actually speed up instead. If anyone has a legal background and wants to beta things I'd welcome it - as ever, I'm trying to walk a line between what makes a good story and my obsessive need for realism.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!