

The Anatomy of a Fall

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The Anatomy of a Fall

by [novembersmith](#)

Summary

The unholy union of a high school AU and a ghost story. Gerard's life takes a strange turn when his family moves to a small town in Vermont and he discovers the locals aren't all what they seem to be. Also includes: unexpected nature walks, murder, pining, improper treatment of crime scenes, a number of bone-related puns, high school bullies, and a short-range shrub named Ferdinand.

Notes

Finally getting around to slinging this massive thing up on AO3, for those who would like to DL easily, or just prefer this interface. :D

First: some extra warnings - This contains violence, homophobia, character death (but the character's still there--there's a fair amount of delving into the subject of death and dying, though, so be aware of that.) There's also some bizarre supernatural sex, but no necrophilia. Just putting that out there now, in case anyone was worried. NO NECROPHILIA. It also could be argued that there's a pretty big age disparity.

Second, there's associated art and mixes that were made to accompany the story, and I cannot begin to express how amazing the creators are and how flabbergasted and lucky I am to get to associate my fic with their work. [galaxyaway](#), [queen_of_goat](#), [arabel](#), [formerlydf](#), [sunlitparadox](#), and [apocalypse_me](#) --- you guys rocking my fucking socks. The art will be scattered through the story, but you can find links to their works here: <http://novembersmith.livejournal.com/41235.html>

Finally, HUGE THANK YOUS to my lovely betas -- [shiningartifact](#) and [brimtoast](#) put in so much work whipping this monster of a story into shape, providing encouragement and love

and insight. I love them both to absolute bits and cannot thank them enough.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1



art by apocalypse_me

[Who You Gonna Call](#) by galaxyaway & [What Else Is There To Say](#) by queen_of_goat

“What?” Gerard said incredulously, and slumped over at the kitchen table with a moan.
“Fucking... what, seriously?”

It was way too early. The sky had just the faintest hint of light, and his mother and brother were somehow dressed and showered and clearly had already been caffeinated. It wasn't fair. Gerard had been dragged out of bed, still in his pajamas, and hadn't even had his first cup of coffee. He wasn't able to make the very rational, vehement protest to his mother's request that he felt was necessary. Mikey quirked an eyebrow at him and took another sip of coffee. His mom was bent over the kitchen sink, rubbing her temples.

“It's just a few blocks, Gerard. Don't be a bitch, we don't have time,” she said, and checked her watch again. “You can walk a few blocks, it won't kill you.”

“It might,” Gerard said very earnestly to the tabletop. He could smell the coffee, but it was so far away. He made a noise of distress.

“Okay, let me put it this way. You walk a few blocks to school at 8 AM, or you get up two hours earlier every day and wait in the parking lot until school opens. Your choice.”

Gerard made a disgruntled noise in response, and his mom nodded, like it was some form of binding agreement. He wanted a do-over, but his mom was already shrugging into her coat and pouring some coffee into a travel mug and asking Mikey if he'd gotten everything, his iPod and shoes and overnight bag.

Mikey was hiding his face behind his coffee mug, but Gerard could tell he was smirking. Gerard scowled and flipped him off half-heartedly before staggering to his feet and lurching towards the coffee pot. Gerard fucking hated high school, and the only thing worse than high school in general was starting a new high school his senior year, when school had already been in session for four weeks, and then having to *walk* there. He hadn't even been in this town a day and he already hated it.

They'd rolled into Glen Fell, Vermont, late yesterday afternoon with the sun sinking orange behind the hills and casting long, thin shadows on the streets. The town was forty-five minutes off the interstate, along a labyrinthine path of two-lane roads, and they'd gotten turned around at least three times, his mother getting increasingly pissy as Gerard squinted at the printout from Google Maps and offered helpful advice.

The plan had been to move in to their new home on a Saturday morning and have the weekend to get situated. This was doomed to fail for a number of reasons, but mainly because his mom had somehow been under the delusion that Mikey and Gerard were going to do anything but wait until the last minute to pack, to say nothing of cleaning their rooms for the renters. That and a flat tire and Mikey's sheepish voice halfway through Delaware announcing that he might have left the toaster on back home, and Gerard figured they were lucky to have gotten there by Sunday.

The fact that Glen Fell was so far off the beaten path hadn't helped matters. It felt like they were driving in circles, the same pattern of farmland-forest-hills-forest scrolling past like an especially dreary screensaver. There weren't many other cars on the road; they'd passed a grey station wagon

headed the other direction, but no one else. Gerard had been growing increasingly convinced that there was no Glen Fell and the whole thing was an elaborate hoax, but then they came to a ridge overlooking a river, and beyond it was the town.

It was fucking small, smaller even than he'd expected. They'd seen the whole of it from the hilltop, laying in wait amidst rolling farmland and stands of maple wood, backed against a dark stretch of forest. There was a white church steeple complete with bell, a main street called Main Street, a general store—a fucking *general store*—and, thank Christ, a coffee shop. Everything was edged in late afternoon shadow, and people on the sidewalks turned their heads and watched as the car went past. And then that was it. That was the town. Gerard could still see the church steeple and bell from the front yard of their new house.

It would have been nice, he supposed, if they had actually gotten there on Saturday, because now everything was happening too quickly. They'd tumbled out of the car into their rented home, barking their shins on the unfamiliar furnishings in the growing dark, before his mom realized they needed to trip a circuit breaker or something equally arcane. Even afterwards, half the lights in the house seemed to be dead.

Mikey had fallen asleep almost immediately after dinner, pale and obviously exhausted, but Gerard couldn't get settled. He spent his first night there staring glumly out the window, listening to the absence of sirens and traffic white-noise. He normally fell asleep to talk shows and infomercials, but his new bedroom had no TV, just an empty bookshelf and a mirrored dresser. All he could hear were creepy countryside sounds and the hum of his brain running in mad loops.

It was somehow insanely quiet and impossibly noisy at the same time. The tree branches scratched like zombie hands at the window, which was, okay, kind of cool, but loud as fuck in the still room. The house itself creaked and moaned constantly, and the staircase groaned from time to time, like someone was slowly creeping up to the second floor. Maybe all houses shifted and sighed like this, but only in the eerie silence of small towns could you actually hear it.

It wasn't just a creepy soundtrack, though. There was actual physical creepiness: flickering hall lights and drifting cobwebs, dark moldy patches on the living room walls. Gerard'd already tripped on three loose floorboards, slammed his thumb in a drawer, and scalded his hand in the bathroom—the faucet apparently had only two settings: cold as death and fiery hellwater. This house was just fucking unfriendly.

He wondered if their old house missed them, leaning a little forward and peering down the street with its window eyes, lonely, waiting for the Ways to come home. Maybe it rattled the cabinets sullenly at the new tenants, or refused to drain the shower, or...

And then apparently he'd fallen asleep, since his mom was suddenly pounding on his door and fuck, life was obviously not worth living. It was early, and he had to walk to school, and Mikey was going away, again, and Gerard couldn't even complain properly because it made him feel like a complete asshole.

This should have been Mikey's sophomore year at Belleville, and instead he was here, pulled out of school to spend the semester at a specialist asthma center, being poked and tested each week by a legion of creepy researchers. He'd left behind all his friends—Pete, and Gabe, and that weird hyper band kid that kept skulking around their house and babbling to Mikey about their pirated Disney DVD empire. So fuck it, Gerard would just be a cheerful little soldier. He'd fucking walk to school, and like it. Hell.

“Fuck,” he muttered, and resisted the urge to rub his eyes again. “Alright, whatever. Maybe it won't be so bad?”

Mikey stared at him and Gerard managed an approximation of a smile. “Good luck with that new doctor, man. Xavier, right?”

“Ha ha,” said Mikey, still looking suspicious. “Funny.”

“I’m just saying,” Gerard said. “They said there’d be side effects of the new medicine, right? Side effects could include, I dunno, psionic blades.”

“Lame,” Mikey scoffed, but Gerard counted it as a win, because Mikey was smiling, just a little. Gerard shuffled over and leaned into him, careful not to spill his coffee. Mikey smelled warm and familiar, sleep and soap and bitter caffeine, and Gerard closed his eyes for just a second. Outside, the horn of their car blared, which, wow, the neighbors were going to love *that* this early in the morning. Mikey shoved him gently away and the coffee in his mug sloshed threateningly.

“Go back to bed, Gee,” he said, and then smirked. “Have fun walking.”

“Fuck you too,” Gerard said, and retreated into the kitchen. The door closed, and he watched through the window as the car pulled away down the street. The sky was still a dark, deep blue, and he figured he had another hour or two to sleep before Marche fucking Slav to the gulag. He laid down a few minutes, uneasy and jittery, but he couldn’t sleep, not now.

He unpacked and set up his bookshelves and posters and fiddled with the supremely obnoxious drawers of the antique dresser, which only opened if he heaved with both hands, and afterwards tended to fall out and squash his toes. By the time daylight started bleeding into the room, he was in an even worse mood than before.

And just in case he’d been thinking the day wasn’t totally fucked up from the start, he managed to do that terrible thing with the eyeliner pencil where he got distracted and stabbed himself. It was at least a billion years before it was remotely possible to even pry the lids back open, and then his eye was all watery and bloodshot and crazy. He’d even thought about not wearing eyeliner today, he really had. But when he’d looked in the mirror his face had looked young and unfamiliar, fragile, and he’d wound up just smearing coal-black around his eyes as usual. Which obviously had been the wrong choice, since now he looked like he had some undead disease—zombie pink eye, maybe.

And his day was only going to get *worse*, because he still had to *walk to school*. That was fucking inhumane, no matter what his mom said.

He sighed loudly to announce his general displeasure with the world—it didn’t count as complaining if no one could hear it, right?—and then set off on foot towards the high school, clutching his thermos of coffee.

He contemplated pretending he’d gotten lost and doubling back to the house, but it really was only three blocks. The school was just ahead, looming in the morning sun, squat and malevolent. There was a steady stream of cars being funneled in its direction, belching black smoke, mufflers rattling in the cold morning air.

The parking lot was filled with pick-up trucks and rusting sedans; a few Volvos and station wagons were scattered here and there. One spotless white truck was in a place of pride at the front, parked next to the school entrance, and Gerard had to stop and stare, because he’d never, in his entire life, seen anyone actually decorate a truck with dead animals. There were deer antlers prancing along the front bumper, a tattered foxtail flying from the elongated radio antenna, and a humongous rack of horns blocking most of the rear window. Gerard could feel his jaw drop open, and he reeled a few involuntary steps backward.

“Holy fucking shit,” he said, tilting his head to better take it in. Someone standing next to him made a threatening, throat-clearing noise.

“You got a problem with my truck, freak?” Oh, that just figured. The guy next to him was scowling down at Gerard from under the brim of his ballcap. “What the fuckin’ hell you wearing, anyway? Is that *make-up*?”

Gerard didn’t really feel he had to justify his sartorial choices to someone who used antlers as fashion accessories, so he just turned away to go into the school. He had to get his schedule, figure out where all his classes were, and somehow manage to avoid interacting with any of the denizens of this hellhole. Just seven hours, and then he could go home, visit Mikey, work on his comic strips. Barricade himself in his room and never come out. He was about to head up the stairs when a huge hand settled on his shoulder and yanked him backward.

“I asked you a question,” the guy said, getting in Gerard’s space and looming, practically bumping chests with him. The fucker was *tall*, at least six feet, with bulging biceps, and his cheap cologne was making Gerard’s eyes water. “You don’t just walk away when someone’s talking to you, faggot.”

It was fucking cold out, and Gerard just wanted to get inside and hunker down and not talk to anyone, especially not anyone wearing camouflage pants and a letter jacket. He wanted to go *home*, but he couldn’t, so he just shrugged noncommittally and tried to edge around the guy. But the asshole kept doing that annoying thing where he matched Gerard step for step, blocking his escape and grinning meanly.

“Fine, your truck is fucking ugly, that answer your question?” Gerard snapped, and the guy sucked in a breath and narrowed his eyes. There was already a sizable crowd of high school sadists forming around them, jostling to get a better whiff of schadenfreude. Great fucking way to start the day. God, Gerard had the worst fucking luck.

“It is *not*,” the guy snarled, and Gerard knew, just knew, that the fucker was an inch away from patting his truck comfortingly and cooing that he wouldn’t let the nasty fag get gay cooties all over his baby. “What the fuck do you know? You’re wearing *pink shoes*.”

“Pink shoelaces,” Gerard corrected him, crossing his arms over his chest and hunching his shoulders. Fuck, he really needed to learn to just shut his mouth.

“You need to learn some fucking manners, freak,” another guy sneered, and Antlers McBigot grunted in agreement, lip still curled in outrage over the insult to his vehicle. He reached out and shoved Gerard, a solid painful blow that left him staggering back on his heels and sent his coffee over his shoes in a wave of wasted caffeine. Laughter echoed though the surrounding crowd.

“I don’t think you understand how this town works,” the guy scowled, hanging over Gerard, face inches away like he was waiting for Gerard to back down. Oh, fuck this.

“Gosh,” Gerard drawled, looking up from under his lashes at the asshole and making a sarcastic moue with his mouth. “How lucky I’ve got a big strong man like you to teach me. You’re a sweetheart.” He batted his eyes for good measure, and Antlers promptly reeled backwards with a dumbfounded look, as though Gerard had just stuck a hand down his pants and grabbed his package.

“Oh, *shit!*” one guy in the crowd said, and another guy in a letter jacket had his eyebrows raised nearly to his hairline. Everyone was looking at the lead jock, who was still staring at Gerard as though Gerard might, at any moment, attack him with eyeliner and dye his shoelaces pink. Gerard

managed to coolly raise an eyebrow, but inwardly he was already in a state of stark, pants-shitting panic. They were going to fucking crucify him. And then maybe set him on fire. And then, fuck, Gerard didn't even know what they did out here. Probably beat him to death with a deer skull.

“What—what the fucking fuck do you think—” Antlers said, voice rising precariously, and then the bell rang, interrupting whatever threat of imminent death was about to be spluttered. In the rush of the rest of the student body to the door, Gerard was able to scuttle past him and his cronies and up into the school before anyone could really react. This was going to be the worst day *ever*. Gerard could already tell.

Once inside, Gerard was basically a Sesame Street episode on non-conformity. One of these things is not like the other, one of these things is wearing eyeliner and all black and has a bookbag embroidered with skulls and the others are all wearing denim and plaid and John Deere t-shirts and camouflage. Gerard kept his head down, but he could sense the brazen staring and raised eyebrows anyway. Fuck. He was so doomed.

Trying to navigate the crowded hallways and find the main office somewhere was basically impossible—there were absolutely no signs, just identical bleak doors and grayish walls, like a fucking labyrinth. The plaque next to the main office was almost maliciously small. He'd made three passes down the halls before he finally spotted it, although at least after the bell for first period had rung, the halls were clear and he didn't have to dodge the crowds. Inside, there was a student working the front desk and a sleepy-looking secretary in the corner filing her nails and watching *The Days of Our Lives*, that weird episode with the Russian ballerina and the cross-dressing.

The student said in an unexpectedly perky voice, “You must be Gerard Way!”

“Yeah, that's me,” Gerard said cautiously. The guy looked surprisingly un-evil. He was wearing a Ramones t-shirt and smiling, and he had a truly impressive head of hair.

“I'm Ray Toro! I've got you a schedule and a map of the school here.” Ray handed over the crisp printed sheets and beamed at Gerard. “Your first period is Geometry with Mrs. Hall, room 205 upstairs. Just go up the staircase on the left when you leave here and once you're upstairs it's the first door on your right.”

“Thanks?” Gerard said uncertainly. The guy kept smiling. Gerard was at a loss. Also, fucking hell, his first class was math, and he was going to have to walk in late and all those eyes would be glaring right at him. Okay, fuck. Fine. Mikey had been right. Possibly the pink shoelaces and Iron Maiden hoodie had been a poor choice today.

“I'm a senior, too,” Ray said, oblivious to Gerard's complete despair and hopelessness, leaning back in his chair and bouncing one foot on his knee. He was still grinning. It was entirely unnatural for 8:30 AM. Gerard squinted at him suspiciously. “I placed out of Geometry last year, so I get to work the front desk this period instead. But I'll see you afterwards in English. It's room 207, by the way. Hey, have you considered joining the marching band? We totally lost like half the band last year when they graduated so we really need some new blood.”

“Hah,” Gerard laughed inadvertently with a terrible honking noise that he resolved not to make again for the rest of the day. “No, uh, you'd probably pay me not to join band.”

“Well, fuck,” Ray said sadly, and then froze, looking warily at the secretary in the corner, who according to the gold-embossed nameplate was aptly named Gertrude Hawthorne. But she was in a soap-opera coma and oblivious to swearing students and the world in general, so Ray turned back to Gerard and beamed again.

“Well, I’ll see you later, Gerard! Nice to meet you!” he chirped, and waved.

“Bye,” Gerard said, eyebrow raised—seriously, that kid had to be on *something*—and felt marginally more hopeful about the rest of the day. At least one person in this town wasn’t a total asshole, even if he was bordering on Stepford cheeriness.

Turned out, though, that his optimism had been premature, because soon as he entered room 205, the class erupted into whispers and one douchebag in the back of the room whistled and said, loud enough to be heard three rows of desks away, “Damn, what the hell, we taking in she-males now?” Awesome. Then Mrs. Hall made him *stand at the front of the room and introduce himself*. Gerard was forced to downgrade her from ‘sweet little old lady’ to ‘the dark lord Mephistopheles.’ And then she immediately proved this decision to be correct by making him complete the problem on the chalk board, because she hadn’t reached her quotient of evil for 8 AM yet, or something.

Then he had to take the only seat open in the class, which of course was in front of fucking Antlers McJockstrap, who was staring up at him with loathing. The rest of the class period passed with Jocko flicking spitballs in his hair and hissing “Oh, pretty and *smart* too, city boy? Ain’t you *special*,” and other gems each time Mrs. Hall looked away. Gerard tried to ignore it and focus on doodling some dueling demon unicorns for Mikey in his notebook. In retrospect, a bad idea, since the asshole next to him spotted it and hooted with delight and called him Princess for the rest of the period.

At least the next class had Ray Toro, he thought, but unfortunately Mrs. Hall (tomorrow he was bringing a crucifix to class, seriously) kept him after the bell rang to discuss Gerard joining the math team and to give him his textbook and the homework assignments he’d missed. By the time he escaped, all the seats in his English class were full. Except, mysteriously, the seat in front of Jocko.

The rest of the day followed suit; most of the other students left him alone, but there were a few assholes in every class that shoved his desk and called out the requisite unimaginative insults. It wasn’t like he hadn’t heard this shit before, but at least he’d been home, then, in familiar territory. In Belleville he even had friends, sort of. Mikey’s friends Pete and Gabe had started sitting with him at lunch last year, and then they’d progressed to stealing his phone and invading his basement and watching movies with him and Mikey on the weekends. It had been nice. He was actually going to miss them, especially now that he was stuck here, in the high school from hell.

Luckily, the last class of the day was Art, with only four other students in the room—four girls set on ignoring him completely, which was fine by Gerard. He spent the time sketching the still life the teacher had set up and adding in tiny vampires and rabid monkeys clinging to the spokes of the bicycle wheel. Mr. Felts apparently wasn’t impressed.

“Unacceptable,” he said darkly, waving his pencil at the totally awesome vampire bicycle monkeys. “Draw it again, please. And stick to the assignment this time.” Because nothing beat art class with all the actual art and fun sucked out of it.

When the school day had finally, finally ended, Gerard found himself surrounded by a gang of guys with letter jackets in the parking lot, having decided, apparently, that the best way to re-establish their heteronormative masculinity was to knock around the new fag and steal his bookbag.

The lead jerk from that morning started off on some rambling monologue on respect and bitches and the baseball team, or something. His name was Ted Sikowski, apparently, and Gerard’d ‘better not forget it, faggot’—which, hey, no points for originality, there. Which possibly hadn’t been the brightest thing for Gerard to say out loud. Ted slammed him up against a truck, shoved his face

against the hot paint hard enough that Gerard's vision went crackly and dim. So that sucked, but once Gerard spit out blood onto the sidewalk, Ted apparently felt his honor was satisfied enough to let him go. Gerard bent gingerly to grab his bookbag, and fuck, his shoulder hurt, too. Fantastic.

He edged his way past the ring of self-righteous onlookers, then closed his eyes for a moment. He didn't want to go home. His mom would fuss over him, the corner of her mouth pulling down and the skin around her eyes tight and upset. She made that face too often, lately. And he sure as hell didn't want to wait around in the parking lot for those assholes to leave, and they were blocking off his exit anyway.

He wound up shuffling off through the few remaining cars, head down, towards the woods bordering the school grounds. The faint impression of a path wound through the tall grass, and he followed it absently, trying to staunch his bloody lip with the sleeve of his hoodie. He could hear laughter and raised voices from the parking lot behind him. He tried not to listen too closely, but he could feel his shoulders hunching miserably.

The grass rustled hollowly as he followed the overgrown path, shuffling his feet, head down and mouth dripping red from a busted lip. He was sure he made an epically tragic figure, sloping monstrous towards the shelter of the woods and away from civilization, the blue sky arcing overhead.

The bright, end-of-summer sun was hot enough now that his shirt had gone all sticky and damp, even though the wind had an October chill. Past the edge of the woods, though, it was actually pretty pleasant, and although he'd intended to collapse in the shade and watch the parking lot trolls mill around until they got bored and left, something made him want to keep plodding onward. Head down, trudging through the leaf litter to wander lost for all eternity. Dante's wood of suicides, the Black Forest level for high-school misfits in make-up. Maybe there would be werewolves.

An ancient-looking flat stone wall bordered one side of the path, crooked and half-toppled. He had to grudgingly admit there was something appealing about the autumn woods, something intangible and deliciously spooky. When he looked up, the trees stretched overhead, arching like the bones of cathedral walls against the blue vault of the sky. The leaves were all red and gold, curling dryly at the edges, rattling when the wind blew.

He kept worrying his lip as he walked, re-opening the cut on his mouth. That was going to be a problem, probably—he was bad about about picking at scabs and prodding bruises. He held his sleeve against his mouth again until it clotted, then fumbled in his pocket for cigarettes, stumbling now and then over random tree roots poking up maliciously from the ground.

First cigarette of the afternoon—it almost, *almost* calmed his nerves. At least it gave him something to do with his hands. The smoke hung heavy in the air. Maybe if he got lost, he could follow the trail out; a modern-day Hansel, complete with lung cancer. He supposed he should turn back soon, before he actually *did* get lost. He took a last drag of the cigarette, and the cut on his mouth must have reopened because the paper stuck to his bleeding lip, clung sticky to his skin.

“Fuck,” he said ruefully to the empty woods, prodding his mouth with ragged, black-painted nails. “Smoking my own blood.”

“Kinky,” the empty woods said back, and Gerard jumped backward, windmilled his arms frantically, and fell on his ass into some intensely spiky unfriendly bush. He made an embarrassing tea-kettle-like noise, flailing.

“Holy shit!” the guy standing behind him on the path said, sounding alarmed and amused. “I didn't

mean to freak you out that bad, man.”

“Gnnaaahh,” Gerard wheezed, trying and failing to stand up. “What the fuck—what is your—where did you even come from!”

The random stealth guy stared at him as Gerard glared witheringly, or attempted to, and then burst into delighted giggles—which, whatever, it wasn’t funny, okay. The fucking bush was *possessed* or something. Gerard yanked his arm again and yelped as thorns dug into his shoulder, and then suddenly a cool hand was on his wrist, confidently lifting away branches and untangling things from Gerard’s hair and hauling him to his feet.

Gerard shook the dead leaves from his hair and spit out a twig, edging away from the bush just in case it decided to leap out at him again. Fuck, his heart was still going eleven billion miles a minute.

“So, uh... you okay, dude?” the guy asked, rocking back on his heels. “Still breathing? I’m Frank, by the way. These are my woods.”

“*Your* woods?” asked Gerard as he brushed hopelessly at the giant muddy stain on his jeans. Oh, his day just kept getting better. At least his pulse was slowly normalizing. Probably his heart wasn’t going to explode, but it had been a close thing. He slanted an accusing look in Frank’s direction.

Frank didn’t so much seem to notice, picking at a nail and staring at it intently. He flicked a glance at Gerard and looked back down again immediately. “I mean, uh, sorta? They are now. People... tend not to come here. You did, though!” he said, perking up. “Which is awesome. Clearly, you are awesome.”

Gerard was still picking thorns and twigs and other random forest paraphernalia out of his hair—what had he been thinking, coming into a forest, nature was fucking red in tooth and claw and *leaf*—but at this he looked back up. That... that was generally not the response he got from people. And now that he wasn’t dying of heart failure or premature death-by-tree, it was dawning on him that Frank was actually sort of attractive. Okay, really attractive.

Frank grinned at him, flicking his lip ring with his tongue. He was even paler than Gerard—pale like a china plate, almost luminous. Tattoos curled beneath the holes in Frank’s shirt and down the insides of his arms, and Gerard itched again for his sketchpad and ink. He couldn’t believe he hadn’t noticed this guy at school, Jesus.

“Fuck,” Gerard laughed in surprise, wincing as his lip cracked open even more. “I thought everyone in this town wore polo shirts and plaid, man.”

“Nothing wrong with plaid,” Frank said, wagging his eyebrows, and then he laughed, high and delighted, and threw an arm around Gerard’s shoulders, squeezing. “This is so awesome! No one cool ever comes out here.”

“Um,” Gerard said, eyes popping open. He wanted to surreptitiously pinch himself, but no, he couldn’t, because his hands were pinned to his side by some random hot guy—who thought Gerard was *cool*—hugging him. He struggled to get his brain to reboot. “Uh. What?”

“Dude,” Frank said, leaning back and letting go of Gerard’s shoulders but still bizarrely and brain-numbingly close. Frank’s face was achieving Ray-Toro-levels of cheer; he looked like someone had just offered him the Nobel Prize or a backstage pass to Bonnaroo. Gerard shivered, rubbing his arms absently. “Seriously, so fucking awesome! C’mon, you have to hang out with me, you wanna

walk a bit? You got a name?” Frank said, bouncing and beaming. “And oh, oh, can I bum a smoke?”

Maybe that was all Frank’s excitement was, a guy jonesing for a cigarette. If so, Gerard could definitely sympathize. Back home he knew all the best places to sneak a smoke on the school grounds—here, not so much. Waiting all day for a cigarette was definitely torture. He fumbled out his pack of Marlboros and his lighter, handed them over gingerly.

“So, yeah,” Gerard said, eyeing Frank warily as he somehow managed to bounce and light a cigarette at the same time. “I’m Gerard? Gerard Way.”

“Nice to meet you, Gerard Way!” Frank said, beaming. He was still leaning into Gerard as he lit up, and he took his first drag with his shoulder bumping into Gerard’s arm and his hair brushing Gerard’s cheek, which, okay, probably wasn’t like a come-on or flirting or anything—Gerard knew better than that, there was no way—but then Frank’s eyes fluttered closed.

“God, Gerard,” he said hoarsely, and Gerard stared at him. “I owe you one, it’s been *ages*.”

“You can, uh, keep the pack if you want?” Gerard offered weakly. He guessed Frank’s parents were anti-smoking Nazis or something. “I’ve got an extra in my bag, anyway.”

“Dude,” Frank said, face lit up. “You’re fucking awesome, Gee—can I call you Gee?—it’s so fucking fantastic that you’re here. I mean, the forest, not Glen Fell, Glen Fell fucking blows cocks. Are you new here? Why’d you move out to the middle of fucking nowhere, dude?”

Gerard took a moment to parse that. He was having a hard time gathering his thoughts when Frank was still making happy little sounds around his cigarette.

“Gee’s fine,” he finally managed, ducking his head. “And, uh, yeah, we just got here last weekend.” Frank seemed to be waiting for more of an explanation than that, and for some reason Gerard found himself going on. “You know the Trumbull Medical Institute? We couldn’t, um, afford to rent a house in the city, and this is the closest town to it, so.” He paused, and waited for the question, but Frank was just puffing away at his cigarette, looking bright and quizzical. “It’s my brother, Mikey,” Gerard got out finally. “He’s got asthma. They’ve got some experimental stuff they can try him on, so, uh. That’s why we’re here.”

Gerard could actually rattle off a list of totally boring stats about jet nebulizers and long-acting beta-2-agonists, but he figured Frank didn’t want to hear all that. He didn’t particularly feel like saying anything else, anyway. It was way too easy to remember how his brother had choked for air last fall, collapsed in the stairwell, not breathing, Gerard pounding on his chest and swearing. Then the ambulance had arrived and Gerard didn’t remember too much of that part, of the CPR and the defibrillator. Just Mikey in the ER later. The only sign his heart had restarted had been a steady beeping from the machines, and otherwise, Mikey had been motionless. Pale and intubated, lifeless, snaky lines of plastic weaving their way around and up inside his nostrils and lungs. He’d been like that for days. If Gerard let his mind wander, it always went back there, to that place, to how close it’d been. How close it still could be.

“Sorry, man.” Gerard jumped, startled, and looked up. Frank was staring at him, solemn for once, his eyes dark. “That’s rough.”

“He’s going to be okay,” Gerard clarified. He bit the inside of his cheek. “Mikey, I mean. He’s gonna be fine.”

Frank didn’t say anything, just sort of squeezed Gerard’s shoulder and Gerard leaned into it before

he realized what he was doing. He should have backed away, he didn't even *know* this kid, but Frank was playing with the strings of Gerard's hoodie and humming something quiet, and Gerard just—couldn't.

Anyway, Frank was just wearing a t-shirt, and it was fucking freezing, so maybe he was trying to steal Gerard's body warmth or something, and it would be wrong to push him away, right? Although, fuck, for all he knew Frank was a crazy serial killer, living in the woods and collecting the scalps of loser kids to make into a coat. Except he was a little short to be a serial killer.

Frank had already gone through one cigarette and was blissfully lighting another. "Really, I mean, even if it sucks being here, I can't lie, I'm glad you came. I've been bored for fucking ever. I haven't had anyone to actually talk to in years," he said out of the corner of his mouth, and then bit his lip and looked at Gerard with wide eyes, like maybe he'd said too much. Gerard snorted. Like anyone could confess to being more of a loner than Gerard himself was.

"No kidding," Gerard said heavily. "I have no idea how I'm gonna survive Glen Fell. It's, like, absent of humanity."

"You stick with me, obviously," Frank said, eyes crinkling as he beamed at Gerard. He wrapped an arm around Gerard's shoulders and squeezed. Gerard's stomach did a completely stupid, unnecessary swooping movement. "We can keep each other company. Fuck all those tools. Hey, you like the Misfits, right?"

"Yeah," Gerard admitted, and okay, it was sort of awesome that Frank knew the Misfits. "Danzig's fucking raw."

"Damn straight," Frank agreed. "You have rocking taste in music, too! See, this is fucking awesome. This is, like, fate. You should totally walk with me a while, Gee." He waggled his eyebrows invitingly. "I know all the best shortcuts and shit. We could go see some ruins, you like ruins?"

Gerard scuffed his boot against the ground, and weighed Frank's ginormous smile against straying out into the woods with the ticks and spiders or whatever with some guy he barely knew. It wasn't like he had anything else to do. Sit at home and drink and wait for his mom to take him to the hospital. And he totally did like the Misfits, but. Fuck. It'd been a really long fucking day, and he wasn't sure he was up for possibly getting murdered, or lost in the woods, or whatever.

"Um, look, I actually have to go. I was just, um." Escaping from a bunch of assholes in letter jackets. "Just exploring," he finished lamely.

Frank's face fell. "You have to leave already?"

"Yeah?" Gerard said, eyeing him uncertainly. Frank let go of Gerard's shoulders and shuffled back a few feet.

"Oh," he said, and he looked so unhappy, hunched in on himself and face twisted. "Oh, um. Okay."

Gerard felt like a tool. Like he'd kicked a puppy and then stolen its ball. And then set its ball on fire. "We could hang out tomorrow?" Gerard offered hesitantly, and stuck his hands in the kangaroo pouch of his hoodie to keep from fiddling impatiently.

"Yeah?" Frank said, a small smile creeping back on his face. "Fuck yeah! I mean, only if you want to. But that would be cool. Meet you here, same time tomorrow?"

"Or I could just see you in school," Gerard said hopefully.

“No, here is better,” said Frank, not meeting Gerard’s eyes. Maybe Frank didn’t want to be seen with Gerard in public. Gerard could sympathize—he didn’t want to be seen in public, either.

“Uh, okay,” he said, and fuck, he was bleeding again. He sucked his lower lip in his mouth and pressed his tongue to the cut. Probably his should ice it when he got home, he guessed.

“You sure you can’t stay a bit later?” Frank wheedled, peered out from under his bangs, looking hopeful and even more puppy-like than before. An adorable punk puppy with tattoos and dimples, which surely was breaking some sort of UN law for weaponized cuteness.

And weirdly, even without the hot Misfits-loving guy, Gerard really did want to stay. These woods weren’t so bad, atmospheric in a way he’d never appreciated before: the falling leaves skittering by on the breeze, the trees stretching upwards, vibrantly orange and red, and Frank standing incongruously cheerful amidst the grey trunks and fallen leaves.

But his shoulder hurt, and his head hurt, and really, it had been the longest, shittiest day ever. Gerard, more than almost anything, just wanted a goddamn beer and to hide in his room until it got dark, and then to crawl into bed with Mikey, listen to him breathe.

“Yeah, I gotta go home,” Gerard said, and Frank frowned.

“But you’ll be back, right?” Frank said, voice oddly young and solemn. “You promise?”

Gerard raised an eyebrow, but Frank just kept looking at him and so Gerard wound up nodding uncertainly. Frank lit up, and Gerard couldn’t help but grin back.

“Sure,” he said. “I promise.” Then he turned to go, leaving Frank standing on the path behind him. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” he called over his shoulder after a moment. He looked back, but Frank must have disappeared around one of the trail’s bends or something. He had to be close, though; Gerard could still hear him.

“Tomorrow,” Frank called back, and Gerard felt the wind blow chilly and October-cool against his cheek.

Okay, so the day hadn’t been a total loss, he thought, and smiled into the collar of his hoodie as he left the forest and walked homeward.

It wasn’t until later that night, chair tucked up close to Mikey’s hospital bed and telling Mikey about his day, that Gerard abruptly realized he was, maybe, a little more excited about seeing Frank tomorrow than he’d thought he was. He’d started telling Mikey about Frank, about his tattoos and bizarre personal space issues, how he’d apparently explored the woods and found ruins, how Frank was the only really friendly person he’d met all day, besides the hyper receptionist-student guy. He caught himself gushing about Frank’s smile mid-sentence and stopped, slightly horrified.

Mikey cocked an eyebrow knowingly.

“Look, he’s totally weird!” Gerard said, backpedaling. “I mean, not that that’s a bad thing. I just. I don’t know, he’s *weird*. I don’t like him or anything.”

Mikey’s mouth twitched.

“Oh, shut up,” Gerard huffed. “He’s just...interesting, okay? He likes the Misfits!” The eyebrow

stayed up. Stupid little brothers and their all-knowing eyebrows.

“I mean, at first I thought he might be a serial killer, but he’s probably not. Pete’s got personal space issues, and he’s not a serial killer, right? I guess I might go hang out with him tomorrow. Just because of the ruins, you know. And now you know where I’m going, so if Frank kills me and hides the body, you know where to look.”

If Mikey kept rolling his eyes like that he was going to strain something, Christ. Gerard was a little offended Mikey wasn’t more concerned for his brother’s safety.

Mikey eventually drifted off, exhausted and pale, without ever saying one word out loud—he’d apparently had a pretty bad attack earlier that afternoon. Random nurses kept poking their heads in to coo worriedly over his limp form. Nurses tended to fawn over Mikey. Gerard had a theory that it was probably a combination of the stoic silence, the big brown eyes, and the fact that the kid weighed a hundred pounds, max. It was like nurse catnip.

His mom had been in the hospital with Mikey all afternoon, so after kissing Mikey’s forehead, she’d stormed out and left the two boys alone. Probably she was off terrorizing the doctors again, who seemed fairly inexperienced at dealing with a Jersey mom in high dudgeon. Gerard almost felt bad for them.

While Mikey slept, Gerard passed the time drawing a totally awesome scene of himself and Mikey with Bruce Campbell chins and chainsaws, patrolling a ghoulish graveyard. If Frank was lurking behind a tombstone with a half-moon grin, then no one had to know. Well. Okay, Mikey would probably notice when he found the drawing on his nightstand in the morning, but that didn’t count. Mikey noticed everything; it was at once awesome and totally annoying.

Gerard tried his best not to snarl at the night nurse, a hefty brunette whose stern expression melted like butter when she gazed at her sleeping patient but turned steely with alarming speed when Gerard protested being kicked out. It wasn’t as though Gerard was disturbing Mikey or keeping him awake or anything. Visiting hours were such bullshit. He hated leaving Mikey there.

On the way home his mom started fussing over Gerard’s bruised mouth, which he could have really done without. He did his best to ignore her as she went off again on how maybe he should try a little harder to fit in at school. That was rich coming from Donna Way, who’d gone to work at the hair salon that morning wearing jeans with giant roses embroidered on the ass and a sparkly black t-shirt that read ‘Queen Bitch’ across the boobs. Gerard was finally forced to distract her by casually letting it drop that he’d been asked to join the math team.

“*What?*” his mom said, eyes bugging out. “You have to be fucking joking, Gerard. You failed your last three math tests back home!”

“Yeah, but that was Calculus. That shit is impossible,” Gerard said defensively, and then clutched the dashboard in terror. “Holy fuck, eyes on the road, Mom!” he squealed.

The near-death experience was worth it, though, because his mom started laughing and looked a little calmer. Gerard relaxed; he felt shitty worrying her when she had so many other things to deal with. Apparently she’d spent the evening yelling at Mikey’s physician, Dr. Costa, who wanted to keep Mikey checked into the hospital longer than expected by, like, a month. Mikey’d had a bad reaction to the new bronchodilator they’d started him on that morning, and Dr. Costa wanted to keep him on oxygen for a while before even *beginning* the experimental treatments.

Apparently Mikey wasn’t getting worse, but he wasn’t getting better, either. It’d been a rough year for all of them. Gerard’s mom had lost about twenty-five pounds in the last five months and quit

smoking entirely—Gerard knew he should, too, but it was hard enough just making sure not to do it anywhere around Mikey, or where Mikey might be. His mom had managed, though. She'd suddenly gone from a relaxed, casual hairdresser who would chill with Gerard in the TV room, watching cartoons and late night monster movies, to a near-stranger, brittle and constantly busy. It was nice to see her joking, just a little, even if it only lasted for a moment.

At home, though, his mother immediately disappeared into her room. Gerard knocked on her door tentatively to see if she wanted a Hot Pocket, or cinnamon toast, or an Irish coffee. She didn't. Gerard retreated to his room, slamming the door just to hear the noise reverberate around the house.

His new room wasn't a basement, got too much sun in the morning, and was fucking drafty as hell, but it was the only place in the entire town that felt remotely familiar. It was strewn with stacks of comics and DVDs. The smell of paint and charcoals and socks already wafted out into the hall when he opened the door.

It wasn't home, but it was what he had, even if it was eerily quiet and creaky. He wound up digging his old TV set out of the stack of unpacked boxes in the living room, something to drown out the silence. He hauled it upstairs awkwardly and only caught his elbow against the banister once. Success.

After a drawn-out battle with all the evil cords and plugs and random buttons, he finally flopped onto his bed and triumphantly pointed the remote at the screen, cueing up an episode of *Mystery Science Theater*. He drifted on the edge of sleep for a long while, watching with half-lidded eyes, but he kept being jolted awake. It was windy tonight, and every few minutes branches scratched against the window. It sounded almost like a cat pawing at the door, like something wanted his attention, wanted to get inside. He kept expecting Mikey to chime in with Tom Servo, and his stupid tired brain kept getting confused and thinking it was Mikey scratching at the window, asking to be let in. Gerard wrapped up in his ugly old quilt and turned up the volume, but it still took two discs to finally fall into an uneasy sleep.

Chapter 2

The next morning, for the first time in years, Gerard actually woke up on his own. No alarm or mother screeching, just the morning sun, hanging at the perfect angle to flood his room. He suddenly jerked up in bed, out of a spider dream of bloated black widows, tangled in hot damp sheets. For a moment he blinked in the light, and had no idea where he was, where he'd woken up. Then he got to realize all over again that he was trapped in fucking Vermont, that he had to walk to school, that Mikey wasn't in the next room and that Gabe and Pete weren't in any of his classes. That his day was stretching hopelessly long in front of him.

"Fuuuuuck," he groaned into his pillow, and made a valiant effort to go back to sleep. Useless. He opened one eye and glared hatefully at the giant bay window. First thing tonight, he was getting a bucket of black paint and covering that shit up.

He finally just staggered downstairs and prodded the coffee maker for a while until it looked like it was working, then stood zombie-like, watching the pot slowly fill. He really didn't want to deal with high school bullshit today. He wasn't eager to stage a repeat of yesterday's morning encounter. Either he could go in really early and hide out somewhere Ted couldn't find him, or he could go in really late and skitter into Geometry at the last minute.

Fuck. Geometry. He collected his coffee and settled down at the table with his homework assignment, graphing sine waves and adding tiny demon snowboarders to the slopes. He wished more math involved drawing shit. They'd already covered this twice back in Belleville, so he finished the assignment pretty quickly, and then there was nothing to do but finish off the pot of Folgers and glare balefully out the window at the sunny street.

Before he left—just late enough to miss the first bell by a minute or two, he hoped—he looked in the mirror for a while. A long greenish bruise was forming along his lower jaw where Ted had slammed him into the truck, and the corner of his mouth had scabbed over, dark red and scaly. How attractive. He hesitated a moment before pulling out his Sephora coal-black eye pencil and ringing his eyes, thicker today. Never let them see you're scared, right?

Outside, the wind had finally died down and the sky was perfectly clear, that kind of cloud-free bright blue that only came during the fall. The streets were almost totally empty; a distant car pattered across an intersection two blocks down and disappeared, but other than that no one was out. Next door he could see some lady peering out of her curtains at him and making cursory window-cleaning gestures with a checkered cloth as she stared, like that wasn't totally creepy. Gerard did a little finger wave at her and the curtains swirled shut immediately.

"Weeird fucking town," Gerard muttered to himself, and kept walking.

There was still a sizable population of students milling around in the parking lot when he got there, but no sign of Sikowski or his deluded minions. His truck was still there as an antler-bedecked reminder, though. Gerard was sorely tempted to deface it. Maybe spit on it or something. People keyed cars, right? It might be better to come late one morning and cover it with pink bows and gay pride stickers. The downside of that was the fact that the culprit would be fairly obvious, and then Ted would beat the shit out of him.

Mrs. Hall was thrilled to see him. Apparently the homework was actually due Thursday, and so he'd inadvertently done it early. Because he needed to look like that much more of a geek. Ted was predictably dickish about it, but the guy next to him, Letter Jacket #2, Isaac Barrows, or something, was genuinely scowling at Gerard and muttering about him being a fucking show-off. Whatever.

Luckily Ted wasn't sitting next to Gerard and couldn't harass him as directly as he had the day before, but Gerard still had to spend the period listening to him snickering about god knew what. The fact that girls had breasts, probably. He'd run into Ted enthusiastically making out with some chick before class, and that seemed to be featuring prominently in the conversation. Gerard didn't want to know what Ted had gotten up to last night. Even Geometry was better than listening to that.

Gerard scuttled out of class soon as Mrs. Hall dismissed them, narrowly avoiding collision with the short squat ball player, the one with, seriously, a face that looked like an Easter Island monolith. He could have sworn the dude fucking *growled* at him. Before he could adequately compose a response—the people here were fucking rabid, he *knew* it—Ray emerged from the stairwell and immediately made a bee-line towards Gerard. Gerard stared at him. Ray was still smiling, huge and irrepressible. The contrast in attitudes was mind-boggling.

“Gerard, hey! What’s up, man, how was your first day?”

“Um, kinda shitty,” Gerard said apologetically, hiking his bag up on his shoulder. Ray’s smile faltered a bit, and then he seemed to shake himself, perking back up.

“Yeah, well,” Ray said, grinning again—it was only 9:30, Gerard thought, squinting at Ray. He really had to find out where Ray got his crack-laced coffee, and then steal it for his own. “It is school. It’ll get better, dude, first days always suck.”

“Maybe,” Gerard said doubtfully, but regardless of Ray’s eerie amounts of energy, he was glad the guy was there, because he’d gotten totally turned around and would never have found his way to the English room in time on his own. Maybe Ray was, like, a psychic vampire, Gerard mused, stealing energy from the general populace. People who smiled before noon could not possibly be human. It was a fact. Although Ray seemed way too perky for a vampire.

They reached room 207 and lounged against the taupe wall, waiting for the bell to ring. “We’ve got about five minutes before class starts,” Ray said, running a hand over his head and apparently trying to smooth down his hair, which, to be frank, was a lost cause. “Do you know anything about Byron, because I totally forgot to do the reading last night. I was messing around with a friend and we got this really sweet guitar and drum thing worked out on GarageBand, but it was like two before I got to bed, you know?”

“Byron is *awesome*,” Gerard gushed before he could stop himself, and then figured, what the hell. Ray seemed pretty nerdy anyway, so he let himself ramble on about Childe Harold and Don Juan and the gobs of sex Byron had probably had with Percy and Mary Shelley, how’d they’d written their own versions of German ghost stories in the midst of their wild orgies.

“But, uh. Carew probably won’t care about most of that,” Gerard said, raising his voice as the bell rang. “Just talk about Byronic heroes being the precursor to the modern anti-hero, and you’re good, probably.”

“Damn,” Ray said, raising an eyebrow. He’d actually seemed interested in the whole thing, which was unexpected. Gerard was sort of used to people tuning him out when he rambled.

Ray steered them over to the far right side of the classroom and sort of pushed Gerard at the front row. Normally Gerard would have objected—he was definitely more a back-corner-of-the-room sorta guy, but he saw what Ray was doing when he put a notebook down on the desk to Gerard’s left and then took the desk behind Gerard for himself, forming a sort of protective barricade between Gerard and the rest of the class.

When Ray saw Gerard looking at the notebook he nodded, grinning. "Savin' a place for Bob. Bob's good people, you'll like him." Gerard was more worried about Bob liking *him*, but he was still touched that Ray was at least trying to seclude him from the class assholes. He'd probably still be harassed, but it was nice of Ray to try. Deluded, but nice.

Other students were filtering into the room now, and Gerard kept his eyes on his desk. Someone with the initials RT guitared BB. Interesting. Then he heard Ray Toro's squeaky voice, "Sorry, guys, seat's taken."

Gerard glanced up and to his shock saw one of the assholes from yesterday receding resentfully as a tallish blonde walked up and took the seat next to Gerard. He handed Ray back his notebook and nodded briefly to Gerard.

"You must be Gerard. Toro told me about you," the guy said placidly, an amused glint in his eyes. "I'm Bob Bryar. You should join the band."

"But I can't play anything!" Gerard responded automatically, just as Ray said, "Hey, Gerard, tell Bob about the Byronic hero! Bob, he's totally an English genius, check it out."

Gerard was saved from replying by Mr. Carew strolling to the front of the classroom and squinting out at all the students, slapping a ruler against his pants. He looked startlingly like a drill sergeant for a fifty-year old man in a red Hawaiian shirt. Gerard slumped low in his chair and shook his bangs into his eyes, trying to look invisible as Carew started firing out random questions to the class.

"We should have sat in the back!" Gerard hissed at Ray as they left the class an hour later. "Then Carew wouldn't notice when I gave you the answers."

Ray shook his head at Gerard. "Nah, that's asking for trouble, dude. Sikowski'd freak out if we took his seats. Gotta run to French, see you guys at lunch!" And then Ray was wandering off through the hall, hair towering over the crowd of students.

"C'mon," Bob said, giving Gerard a small grin, and then stared blankly and terrifyingly at one of the smaller jocks that had just slammed his shoulder hard into Gerard's side. The jock sort of squeaked and scurried off. Gerard was in awe. And in love. He totally got why Ray guitared Bob. "I'm in your History class," Bob continued, setting off down the hallway, Gerard following gratefully in his wake. "You know as much about the French-Indian War as you do about Gothic romance?"

Gerard scowled. "I hate American history," he grumbled. "European history is so much better. They have castles, and druids, and fucking knights in shining armor, you know?" The only part of US history that was worthwhile involved Blondie and Doc Holliday, and unfortunately most classes tended to ignore the Sergio Leone and Tombstone aspects.

"Cool," Bob said. "I always take a nap in this class anyway."

Yesterday, Ted had spent the whole of U.S. History taking advantage of the teacher's tendency to read directly from her lecture notes (seriously, Gerard thought it'd take an act of Congress or nuclear war for Mrs. Gist to look up) to jostle Gerard's desk every three seconds and whisper nastily and throw things in Gerard's hair. But Bob Bryar was apparently goon-repellant, because even though Bob did, as promised, fall asleep ten minutes into the lecture, the jocks only threw like three spitballs and mainly stayed quiet.

Gerard used the time to color all his fingernails black with a sharpie and to work on his Mikey

Way: Unicorn Warrior cartoon. He'd gotten up to the point where Mikey had entered the space station lair of Steve the Solar Bonobo when the bell rang for the end of class. Bob stretched and looked down at Gerard's notebook.

"Pretty sweet," Bob commented. "Is that monkey on fire?"

"No, he *is* fire," Gerard explained as he started cramming his stuff back into the bag. "He's a solar flare brought to life by the wishes of his captive brethren back on Earth, subjected to animal testing and cruel commercial acting."

"Chimps do sorta get short shrift," Bob agreed. "C'mon, the cafeteria'll run out of fries if we're late."

Yesterday Gerard had refrained from going to lunch and instead hid in the library, flipping through his September copy of *Fangoria* and furtively drinking the Diet Coke he'd brought from home. The cafeteria of any high school was always a wretched hive of scum and villainy, best to avoid if at all possible. Today, though, Bob just inexorably steered him through the room, totally unconcerned by the glaring eyes from the letter-jackets-only table and the people whispering as they passed. No one bothered them. It was *awesome*. Bob was a total Jedi.

Gerard wasn't actually that hungry, though, and the food all looked sort of foul, but by that time Ray had joined up with them in the line and begun prattling about healthy diets and vitamins, so Gerard rolled his eyes and grabbed a greenish orange to go with his bottle of diet coke. While he wasn't looking, a plate of antique, pre-WWII spaghetti snuck onto his tray. Gerard looked at Ray. Ray widened his eyes and shrugged, all, What? Plate of spaghetti? I don't see any plate of spaghetti.

Bob shook his head. "It's easier to humor him, Way. Go with it. And seriously, get the fries."

Ray leaned over Gerard's shoulder and said airily, "Yeah, it's easier to humor him, Gerard. Just go with it, get the fries."

A brief scuffle broke out, so Gerard sighed and in the interests of keeping the peace, grabbed a little checkered boat of the french fries. He really wasn't hungry, but he figured he could just give them to Bob later.

The cafeteria was dank and dark, with a low ceiling and flickering fluorescent lights, and also filled with sneering faces. Gerard had been looking around for Frank all day, but he didn't see anyone short and hyper and covered with tattoos in here, so he wasn't too bothered when Ray and Bob headed outside to go eat lunch next to the band room.

Gerard squinted in the sun as they exited the cafeteria. Fuck, he was actually enjoying the fresh air. Much more time in this town and he'd probably turn into some obsessed nature lover and go hiking and climb mountains and shit. And then he'd fall off the mountains and die. He felt a vague resignation to this series of events.

There was a giant maple tree next to the band room, and the picnic tables beneath it were strewn with bright red leaves and those little helicopter seeds. A few kids were loitering around, some sitting on the tree's roots and balancing their lunch trays on their knees, others eating at the rickety wooden picnic tables.

"Don't worry," Ray said, completely misinterpreting Gerard's nervousness. "When it rains we have these beach umbrellas that we found in the band storage room, and we rig them to the tables. It works pretty well until it gets cold—then we usually invade the library."

“You eat out here when it rains?” Gerard replied, horrified. Oh god, he was probably going to be eating grubs and acorns before the week was out. “Why does the band room have beach umbrellas? The beach is like a hundred miles from here.”

“For the rain,” Bob said mildly, and set his tray down on the warped wooden table. “Hey Patrick, Worm. This is Gerard.”

A diminutive guy wearing a trucker hat and a blank expression looked up from the sheets of music he was scribbling on and mumbled hello before turning back to his paper, the brim of his hat hiding his eyes.

“Hey,” the bigger guy said, toying with his bottle of orange juice and smiling. He had some killer tattoos, Gerard noticed. Maybe he knew Frank. “I’m Worm, French horn. Patrick plays everything; drums, sax, guitar. You’re the new senior, right? You play anything?”

“Yeah, I’m a senior,” Gerard said and sat down at the far edge of the table next to Ray. Ray and Bob were both leaning over across the table and poking at Patrick’s sheet music, debating whether the staccato in the third measure was too much. “And, no, I don’t play anything. Besides, like, the kazoo. But, um. Sometimes I sing?”

This was an exaggeration. Gerard sang in the shower, and to Mikey, and in seventh and eighth grade he’d been the lead tenor for the chorus group, but in high school he’d abandoned extracurricular activities in favor of drawing comics in the basement. All the guys perked up, though, and Gerard realized he may have made a tactical error as they leaned towards him, eyes eager.

“Oh, yeah? Patrick sings too, he’s phenomenal. Too bad we don’t have chorus here,” Worm said over Patrick’s denials. “Mr. Curtis is thinking of adding a vocals section to the band, though, you should definitely audition if he does.”

Gerard frowned and poked at the helicopter seed that had landed on the arm of his hoodie, picked it up and watched it twirl off in the light breeze to land in a drift of leaves near Bob’s foot. “Uh, maybe,” he said, avoiding eye contact. “I dunno.”

“How do you like Glen Fell?” Patrick interjected with an expression of solidarity, cutting off an enthusiastic-looking Ray who’d already started to rattle something about try-outs and practice sessions. “I know it’s pretty small.”

Gerard pondered how to respond to this blatant understatement.

“Really fucking small, you mean,” Bob said, snorting and stealing one of Gerard’s fries. Gerard gloated a little at the success of his plan. Now he just had to stealthily slip his spaghetti, noodle by disgusting noodle, under the table. Ray would never notice. He’d cover up the evidence with dead leaves.

“It is a little smaller than I’m used to,” Gerard admitted, twirling the rubbery spaghetti with his fork. “I keep thinking the townspeople are gonna come up and ask me to join their lottery and, like, fucking stone me to death in the town square or something.”

Just as he was freaking out that that had maybe, just maybe, been a little bit insensitive, Patrick snorted into his chocolate milk.

“Yeah,” Patrick said, looking up at Gerard and smiling crookedly, “We’ve definitely got that wholesome Norman Rockwell creepiness going on. Just wait ‘til you see the corn mazes. About

fifteen of them pop up around Halloween.”

Ray, who was diligently cutting his spaghetti into manageable portions and chewing carefully, swallowed and nodded earnestly. “Yeah, man, I got lost in one of those mazes when I was six. Scarred for life, man. I can’t even eat creamed corn now.”

“And,” Worm said conspiratorially, “he totally had to be excused from class when we were watching *Children of the Corn* during English last Halloween.”

Ray tossed one of his fries at Worm’s head, scowling. “It’s fucking creepy, dude. Little kids and corn will never not be creepy.”

Gerard secretly agreed with Ray. Little kids were totally sinister, and there was no way in hell he was ever going into a cornfield without a giant mirror on a stick, or a gun, or someone else to climb on top of. He wondered if Frank liked the corn mazes, if he went to the local ‘Halloween Extravaganza.’ There were black and orange posters for it all throughout town, some already ragged and flapping in the breeze, promising hay rides, a haunted house run by the local baseball team—Gerard could safely say that he’d be sitting that one out—and, this was the best part: a greased pole with a Grand Prize for whoever could climb to the top of it. Norman Rockwell had nothing on this shit.

Bob was nodding along. “Ray’s just traumatized because he had to teach the Laughlins’ kids the mandolin that weekend.”

“Ohhhhh,” Patrick said in understanding, grinning. “The WASPs in training. Gotcha. Probably they have nothing to do with devil-worship, though. The kids seem sweet.”

Ray muttered into his coke bottle, scowling darkly.

“Anyway, besides the occasional escape attempt by McEwan’s cattle, there’s really nothing that exciting about the townfolk, promise. No serial killers or Satanists or anything,” Patrick continued, eyes back on the musical notation in front of him, frowning thoughtfully.

Bob stole another fry from Gerard. “Well, there was Mary Jenkins. She shot her husband, right?”

Worm rolled his eyes expressively as Gerard perked up. “In the twenties,” Worm said pointedly.

“Yeah,” Bob admitted. “Still. Happened here. And there were those two girls in, what, 1980? They had that suicide pact and both jumped off the Pequannock Bridge and drowned. That was pretty fucking creepy. Oh, that that one kid who disappeared before I moved here. You knew him, right, Toro?”

“Yeah,” Ray said, putting his fork down and resting his hand on his chin. “Yeah, he took guitar lessons from my mom when I was a kid. He always stayed late to jam with me, gave me these great CDs. Bowie, Black Flag, the Clash. God, I thought that guy totally wrote the book on cool, you know?”

“And this guy disappeared?” Gerard said, fascinated. The suicide girls were cool enough, but this had the unmistakable and irresistible allure of an unsolved mystery. It wasn’t a vampire cult or alien abductions and mysterious crop circles, but he still felt vaguely validated. The town was clearly a font of evil.

“Yeah, he missed school one day and just never showed up again,” Ray said, shredding a napkin and frowning. “It was a big deal. There were searches with dogs and police and everything. He had all these music scholarships, there was no way he’d have run away, and he was gonna graduate that

spring. It's fucking sad, you know?"

Patrick was nodding, shoving his sheet music into his bookbag and picking up his tray. "I remember that. It really was a big deal. I mean, I didn't know what was going on or anything, I was only six, but my parents were part of the search party and I had to stay with Mrs. Jules every night for like two weeks. Brussels sprouts for dinner each night."

"So this guy just vanished without a trace?" Gerard asked, covering the remains of his lunch subtly with a paper napkin and standing up as the rest of the band guys prepared to go.

"Yeah," Ray said quietly. "Just, suddenly. Gone. Hey, Gerard, did you actually even eat anything? Here, at least eat my roll, jeez, your blood sugar must be hell by now."

Bob groaned and hit Ray in the back of the head. "Seriously, ignore him," he told Gerard. "His dad's a nutritionist at the Trumbull Center—he was warped at a young age."

They were all heading back into the cafeteria to dump off their trays when one of the younger band girls, who'd been looming around their table all throughout lunch, cornered Patrick by the milk dispenser. Ray and Bob were grinning to each other and Patrick was blushing furiously. Gerard fell back a little, feeling abruptly like an outsider all over again. He was just searching his pockets for his phone to send Mikey a text when the raised voices at the other end of the cafeteria caught his attention.

There was some commotion in the hall in front of the cafeteria. A few kids seemed nervous, but most of the bystanders just looked amused. For once, no one was paying much attention to Gerard—all focus was on this skinny little kid Gerard had seen near the band room earlier. He was wearing what Gerard could only assume was an un-ironic red bandana, cowboy style around his neck, which was sort of awesome. Currently he was staring at the ground, cheeks red and jaw clenched, as he mechanically gathered up his spilled notebooks and papers. He was clearly a freshman—there was no way he was more than thirteen—and as Gerard watched, Ted, jeering, dropped a can of soda next to the kid, soaking most of the books.

"What the fuck," Gerard said, outraged.

It's not like he didn't know he was being a moron, somewhere in the back of his brain, but it took a backseat to the rising indignation. He stalked past Ted, who did a double-take, and crouched down amid the soggy papers. The crowd of students around them made a collective noise, a drawn out *ohhhh* that was the universal signal for 'crazy shit's about to go down.'

Gerard hated people.

"You okay?" he asked the kid, who promptly glared at him, blushed, and looked away. Actually, he seemed younger than thirteen. Maybe twelve, Christ. Gerard ignored Ted, who was saying something generic about faggots and cocksucking. "Here, let me help."

The papers were running with ink, clinging to the sticky floor, and Gerard manfully resisted the urge to try reading them—it was clearly some sort of poetry or lyrics, which probably explained why the local Heteronormative Gender Roles Patrol was after him. He was so sick of this fucking backwards, repressed town, and he'd been here two days. God, this poor kid had probably been here years. Gerard couldn't even imagine.

He finally got most of the mess off the linoleum and handed it to the kid, who muttered thank you, never meeting Gerard's eyes, and peeled off through the crowd at top speed. It was actually sort of impressive, the way he seamlessly melted into the throng of people and disappeared.

Gerard sat back on his heels. He could literally feel Ted's eyes on his back. He'd always thought that was just an expression, but his skin was literally crawling with the knowledge that Ted was staring at him. Then he actually did feel something: Ted's giant smelly fucking foot on his shoulder, shoving him over so that he just barely caught himself with his hands before falling into the puddle of inky soda. He scrambled to his feet and wondered if he could maybe emulate that kid and disappear somehow. He caught sight of Ray at the back of the crowd, and he was staring at Gerard with wide eyes and trying to say something, not that Gerard could fucking hear him. Even his hair looked upset.

"You done with your little fuckbuddy, now? Should have known you fags would stick together," Ted sneered.

Gerard glared at Ted from under his bangs and fumed. Fucking asshole. He tried to edge past Ted towards freedom, but Ted caught him by the elbow, and apparently swinging baseball bats was good conditioning for squeezing the fuck out of someone's arm. Gerard tried to twist loose and Ted tightened his grip.

"What the fuck's your problem?" Gerard gritted out. "What the fuck did that kid ever do to you?"

"I don't know who the fuck you think you are, princess," Ted drawled, right up in Gerard's face, close enough that his breath was gross and moist on Gerard's cheek. Gerard recoiled backwards, wrenching free of Ted's grip. Over Ted's shoulder, he saw one of the teachers, the gym coach, maybe, look their way, smirk, and then deliberately turn around and keep walking. Fantastic.

"You really can't take a hint, can you?" Isaac drawled from behind him. "Most people would have by now."

"You don't understand how things work around here," Ted said, still entirely too close for comfort. "Go back to the city and take it up the ass there, fag, we don't need that shit here. Take your pansy ass little brother, too. Hear he don't breathe so good? Too fucking bad."

Distantly Gerard could see Ray and Bob fighting their way through the crowd towards him, but they seemed very far away.

"You shut the fuck up about my brother," he said, chest tight. His blood felt strange and fizzy, like it'd been replaced with carbonated water, or helium, or carbonic acid.

"Oh, who fucking cares," Ted said, rocking back on his heels and grinning at Gerard, obviously pleased with the reaction he was getting. "Nobody cares if some loser kid dies. Except you, maybe. What, you gonna miss him sucking your cock?"

"You fucker," Gerard said, fists clenching. He was just about to launch himself and, and—and do *something*, he didn't know what, exactly. Pound in Ted's *fucking face*, maybe, but Bob suddenly appeared out of nowhere and grabbed him by the arm, hauling backwards. Ray was in front of them, saying something high and defiant, and the crowd was finally breaking up and dispersing. Gerard couldn't stop shaking. Bob kept pushing him down the hall, looking over his shoulder now and then.

"You okay?" Bob said quietly.

"That *fucker*," Gerard said. It was hard to breathe. Little black spots were dancing in front of his eyes. "Who the fuck do they think they fucking are, the Gestapo? Fuck! And where were the fucking teachers? They were totally fucking around with that kid, it's not fucking *right*."

“C’mon, some nice soothing biology will help calm you down, dude,” Bob said, then sighed and pulled Gerard into a stairwell that was mostly empty—they were already late for class. “Look, you gotta be careful with those guys. Their fucking families own this town. It sucks.”

“That doesn’t mean they can just push little kids around and act like they’re the fucking second coming of the Hitler Youth!” Gerard seethed, and strongly considered punching the wall.

Bob looked at Gerard for a moment, and then said, “Yeah. I know. Want to skip class and go play *Resident Evil 4*?”

“Yes,” Gerard said fervently, then registered what Bob had said. It was enough to shock him out of his rage, slightly, that Bob, who seemed seriously cool, actually wanted to hang out with him outside of school. He’d been surprised enough that Frank seemed to like him, and now... Gerard never made friends this easily. He couldn’t decide whether to chalk that up to Glen Fell being weird as hell, or what.

“I mean, yes, but I can’t,” he amended hesitantly. “I told Ray I’d be his partner in biology today. We could see if he wants to skip too, I guess?”

“I can text him, but I’ll tell you right now he’s not gonna. Fucker takes being a responsible student way too seriously.”

Bob stuck his hands in his pockets and grinned at Gerard, and, okay, Gerard felt like maybe he was calming down a little. His legs had stopped shaking, anyway. Bob was good at being quiet, which helped. They shared a cigarette, and Gerard got his phone out to text Mikey. Sometime during the bandana-kid fiasco, Mikey had sent him a picture of what had to be his lunch, some discolored pasta and vegetables, with the caption *save me*. Another text came while Gerard and Bob were finally heading towards class, taking a roundabout route that avoided the attendance office. Gerard wasn’t too worried about being late for Biology – Mrs. Strobel didn’t care much about tardiness, or anything, it seemed like. He hoped Bob wouldn’t get in trouble though.

srsly bring poptarts ill owe you and petes sendin a pic of hs dck 2 hs entire fonebk bware. God, Pete was such an asshole. Gerard grinned at the phone and Bob raised an eyebrow.

“My brother,” he explained, and decided to leave the explanation about Pete’s exhibitionist tendencies out of it. Then Bob peeled off for Calculus, leaving Gerard to make his way down the hallway, keeping a wary eye out for Ted or one of his friends. Ray was waiting for him in the Biology room, shaking his head.

“I can’t believe you did that!” he exclaimed, dragging Gerard over to his station in the far right corner. “But that was totally awesome; they’ve been giving Ryan a hard time all year. The other band kids try to look out for him, but they can’t be there all the time, you know? And you have to be careful with those guys.”

Gerard stared at the dead frog in front of him, a sad twisted little amphibian corpse, waiting to be torn apart, and felt angry all over again.

“What the fuck ever, those assholes don’t scare me,” he said. He flipped open his notebook and started scrawling down the teacher’s brief, incoherent instructions, pen pushing down too hard and ripping tiny holes in the paper as he wrote.

“I mean, they can’t just fucking do whatever the fuck they want,” he hissed at Ray after the teacher had stopped talking and retreated behind her desk. “It’s not like they’re fucking gods.”

“Not *gods*, but, like, royalty, I dunno,” Ray said, looking alarmed. “Their families are a big deal in this town. Just, seriously, you have to be careful, okay? That’s all I’m saying.”

Gerard scowled. “Yeah, yeah,” he said, and remembered the look on Ted’s face when he said that shit about Mikey, as though he had any idea what it was like, how fucking awful it was to know his brother was sick and not to be able to do anything about it. His pencil snapped against the paper and he jumped, startled. “Fuck,” he said, and tried to calm himself down. He guessed it was time to get started on the frog, anyway. “Pass me the scalpel?”

Ray looked at him sideways. “No offense, dude, but *no*.”

Gerard cracked a smile. “Sorry, I’m being kind of an asshole, I guess.”

“Nah,” Ray said. “I totally get why you’re mad. I just don’t know that I want you holding sharp objects right now, you know?”

Gerard supposed that was fair.

“I just made it like fifty times worse for myself, didn’t I,” he said reluctantly, and poked the frog with his tweezers as Ray sliced open its belly. It oozed formaldehyde. Delightful. Still, even if Gerard had just antagonized Ted and his asshole friends again, he didn’t regret it. He knew what it was like to be picked on.

“Um,” Ray said, sticking out his tongue as he tried to make a straight cut. “Look, you just need to stick with us. Safety in numbers. Fuck, I just cut open the stomach, that is seriously gross. Ugh. But yeah, you should meet us by the band room after school, we were gonna meet up at my place and play *Guitar Hero* after practice, if you want to come.”

“I suck at *Guitar Hero*,” Gerard said, which came out a little brusquer than he meant it to. Fuck. “Plus I was supposed to meet someone after school. But, uh, thanks. Hey, do you have the lab book? I never picked one up.”

“Yep, and all the notes from the last month, I can make you copies tomorrow in the front office,” Ray said, nudging his own book over with gross, froggy hands. Gerard wrinkled his nose and took the notes gingerly. “So lemme give you my address and you can stop by my house later, if you want. It’s totally easy to get to, just head down Main Street, cross the bridge, and turn left at Maple.”

It was nice of Ray to ask, Gerard thought, staring at their dead frog. He still felt awkward and weird about showing up at Ray’s house, though—he hated interacting with other peoples’ parents; they always looked at him funny and acted like he was going to steal the silver, just because he wore black eyeliner and dyed his hair. Ray seemed pretty awesome, but maybe he was just sorry for him, the poor outcast new kid with the busted lip. Plus, Gerard had promised to meet up with Frank, who he hadn’t seen yet today at all. He frowned. He’d sort of thought Frank would stand out.

Ray accidentally flipped the dead frog over and got formaldehyde everywhere before Gerard could work himself up to asking obliquely about whether he knew any hot tattooed punk kids and if they might be currently, um, dating anyone.

Instead they spent the rest of the period trying to soak the crap up and stuff the stomach back in the frog’s abdominal cavity. It was depressingly clear that they were both going to fail the class, but at least Ray was pretty funny, and a total dork, too. Maybe he and Bob really did want to hang out.

For having just spent an hour staring at a dead frog, Gerard felt strangely better about the whole day.

So, naturally, when he was getting out of his last class, fucking Ted had to come out of fucking nowhere and grab Gerard's bookbag. It happened so quickly it barely registered, but his bag was gone, and Ted had a stupid shit-eating grin all over his stupid, asshole face as he took off down the hall. Gerard gaped after him for a moment before realizing, fuck, that fucker actually *took his bag*, what the *fuck*. He almost lost Ted in the seething exodus of students; Ted passed through the hall effortlessly, but for Gerard it was fucking impenetrable, a wall of arms and torsos and condescending faces.

He finally caught up with him in the parking lot. Ted was smirking, leaning against the dumpster. His hands were empty and Gerard's bag was nowhere to be seen. Gerard hated Ted so much. Fuck gay pride stickers on his truck, Gerard was going to make up some I LIKE SUCKING GOATS AND LITTLE BOYS stickers and put them on Ted's *face*.

"Have fun with that, assclown," Ted said cheerfully, slapping Gerard on the back. "Fuck with me again, and you'll get worse." He winked and stuck his hands in his pockets, sauntering off. Gerard *hated* him. There were still tons of people in the parking lot, so it wasn't like Gerard could just go dumpster diving and be done with it. All he needed to cement himself in the lowest caste of the high school hierarchy—if he hadn't already—would be to rummage around in the garbage in front of the entire school. Although it'd still probably be a more enjoyable experience than actually going to class here. *Motherfucker*.

He fumbled for his cell phone and checked the time. He supposed while he was waiting for the parking lot to empty, he could go meet with Frank. For all Frank's bizarre social skills, he was at least friendly, and seemed to genuinely like Gerard's company. It wasn't like Gerard was exactly the poster child for normal himself, anyway. He'd just go hang out with Frank, explore some ruins, and if he wound up as a skin suit for a tiny, hot serial killer, well. It was better than going to this fucking school.

Frank was hovering at the edge of the woods, and when he spotted Gerard he beamed and waved enthusiastically.

"You came back!" he whooped, and he sounded fucking ecstatic. Gerard smiled helplessly at him, and when Frank launched himself into an attack hug, Gerard was strangely okay with it. Frank let go almost immediately, but still stayed close, nose to nose, so that Gerard was staring down into his eyes and counting his freckles and could tell that Frank smelled strangely musty and sweet and smoky, which made him feel a little like a creeper. He took a step backward and laughed awkwardly, trying to cover up the fact that he'd been sniffing Frank's hair.

"Fuck, I was afraid I'd weirded you out yesterday and you wouldn't come back," Frank said, and Gerard bit his lip.

"Well," he admitted. "I'm pretty fucking weird myself, so. Maybe we can, uh, be weird together?"

He decided against mentioning the serial killer theory, which was good, because Frank looked fucking delighted. He was rocking back and forth on his heels, hands shoved in his pockets, the grin on his face so wide it had to be painful.

"I knew you couldn't resist me," he smirked, eyes sparkling. "I'm fucking charming. Who wants to hang out with normal assholes anyway, right?"

He bumped shoulders with Gerard happily, and then started wandering deeper into the forest,

tugging a bemused Gerard along by the sleeve. To be honest, Gerard was mainly charmed by the fact that there was someone in the world more socially awkward than he was.

“Seriously, I am so fucking glad you came back, this is going to be awesome,” Frank said, immediately proving the opposite to be true when he dragged Gerard through a patch of leaves, which looked innocent and beautiful and serene on the surface, jagged-edged red maples and round yellow birches, but turned out to have cold water and mud and probably fucking leeches lurking beneath. Frank totally ignored Gerard’s yelling and attempts to escape to higher ground, just plowing straight through until Gerard’s shoes were totally gross and soaked clear through to his skin.

“What the fuck, let me go!” Gerard moaned, trying to yank his sleeve free of Frank’s surprisingly stubborn grip. “Fuck, I can walk by myself, fucker. Let go. Augh, oh my god, this is disgusting.”

“Pfft,” Frank scoffed. “I saw you yesterday. You walked right into a thorn bush. You clearly need a keeper.”

“You dragged me into a mud puddle, asshole!”

“Oh, fuck,” Frank said, looking behind them at the patch of muddy, rucked-up leaves. “So I did. Whoops!” He looked totally unrepentant, because he was clearly a sadistic prick. He’d started giggling, this ridiculous high-pitched laugh that Gerard totally didn’t find cute at all. “Guess I’ll have to start paying better attention to where I’m walking, with you here. Since you’re such a delicate princess and all, I mean.”

Gerard tried to glare at him, but then Frank cunningly distracted him by complimenting the sharpie-black of his fingernails, taking Gerard’s hand and peering at it, and then Gerard was busy fighting a blush and explaining how fucking boring history class was, and what a shitty day he’d had and how he couldn’t believe he was living in a town where people put *antlers* on their *cars*, what the fuck was that? Frank commiserated, and went off on a complementary tangent on how hunting was such bullshit, and people should be more aware of what they ate, and how more people should be vegan, or at least go organic.

“There needs to be a new superhero, for, like animal rights or something,” Frank said earnestly. “They could join up with the Justice League.”

“Fuck yeah,” Gerard said, already scrolling through a mental flipbook of superhero designs. “We totally need an eco-terrorist superhero, that’d be badass. Nothing like Captain Planet, that’s too way fucking lame and cutesy. I don’t know, someone fucking edgy and sort of insane, a total outsider.”

“Like Rorschach?” Frank asked, looking at Gerard and grinning, his lip ring catching the autumn light and his eyes wide and sparkling, and okay, if Frank was a sociopathic killer, Gerard wasn’t entirely sure he cared.

“Dude,” he squealed. “Watchmen is the *best thing ever*.”

“Can’t fuck with Alan Moore,” Frank agreed. “Man, have you read *From Hell*? Fucking amazing, right?” Then he spent an eternity laughing and pointing at Gerard, who was stuck in a fucking thornbush, again, because he’d gotten too distracted staring at Frank in delight to watch where he was going. Which was, needless to say, hugely embarrassing. Ugh.

He had no idea where the fuck they *were* going, actually. They’d left the path at some point and were just threading their way through the trees. The temperature in the forest must drop a lot as it

got later in the day, or maybe the weather was changing, because the afternoon-warm air had become downright fucking chilly.

Frank kept bumping shoulders with him and shooting him a conspiratorial look of glee and sometimes their hands brushed, and oh God, Gerard was fourteen. Thirteen, maybe.

“So, uh,” Gerard said, after he’d ripped himself free of another bush—after some reflection, he thought the new holes in his hoodie were sort of aesthetically pleasing, at least—“You actually know where we’re going, right? We’re not lost and wandering in circles?”

“I find your lack of faith disturbing,” Frank intoned menacingly, and then did a fucking awesome Darth Vader wheeze. Gerard couldn’t stop giggling. He suspected he might actually be gazing at Frank adoringly. But, c’mon, Star Wars reference! No nerd in the world would blame him. “By which I mean, fuck yeah, I know where I’m going,” Frank said. “C’mon, this way.”

“Hey, where *are* we going, by the way?” Gerard asked, and Frank was doing some sort of ridiculous soft-shoe through the fallen leaves, singing the chorus to Skulls, like he was deliberately trying to hit every single one of Gerard’s kinks in one conversation. He glanced back at Gerard over his shoulder and shrugged, crinkling his nose.

“Figured we could go look at the old mill? It’s pretty sweet, from, like, the 1700s. But no rush, it’s fucking nice out. Gotta soak up the last of the sun before winter starts beating the shit out of us, you know.”

This was not actually a sentiment Gerard was familiar with. Gerard was not generally a fan of the sun, per se, but Frank was looking at him hopefully and fuck, Gerard could already tell this was going to be a problem.

“Okay,” he said gamely, and hoped to God it was too cold for there to be ticks out. “Lay on, MacDuff.”

“Anyone ever told you you’re fucking bizarre?” Frank asked, kicking at a pile of leaves to make sure nothing unpleasantly moist lurked beneath before motioning Gerard forward.

“I’m fucking *charming*,” Gerard quipped, and then had to fight a blush when Frank beamed at him and said, “You totally are. I am charmed as fuck.”

Half an hour or so later, they wandered past a dilapidated stone house and Gerard halted mid-sentence, abandoning their fierce debate on whether or not the Sandman graphic novels should be adapted to film (Frank a definite yes, Gerard an emphatic no) to stare at it. There had been dilapidated houses in Jersey, sure, and old ruined factories with broken glass windows, but this was different. This was another scale entirely.

The house was barely identifiable, trees growing throughout, the front wall a crumbling pile of rubble, the chimney barely standing. Ruins, real ruins, how fucking *cool*. He had to admit Vermont had atmosphere, if nothing else. He dug in his pockets and found a couple receipts big enough to sketch on.

“Hey, Frank, you got a pen?” he asked. “This fucker at school took my bag earlier. Fucking assholes. At least he didn’t shove me around this time, I guess.”

Frank shook his head and scowled. “Someone shoved you around?”

“Well, yeah,” Gerard said, and fingered the cut on his lip, mildly embarrassed. He bet people never picked on Frank. Frank was hardcore, even if he was basically a midget. Frank looked like he

could fuck shit up, if he wanted. Gerard mainly glared at people and made kissy faces, and then got punched and had his bag thrown into garbage. “S no big deal, though,” Gerard added airily, and shoved his hands in his pockets, fiddling with loose change and his lighter. “Those fuckers don’t scare me.”

When he looked back up Frank was suddenly right in front of him, inches from his face. Gerard drew in a quick, startled breath and then Frank was grabbing Gerard’s shoulder, the line of his mouth hard. “You should be scared, Gee. You need to watch yourself around guys like that,” he said intently. “People out here can be vicious close-minded pigfuckers. Stay out of their way.”

“I didn’t exactly go up and kick them in the shins or anything,” Gerard said, taken aback and, really, sort of insulted. He knew all about close-minded fuckers, he didn’t go seek them out—well. He sort of maybe had provoked them, a little, but they’d provoked him first. Anyway, Gerard had had worse back home, before Mikey tricked him into being friends with Pete Wentz, and before Gabe Saporta had adopted him.

The point was, Gerard could take a bunch of high school jocks flexing their hetero muscles for a few months, especially if he had someone awesome and strange like Frank to hang out with in the meantime. But Frank looked intense, like he *did* think it was a big deal. Gerard wasn’t really interested in reliving the experience, though, or being lectured on it, even if the lecture was well-meaning, or driven by righteous fury or whatever. Time to change the subject.

“Um,” he said diffidently, searching his pockets for his Marlboros. “Sure, yeah. Whatever, I’ll be careful. Stay out of their way, all that. ’Nother cigarette?”

Another second or so passed with Frank still staring at him, hand tight on Gerard’s shoulder, before he sort of shook himself, face clearing.

“Hell yeah, if you’re offering. I never pass up a free smoke.”

They started walking again, winding around past the collapsed walls and what looked like an old, mossy well. Gerard eyed Frank a little warily, but he’d totally calmed down, was all bright and bubbly again, all traces of the intense emotion he’d just been showing completely wiped away. Which was kind of weird. But he guessed living in Glen Fell would do that to you.

Gerard had always thought woods were supposed to be quiet, but there were a thousand tiny noises filling the spaces in their conversation: distant birds, something crackling through the undergrowth, the wind in the trees. The woods here were thicker, and the moldering leaves blanketed the forest floor in deep drifts. Gerard couldn’t believe he’d actually let Frank lead him off the path, now that he thought about it—he couldn’t follow the most basic directions on a *street map* and now he was in the middle of the woods somewhere, watching Frank. He barely knew Frank—how sure was he that Frank hadn’t gotten them blitheringly lost?

Frank had bopped a few more yards ahead, like a punk will-o’-the-wisp, before he looked back and realized that no, Gerard had actually stopped and wasn’t merely temporarily delayed by vegetation.

“Alright, Gee?” he called, a strange note in his voice, bangs over his eyes.

“Yeah,” Gerard replied slowly, and ran a hand through his hair, trying not to freak out. Frank probably knew where they were going. “Just, you know. Smoker’s lung. Movement, bleah,” He shrugged. “Uh. So. Is it much farther, the mill or whatever?”

Frank bounded back—like Tigger, Gerard thought inanely, and pictured Frank in Halloween colors, which would be an awesome portrait, he’d have to get out his good markers when he got home.

And okay, Frank either must be freezing or he just had no concept of personal space, because he was hovering about two inches from Gerard's nose. No one did that, got close to him like that, except his Mom and Mikey and sometimes Pete, because Pete was like an attack monkey of inappropriate hugging.

"S not far at all," Frank said happily and ruffled Gerard's hair, leaning in *even closer*, what the fuck. Gerard stared at Frank's neck, at the inky black scorpion crawling towards the line of his jaw, and had a sudden blinding urge to lean over and scrape his teeth over Frank's skin. "Plus, I have a surprise for you. I'm pretty sure you'll totally love it—it's fucking awesome."

"How awesome, on a scale of Spiderman to Rob Zombie?" Ten points for his voice not shaking, and twelve zillion points for not freaking out and running away. He needed to get home soon, seriously. Home, where there were lights and heating and coffee and cold showers.

"Rob Zombie dueling Batman levels of awesome. It's creepy cool. Don't punk out on me now, Gee, c'mon! We can take a break if you really have to be a pussy about it, though. Do you need a break?" Frank said, completely oblivious to Gerard's inner struggles. "It'll be dark soon, I think, but I can get you back to the school, if you're worried. The dark doesn't bother me."

Gerard huffed shakily and scuffed a toe against the forest floor as he weighed his options. The ground here was deep with leaves and fallen branches, and smelled rich and earthy when he overturned it with his shoe. "Like a fresh grave," he said to himself absently, in his best Cryptkeeper voice, and then shook himself. Okay, being weird in public again. This town was totally warping his brain. "Man, I gotta get out of here," he said ruefully.

Frank frowned abruptly and stepped back, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"Or, we can go back now, if you want. 'S okay."

Gerard blinked. It obviously wasn't okay. Frank was looking away from Gerard, scowling, his shoulders slumped. He looked almost... disappointed, like Gerard had let him down somehow.

"Huh?" Gerard said intelligently, and Frank shrugged.

"If you wanna go, we can go."

"Oh!" Gerard said. "No, that's not—that's not what I meant. I don't want to miss out on your, uh, super cool creepy surprise, honest. It sounds amazing. But I probably should get going eventually. I have to be home in time to visit Mikey, you know?" Frank eyed him, looking hopeful, eyes big and that damned dimple coming back into play on his face.

And okay, Frank liked Alan Moore and played guitar and loved punk and the Misfits and his favorite movie was the *The Devil's Rejects*, and Gerard didn't have a *crush* or anything, okay. But Frank was pretty damned awesome, even if he did have some mood swing issues. Gerard was pretty moody himself.

On the other hand, it was fucking cold, and getting colder, and even though he liked Frank, really, they'd had only met yesterday. Gerard was never like this with strangers. It was awesome, but also weird.

Frank was almost all in shadow now; it was getting pretty late. They'd been out here wandering for hours, just talking, which was weird all on its own. And then the significance of the shadows hit him, because he was a fucking moron and hadn't even thought about what time it was. Holy *fuck*. Fuck, he had to be home, like, an hour ago.

“Shit! Shit shit shit! Frank, what time is it?” he asked, frantic. Frank stopped looking pissy and mournful, and started staring at Gerard as though he had live lobsters crawling out of his ears, like Ralphie from *A Christmas Story*. Possibly because Gerard had grabbed two handfuls of his own hair and was pacing in frantic, tiny circles. He was so screwed.

“Dude,” Frank said in a hushed voice as Gerard nearly tripped over a giant rock, fucking nature, with all the fucking rocks, and trees, and sunsets. Frank had an unwillingly fascinated look on his face, like he thought Gerard might start speaking in tongues at any second. “I think it’s almost six? I dunno. Are you okay?”

“Fuck, my mom’s gonna flip. Mikey’s gonna flip. I’m going to miss visiting hours, I can’t fucking—I’m such an asshole.”

“Ohhh,” Frank said. “Oh, man, it’s okay, Gee. Don’t worry, it’s not far. We’ll take a short cut. Uh. Calm down. Breathe?”

Gerard tried to glare at him, but he was too busy freaking out with guilt and self-loathing for it to really take. It was only Mikey’s second day here, and Gerard was already letting him down. Fuck.

Frank started herding Gerard back the way they’d come, which, now that he looked at it, was a pretty clear trail of skid marks in the dirt and broken branches and crushed bushes. Crushed bushes filled with *thorns*, he thought darkly, rubbing at an angry scratch on his wrist. Frank’s hand had wandered back onto Gerard’s sleeve and all of his energy was going towards not leaning into Frank.

It wasn’t that it freaked Gerard out, exactly, to be out in the woods at night—it was actually pretty fucking cool, in a novel sort of way. He totally dug the creepy scuttling sounds in the underbrush and the looming darkness, though it did up his chances of tripping on shit. Just, this wasn’t exactly Gerard’s realm of expertise. He kept close to Frank, who looked totally serene in the dim light. Hopefully that meant they weren’t lost beyond all hope or knowledge.

“Fuck,” Frank said, breaking the silence between them as he hauled Gerard back onto the main path, thank God. “I’ll just show you the graveyard another time, if you still want.” Gerard stared at him, forgetting for a moment how fucking late he was.

“Seriously?” he said, and okay, maybe his voice went all high-pitched with glee. But seriously, a *graveyard*. How awesomely Halloween was that? “An abandoned graveyard! That’s so cool, is it, like, in the woods? How’d you find it?”

Frank shot him a tiny, delighted smile, like maybe he’d thought Gerard wouldn’t think a ruined graveyard from the 1700s in the middle of a forest was cool. Which was clearly ridiculous. Gerard was tempted to go tearing off with Frank into the woods right now. It sounded just like a fucking movie set.

“I’ve been exploring out here for a while,” Frank told him, smile audible in his voice, which had the effect of making Gerard beam in response, and then they just smiled at each other for a moment before Frank visibly shook himself and reminded Gerard they had to keep going.

As they walked, Frank adopted a story-telling voice, launching into the story of how Glen Fell had been a little mill town, how it had gotten abandoned and overgrown by the forest when the river shifted, rebuilt three miles away years later. Apparently you could still see parts of the graveyard—old broken marble angels and mossy tombstones, and walk through some of the houses that were still standing.

It took a while for Gerard to remember (re-remember) that he was late, because fuck, it was like walking through a campfire tale, with Frank narrating, grinning evilly and cackling at how Gerard jumped when he ran a cold finger along the back of his neck. Gerard tried to focus on how much of a dick Frank was, instead of on how Frank's fingers hooked into his belt loops, tugging his jeans low as he walked to show a flat stomach with dark words edging above the hemline. He wasn't sure how much success he had, to be honest. He'd definitely figured out the word 'Destroy' was involved by the time they'd reached the forest's edge.

Gerard continuing onward a few halting steps into the field, before craning his head and looking back at Frank, who'd stopped for some reason, hands in his pockets.

"Aren't you coming?" Gerard asked, confused.

Frank shook his head. "No," he said. "I'm... I'm just, going to hang out here for a while longer. Got shit to do. You know the way, though, right?"

Gerard rolled his eyes. Like the fucking high school wasn't right fucking behind him, he wasn't *that* inept.

"Just checking." Frank grinned a little, and then looked down at his feet. "Fucking blows you have to leave already."

Gerard had to go, like *yesterday*, but Frank looked so oddly wistful he couldn't bring himself to just brush the guy off and sprint for home.

"Well, you could, I don't know, come by my place, if you want? Tomorrow, I mean," He had a brief moment of insanity where he almost invited Frank to come to the hospital with him and his mom, but luckily he managed to bite his tongue on that before it escaped.

"Nahh," Frank said, still not meeting Gerard's eyes. "Thanks, though. But, um. You could come back here, and we could hike the rest of the way? I was sort of taking you the long way around today. Didn't realize you had a time limit."

Gerard was about to disagree vehemently—he was covered in thorns and scratches and mud. It wasn't fair, Frank seemed basically unscathed and he'd stepped in just as many mud puddles and through as many brambles as Gerard. Unfortunately, Gerard was fucking late and didn't have time to debate how much the forest sucked donkey balls. He also had a sneaking suspicion that Frank might have been taking him through the thorniest, muddiest patches on purpose, because Frank was an asshole like that. But Gerard would let it go, because he was the bigger person, and also because it was obnoxiously endearing, somehow.

"Sure," he sighed. "You still have to show me the graveyard, right?" A smile flickered on Frank's face, and Gerard wavered. He wanted to stay, he realized incredulously. He wanted to stay in the treacherous forest, which as night had fallen had gotten even more deadly and unnerving. The forest here had thinned and purpling sky showed between the branches, and Frank looked otherworldly standing there, pale against the darkness.

Gerard's fingers twitched. "I'll bring my sketchbook next time," he said, and that got a real grin out of Frank at last.

"Oh man, I'd love to see you sketch, Gee. That'd be fucking sweet," Frank said earnestly and sort of hugged himself and peered out from under his bangs. "You sure you can't stay longer?"

Gerard flailed mentally for a moment. He had to *go*, his Mom was going to *leave without him*.

“Yeah,” he said, and spun on his heel resolutely. “See you tomorrow, Frank!” he called over his shoulder, and jogged off, stopping now and then to pound his chest, because wow, he was out of shape. By the time he’d gotten to the house, his Mom already in the car and glaring at him from the driver’s seat, it was full darkness.

Weird. He hoped Frank had a flashlight out there, in the woods. Doing whatever the fuck it was he was doing. Maybe he’d lost something?

Whatever. He’d ask tomorrow at school.

Chapter 3

Mikey slept pretty much the entire time Gerard was there, but Gerard was still glad he made it, glad he got to say hello and crawl on the bed with his brother and draw him some of the ruined houses and a zombie unicorn. Mikey asked about his date with Frank at one point, though, his voice hoarse but dryly amused.

“It wasn’t a *date!*” Gerard protested, and Mikey just grinned and raised an eyebrow, so Gerard had to mock-rant for about a year about how it wasn’t a fucking date, it was just a hike, who went on a date in the woods, anyway? And at some point during his well-thought out argument, Mikey fell asleep. Typical. Gerard left the sketches on Mikey’s pillow and let the nurse hustle him out into the hall, where he blinked unhappily in the florescent lights and stared at Mikey’s door. Room 402, Mikey Way. There was a chart of gibberish and shorthand and numbers that all added up to mean Mikey wasn’t coming home, not yet.

In the car on the way back, settling in for the hour-long drive, his mother tried to strike up a conversation about school, but her mind was obviously on other things, and Gerard didn’t really want to talk about it anyway. He managed to glare her into submission and then cranked up the CD player, staring at his feet and zoning out on Metallica until they got home.

It was only much, much later, lying in bed after a late dinner, clutching half a bottle of bourbon to his chest and replaying the confrontation at lunch over in his head, recasting Ted and Isaac as werewolf lepers and himself as a badass priest with a fucking holy shotgun, that another thought struck him.

He still hadn’t retrieved his bookbag from the dumpster. Fuck. Now it was 1:48 AM and he’d spent the last hour drinking and staring at the unmoving ceiling. He really wasn’t in the state for, say, like, dumpster-diving. Or walking.

Fuck, if he’d gotten Frank’s number he could have called him, found out where Frank was and made him help.

Of course, he’d probably have used the phone to say something completely moronic, so maybe it was for the best. But he was going to have to go out there, in the dark and cold and creepy tiny town-ness, and having Frank there would have gone a long way towards making Gerard not completely hate his life.

But even Frankless, he had to go. His copy of the fifth *Doom Patrol* was in that bag, along with his charcoals and his sketch pad—his *good* sketch pad. If he waited any longer, the bag and all its contents would probably be lost to humanity under a heap of rancid cafeteria lunch.

He finally made himself stagger out of bed, and as soon as he was upright, the room spun hazily, all Dadaist and nonsensical. He clung to the bedpost for a while, waiting for his vision to normalize. Probably he wouldn’t throw up. The bottle of Maker’s Mark was still clutched loosely in his left hand, and he figured what the hell, take it with him. Liquid comfort, right? The wind was blowing pretty hard, and he could hear the zombie tree hands scrabbling frantically at the window – the booze would keep him warm, and the bottle was almost empty anyway. He could be efficient and finish it off on the way to the dumpster, chuck it when he was done.

The house was at it again, making creepy noises. It was even worse now that the wind had joined in, mumbling and groaning. “Old houses settle, Gerard,” his mom had told him wearily when he complained, but the house sounded pretty fucking unsettled to him. Each board on the staircase

protested loudly in a different key of moan when he stepped on it, which got sort of exciting when he slid down the last couple stairs.

Outside, the town was dead. There were a few widely spaced lampposts that created small islands of light, but they did more to emphasize the surrounding darkness than anything else. It felt like October now, all the warmth of the day gone, air chill and clear, with a few dead leaves dancing about his feet, and all the houses were staring at him with empty glassy eyes, all dark and waiting.

And then there was the school in the distance, a low-slung monument to wasted time and stupidity. Had the walk to school been this long last morning? Jeez, it was like a mile away, the distance all shimmery and wavy in his vision. At least the combination of the booze and the physical exertion would probably let him sleep deep and dreamless tonight.

He set off down the street, humming the theme to *The Nightmare Before Christmas* and occasionally breaking out into actual song. “Boys and girls of every age,” he sang cheerfully—probably missing a few notes, but who was listening, anyway?—and weaved across the street to kick at a drift of leaves. He wished he was in Halloweentown. Halloweentown was way preferable to the Stepford, wholesome creepiness of Glen Fell. And Frank would make a badass Jack Skellington. Maybe Gerard would be Sally, all awkward pieces stitched together. “I sense there’s something in the wind, that feels like—gah!”

What the shit, there was bat right next to his fucking face. Inches away! It flapped about for a second, inspecting him, and then fled off into the night. It had been right next to his *face*! How fucking cool was that? The bee’s fucking knees. The bat’s fucking knees, even. Maybe if a bat bit him, he’d turn into Batman for *real*, like Spiderman with bats and without the whining. He’d grow long wing-fingers. Or just get rabies, whatever. But that wasn’t so bad—Gerard hated showering anyway. No big loss there.

Now that he’d noticed, he saw the bats everywhere, wheeling in the sky, tiny dark forms against the stars. If he stood still and listened, really listened, he could hear them chirping. Echolocating. Gerard chirped back hopefully, but the bats ignored him and Gerard eventually gave it up as a lost cause—no radioactive super batpowers for him, not tonight—and headed onwards.

Finally, he staggered into the high school parking lot, the trip possibly slightly prolonged by his newfound fascination with the sky and the lacy clouds racing past the moon and the swift squeaking flight of the bats. If it wasn’t for the people, he had to admit, this town would be awesome. Now that he knew how apocalyptic and surreal it was at night, he’d come out more often. Maybe go sit on that bridge spanning the river and watch the water flow past, finish off his dwindling alcohol supply.

Even the high school looked strange and epic in the cold moonlight, long blue shadows and silvery windows and wavery walls, although, okay, he was willing to attribute that last bit to the bourbon. The dumpster, though, was less epic and more sordid. Gerard stared at it. He hadn’t gotten quite this far in his brilliant plan, and now that the dumpster was looming chin-height in front of him, all impenetrable metal and tell-tale stench, he was at a loss.

He got on his tip-toes and peered inside. Oh. Oh, that was *foul*. But there was his bookbag, nestled among what looked like a mountain of wilted lettuce and what was hopefully macaroni. That was as far as he’d let his mind wander on that subject. Macaroni, it was totally macaroni.

Okay, he’d found the bookbag. Now to get it out without actually having to climb in the dumpster himself. Problem solving, he could do this. He was creative. An anti-gravity ray gun would be best for this job, but with his limited supplies such a tool was out of the question. In a pinch, though, he could drag over those cinder blocks and make a staircase, and then use a stick to haul his bag up by

the straps. Yes. That was totally brilliant. He was doing it.

The cinder blocks, though, turned out to be fucking *heavy*, and they scraped against his fingertips and palms unpleasantly. He needed at least four of the blocks to create a stable platform to stand on, four motherfucking trips across the parking lot, and now that he was exposed in this vast open treeless space, he was a little freaked. He'd have to keep a leery eye out for zombie third basemen and outfielders.

He was just lugging the last cinder block over to the dumpster when he heard something, something that didn't sound like the wind. It sounded like a fucking *voice*. Gerard clutched the cinder block to his chest and flattened himself against the gym wall.

"Hey, Gerard!"

Oh God, it knew his name. He scrunched his eyes shut tight and wished he hadn't left the bourbon by the dumpster. Oh, and now the wind was laughing at him. He opened his eyes indignantly, but the parking lot was still empty, an expanse of grey asphalt stretching off into the fields, the distant woods a dark line against the sky. Maybe it was the bats? Gerard kept frowning for a moment, then dismissed it as the work of his drunken and notoriously batshit—ha!—imagination.

Alright, he thought. Back to the mission. There were no voices. He was just tired. It was just the wind. He took a few lurching steps away from the wall and towards his goal, the Impenetrable Dumpster of Hate and Despair, and then he heard it again.

"Gerard, you moron, I'm over here!"

Motherfucker, he'd dropped the cinder block and it'd broken into three totally useless pieces and now he'd have to go back and get *another* one. "Fuck," he said and kicked at one of the piece and then promptly clutched at his maimed foot and glared at the broken block before turning around, eyes narrowed suspiciously.

He was reasonably sure the voice didn't belong to a violent local with a hankering for manflesh, but further examination of the parking lot remained inconclusive. No-one was fucking *there*, goddammit.

"Uh, what the fuck?" he hollered back tentatively, and then he saw it, at the edge of the wood—a small pale figure waving frantically. "Frank?" he hooted in surprise. "Frank, what the fuck are you doing here, dude?"

"What the fuck am *I* doing here? What are you doing here?" the tiny Frank-figure yelled, his voice carried on the wind, still swinging his arms about spastically. Gerard squinted. What the fuck was he doing over there, the Hokey Pokey? "Get over here!"

"You come here!" Gerard said, stomping his right foot before he remember that he'd just fucking broken it on the concrete block. Holy monkeyfuck, pain. But seriously, had Frank just been watching his toil and not come to help? Because that was *not on*. Frank was a jerk.

He turned around and huffed back to the dumpster. He'd just have to put up with the unstable platform, and when he died falling to his death Frank would be totally sorry for being such a lazy punkass jerkface.

"Can't!" Frank called back, voice distant and clear. "What the hell are you doing with that dumpster, dude?"

"Nothing," Gerard grumped under his breath, and took a last fortifying swig of the Maker's Mark

before hurling the bottle with a satisfying crash into the dumpster. Okay. Operation so far: moderate success. The next phase would be more tricky. He picked up a stick and teetered atop the cinder blocks, trying unsuccessfully to keep his hair out of his eyes.

It took eleven or twelve (or possibly seventeen) tries before he successfully caught the bag's straps and lifted it out of the dumpster, although he felt this could be partially excused by extenuating circumstances. During the whole operation, Frank had been hollering and hooting insults from the edge of the woods, and the brick beneath him had been wobbling in an extremely alarming manner, and also he couldn't quite focus his eyes, so really, Gerard felt that he'd done pretty well.

His bag was drooping and discolored, oozing some sort of liquid onto the asphalt. Gerard looked at it sadly. He'd spent his last Home Ec class in Belleville embroidering blood drops and alien vampires all over it, and he'd glued these awesome rhinestone skulls to the straps. It was a great bag, or it had been, before high school had vomited all over it.

He picked the wounded bag up gingerly by the least gross-looking strap and heaved another huge sigh, in case the universe hadn't adequately registered his displeasure.

"Shut up, Frank, Jesus, I'm coming," he grumbled unhappily to himself and set off on the long, infinitely hazardous path to the forest.

It took all his effort to put each foot carefully in front of the other and by the time he reached Frank at the very edge of the woods, his mood had degenerated considerably. Goddamn wilderness. Fucking prickly bush with hitchhiker seedpod things all up in his socks and formerly pretty shoelaces.

Frank, the little jerk, had his hands in his pockets and was making a terrible snerking noise with his nose as he tried not to laugh.

"You're back!" Frank said happily and did a little jig. "Already! This is awesome."

Gerard peered blearily at Frank. He wished the little fucker would stop moving, jeez, he looked all blurry and indistinct. "Yeah, but, Frank, what are you still doing here? Did you lose something?"

Frank snorted, mouth twitching. "You could say that, I guess. Besides, I don't really sleep so well. I was on a walk, heard your dulcet voice and came running." Frank made a 'ta da' gesture; Gerard blinked at him, nonplussed. "But what are *you* doing here, Gerard Way? And what the fuck are you carrying? It smells like gorilla ass."

Gerard winced. The reason he was out here was, actually, sort of embarrassing and pathetic. Gerard's two standard modes of existence. And he was a little too toasted to come up with a lie at the moment, so embarrassing, pathetic truth it was.

"There's these guys, these asshole baseball players... you know them?" Gerard asked uncertainly. Frank had stilled suddenly, mouth a thin line and eyes narrowed, the lines of his body abruptly looking poised for violence. "Uh, well, anyway," Gerard continued, voice wavering into a higher pitch. He nervously wound a finger around some of his bangs and twisted them before he remembered his hand was covered with dead maggoty lunch remains. Oh, blow. Hell. "I think I told you earlier. The supreme head asshole, Ted, he stole my bag and tossed in the dumpster, because he is, as I have mentioned, an asshole. And I couldn't sleep either, so— here I am? Ta da?"

"Who is this asshole? Ted?" Frank gritted out, and he was actually looking kinda scary at the moment, jaw clenched, eyes burning. He looked frighteningly competent, and Gerard squinted at

him and remembered, train of thought derailing abruptly in outrage.

“Hey!” he said accusingly. “Why didn’t you come help me? You saw me, I could have—I could have used some help, man, dumpsters are hard. And gross. I almost fell to my death.”

Ooooh, was Frank laughing at him? That was uncool. Unfair. But at least Frank wasn’t looking quite so alarming anymore. Just normal Frank, giggling and grinning. Gerard liked Frank’s dimples. He liked Frank period, except for when he watched Gerard dumpster-dive.

Frank was rocking back and forth on his heels and grinning and totally avoiding the question, the ass. “You, uh, been hitting the sauce, dude?”

The moonlight glinted off his lip ring. Gerard tried not to stare. “Maybe,” he told Frank earnestly and without thinking reached out to touch the metal of the ring, cold beneath his hand. Frank’s eyes got huge. Then Gerard realized what he was doing and snatched his hand back. “Um. Yes. There was bourbon,” he admitted sheepishly, shoving his hand inside his pocket where it wouldn’t be tempted to leap out at Frank again. “You know, liquid courage, and warmth, I dunno. It seemed like a good idea.” Hey, Frank had to be freezing. He hadn’t had any bourbon, and he was just in a t-shirt, and it was windy, and cold out. “You want my jacket, Frankie?”

“Huh? Oh. No, you keep it,” Frank said, smiling strangely. “But thanks anyway, Gee. You’re a peach.”

Gerard eyed him doubtfully, and Frank’s mouth quirked and then he was wrinkling his nose and kicking at Gerard’s bag disdainfully, and hey, not cool. It was a good bag! It wasn’t its fault that it smelled like rotten moldy death. Frank didn’t need to *kick* it. Gerard scowled and dragged the bag protectively closer to himself, and then recoiled a bit as the smell wafted towards him.

Poor bag, he thought mournfully. Maybe he should just leave it out here. Give it a proper burial. A eulogy. Gerard sighed and hunched down, started pawing through it to retrieve his belongings, which hopefully weren’t too befouled by the garbage and stench. Frank bent to peer at the bag with Gerard, pinching his nose shut and making horking sounds that were, in Gerard’s opinion, completely overdramatic and unnecessary. A moment passed as Gerard sorted through the notebooks and pencils, setting the hopelessly disgusting ones off in a defeated little pile to the side.

“Gerard. Are those... are those *rhinestone skulls*?” Frank asked suddenly, voice hushed.

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Yeaahh,” Gerard said sadly, and stroked one of the skulls with his forefinger. Goodbye, little buddy. Frank made a choked noise. “I sewed them on myself. I suck at sewing, though. There was so much blood! And needles. Fucking needles. See, that’s my blood right there. And there. There too. Totally failed the assignment, but I think it’s a kickass bag. Adds, what’s it. Vermillion. Verisim—verisimilitude. Hey, you okay, Frankie?”

“Oh my god, dude,” Frank groaned. “Please. Stop being so cute. You’re killing me.”

“I am not,” Gerard said, frowning, and then went back to poking at a mysterious orange stain on the front pocket of the bag. Probably he was giving himself salmonella, great. He left off worrying about disease for now—he’d bleach his hands when he got home. He pulled out his sketchbook, eyeing it worriedly. It looked a little damp, and there was a lingering odor of rancid Thousand Island when he pressed it to his nose and sniffed. But this was his good sketchpad, the one with his story arcs for potential comic books, with panels of Mikey Way: Unicorn Warrior. He couldn’t just *toss* it. Maybe it’d air out?

While he was pondering this, Frank started peering over his shoulder and making impressed-

sounding noises and trying to flip the pages before Gerard was done smelling them, and finally Gerard had to bat him away, grumbling. Then Gerard pulled out *Doom Patrol: Magic Bus* and fell over assbackwards in alarm as Frank launched himself at Gerard, making grabby hands and snatching the book away.

“Is this—? It is! I haven’t read these issues yet! Oh my god, do you have the rest? Do you?” Frank’s voice had gone startingly high pitched.

“Dude,” Gerard said, nursing his injured hand and glaring at Frank. “The trades have been out for ages! Ages and ages. And ages. Like, last year at least.”

But Frank was clearly zoned out and totally ignoring him, clutching the trade paperback blissfully and stroking the cover. Holy hell, Gerard had forgotten just how hot Frank was when he smiled, beaming with his whole face, hair curling down over his eyes, framed by the stars and the branches of trees. He was practically fucking glowing; it was like he was made of glass and Gerard could see the stars through his skin.

Huh, Gerard thought, and squinted, rubbed at his eyes. Fuck, he must have had more bourbon than he’d thought, and he guessed he was a bit tired, too. Frank just sort of looked, well, blurry. Everything else looked somewhat normal, but Frank was starting to drift apart at the edges. It made Gerard feel sick, and weird, and maybe like he should stop getting shitfaced after every visit to the Trumbull Hospital, because he didn’t like this feeling at all.

“Frank?” Gerard asked, waveringly, arms wrapped around himself.

Frank looked up from the book, startled. And, and his eyes had trees in them. Gerard could see leaves and branches and the forest through Frank’s eyes, and—

“Oh, fuck,” Frank said, and his voice sounded like the wind and the rustling grass. Gerard felt himself break out into a sweat, and hey, he guessed this was a cold sweat, cold down to the bone, into the marrow and, fuck, probably into all the little mitochondrial cells, too.

Frank moved towards him, eyes round and upset. “Gerard, I. I just. Look, don’t freak out, okay? Oh, you’re totally freaking out, fuck, of course you are. But I can explain, really.”

His hands closed on Gerard’s shoulders, icy and solid, his thumbs stroking Gerard’s collar bones, and Gerard promptly closed his eyes and threw up.

There was a silence broken only by the sound of rustling leaves and trees and Gerard’s unhappy, labored breathing.

“Huh,” Frank said, finally. Gerard kept his eyes closed and wished that the terrible dizzy whirling sensation in his body would stop and that Frank would go away and that he could wake up in bed with this never having happened. He was never drinking again. Never bourbon, never cheap beer. Never never never. “So, you’re... drunker than I thought.”

Gerard nodded pathetically and leaned forward, resting his forehead against something that turned out to be Frank’s shoulder.

“Hey, hey. Gerard, come on, it’s okay. Fuck, I don’t have any water. Gerard, Gee, c’mon, open your eyes.”

His voice sounded upset, so Gerard opened his eyes. Frank was kneeling beside him, solid and opaque. Normal, as normal as he could be, with him being Frank and all, and Gerard’s vision still tending towards slightly swimmy.

“I feel shitty,” Gerard told him, and sighed, trying to struggle to his feet, but his feet were tangled up in the straps of his bag and he fell back down again, probably into regurgitated alcohol and stomach acid. That was the kind of day he was having. But Frank carefully lifted one Gerard-foot and then the other Gerard-foot out of the tangle of straps. Then, steadying him with one hand on his hip, Frank pulled him upright and let Gerard lean against his shoulder. Frank was sort of... petting him, stroking his fingers through Gerard’s tangled hair. It was nice, except Gerard had just vomited *on* Frank, and Frank knew all those jerks at school messed with him and that Gerard couldn’t do anything about it, and Frank probably thought Gerard was the most pathetic, washed-up loser of all time.

“I’m. I’m going to bed,” Gerard said miserably into Frank’s shirt.

“Not here!” Frank said, clearly alarmed. Gerard snorted dully, shoving Frank off and shuffling backwards. His mouth tasted terrible, like a Rancor had shit all over his tongue. He smelled bad, and he’d puked on Frankie, and he just wanted to leave and curl up and die somewhere.

“Not here,” Gerard agreed bitterly. “I’m goin’ home.”

Frank sighed and kicked at the nearest tree, swearing and grumbling to himself, which was unfair, because Gerard couldn’t hear what Frank was saying, and it looked important. Frank needed to speak up.

“Can you make it home okay by yourself, Gee?” Frank said miserably, and he did that thing where his hair fell in his eyes and his mouth twisted unhappily and Gerard wanted to give him a castle or a comic book store or something, anything that would make him stop looking so crushed. He took a wavering step forward and poked at Frank’s side until Frank cracked a bewildered smile.

“Seriously, Gerard, is home close?”

Gerard held up three fingers. Frank stared for a minute, mouth twitching again. “Three blocks, huh. Okay, you can make three blocks? I can’t come with you. You sure you can make it?” Gerard walked in an experimental circle, and, despite the wobbling, he felt it was pretty much a success.

“Guess it’ll have to do,” Frank said, and where did he get off acting all critical? Feed tiny itty Frank a bottle of bourbon and see how well he walked, huh. Frank was rolling his eyes again, the punk. “C’mon, Gee, you’d better get going. You look pretty cold. I’ll watch your stuff for you, okay?”

Gerard beamed at Frank. “Thanks, Frankie,” he said earnestly and watched Frank blink at him, jaw gone slack.

“Your *face*,” Frank muttered under his breath. “This is like torture. Okay, seriously, you dumb adorable fucker. Home. Water. Bed. Please, promise me you’ll drink some water?”

“Mmm,” Gerard said. “Yeah. I promise. I wish you could come with me.”

Frank closed his eyes again. “Yeah,” he said.

“Bye, Frankie. See you tomorrow.”

“Be careful, Gerard. Please,” Frank said, and his voice was rough and had dead leaves in it, and clouds skittering across the sky, and the hollow sound of vast empty spaces. “Come see me tomorrow so I know you’re okay?”

“Okay,” Gerard said. “Okay, Frankie. Good night. You’ll be here?”

Frank nodded, did a Scout's Honor sign with his hand. "I'll be here."

Gerard had the feeling that maybe he was smiling dopily. Just a bit. Frank didn't hate him. Frank thought he was adorable. Wow.

Frank gave him a little push after a moment, and Gerard sighed, a nice long 'fuck you, universe' sigh, and began shambling home, past the shadowed school and down the empty streets and fell into his doorway. He got a glass of water from the sink, because he'd promised, and drank it shivering by his bedroom window. The bed was cool and soft, and he wrapped himself in blankets and waited to warm up. When he fell asleep, he didn't dream.

There was a terrible noise coming from somewhere in Gerard's room. A terrible, awful, brain-splitting noise. Gerard squinted at the blinking Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle alarm clock on his nightstand and deeply regretted setting the alarm to "theme song." He deeply regretted setting the alarm at all. In fact, he was pretty sure he *hadn't*. He hadn't messed with it last night, anyway. Gerard sensed his mother's diabolical hand in this.

Raphael squawked at him, "Hey, get a grip!" and Gerard moaned and buried his head under the pillow. He rummaged around with one hand by the base of the nightstand and finally got hold of the power cord and yanked. He snuggled back down into his cocoon of sheets and covers in blessed silence, going as still as possible, hoping that the bones of his skull would stop grinding together.

He woke back up an hour later with his mother pounding on the door like a bad dream, screeching something about how she'd thought Gerard had left already, hadn't he heard his alarm? Unfortunately his mother didn't come with a power cord or a snooze button, and it didn't sound like she was giving up anytime soon. Gerard staggered out of bed, clutching his head in his one hand, and opened the door about an inch. He glared at his mom and said, "Hnnfhghn."

She glared back.

"m up," he croaked, and flapped a hand in dismissal.

"You'll be late," she warned huffily, at least settling back down to a more acceptable volume of scolding. "You're late already, Gerard Way. Move. Do not get back in that fucking bed."

Gerard would have rolled his eyes if his head hadn't been full of ground glass. Fuck, and his body was so fucking sore, it was like someone had taken a baseball bat and beaten him with it. Or, well, more like someone had taken his body and beaten a truck with it, he guessed.

"m a take a shower," he grumbled at his mom. "Go 'way. Shouldn't you be workin."

Gerard's mom visibly wavered between badgering him out of his room and onto the street and rejoicing that her son was actually going to take a shower of his own volition. She settled for shaking her head and heading downstairs.

"I *am* working—they sent me home to get some photos from the Jersey salon, asshole," she called over her shoulder as Gerard shuffled down the hall towards the bathroom. Fuck, it hurt to walk, his stupid brain was going to slosh out of its skull. "I'll be back here at 5:30, so please fucking be here this time? Christ."

Gerard grunted and shut the bathroom door. How his mother had even known Gerard was still home was a fucking mystery. She had like Mom Radar or something, like the stork delivered super

powers along with babies. Especially ever since Mikey had gotten sick and she and Dad had gotten divorced—she was in total Supermom mode. All, ‘you need to go to class,’ and ‘maybe you should go out more, Gerard,’ and ‘don’t you have any friends besides Mikey.’ And on and on. Whatever. Like it mattered if he was late to class. Missing Mrs. Hall and Ted Sikowski was all to the good, in his book. And he’d definitely rather have a shower than show up to school smelling like puke and garbage.

Anyway, the bathroom here was pretty sweet; Gerard sort of wanted to draw a bath and lounge in the hot water with a comic book or a sketchpad for the rest of the day. There was a skylight and the red-leafed tree branches that arched over it cast these really phantasmagoric shadows on the tiled floor, all jagged and delicate. He’d have to remember to try using that pattern next time he sketched. And the archaic claw-footed bathtub was truly a thing of beauty: it looked like it was going to skitter down the hall or ask Gerard how he liked his bubble bath, like Mrs. fuckin’ Potts or something. Even the faucets looked cool, tarnished and silver and shaped like flowers.

Gerard started the shower running to let the water warm up and sat on the edge of the tub to wait. In the scalloped mirror, a reverse Gerard stared back at him, hair achieving truly impressive heights, mouth bruised and streaks of green tracing down his chin from where Ted had shoved him face-first into his truck that first day. Then Mirror-Gerard had started to steam up around the edges, so he figured the water had probably gotten hot enough. He stepped gingerly into the shower, and sighed blissfully as the hot water pounded down on him. He was sore in muscles he hadn’t even known he had—he blamed Frank for making him trudge around a fucking forest for hours at a time.

A few cursory go-rounds with a washcloth doused in Satsuma Bath Gel from the Body Shop, and he was pretty much clean, he figured. After yesterday’s excitement and adventure, he could probably stand to go ahead and shampoo too, even though he’d already washed his hair like three days ago.

He scrubbed his hands through his hair, dumped in some conditioner until it untangled, mostly, and tried to ignore the morning erection that was fighting for his attention. He couldn’t get Frank out of his head, which was kind of making the situation worse, but jerking off to people he knew was weird, and also tended to make Gerard blush at unfortunate moments. That one time he’d had that wet dream about Pete had been pretty much the worst day of his life.

But even with the hangover, his skin was buzzing with it, and he was horny, goddammit. He finally gave in, closed his eyes and wrapped his hand around his cock, tried to think nice standard thoughts about telekinetic floating sex.

Except his nice stock fantasy of Jean Grey sucking him off kept morphing into Frank, looking up at him with wet lashes. Frank’s hand wrapped around his cock, tattooed knuckles moving up and down, and then Frank lowering his head, and there’d be that cold metal lip ring, and Gerard came all over his own fingers at just the thought of it.

He leaned against the cold tile of the shower wall and flung an arm over his eyes, blood still pounding in his ears. God, Frank’s hands. Poor Jean Grey, who had perfectly nice if untattooed hands, and didn’t really deserve to be abandoned mid-masturbation fantasy.

Fuck, he was so screwed. He didn’t even want to think about Frank at all, to remember how much of an ass he’d made of himself last night, or how weird Frank had been acting, or how he’d said that Gerard was cute and how he’d petted Gerard’s filthy, sweaty hair and looked so fucking sweet and concerned, like he cared. It all created a jumble of emotions, elation and horror and hope and despair, and he just didn’t want to deal with it. And now he’d probably get hard the next time he

even glanced at Frank's mouth. Or hands. Or anything.

His headache was coming back with a vengeance, so he grabbed some Tylenol and a couple Aleve from the medicine cabinet, washed them down with a handful of cold water from the sink. He peeked out the door to make sure his mom was actually gone before leaving the bathroom, wrapped in a fluffy pink towel and hair tucked up in a lavender turban. By the time he'd struggled into a reasonably clean Ziggy Stardust hoodie and hiked on some baggy jeans, run a comb through his hair, and smudged on some eyeliner, he was feeling more human and less like the living dead.

He still didn't have a bookbag, though. He'd left his out in the forest with Frank last night, after all that fucking effort. He wound up sneaking into Mikey's room and stealing his abandoned army-green satchel. It was sitting forlornly in a box in his room and still had the old school notebooks from last year, from his last day in class, before the stairwell. There were half-finished sheets of chemistry homework and dead pens and a tiny drawing of a unicorn piercing the heart of the Michelin man tucked in the frontmost pocket.

Gerard left everything as it was and just added a few notebooks and a pencil. He closed the door to Mikey's room carefully and rested his forehead against it for a moment, waiting for his eyes to stop stinging. Fuck, he didn't want to go to school today. At least he'd definitely missed math.

Sunglasses to cut out the glare, a pot of coffee to keep him alive and upright, and he was marginally ready to face the day.

The town was almost creepier in the bright morning sunshine than it had been last night. Birds were chirping, the trees were cheerfully orange and red against the blue sky, there was absolutely no one on the streets, and, aside from the housewife staring out at him from her window, which had to be seriously clean by now, all the houses looked empty. It was surreal, like a scene from a Tim Burton movie, all bright colors and exaggerated lines. He walked quickly up the street, head down, not looking up until he reached the school.

One good thing, at least, had come out of his drunken spree and vomitfest last night: he managed to enter the building just as Ray was leaving the attendance office. Ray spotted him and beamed.

"Oh, hey!" Ray said, bounding over, just as bubbling and friendly as he had been yesterday. "Awesome hoodie, man. I love me some Bowie."

Gerard peered down at his hoodie, and Bowie stared back up at him, alien and beautiful. He glanced at Ray, smiling tentatively. "Me too," he said. "I have a signed record at home. The, uh, Space Oddity album? My brother got it for me for my birthday last spring."

Ray looked suitably awed. "Dude, you've got to show that to me later. That's fucking sweet. Oh, hey, speaking of music. Do you like Dinosaur Jr? 'Cause they're playing in the city this weekend and a bunch of us were gonna go. You should come! I know Ryan's going because he spent all band practice bugging me about it and asking if you were going."

"Who's Ryan?" Gerard asked, bewildered, as they climbed up the stairs, and then he had to clutch Ray's shoulder to keep from falling to his death, because Ted fucking Sikowski had just shoved him, hard, into the wall, and the shock of it had nearly made Gerard's feet slip off the narrow stairs. Also, *ow*. He gritted his teeth and ignored it.

"Dinosaur Jr, right," he said, determinedly cheerful. "Dinosaur Jr's good stuff, maybe I'll go. Hey, will I, uh, get in trouble for missing first period, do you know?"

"Nahh," Ray said, waving a hand. He was still looking furiously over at Ted, who was slouched

against the wall outside Mr. Carew's room and smirking, but he perked back up when Gerard brought up the front office. "Got you covered this once. Mrs. Hawthorne seriously doesn't pay any attention to attendance, it's a disgrace."

Gerard eyed him. He sort of was getting what Bob meant now about Ray taking his job a little too seriously. At least Ray was covering for Gerard, though, even if he got the feeling Ray would start lecturing if he skipped again.

English passed without much trouble, although Ted and his posse of fucking thugs were really starting to freak him out with their staring and whispering. Plus, he kept getting the feeling between classes that someone was following him—he kept seeing movement out of the corner of his eye, but it was always just some anonymous student, bored, blank-faced. Then he'd get distracted by Ray again, who kept popping up and bugging Gerard about playing video games that afternoon.

"Seriously, it'll be fucking epic. We're having a Resident Evil marathon!" Ray jogged Gerard's shoulder pleadingly. "You should really come this time. It's Bob, Patrick, Worm and some other guys from band. Mike, and oh man, apparently Greta plays, so she's coming. Patrick's gonna flip. And my mom's making snacks, it'll be great. C'monnnn."

Gerard hummed noncommittally, because fuck, that was a lot of people he didn't really know. He liked Bob and Ray a lot, and Patrick and Worm were okay, but he didn't really do well with crowds. Ray spent the rest of the day pestering Gerard about it, though, and enlisted Bob to help, and by the time Gerard left Biology he'd semi-grudgingly agreed to at least think about it. Mainly just because he was fucking amazed Ray actually cared enough to wage a campaign to convince Gerard to come, complete with a Dead Frog Skit during Bio. It was kind of hard to resist a dancing dead frog.

He spent most of art class debating his options, because it wasn't like the class demanded a lot of his attention. This time they were doing a still life of a mirror, a milk jug, and a stack of blank CDs. Mr. Felts had a total hard-on for still life. According to the syllabus, the class hadn't been doing anything else since August, and weren't due to start on Cubism until late October. Gerard foresaw a lot of boredom in his future. He sketched a quick, shabby outline of the tableau, and then spent the rest of the class pondering what to do.

He didn't really want to go to Ray's, not for a big epic party or anything. Maybe if it'd been just Ray and Bob. Besides, he still needed to get his bag from Frank, with all his comics and his favorite lighter and his sketchpad. His math homework, too, now that he thought of it. Maybe Frank would want to go to the party. Maybe he was already going. Gerard thought he might not mind so much, if Frank was there too.

He was going to have to just admit it. He had a giant, world-ending hopeless crush on Frank. Admitting it was the first step to overcoming it, he hoped. The trick was not to get his hopes up.

Frank was just so fucking *cool*. Just being his friend would be awesome, honestly. Gerard had remembered, at the last minute, to pack the next Doom Patrol volume, since Frank hadn't read it yet, and his good Derwent pencils, so he could sketch the graveyard, if Frank asked, and he'd maybe been doodling Frank's tattoos all over everything all day. Mikey had already sent ten thousand texts bugging him about Frank and their date, and it was annoying as fuck and kept making Gerard feel nervous. It wasn't a *date*; it wasn't *like* that. Thinking like that was bound to end in disappointment.

It was odd that Gerard still hadn't seen Frank in school. Maybe Frank was in a different class or something—maybe he was a sophomore or a junior instead of a senior. But that didn't make sense. Frank definitely looked older, and he had to be at least sixteen to have gotten all those tattoos.

Maybe he was homeschooled. Or... maybe Frank had run away from home and was waiting to turn eighteen and a legal adult before he showed back up in society again? That might explain why he was so reluctant to leave the woods all the time, if he was afraid of being caught and dragged back home. Maybe his parents were assholes. Gerard's own dad had been kind of a dick during the divorce, but Gerard had never felt so trapped that he'd ever considered fucking *running away* and living in the woods.

He hoped that wasn't the reason. He hated to think of Frank that unhappy, that miserable. Maybe there was another explanation.

Shit, he was totally spacing out, and Mr. Felts was circling the room, eyeing him suspiciously. Gerard hastily shuffled around the papers so that his original, boring-ass drawing was on top and began diligently re-shading the dimpling of the milk jug.

Yesterday Mr. Felts had mentioned maybe contacting the guidance counselor after he'd seen Gerard's 'still life' of a vampire-bat-child gnawing on an arm, and Gerard was not fucking around with that shit. He was gonna put *that* disaster off for as long as humanly possible.

"Well done, Mr. Way," Mr. Felts said approvingly, looking over Gerard's shoulder. "You have an instinctive knack for perspective. Perhaps you might enter some of your work with mine in the local county fair next weekend."

Gerard stared at the man, horrified. Local county fair, holy shit. He bet there would be prize-winning produce. And *hens*.

Luckily Mr. Felts was too distracted by class ending to notice Gerard's stricken expression. The bell rang and the girls, who had spent the period covertly discussing the relative merits of the Jonas Brothers and Miley Cyrus— gag Gerard with a spoon, seriously— promptly fled, leaving a detritus of broken pencils and crumpled paper in their wake. Gerard slouched slowly from the room after gathering his extra papers and stuffing them into Mikey's bag.

He peered out a window at the rapidly emptying parking lot, the steady stream of cars dispersing outwards into town. He waited a few minutes in the hallway, watching the dregs of students trickling by, then slipped through the cafeteria and found the back door leading to the band room. Looking uneasily behind him, he set off towards the woods, clutching the strap of Mikey's bag tightly and squinting against the afternoon sun.

The wind had picked up again, tugging at Gerard's hoodie strings and playing fitfully in the tall grass, chilly despite the sun. Winter here was going to be brutal, Gerard could tell. More leaves had fallen today; grey-brown tree branches showed here and there among the red and orange foliage. Gerard stood at the forest edge and peered down the path. Nothing was there—it was just dappled shadows, the far-off cry of birds. There was a strange echoing quality to the sound, like being in a vast empty cave full of trees. Maybe there was just the one bird, talking to itself. He wondered if he should walk a little further, see if Frank was waiting by the ruined house.

He took a step off the path in what he thought was the right direction, stood ankle deep in leaf litter and looked around. The trees stretched tall and dizzily similar around him. He vaguely remembered something about how moss grew on the north side of trees, but he'd never really understood how that was supposed to help if he didn't know which way north was pointing to begin with. Moss didn't grow in the direction of Frank, or of the path, for that matter. Gerard retreated the few steps back onto the path, shaking the leaves out of his socks, and scowled at the woods. Hopefully Frank would think to meet him on the path, instead of further out.

He settled down to sit on an old stone wall to wait. Occasionally the wind shifted and he could

hear faint music, from the band room, he guessed, but it was too far off to tell what song was playing. Every now and then he thought he heard someone walking, the crackle of footsteps filled with dead leaves, but when he looked, there was only ever empty forest. It was kind of creepy, not the good kind, either—more like an asshole-jock-lying-in-wait creepy. And now the wind was picking up, whistling mournfully through the skeletal canopy and scattering down drifts of red and orange.

After an hour of waiting, Gerard had to face the truth. Frank wasn't coming. Gerard felt disproportionately awful; his chest ached, like his ribcage was collapsing inward, like he'd suddenly gained a super-dense lump in his chest where his heart should be. Which was stupid, he'd just met Frank a few days ago. It wasn't like he was getting fucking stood up for prom.

It just sucked that he couldn't get his bag and his shit back, that was all. It wasn't a big deal. There were other people in town that liked him. He could just go hang out with Ray and Bob and all their friends, inside four solid walls, where there was heating and lights and video games. Probably Mrs. Toro was one of those moms that made homemade hot cocoa and cookies or whatever, unlike Gerard's mom, who made mainly coffee, and sometimes Black Russians.

But he stayed sitting on the cold stone wall, staring at his feet, every now and then craning his neck to look down the path. He felt like he could stay here forever, just disappear like that kid Ray had talked about at lunch. Or, instead of him disappearing, it'd be the other way around. The world outside the forest would vanish, and he'd wander the autumn woods forever, lost in dead leaves and distant blue sky. It was sort of eerie how easy it was after a while to convince himself that there was nothing outside the forest, how clearly he could imagine it. But it had been like an hour and a half with no sign of Frank, so Gerard eventually made himself get up and leave the forest.

The world was still there. The school parking lot was empty.

He couldn't bring himself to go to Ray's, not now. He headed home to make a care package for Mikey instead, and if he got maybe a little trashed on cheap Miller Lite as he did, well, he figured his mom wouldn't buy it if she didn't want him to drink it. Just—it was almost like heartburn, this tight feeling in his chest that he kept trying to shake by playing Black Flag really loud and singing his throat hoarse. He was probably annoying the hell out of his neighbors, but who gave a fuck. It wasn't that big a deal.

Maybe Frank was sick. But no, the fact was he'd probably just thought better of it after last night, after seeing what a drunk loser Gerard could be. Fuck. Well, what the fuck, ever, Frank. Who needed him, and his tattoos, and his fucking abandoned graveyard, and his scratchy voice singing the Misfits. Gerard fucking didn't need him, that was for fucking sure. He drank another beer.

He filled Mikey's bag with blueberry Poptarts and some of those snack-sized bags of Cheetos. A search through the cabinet turned up a couple cans of Diet Coke and those weird packets of instant cappuccino. Mikey claimed they were like caffeinated Pixie Stix, which even Gerard thought was maybe taking the caffeine addiction a little too far, but Mikey was sick and if he wanted to a caffeine buzz, who was Gerard to judge?

Gathering everything up, he went to sit out on the porch to wait for his mom. It was only the first week of October and there were already jack-o'-lanterns on some of the porches. There was one at the house across the street with a sphinx-like smirk, the edges of its mouth thin and curled. Gerard stared into its unlit eyes and listened to the distant sound of the traffic on Main Street. It sounded like the wind in the trees.

His mom pulled into the driveway half an hour later, and didn't ask any questions, just turned up the music on the radio. He guessed they'd both had a shitty day. They drove like that, in silence,

with Gerard staring out the window at the blur of passing fields, of stands of forest. When they got to the Trumbull Center, Mikey seemed like he'd had a better day, at least. He was typing furiously on his cell phone when they arrived. Gerard immediately went to go sit on the edge of his bed and dumped the bag of contraband on Mikey's pillow. He leaned against Mikey's shoulder. Mikey was warm, and smiling. It was nice.

"Fucking A," Mikey whispered happily when he found the packets of cappuccino mix. "You're my fuckin' hero, Gee."

Gerard felt a little drunk, still, not bad, just enough to be warm and maybe flushed—he hoped the nurse didn't notice, but Mikey totally did. As soon as their mom left, he cocked his head at Gerard and frowned.

"I'm fine," Gerard said and fuck, he could try to be a little more convincing, couldn't he? He didn't want to talk about Frank right now, or about Ted and his fucking asshole friends, but if he didn't say something Mikey would probably guess in a minute or two.

"Hey, I got a text from Pete earlier," he said brightly, forcing up a smile from somewhere. "Did he tell you he and Gabe want to come caravan up and visit sometime?"

And Mikey fucking beamed, which, okay, actually did make Gerard feel a little better. A lot better.

They spent the rest of the evening curled up on Mikey's bed, debating the havoc Pete and Gabe would wreak on a small town, then re-reading the old issues of *Kerrang* Gerard'd brought. Before he knew it, visiting hours were over, and Gerard had never thought he'd be reluctant to leave the flickering fluorescence and eerie sterility of a hospital. But he was, and it sucked.

See you tomorrow, Gee, Mikey mouthed and Nurse Ratched glared from the doorway, the picture of malevolence in white buckled shoes. She probably had needles secreted away somewhere on her person. Gerard shuddered. He hoped Mikey had hidden the black market goods away, because he totally knew who would get the blame for that one.

"I'm going, I'm going," he muttered, glaring at her, and hugged Mikey goodbye. "Have awesome dreams, Mikey," he said, feeling miserable. "You know you can text me whenever, right?"

Mikey rolled his eyes and made a shooin' motion with his hand. Gerard hated it, hated leaving him. If it wasn't for Gerard and his stupid fucking high school, maybe his mom could have stayed camped out in the hospital all night. She wouldn't have to leave to take Gerard home so that he could go to class first thing in the damned morning, and Mikey wouldn't have to be here alone. It wasn't fair. Life wasn't fair.

Chapter 4

That night, Gerard stayed up late and pondered running away, like Frank, maybe. Then his mom could live at the hospital, and Mikey would have company. But that'd make Mikey upset, and his mom, probably. Not to mention Gerard would probably die if he tried to go all caveman hermit in the woods. He couldn't figure it out, how to fix things, and wound up ignoring his earlier plan to try and stay sober, tonight; he just wanted to stop thinking about Mikey in that stairwell, about Mikey lying alone in the dark hospital, wheezing in his sleep.

The next day at school, he was in a shit-awful mood, and he *still* didn't have his own bag, just Mikey's borrowed knapsack, disproportionately heavy on his shoulders and filled with dead pens.

He knew he was being a dick, scowling at everyone and answering everything in monosyllables. He was probably freaking out Ray and annoying Bob, but he couldn't quite help himself. Each heartbeat throbbed in his temples, like mutant Athenan elves were trying to drill out of his skull, and fucking Ted had spent all of History flicking white-out all over his Bowie hoodie, and Isaac had tripped him so that he fell down the stairs on the way to lunch and everyone fucking laughed. It was a fucking horrible, terrible, day and Gerard would rather chew his own face off than stay in Vermont another three seconds.

He didn't want to whine, though, not out loud, so he just sat quietly at lunch and stared at his plate of wilted lettuce and tried not to give into the urge to just lay his head on the rough wooden table and go to sleep forever. Patrick looked at him a little funny and broke off in the middle of a conversation about zithers to offer him some extra-dark chocolate and a handful of Excedrin.

"You sort of look like you want to die," he said sympathetically, and Gerard didn't think some candy and pills was going to make him feel any differently, really, but it was a nice thought. It was good to remember there were decent people here, that it wasn't all Ted and his goons and the high school staff from hell.

He even managed to perk up a little in Biology, where they were taking a break from dissection to watch a NOVA special on the "Missing Link," which was, by all reports, pretty cute. Like a shell-less ninja turtle with a fishy tail.

"He seems like a Michelangelo to me," Ray commented after Gerard shared this profound insight. "Maybe that giant bug can be Splinter?"

Gerard was about to hypothesize what Shredder would be—one of those armored fish with giant teeth, maybe?—but then the teacher shushed them both. Without a good conversation going, it was hard to stay awake. It was a gray gloomy day, the sun sulking behind the clouds, and the narrator was droning soothingly about lobes and lungs. Most of the class was asleep, slumped motionless over their lab benches, shadowed and faceless. Gerard thought Ray had passed out too, head lolling in one hand, but then he poked Gerard in the shoulder, making him jump.

"So, seriously," Ray whispered. The kid behind them twitched briefly, snorting in his sleep, and Ray lowered his voice even more. Well, as low as Ray's voice *could* get, anyway. "Tomorrow's Friday. You have to come to Bob's, okay? We're all gonna spend the night and play video games until we puke. You in?"

Gerard had been a fucking bitch all day, he knew he had been, and Ray was still grinning at him hopefully, still making conversation, inviting him to hang out. It was uncanny. Ray was seriously the nicest person Gerard had ever met, ever. Gerard bit his lip. He wasn't—he liked Ray, he did. It

was just, he was crap with parties. Pete and Gabe had kept dragging him out to parties back in Jersey, but he'd always wound up that weird kid in the corner that picked over the bookshelves and drank all the tequila and couldn't keep up a conversation.

“Aww, c'mon, Gee. Come. Cooomme.” And then Ray seemed to realize he was saying something potentially vulgar and waggled his eyebrows in delight, making a ridiculous leering face and an obscene hand gesture.

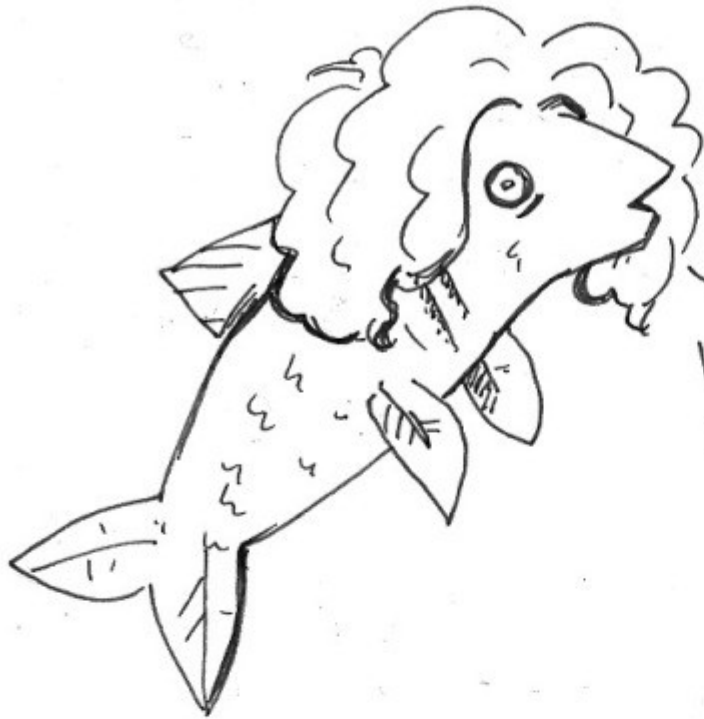
“What the fuck kind of slumber party is this?” Gerard retorted, unable to hide his grin. He turned back to the TV, though, because if Ray kept making that face, Gerard was probably going to lose it, bust up laughing into the echoing quiet of the room. Even Mrs. Stroble would notice that, he figured.

On the television screen, a bunch of fish were standing on their heads on the bottom of the ocean. What the fuck—fish were awesome. The sleeping kids were totally missing out.

“It's the best kind of party,” Ray said, in this super sleazy voice, forcing Gerard to smother a sudden fit of giggles into his sleeve, because wow, Ray was the exact opposite of sleazy. Then, as though to prove Gerard's point, Ray said in wondering tones, “Dude, what are those fish *doing*?”

“Headstands,” Gerard said knowingly, and the girl in front of them turned and shushed them, scowling, and Ray rolled his eyes and mimed zipping his lips. A few minutes later—the fish were apparently eating some sort of rock squid while they did headstands, and also they glowed blue, it was nuts—Ray shoved a notepad in front of Gerard. There was a sketch on the blue-lined paper. A fish with a fro said, “OMG GERARD WE WILL HAVE SO MUCH FUN.” Underneath in smaller letters, “GERARD WHY YOU GOTTA HATE THE FUN.” Gerard glanced down at it, then looked back up at the screen, then back down, at his vibrating phone. Pete had just sent him a series of pictures: an empty desk, a pink Converse shoe, that hyper band kid in a pink tiara. Gerard sent him one back of the Rayfish and then another of Ray himself making a puzzled face. Ray tolerated the picture-taking, then shoved the notebook back in front of Gerard and wiggled it.

Gerard gave in. He drew a Gerardsquid hiding under a rock and pondered a long time what to have it say. “I'm not really a party person,” he finally wrote in a drippy speech bubble, and shoved the notebook back.



OMG GERARD
WE WILL HAVE
SO MUCH FUN

GERARD,
WHY YOU GOTTA
HATE THE FUN?



I'M NOT REALLY
A PARTY PERSON

“But it’s just going to be me and Bob and maybe Patrick,” Ray said out of the corner of his mouth. “It’s not a party, dude.” Gerard looked down, away from Ray’s hangdog face, noticed his phone flashing again. ONE NEW MESSAGE. *who’s the man with the luxurious locks and can I pet him.* Gabe. Gerard shook his head, smiling at the phone.

“So are you coming?” Ray whispered, and Gerard shoved the phone hastily back in his pocket.

“Well. I don’t get home until late,” Gerard said finally, stared at a dead catfish in a nearby specimen jar instead. Fish everywhere today, this one smiling with a thin, lipless mouth and cloudy eyes, stubby whiskers. Ray bumped his shoulder and Gerard startled, looked up into Ray’s cheerful face. “It’s just... I don’t get back from seeing Mikey until, like, midnight.”

One of the things that he liked about Ray was that he’d never actually asked what was wrong with Mikey, even though he had to know it something pretty serious. It was still nice not being poked and prodded, nice not having sympathetic, knowing eyes aimed at him.

“Oh, what the fuck ever, dude,” Ray said, shaking his head. “Like any of us get to bed before fucking 6 am anyway. It’ll be fun. I’ll pick you up from your house at midnight, it’s no big deal. Give in, Gerard! Resistance is futile.”

So somehow Gerard had a slumber party arranged for that weekend. Bizarre. He’d never been to a sleepover type party before. He’d passed out at some kid’s house once, some friend of Pete’s, and woke up with raw egg all over himself the next morning—fucking parties. That probably didn’t count as a sleepover, anyway. Pete and Gabe had sometimes crashed at the Way house, and wound up in Gerard’s room, but that seemed more like an invasion than a slumber party, really. Though Gabe did like to paint fingernails on occasion, but Gerard suspected that probably wasn’t going to go on with Bob and Ray. Too bad, really. Ray would look awesome in sparkly teal.

Maybe he should bring beer or something, though. But did Ray drink? Gerard’d never asked, but he got the feeling Ray was sort of wholesome and would be horrified by even being asked about it. But Gerard wasn’t, like, positive about that. He spent the rest of biology and most of art worrying about it, and being glad Ray hadn’t asked him what bug had crawled up his ass earlier, and wondering whether to even bother stopping by the path to look for Frank again. But maybe Frank had been sick, and, well. No one at school mentioned him, and when Gerard tentatively asked Bob in history if he knew a guy named Frank, Bob just looked at him blankly, and then they got served a pop quiz and the conversation was dropped.

So maybe Frank *was* a runaway.

Or maybe he was just avoiding Gerard.

Either way, if Frank didn’t show up today... well, Gerard knew what that meant. It wasn’t like it was that surprising, and he had people to hang out with that weren’t Frank, anyway. He didn’t need Frank as a friend. It was totally fine. Except maybe if Frank didn’t show up, Gerard was going to get a little freaked out and possibly stage a man-hunt, or at least babble worriedly at Ray and Bob and make them scour the woods with him. Living in the woods couldn’t be safe, not really. What if Frank had gotten hurt? Fuck.

The bell rang, and he lingered in the art room until the halls cleared out, cleaning up the scrap paper and re-ordering the charcoal pencils while Mr. Felts watched him suspiciously. He managed

to escape the school without being stopped by anyone, and made a beeline for the woods.

He stood at the forest's edge, annoyed with himself for being hopeful. "Frank?" he said, as though Frank might be hiding behind a random tree or bush, or something. He looked around uneasily—nothing. No one. More trees. The parking lot was still half-full with the cars of kids trapped in band practice, or of fucking asshole jocks lying in wait for their next victim. Settling against the trunk of a maple, he fumbled in his bag for cigarettes—he was just waiting for everyone to leave, he wasn't waiting *for* anyone—when there was sudden movement, right next to him, just out of his range of vision. Gerard froze.

"Boo!" someone said in his ear, breath ghosting on the nape of his neck.

Fucking ninja fucker, Christ. Gerard clutched at his chest and maybe, just maybe, shrieked a little. He dropped his cigarettes and Frank retrieved them, giggling and smug and pleased with himself. One second there had only been dead leaves and stolid trunks of trees, wind and distant high-school sound, and now there was abruptly, in the midst of the empty woods, this human presence, shifting from foot to foot, stealing his cigarettes, talking a mile a minute about who knew what. Gerard was obnoxiously relieved, at first, and then slowly indignation started seeping in. He folded his arms over his chest, scowling.

"Where were you yesterday?" And despite his best efforts, his voice came out plaintive instead of nonchalant.

Frank paused, stopping mid-speech on whatever topic he'd stumbled on while Gerard was busy glaring—Gerard thought it might involve Silly Putty.

"Yesterday?" Frank said slowly, looking worried. "I was here yesterday. Like always."

"No," Gerard replied after a moment, a little bewildered. Frank looked confused; he was staring at Gerard with his brow furrowed. It wasn't exactly the response Gerard had expected. "I was here, right here. I waited. You weren't in school, either," he said pointedly. In fact, unless Frank had been incredibly stealthy, Gerard hadn't seen him in school at all, ever.

Gerard was gearing up to confront Frank about it when suddenly Frank's face cleared, and the look of confusion was replaced with a look of dawning horror.

"Oh," Frank said, eyes going huge. "Oh, fuck. Gee. I'm so sorry. I'm just, fuck, I'm not in school anymore, and I'm really bad with time, now. I swear I didn't mean to stand you up, I fucking swear."

"So, what, you just forgot about me?" Gerard said, feeling a sinking, terrible sensation in his chest. He stuffed his hands in his hoodie pocket and stared over Frank's shoulder. There was a bird's nest in the crook of a tree, all ragged unraveling twigs, its tenants flown south for winter to warmth and sunshine and leaves that stayed green.

"It's not like that," he said quickly, words tripping over each other, running together. And it wasn't fair that he could do the giant eyes and wounded expression that well. It made Gerard want to cave instantly. "You don't understand, I didn't forget, I just... I just lost track of myself. You know? When you're doing something and you lose track of time?" Frank looked frantic, almost, biting his lip and hugging himself. "You know, I have really awesome hearing, if I ever don't show again you can just call for me and I'll show up. I'll find you, honest."

"Call for you?" Gerard said incredulously, tricked into meeting Frank's eyes again. Fuck, he was doomed. The asshole was so fucking cute and plaintive. Unfair. "Like, what, like a duck call?"

“A Frank call,” Frank agreed, eyes big and pleading. Gerard melted. “But you can quack if you want.”

Gerard put on a show of rolling his eyes hugely and huffing, because he didn’t want to look *easy*. “You’re so fucking weird, seriously. You have a cell phone? I mean, I could just *call* call you next time.” Frank beamed at him and hell, he’d said next time, hadn’t he? “I’m not forgiving you,” Gerard said stubbornly, but fuck, did Frank have to have such a fucking bright smile? He could feel his pulse picking up, and even though he was still kind of mad at Frank, he still *wanted*, with a hot painful rush, and it sucked.

“Please forgive me, Gee,” Frank said leaning forward and pressing a hand to Gerard’s heart, oddly solemn. It should have been a joking tone of voice, but it wasn’t somehow. Gerard forgot to breathe for a second. “I don’t have a phone, but I promise it won’t happen again. I’ll be careful, honest. Forgive me?”

“Maybe,” Gerard hedged, and he was absolutely one hundred and ten percent sure Frank could feel Gerard’s heart beating out of his chest.

“I know I’m a fucking douche.” Frank was in his space, again, biting his lip and looking tragic, like someone had stood *him* up. Frank sort of was a fucking douche, but he looked so, well, *sincere*, that Gerard could feel himself wavering.

“You are sort of a douche,” he told Frank resolutely.

“I am a flaming, yeasty, douche,” Frank agreed, and, he apparently took Gerard’s horrified laugh as his cue to fling himself at Gerard and lock his arms around Gerard’s neck, dangling there beseechingly. “I am a fungus-ridden, bloody douche.”

“Gross, Frank!” Gerard protested, but he was giggling, because seriously, gross. Grosssss. Fuck, he’d totally given ground, and Frank was definitely pressing his advantage, beaming and laughing and tackling Gerard. He squashed their faces together and wheezed pleadingly into Gerard’s face, unaware that he was giving Gerard a small aneurysm.

“Can you ever forgive me?” Complete with batting lashes and an admirable attempt at a heaving bosom—the seriousness of the previous moment had completely fled. “I’ll do better, I swear, just give me a chance.”

“Get off me, oh my god!” But Gerard couldn’t stop laughing; he probably could have made a better effort to shove Frank off, but he was so ridiculously relieved that Frank hadn’t been standing him up, that he still wanted to be friends. Anyway, Frank was like a fucking leech. “Fine, I forgive you, let me go, oh my *god*.”

“I’ll never let go again,” Frank said dramatically, beaming, and dug his fingers into Gerard’s armpit. Gerard squawked and writhed free, or tried to—Frank sometimes seemed like he had twelve arms, and maybe a prehensile tail. And suction cups.

“So, um, you’re not in school anymore?” Gerard asked, carefully offhand, and Frank’s hands immediately let go of him and Frank took a step back, looking at Gerard like he’d suddenly sucker-punched him. Whoa. “...did you graduate?” Gerard continued uncertainly, biting his lip.

“Yeah, no school for me. I totally graduated,” Frank said, looking at the ground, hands shoved in his pockets, now, and okay, Gerard shouldn’t feel hurt that Frank was lying, but it still stung, that Frank didn’t trust him. He shoved his own hands in his hoodie glumly. But Frank was clearly uncomfortable, and Gerard didn’t want to press him, not if he wasn’t ready. Not yet.

“So,” he said, scrambling for a topic change. “Uh, do you still have my bag, with the comics and my notebooks and whatever? I sort of remember leaving it with you, but I was... kinda out of it. I should probably—”

“Oh! Sorry, I totally forgot.” Frank grinned at him, visibly relieved, and started strolling down the path backward, watching Gerard and beaming when Gerard started shuffling after him. “I actually cleaned the bag up for you, but I left it in the graveyard. So now you totally have to come. Plus, you promised me a sketch, you know.”

“You cleaned up the bag,” Gerard said incredulously, catching up. “That bag was totally dead. Nothing left to salvage. It was covered in at least three different food groups, all rotting, and also, *bile*.”

“I’m a master in the art of laundry,” Frank said modestly, and absently steered Gerard around a mud puddle. “Nothing else to do all day. Dude, tell me you brought the next copy of Doom Patrol, *please*.”

Gerard looked over at him guiltily and proffered his pack of Marlboros. “Uh, cigarette?” he said hopefully. Frank sighed, which shouldn’t have made Gerard feel so guilty, but it totally did.

“Tomorrow!” Gerard promised. “I totally forgot. I mean, I had it yesterday, but you didn’t show up, so,” he said pointedly, and Frank had the grace to look slightly abashed. “I’ll remember to bring them tomorrow, though. Promise. I’ll sharpie it on my arm.”

Appeased, Frank stole the pack and lit two cigarettes, handing Gerard one magnanimously. He dragged in a lungful of smoke, sighed blissfully, and grinned wolfishly at Gerard, all smiles and teeth and twinkling eyes. He led Gerard off the main path again, and down a thin, twisted route through the trees—a game trail, Frank had said absently, when Gerard asked. Frank stayed close, holding back brambles and kicking dead branches out of the way. Pale sunlight fell against the autumn leaves and cast dancing shadows on the back of Frank’s shirt.

“Short cut,” Frank said when Gerard finally called bullshit: this was no stinkin’ trail, this was Frank walking haphazardly through the trees and getting them totally lost. They’d halted by a shallow, fast-running stream. It was about twenty feet across, and there was a series of fallen logs wedged in amongst the rocks in a suspiciously linear pattern. The logs were shifting visibly in the current and covered in lichen and fungus. Gerard stared at them with dawning horror.

“C’mon, brave adventurer, time to ford the creek,” Frank said cheerily, shoving Gerard forward. Gerard balked.

“Oh, *fuck* no,” he said, standing on the bank and staring down at the clear, icy depths. The creek looked like hypothermia made incarnate. There was a lacy froth where it hit half-submerged rocks, and swirls of dead leaves drifted past in mysterious, hieroglyphic patterns. Some corner of Gerard’s mind had been leery of all the hiking and outdoorsy behavior he was embarking on, worried about ticks and exposure and getting lost, but he hadn’t suspected anything quite so dastardly as *this* lying in wait for him. While he stared in disbelief at the make-shift bridge, Frank took the opportunity to scurry across, moving lightly and doing a triumphant dance once he reached the other side.

“C’mon, Gee!” Frank hollered across. “You have no idea how long it took me to find these bastard logs for you and figure out if they’d hold your weight.”

“Fuck you!” Gerard said, indignant. “I’m not that much heavier than you. If it held you, it should hold me, right?”

Frank looked shifty on the other side of the river. “Probably.”

Gerard put a tentative foot on the bridge and felt the log roll beneath his foot. Oh man, this was going to end in hypothermia and watery death. Fuck this.

“I’ll just stay here,” Gerard said. “You can go fetch my bag. Chop chop.”

“Oh, kiss my ass,” Frank replied cheerfully, stepping lightly onto one of the logs. “C’mon, Gee, I’ll meet you halfway. Take my hand if you want to live!” And then he cackled ridiculously, swaying above the flowing water.

The logs were basically a death trap, Gerard knew this, but he still found himself inching out towards Frank in tiny, careful steps. Frank was doing some sort of bizarre flamingo pose and beaming at Gerard encouragingly, wiggling his fingers in the air. Frank was maybe a foot away when one of the logs crunched beneath Gerard’s foot and sent a cascade of centipedes and grubs and many-legged things out onto his shoe and the leg of his pants. Gerard squawked and probably would have hurtled ass-backwards into the water if a hand hadn’t grabbed him suddenly and hauled him to safety, which Gerard would probably appreciate more when he wasn’t covered with spidery agents of death.

“Get them off! Seriously, fucking get them off, oh Jesus, you asshole, what the fuck, the fucking woods! Who comes here! You and your fucking bridge, I’m going to *die*.”

Eventually Frank stopped laughing long enough to help, inspecting his feet and pants legs for evil maggot spiders, flicking them off into the wilderness with a forefinger.

“These used to bother the fuck out of me,” Frank said, peering at one fat, pale-bodied spider perched on his fingertip. Gerard stared at him. Frank was clearly in league with the forces of darkness. This fucking clinched it. Frank flicked the spider into the leaf litter, where it scuttled away on its evil purposes. Gerard shuddered and patted his jeans again against stray skittering sensations. What if they’d laid *eggs*?

“You’re all clear, Gee,” Frank said, clearly amused. “Calm down. It’s just spiders, babyface.”

Unfortunately, Gerard sensed that to give into his prima donna instinct and stomp off into the nearest grove of trees, cursing all hot boys and their treacherous ways, would result in mud and leeches and other unpleasant woodland things, not to mention being lost for all eternity and dying cold and alone. So he settled for blowing his bangs out of his eyes with a huffy breath and glaring.

“Aw, Gee,” Frank said, rocking back on his heels and giggling. “Buck up. We’re almost there. Even you couldn’t get lost now.”

Gerard sincerely doubted this, but the trees were thinner here, and the woods looked strangely insubstantial, as if the late afternoon sunlight was a thin veneer Gerard could scrape away with his thumbnail. Frank was walking backwards, doing an MC Hammer slide through the leaves—the showoff, Gerard grumped to himself, biting down on a grin.

“You’re gonna fucking run into a tree or something,” he called out, shuffling along at a more sedate pace behind Frank, keeping a weather eye out for spider webs.

“Not me,” Frank said, and grinned as he dodged a stump. “I know these woods like the backs of my hands, motherfucker.”

Gerard had to admit, that did imply a certain degree of familiarity. God, Frank’s hands. Christ, he had to remember not to think about that whole shower scenario, Frank’s tattoos blurring up and

down, until he knew for sure he wasn't going to embarrass himself and get a ridiculously large boner or something. Frank looked over, mouth open to say something, and caught Gerard staring. His eyes went wide—fuck, Gerard probably was making a terrible, weird face, and now Frank had *seen it*—but then suddenly Frank's foot caught mid-stride in a muddy hollow and he toppled over with a look of comic surprise, landing in a drift of leaves with a thump and a muffled “What the fuck!”

Gerard felt a pointed silence and maybe a raised, gleeful eyebrow would be the best commentary on the situation, so he manfully withheld his triumphant cackling and sauntered over to the supine Frank. Frank looked flabbergasted.

“I never trip,” Frank said, laying on his back and staring up at Gerard. He pointed a finger accusingly in the vague direction of Gerard's kneecap. “You made me lose my balance!”

“Ah, yes, I finally get my superpower,” Gerard said solemnly. “Tripping people that walk backwards. Fuckin' A. I vow to use it only for good.”

Frank seemed pretty committed to lying in the leaf litter, one red maple leaf stuck in his hair. “Liar. You're a fucking fiend. Supervillain material for sure.”

Gerard dug a toe into Frank's side.

“Up,” he said. “We have stuff to do, motherfucker, and if I'm late again tonight my mom's gonna roast my balls over hot coals.”

“Oh, well then,” Frank said. “In the interest of saving your balls for another day. It's just around the bend. Can't you hear the river from here?”

“Do we have to ford it?” Gerard asked darkly. He didn't know how he'd fallen in with a punk Huck Finn wannabe, but he knew he didn't like it.

“Nah, task for another day,” Frank said, cheer apparently regained as he levered himself up by means of Gerard's pants, grabbing handfuls of fabric and dragging himself up. Gerard clung to his waistband for dear life.

“What the fuck, Frank?” he squeaked. “I'm not a fucking ladder.”

“Good man,” Frank said, and patted Gerard on the shoulder. Gerard stared at him. He'd known weird people in his day—Gabe Saporta came to mind—but Frank really took the cake on personal space issues, or the lack thereof. Dude was fucking handsy.

“C'mon, this way, Gee.”

'This way' involved one last tromp through a thatch of spiky hell-plants, and then abruptly Gerard bashed his shin on a granite cross. Who the cross belonged to was unclear; the name had worn away and all he could see through watering eyes was an indistinct squiggled impression.

“I call her Matilda Bones,” Frank said over Gerard's shoulder, making him jump. He was watching Gerard intently. “I named all the ones that didn't have their own names anymore, you know?”

“Yeah?” Gerard said, grinning. “Dude, that's fucking macabre. And awesome!” He added quickly, in case Frank was offended, but he shouldn't have worried. Frank was obviously ridiculously excited by the whole thing, pointing out a tombstone with a skull and crossbones and the really eerie epitaph “Today for me, tomorrow for thee,” then getting distracted and dragging Gerard over to look at the intricate carving on a stone set into the ground, engraved with willows and urns and a

sunburst pattern rising off of the granite. Someone must have planted roses on one of these graves, once, because here and there thorny vines snaked around tombstones and crawled up trees.

“They bloom in spring,” Frank said. “You’ll like it, it looks fuckin’ creepy and symbolic and shit. There’s apple blossoms, too. Careful, don’t slip—it’s kind of mossy here.”

“Watch your own self, dude,” Gerard said, but his old Converse were sliding all over the place, so he caught hold of Frank’s arm preemptively before he continued mocking him. “‘Know these woods like the backs of my hands,’ my ass.”

“Yeah,” Frank said, staring at Gerard’s hand on his sleeve, brow furrowed. “That was a fluke, though. You’re a total klutz. I’m a goddamn ninja fox.”

“I know,” Gerard glowered, scowling at Frank as they weaved among tree trunks and tombstones. “You always scare the shit out of me, I never hear you coming. I still think you must have tunnels or a fucking trapeze or something.”

“Mmm,” Frank hummed noncommittally and bumped Gerard with his shoulder. “Here, check it out.”

He nodded to a non-descript grey tombstone, hands in his pockets. Standing in the patches of sunlight, Frank looked even paler than before, like even the cold autumn sun could blister him. Gerard had a moment where he jumped from the thought, ‘I should slather him in sunscreen, jeez, I bet he scorches in the summer,’ to ‘I should slather him in sunscreen and take off his pants and maybe bite his collar bone,’ to other, less decent images, and he totally missed whatever Frank had been saying.

“Sorry, uh. What were you saying?” Gerard said sheepishly, and sent a silent prayer to the god of teenage crushes that he hadn’t been making a terrible, slack-jawed sexual-fantasy face. Frank was grinning at him and shaking his head, so probably he hadn’t noticed anything untoward.

“Nothing important, I guess,” Frank laughed, and knelt on the mossy ground, brushing away some grime from the tombstone before looking up directly into Gerard’s eyes.

“Gerard, meet Sally,” Frank said, strangely solemn, running his hand over the smooth slate. The words on her tombstone were deeply grooved and still legible. Sally Cartmill, September 12th, 1811-April 13th, 1829.

“She was our age, huh,” Gerard said, enchanted. Fuck, this was cool. It wasn’t a date, he knew that, but if it had been, it’d be the coolest date *ever*. He knelt next to Frank and reached out a hand, felt the name beneath his fingers, rubbed his thumb over the deep text and the engraving of a simple lily.

“Yeah,” Frank replied, leaning against the stone and flicking his hair out of his eyes. “This is her family plot, see? You can sorta see the wall around it, but it’s mostly gone. And I guess maybe they planted apple trees in it, on the graves – see, there’s one by each headstone, and they’re the oldest. I guess they spread from there.”

And yeah, now that Gerard noticed it, there were fallen apples strewn about the forest floor, patches of red and reddish brown, and in the trees the apples still hung low and heavy from the bows. Fruit actually growing on trees. Weird. Awesome. Gerard was yanked from his reverie about living from the land and trapping furs by Frank kicking a rotten apple at him. It rocketed past with a squishy thump and Gerard flung his hands in front of his face a split second later.

“Why!” Gerard sputtered indignantly, clutching his hoodie closer like a shield. “That thing probably had fucking wasps nesting in it or something!”

“Pay attention to me, asshole,” Frank said, sticking out his tongue. “I could see you drifting off again.” And then, as Gerard continued to glower, he shook his head and muttered something about Gerard being a giant baby, reaching upwards to an overhead tree branch and exposing a strip of pale, inked skin. Gerard edged a few steps closer, skirting past a small, square grave marker. He was just interested in what exactly the tattoo said, what the wrought-iron letters spelled. Not at all in the curling line of hair trailing down Frank’s belly and into his pants. Definitely not.

“Heads up!”



Through some miracle of physics, Gerard flailed his hands around spastically and managed to catch the apple just before it hit his nose. Frank did a golf clap, which Gerard ignored in favor of being hugely impressed with himself. The apple was still warm from hanging in the autumn sun, dappled red and gold, surface more uneven and rough than the fruit he saw in the grocery store.

“They’re pretty good this time of year,” Frank told him and watched Gerard carefully inspect the apple for worm or wasp holes before taking a self-conscious bite. It was good, Frank was right. Crisp and tart, with an undertone like honey.

“Anyway,” Frank said, looking away as Gerard blissfully savored each bite. Wild apples from a fucking abandoned graveyard. It was like a fucking storybook. Maybe they’d give him powers, let him talk to the dead. He dragged his attention back to Frank, who was rambling on again. “So, yeah. This is the Cartmill family plot,” Frank said, waving a hand around them. “It’s my favorite. What do you think?”

“Hey,” Gerard said around a mouthful of fruit, bending down to peer at another stone. “You can actually still see the names and dates on almost all of these. That’s weird. Most of the other ones we’ve seen were completely obliterated.”

“Different kind of stone,” Frank said, hands in his pockets. He was watching Gerard potter around with an expression Gerard couldn’t quite read—hopeful, almost, which didn’t make sense, so Gerard went back to trying to read the weathered stone. “Slate, I think, but what do I know. I’m not a rock doctor.”

“A geologist,” Gerard corrected absently, and Frank rolled his eyes hugely and muttered, “Beg your pardon, I’m not a *geologist*.” When Gerard pouted, though, Frank grinned and called him a dweeb, but in this really proprietary, affectionate voice that made Gerard feel kind of hot and dizzy and delighted.

He went back to poking through the little family plot, trying not to blush, and then got genuinely diverted by deciphering the dates.

“Holy shit,” Gerard whispered, and crouched down on his knees by the last stone, apple sticky and forgotten in his hand. “They all died within, like, a fucking week of each other. You think there was an Indian attack or something? Maybe some kind of Mike Meyers vengeance killer going after the Cartmill family...” Gerard trailed off, story panels already falling into place in his head. Open with the overgrown cemetery, the fallen stones. Flash forward to a blood-soaked room.

“Nah,” Frank said vaguely, and slouched further down against a tree trunk, hands in his pockets. “Think they died in a flu outbreak or something.”

“Yeah?” Gerard said, slightly disappointed but still intrigued. Killer viruses were good too, just in a different way. He could work with a killer virus. “How d’you know?”

“Oh,” Frank said, hair blowing into his eyes. “Dunno, just a feeling. Probably read it somewhere.”

“Huh,” Gerard said, and started rummaging through his bag, coming up with his sketchpad and Derwent pencils, and then he jumped about a million feet in the air. “Fuck!”

“What?” Frank asked, staring at him.

“Did you hear that?” Gerard said, looking behind himself nervously. “I thought... nevermind. It was just the wind.” But he could have sworn he’d heard someone laughing, in his ear. Right next to him. Just the wind, though. Right. Way to act like a spaz, Gerard. He pulled his hoodie closer around him. The afternoon light was all warm and gold now, slanting through the empty branches, but it was still cold, chilly enough that he wished he’d worn a long sleeve shirt beneath his hoodie instead of a t-shirt.

“Hey, do you mind just standing there a moment while I draw you?” he asked Frank diffidently.

Frank had been looking at Gerard contemplatively, but at this he promptly struck a bizarre, Egyptian pose and started singing Vogue. It was painfully adorable and completely at odds with the atmosphere Gerard had been hoping for—suitable for a doodle, but not really an in-depth study.

“Jackass.” Gerard rolled his eyes, manfully resisting the urge to sing along. “Can’t you just stand there? Look, I dunno, contemplative? Look like you’ve got the flu.”

Gerard settled with his back to Sally’s tombstone and spread out his supplies on the ground beside him, flipped to a clean page in the book. He glanced back up, charcoal pencil next to the paper, and Frank stared back at him, waggling his eyebrows dramatically. Biting his lip, Gerard returned his eyes to the paper, starting off with quick sure strokes of the outline of trees, the shadows of the tombstones, a white island in the left side of the paper where Frank and his tree would be.

The river was rushing past and filling the graveyard with water-sounds, roars and ripples; Gerard could see it froth white beyond the last edge of the trees and tombstones. Frank was half in shadow, and something made him want to add in the Cartmills, Sally Cartmill a distant column of smoky charcoal, with the faintest hint of a face. He blew at the page, charcoal dust lifting, and picked up his red and burnt sienna watercolor pencils, his burnt ultraviolet and black pine, and shaded some of the leaves, edged some purple shadows beneath the tombstones. He couldn’t shake the feeling that someone was laughing. He kept twitching and looking over his shoulder, but nothing was there.

When he stretched, looking back up again, Frank was looking at him oddly, gaze intense and penetrating.

“Uh,” Gerard said uncertainly, and looked over his shoulder again. Nothing. What was Frank looking at? Had he gotten charcoal on his face? “Sorry if that was boring. Wanna see?”

Frank approached slowly through the tall dead grass and leaves, coming right up to Gerard’s feet before stopping, face still strangely blank. Gerard turned the sketchpad around and Frank started, reached out a hand to touch the page. When Frank laughed suddenly into the quiet river-noise, Gerard actually could feel his heart sort of stutter before getting back on beat.

“Fuck, Gerard, you did this in like fifteen minutes and it’s the most awesome thing ever. Damn,” he whistled, shaking his head, still chuckling.

“Yeah?” Gerard said, and felt his cheeks flush. “You like it?”

“Fucking—yes, I fucking like it, moron,” Frank said, still cradling the sketchpad carefully, like it was a tiny paper baby. “The fucking leaves blowing across everything. The, whatsit, the perspective. You made me look so badass, dude. I look like a fuckin’ necromancer. And hey, you even got Sally. Gorgeous, dude. Can I have this?”

“Of course, yeah. I drew it for you,” Gerard said, still blushing as Frank carefully tore the sheet out

of the book.

“Lemme go put this away before it gets crinkled and shit.”

“I can just draw you another if it does,” Gerard offered. Seriously, Frank was totally overreacting.

Frank waved him off and started loping towards some crumbling stone buildings on the edge of the river. “I know it’s kinda late, but it’ll only take a second. I’ll get you home on time, princess, don’t worry.”

A rabbit startled away from them as they crashed through the underbrush—Gerard didn’t know what the fuck people were talking about when they said the grandeur of nature made them feel small. Gerard always felt like a fucking water buffalo lumbering around out here. But the rabbit was a dark glossy brown with a white flashing tail and Gerard, charmed, followed it with his eyes for a few moments before he lost sight of it again.

“A bunny, dude!” Gerard said, hustling to catch back up with Frank and banging his shin on a dead stump. Another bruise for the collection, whatever. Gerard had a theory that eventually he’d just become impervious to pain entirely, and that day was gonna be awesome. “Did you see it?”

“I see them all the time,” Frank said, bemused. He’d stopped to watch Gerard watch the rabbit. “I know you may not have noticed, Sasquatch, but we *are* in the woods. Bunny country.”

“Did you see its little nose?” Gerard sighed, hugging himself and wondering if the fur had been as soft as it looked. “Fuck, I want a bunny. Frank, catch me a bunny.”

“What am I, Daniel Boone?” Frank laughed, and pushed aside some branches covering a door into one of the dilapidated stone houses and making a grand sweeping gesture, motioning Gerard forward. “Home sweet home. Cool, right? They had some archaeologists out here a while back, identifying all this shit, but they didn’t stay long. ”

Gerard stayed put. He felt a little iffy on the sweetness or the hominess of the building. He also felt a little worried about the stability of the infrastructure.

“So, this is the mill house. No one comes out here, not since that archaeology thing, anyway. Guess it’s supposed to be haunted or something.” Frank laughed and looked at Gerard’s sketch, grinning crookedly. “I sorta fell into hiking when my parents moved out here, found this place and set up camp. Nothing much else to do, you know, besides sit at home and scratch your balls, and here my parents weren’t always yelling about money and shit.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” Gerard said, still hovering outside the door, despite Frank rolling his eyes and pushing him towards the door. “If you hadn’t dragged me out here, I’d probably have just slept until my mom got home. It’s nice to not be in that house, all the time. It’s not *my* house, it’s just... I dunno, it kinda creeps me out sometimes. And it’s always so empty.”

“Empty sucks,” Frank agreed quietly, and then shook himself. “Fuck, it’s getting late. C’mon, you coming in or what?”

Gerard batted away some cobwebs stretched across the door and peered warily into the shadowed room. Frank finally just swore and tugged Gerard inside by the wrist, because “It’s fucking fine, you pansy, it hasn’t fallen yet.” Gerard stuck out his tongue to the back of Frank’s head and let himself be pulled.

“When’d your family move to Glen Fell, anyway?” Gerard asked, edging inside after him. Maybe the roof wouldn’t cave in.

Frank was rustling around in a corner somewhere, futzing with a ratty backpack.

“Oh, a while back,” Frank said absently, emerging from the bag with a dusty-looking can of Diet Coke. “Thirsty?”

Gerard accepted the can cautiously—seriously, it was offering a Grand Sweepstakes Prize to go see the *Nsync World Tour. This can had probably been made when Gerard was still, like, in diapers or whatever. The aluminum had probably leached heavy metals and poison dye into the soda by now. Possibly when he opened it, an airborne killer virus would escape. He cautiously popped the top and pattered around the room for a while, fake-drinking and making swallowing gestures. Where the hell had Frank gotten this shit? Was he raiding the backrooms of warehouses or something? But Frank had gone into sullen, non-communicative mode, so Gerard bit his tongue on his questions for now.

Half the building was roofed only by tree branches and tiled with rubble and sapling trees. On the other side there was a blackened fireplace with a sleeping bag tucked up next to it, Gerard’s copy of *Doom Patrol* on top of the pillow. Another stack of tattered comics rested on a makeshift log shelf, and a guitar case leaned drunkenly next to it, and a hand-crank radio/flashlight, along with an assortment of lighters and candles littered the ground by the fireplace.

Frank’s only attempt at decoration, it looked like, was the row of colorful glass bottles he’d lined along most of the windows, sunlight casting bright shadows on the floor. Old, warped cloudy jugs and beer bottles and medicine containers, Gerard guessed, and an assortment of water-smoothed fragments that glittered in the afternoon light. Greens and blues and murky whites, ambers and deep reds, dark browns.

It was an awesome set up, in terms of looking totally badass and like a fucking lair or something, but Christ, if Frank were actually spending the night out here for more than a day or two at a time, it was a little subpar. Gerard stirred the glass shards with his hand, the water-worn edges smooth against his palm, deep in thought. He had to be spending the night, right? Just camping trips or whatever. He couldn’t actually live out here, could he?

But that was definitely what it looked like was going on, and he really couldn’t think of a better explanation for Frank being out here all the time, for Frank never leaving the woods at all. Fuck, Gerard had to get him out of there, somehow. He could totally drag Frank home with him, at least. What could be so bad that living out in the woods was better than being in an actual house, an actual home? Gerard’s house might suck at the moment, but at least it was warm, and out of the wind.

“Found those in the river,” Frank said from behind him, making Gerard jump and drop the shards with a clatter. “I kept thinking I’d do something with them, but I can never think what to make. I’m not artsy and shit, like you.”

“Yeah?” Gerard said, and bit his lip, thinking. “I have some good adhesives and frames at home, packed away somewhere, I could probably make you a pretty nasty mosaic. Stained glass, you know.”

“Really?” Frank said, beaming from ear to ear. “That’d be so fucking sweet, Gee. Anything you make would be awesome, honest.”

Gerard pattered with the glass some more, waiting for his cheeks to cool, then after getting the go-ahead from Frank, he pocketed some of the shards to show Mikey later. Frank was grinning at him, leaning against the windowsill overlooking the river.

“Found those bottles the other summer on the island,” Frank told him. “There’s a lot of cool stuff washed up there, all these bones, and some crazy buttons, and nails. I like the glass best though.” He snorted. “I’m pretty great at decorating, huh. Whatcha think, I need some goldfish to fix my chi?”

“Nah, maybe a rabbit,” Gerard said absently, staring out the window and trying to imagine what it’d be like to live out here, how starved you’d be for attention, if this was your home, this broken house from three hundred years ago. No television, just the piping of birds, the sound of the river and trees. And it got so dark at night, and cold. It wasn’t even winter yet, but it was already chilly—not to the point that frost was on the ground in the morning, but close.

Gerard wanted to say something, something like how long have you been out here, are you okay, let me help—but Frank couldn’t be planning to stay out here, like, *permanently*. That’d be insane.

“You and that bunny,” Frank said, shaking his head, laughing. “Bunnies are fucking vicious, you know that right? They have giant teeth, and claws. Monty Python don’t lie.”

“We’ll name him Tim, then,” Gerard said, lounging against the windowsill and staring out at the sky, streaked with high cirrus clouds. Frank looked sort of jittery, and he was fiddling with a lighter, flipping it on and off. Fuck, Gerard was going to have to say *something*.

“Look, I don’t wanna pry, Frankie,” he started nervously, staring at his hands, then over at the pathetic sleeping bag, the crumbled remains of a fire. “But... I mean, it sorta seems like you’re living out here. But you’re not, right?”

“Can we not talk about this right now?” Frank said, voice small. Gerard cut his eyes over at Frank, who was all in shadow now and pressing himself into the wall, like he could make himself disappear. “Just... not today?”

“Okay,” Gerard said readily, a little ashamed of how relieved he was to let the subject go. “No, that’s cool. Just, do you need anything? Like, a place to stay, or food, or something? My mom wouldn’t mind, I—”

“No! No. Thanks, though,” Frank said, voice quiet and unhappy. “You’re—it was nice of you to ask. I can’t, though.”

“I mean,” Gerard said in a rush. “It’s not like I’d tell anyone you were here or anything, or judge, or whatever. We’re friends, right? I mean, I totally like you, like, um. A lot, and if there’s anything I can do to help—”

Frank had the strangest look on his face, eyes wide and staring and he wasn’t saying anything, Jesus Christ, it was like torture. Gerard could not get himself to stop talking, it was like an out-of-body experience.

“And you totally don’t have to tell me now, or whenever, I just want you to know that, um, I’m here for you, uh—” Oh Christ, he’d really just said that. He was like a Lifetime Romance Hallmark card. He finally just shut himself up with the soda, before remembering the whole Soda of the Ancients thing and then he stood there for a second with his cheeks bulged out with flat, dead soda, trying to decide if spitting or swallowing was the better part of valor. Maybe he could pretend to be overcome with emotion and turn around and subtly spit out the window. Frank finally burst into laughter, and the weird terrible awkward stillness finally passed. Gerard swallowed and made an unhappy, dying sound.

“Soda a little out of date?” Frank snickered. “Sorry, dude, I wasn’t thinking, I never drink that

stuff.”

“Shut up, asshole,” Gerard said, pained, tongue gone all fuzzy and gross. He totally should have spit that shit out. He was probably going to get *E. coli.*, but it was sort of worth it, to see Frank grinning again. “Oh my god, that was so gross.”

“Shoulda spit it out,” Frank said, still snickering, shaking his head. “You’re fucking nuts, you know that? Anyway, we should get going before it’s dark.”

Which was true. Gerard dumped the rest of the coke out the window and smashed the can, shoved it in his hoodie pocket to recycle later.

“Hey, um. Thanks,” Frank said awkwardly as they left, shuffling through the late afternoon sunshine back towards the woods. “For being understanding or whatever. I promise, I’ll tell you the whole story one day. Soon. Just, there’s stuff about me you don’t know, and I—fuck, later, right?”

Frank turned his head to look up at Gerard hopefully, and Gerard looked down and hated his brain, because now was totally not the time to think about leaning down three inches and kissing Frank’s lower lip, but that was definitely the one image at the forefront of his brain. Frank’s lips, pale and pink, and he just wanted to press Frank into the sun-warmed grass and see what he tasted like. Probably better than expired Diet Coke. Probably like cigarettes.

Meanwhile, while his brain derailed and pondered Frank’s flavor, Frank was looking at him and waiting for an answer. Great.

“Oh, yeah,” Gerard said, and de-snagged his sleeve from a bush that he’d wandered into while on autopilot. “Yeah, later. No rush, dude. I trust you.”

Frank blew out a gusty sigh and then grinned at Gerard, and Gerard sort of didn’t mind if Frank never told him the whole story, only he *did* mind, because something bad had happened to Frank, Gerard knew it, and he just wanted to fucking help. But Frank kept shooting him disbelieving, delighted looks, like he’d gotten a reprieve at the gallows or something, and if he wasn’t flirting with Gerard then he was a total fucking tease. He kept bumping his shoulder against Gerard’s and brushing their hands together and Gerard was about to explode with confusion and giddiness. Frank was totally flirting with him, he had to be, or Gerard was completely and utterly out of his mind.

The sun was slowly setting and the forest seemed—not darker, but the colors had changed: cooler, shot through with purple. It was weird how different the forest could look through the course of a day. Probably it’d look like a different place entirely in winter, no bright red and gold of leaves on trees, just dark branches and white snow. And in spring, damn. Gerard really couldn’t imagine this place in spring.

He wasn’t looking forward to the rest of the walk home in the dark forest, though, even with Frank leaning against him, rambling on about Gerard’s Bowie hoodie and how *The Man Who Fell to Earth* was pretty much the zenith of modern cinema. Gerard tended to agree, but he was starting to feel pretty damned tired; he hadn’t really paid attention to the fact that they’d been heading downhill earlier, other than to note that dead leaves were slippery and that he didn’t want to careen to his death, but every bruise on his body sure as hell noticed the trail sloping upwards now.

Mikey would never make it out here to see these ruins—fuck, he couldn’t even make it up a flight of stairs. A hill like this, covered in leaf mold and dirt and god knew what other irritants... it was stupid to think about, anyway. Asthma aside, Mikey wasn’t any more of an outdoorsy guy than Gerard was, and it wasn’t like *he* had a crush on Frank that would make him want to torture

himself with evil thorn bushes and mud puddles and physical exertion. Or hopefully didn't. Wouldn't. Whatever. But it would have been nice to have the option to drag Mikey out here, to have someone to sympathize and complain with.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," Gerard said, groping for a change in subject when Frank stopped mid-rant and looked at him strangely, like maybe he'd noticed Gerard's expression shifting. "I might go to a concert this weekend with some guys from school, but I guess you can't come?" Frank nodded, didn't say anything or meet Gerard's eyes and Gerard hastily continued. "They're good guys, I like them a lot. They're all in band. Bob Bryar and Ray Toro, and some band kids named Patrick and, um. Worm? They're pretty cool. Ray likes Bowie too, he's—"

"Toro?" Frank interrupted, eyes huge. "Little Ray Toro?"

"Uh, that dude isn't little," Gerard said, looking down at Frank pointedly from his two extra inches of height. Gerard had a freakishly tall little brother; he knew to savor what he had.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Frank said dismissively, and lifted a blackberry bramble out of the way for Gerard, which probably Gerard shouldn't glow over. "He still play guitar? That kid could shred like a motherfucker."

"I guess so," Gerard hazarded. Fuck, they were at the creek again. Maybe he could just jump across. "Yeah, he said something about working out some songs with Patrick on Garageband."

"Yeah?" Frank said wistfully. "Fuck, I miss jamming with the kid. But, um. Don't tell him you saw me or anything, seriously, Gee. Please."

"Huh?" Gerard said, startled, and tried to remember if he'd mentioned Frank to Ray yet—no, he'd just talked to Bob and Patrick, he thought. "Oh, uh. No, sure. S'cool. My lips are sealed."

Frank punched him gleefully in the shoulder. "You're totally my dog," he said solemnly.

"I am?" Gerard asked, beaming and playing with his hair before he could stop himself. "Awesome. So, uh, is it okay for you to maybe meet me tonight at my house? I mean, it'll be dark, probably no one would see you or anything, right? And my mom totally goes to sleep at like midnight, passes right the fuck out. She'd never know you were there, honest."

Frank stared at his feet, and then stared out towards the distance.

"No, uh. That's not really a good idea," he said, not meeting Gerard's eyes.

"We could be really stealthy?" Gerard said hopefully. He'd anticipated resistance on Frank's part, and had already planned out a counterattack. "I've got all the special edition Sam Raimi films on DVD. We could have a marathon. With pizza. And, uh." Gerard pondered his mental catalog of alcohol. "Gin and tonics. And a carton of cigarettes. Or just coffee, if you want." He made his eyes as wide as possible and waited.

Frank made a frustrated noise and waved his hands.

"Dude," he said unhappily. "I *can't*."

Well, shit, if Frank could resist the allure of campy zombies and the Necronomicon, then Gerard had nothing. He wondered how Frank got food if he never fucking left the forest. He narrowed his eyes. Fuck, if Frank was a fucking scout and, like, hunted for his food, Gerard might have to disown him. That shit was not cool.

“Fine,” he grumbled, and stared morosely at the crumbling, vermin-infested bridge over the Creek of Doom. “But when I die visiting you out here in the darkness with all the hidden stones and fucking, I dunno, chupacabras, you’ll totally be sorry.”

“So melodramatic,” Frank teased, and shook his head. “I’d never let you die, Gee. I’ll fight all the chupacabras with my bare hands. My teeth. Those fuckers wouldn’t stand a chance.”

Gerard couldn’t stop beaming at that, not for hours, not even after he’d fallen in the creek and sloshed home, dripping muddy and happy on the porch in the fading light. It did sort of suck that he’d dropped his bag in the fucking creek, though, even if Frank had fished it out in time for only a few of the things inside to get wet. Ah, well. He’d gotten sort of used to using Mikey’s bag—he’d just transfer his notebooks over until his own dried out and stopped smelling slightly like foot.

Anyway, the point was, Frank was his knight in grungy armor. It was awesome.

His mother was less pleased. She clearly hadn’t anticipated her son metamorphosing into Tom Sawyer overnight, staring at Gerard in slack-jawed disbelief.

“You fell into a *what*? Hell no, you’re not coming into the house like that,” she told Gerard finally, hands on her hips and blocking the doorway.

“What, you going to hose me down on the porch?” Gerard asked cheerfully, and squelched past her into the foyer. He at least had shucked his dead Converse on the front step, but his too-long jeans left a muddy slime trail behind him as he headed upstairs to change. His mother hovered behind him with a towel, grumbling.

“Hey, you’re the one that said I needed to get out more,” Gerard pointed out airily, and left her muttering to herself darkly about the signs of the apocalypse. He closed the door to his room, peeling off his rank jeans and shucking off his hoodie. His clothes were actually more damp than wet by now, but it was still fucking freezing outside, especially with the wind blowing. Dry clothes were totally a necessity, even if it did make them a little late to the Center.

Chapter 5

That night Mikey was upset, jittery with some new corticosteroid treatment they had him on.

“Don’t like it,” he whispered at Gerard, hoarse and quiet. “I can’t stay still. I can’t sleep.”

So Gerard climbed in the bed with him and let Mikey play with the old broken bits of glass Frank had collected, running them over his hands and listening to them clink together like windchimes while Gerard described the river and the toppled gravestones. He figured it was safe telling Mikey about the mill house, about Frank’s sleeping bag, because who would Mikey tell? Mikey kept all Gerard’s secrets; Gerard didn’t know how *not* to tell him.

Mikey seemed just as worried about Frank as Gerard, but didn’t have any better ideas of what to do about it, so Gerard let it drop for a while. Mikey had enough to deal with, after all.

Gerard got out an old issue of *Sandman* and read it aloud, instead, doing all the voices, Doctor Destiny and everything. Nurse Ratched came in after an hour or so, to stare disapprovingly and inject some poison into Mikey’s IV, taking spirometry measurements.

He made himself watch for the IV thing, because if Mikey had to deal with it then Gerard could at least do the solidarity thing, and tried not to shudder too obviously.

“S cold,” Mikey said, sighing and rubbing at his arm above the needle insertion. Gerard was not going to throw up. He put his arm around Mikey in a show of support. IVs were the worst of all needles, maybe even worse than the eyeball death needles from *Fire in the Sky*, which were pretty fucking bad. He started flipping through the comic book again, trying to distract himself from the rising bile in his throat.

“You smell weird,” Mikey told him after the nurse had left, burying his face in Gerard’s shoulder and sort of wheezing carefully into the cloth. “Like dirt.”

“Your mom smells weird,” Gerard retorted, and Mikey rolled his eyes. “I told you, I fell in the fucking creek. And stop talking, you’ll make it worse, man.”

Mikey shook his head, face calm and resigned as his breath rattled and his thin frame shook with each intake of air. Gerard hated it. He hated the face Mikey made sometimes, like he’d given up hope, like he’d accepted the inevitable cruelty and irrationality of the universe and moved on.

Gerard choked down his directionless rage. Maybe he was like Mikey’s portrait of Dorian Grey, siphoning off all the unhappiness and despair Mikey couldn’t afford to feel or articulate. He wanted to smash shit and scream and rip down curtains until someone gave into his tantrum and fixed things. Fixed Mikey. He flashed on a memory of Ted’s sneering face and had to close his eyes, count to ten for a moment.

“M’okay,” Mikey said, leaning into his brother, head on his shoulder. He mouthed the words into Gerard’s shirt, and Gerard could feel them, warm and soft. “M’okay, Gee.”

“You’re not,” Gerard said lowly, quiet enough that Mikey couldn’t hear, and took a couple deep breaths of his own until he could force a smile on his face, into his voice. “Yeah, I know, Mikey. Hey, did I tell you about how awesome Bob and Ray are? I told you about our sleepover plans, right? Lemme get my sketchpad out, I’ll show you.”

He spent the rest of the hour drawing. He drew Bob and Ray in the lunch line, Bob drooling on his

desk during history, Ray in safety goggles making a dubious face as he wielded scissors and dissection pins at a dead frog. When his mother caught his eye and jerked her head towards the door, he realized that Mikey was sleeping, wheezing faintly and eyelids twitching. Gerard always worried that Mikey would suffocate while he slept. Gerard should be there to make sure he was safe, to listen for the sound of choking, the restless twitching of bedclothes.

“Time to go, Gee,” his mom whispered. “Let him sleep.”

Gerard disentangled himself, and left the sketches and his Sandman comics under his brother’s sleeping hand.

When they got home around ten or so, Gerard really, really wanted a drink. Something to numb the stinging behind his eyes. But it hadn’t worked out so well last time, so he just made himself some black coffee, strong and bitter, and resigned himself to a night awake. His mom disappeared into her bedroom and Gerard was left to poke through the half-assembled kitchen alone, finding a stash of Diet Coke and a jumbo can of Beefaroni.

He wondered how his mom could sleep like this, listening to the house and the empty spaces. Just her and Gerard, rattling around the lack of two people in a four-bedroom farmhouse. Mikey should have been in his room, practicing bass or listening to Morrissey at three in the morning. His dad should have been in the living room, watching the weather channel and fiddling around with one of his model cars, making everything smell like craft glue and turpentine. Instead it was just his mom, locked into her room and quiet. Gerard was alone in the echoing kitchen with the bright cheerful yellow lights and black windows, plugging in the microwave. He leaned a hip against the counter and watched the fake pasta revolve, waited impatiently for the coffee pot to stop gurgling.

He wished Frank could have made it out here. They could have ordered a pizza, watched *Jesus Christ: Vampire Slayer*, or the sixth season of Buffy, or just hung out. If Frank was worried about being spotted or whatever, well. Gerard was reasonably sure he could elude any unwanted notice by just blending into the shadows like he always did. He’d seen Frank do as much in broad daylight, for fuck’s sake. It wasn’t really that asking that much, was it, wanting Frank to visit the civilized, well-lighted lands instead of forcing Gerard to leave his warm, though hatefully quiet house and tromp through the wilderness.

Frank had looked genuinely distressed, though. As if stepping foot out of the forest would result in him immediately being set upon by demons, by ravaging wolves. In Gerard’s head the wolves wore the ragged remains of baseball uniforms, and Frank was waving a silver shotgun at them menacingly, outnumbered but still fierce.

The microwave dinged three times, dragging him back to reality, and Gerard tugged his hoodie sleeves down over his hand so he could pick up the hot bowl without burning his palm, then trudged upstairs precariously loaded down with the Chef and the pot of coffee and a slightly chipped mug. Each step creaked ominously beneath his weight, and he didn’t have a free hand to flick on the light switch, so he just edged his way up slowly in the dark to his room and hoped the house would give him a break for once.

It seemed like every part of his body ached, not the just the bruises, but the muscles, too, he guessed from dragging himself up and down every hill in fucking Vermont over the last few days. Gerard was tired, so fucking tired. He flipped the TV on and eased himself into bed, mounded the covers and pillows up around himself until he was vaguely comfortable.

He wanted Frank here, on the other side of the bed with him, chortling over a Diet Coke at Jesus’ haircut and flicking ash on the comforter. Every room in this house seemed so fucking empty. He wanted Mikey snorting and making derisive comments on the cinematography, or Pete composing

porn soundtracks and Gabe constructing some sort of elaborate drinking game out of DDR and handheld Simon Says. Anything but this fucking quiet.

He texted Pete to tell him about how much life sucked and how the quiet spaces were filling up everything, and Pete responded with a stream of nonsensical, lyrical lines about an ocean of leaves and smiles like sunshine and skin like scurvy. An hour later Gabe sent him a picture of what appeared to be a nostril (fuck, please let it be a nostril) and of his snake, Beatrice, poking her head out of someone's sleeve, and then Mikey texted him goodnight, and Gerard felt minutely better about life again. He finished the rest of *Jesus Christ: Vampire Slayer*, and then watched old reruns of Adam West's Batman until it blended in with his dreams. Then it was bang, pow, time for high school again. He'd rather face the Riddler or the Penguin any day, even if it did mean wearing spandex.

Gerard was nearly forced to skip Geometry because Ted was practically having sex with some girl in the hall outside class. There were hands in inappropriate places, and Isaac was leaning against the wall nearby and rolling his eyes. Gerard tried to keep his own eyes averted as much as possible, because it was totally gross. It was a terrible start to the day, then it was compounded by a pop quiz and Noltes squeaking his desk forward to try and look at Gerard's answers, Mrs. Hall yelling at both of them, like it was somehow Gerard's fault.

After class, Gerard got turned around and went the wrong direction down the hall and wound up in a completely different section of school, a hallway he'd only wandered through once or twice before. It was lined with trophy cases and old black and white photographs—a hall of mirrors, throwing back carnival reflections of the students rushing past. Noltes caught up with him, snagging his bookbag and pulling Gerard up short with a nauseating yank. He threw the bag down the hall, after rifling through it and stealing Gerard's emergency can of coke.

The whole time, he was grumbling something about it being Gerard's fault he had detention. Gerard fought the urge to make mocking cave-man like grunts at the douchebag, and stomped off down the hall to get his things. By the time he got to his bag, the bandana kid from the day before was holding it, blushing a terrifyingly bright crimson. Gerard was a little worried the kid was having an aneurysm. He also appeared to have a fake rose in his buttonhole, which was sort of awesome.

"Thanks?" Gerard said, fidgeting. He gestured awkwardly with his elbow while scratching his head, letting his hair fall down into his eyes. "I like your flower."

The kid somehow got even redder, shoved the bag into Gerard's arms and took off down the hall before Gerard could ask if he knew which stairwells led to the second floor. Gerard managed to figure it out on his own, after some trial and error—for some reason, one stairwell only had steps that descended into the basement where, if Buffy was anything to go by, the gym coach was probably breeding amphibious carnivorous jock-monsters in locker-cocoons.

He burst into English class ten minutes late, and Carew was seriously a scary dude, with burning eyes. Maybe he was the one breeding the amphi-jocks. Bob gravely agreed with this assessment, and then punched Gerard in the shoulder for not showing up to play Halo and Resident Evil yesterday afternoon. When Gerard gave him a wounded look, Bob just went to sleep, which seemed to be his standard response to classwork and lectures. But apparently it mysteriously worked for him; Ray said he got mostly Bs. Lucky bastard. Gerard wished he could sleep through the school day.

"You should sit in on band practice, seriously," Ray said after class, lingering in the hallway. He put his head on Gerard's shoulder and made giant pleading eyes until Ted stomped by shouting

about how the school was overrun by fucking faggots.

“One day,” Bob said. “I’m going to steal Worm’s tuba, and beat Sikowski’s head in with it.”

“That is why you’re our hero,” Ray replied, smiling at Bob hugely. “Worm’ll kill you, though.”

“Meh.” Bob shrugged. “See you at lunch, Toro. Way.” He nodded at them both and then sauntered off, and Gerard was left with Ray, who was still smiling adoringly after Bob, and luckily Patrick showed up before Gerard could actually start snickering, because oh god, it was sort of ridiculously adorable, Ray’s giant moon-sized crush.

Gerard hadn’t really taken in just how short Patrick was until he was surrounded by upper classmen. It was possible that Patrick was even shorter than Frank, which boggled the mind. Patrick and Ray started talking about the show on Saturday night, and who would drive. Gerard kept quiet, for the most part, but Patrick kept looking back at Gerard, and then, like, looking over Gerard’s shoulder at something and snickering, which was weird. Gerard would have been more put off, except Patrick didn’t seem to be laughing *at* Gerard, exactly, and actually seemed really interested in Gerard’s opinions on music and different groups.

Fuck, Gerard actually had somehow managed to make friends, of his own. It was kind of amazing. Normally he just kind of got absorbed by Mikey’s friends—Mikey made friends simply by existing. It had never been that easy for Gerard, but somehow these guys were different.

He spent History passing notes with Bob. It started out as a lengthy discussion about famous drummers and Guitar Hero, and then devolved from there into a critique of Mario Galaxy and a cartoon where Bob was Donkey Kong and Ray was Diddy. Bob kept cracking up and getting them in trouble with Mrs. Gist, but Gerard was secretly thrilled. He could make Bob Bryar laugh. Gerard felt like a million bucks of awesome.

Of course, because his life couldn’t stay on a plateau of happiness for more than three minutes, as they left the class, Ted slammed into Gerard’s shoulder, hard, and then sneered at Bob. “Watch out, Bryar, that fucker’s a fairy. Don’t get too close, you don’t want anyone thinking you’re one of *them*.”

Bob just narrowed his eyes, and said coolly, “Watch your own self, Sikowski.” Ted hesitated a second before scowling and stomping off.

“What a dumb fucker,” Bob said flatly. “I can’t wait to get out of this fucking town.”

Gerard was sort of relieved Bob hadn’t, like, edged away or anything, which was an asshole thing to think, actually. Bob was way too awesome to do anything like that. But still. It was nice, having someone stick up for him. He really hadn’t expected anything like that in Glen Fell. Bob had never exactly asked about Gerard’s sexuality, but when Gerard mentioned it obliquely, said something about how hot Robert Downey Jr. was looking lately, he’d nodded and agreed, hadn’t batted an eye. If not for Frank and the fact that Ray would probably kill him with scalpels and dissection probes, he’d probably have a moon-sized crush on Bob himself.

“No fucking kidding,” Gerard said, and Bob grinned at him. “Hey, have you applied for colleges yet? I’ve got, like, just the one in, to SVA in New York, but I should probably apply to more. Thank god Mr. Russo already wrote me recommendations, ‘cause the art teacher here fucking hates me.”

“I thought I might go back to Chicago for school, actually,” Bob said as he pushed open the cafeteria door, raising his voice slightly as a wave of conversation and clanging utensils filled the

hallway. “Patrick sounded interested too. Don’t know about Ray.”

“Oh,” Gerard said as they got into line. “I bet Ray’s totally interested in, uh, Chicago. Wouldn’t be surprised. Heh.”

Bob shot him a bewildered look.

“You’re weird, Way,” he said, but he said it in a bemused way, not mean or anything, so Gerard just smiled mysteriously and picked up a tray.

Lunch was sort of awesome. The school served pizza that was almost edible, and had jello cups for dessert. It was warm out, warm with the sun overhead and with the palette of colors around them, rich browns and reds and oranges, golden grass and bright blue sky. It was like sitting inside a campfire, or a bucket of Halloween candy.

Ray got involved in a tiff over who was driving what car to Burlington for the Dinosaur Jr. show on Saturday, and kept asking Gerard’s opinion, like he was completely confident of Gerard coming along. Not that it mattered, since Gerard had no idea who had what car and if Patrick’s story about Bob backing out of the driveway and taking out all four mailboxes on his block was true or a gross exaggeration. Gerard was sort of busy wistfully wishing Frank could come to the show, but, well. No one had to know that.

Somehow without his noticing, the topic had shifted, and everyone at the table was staring at him. Gerard stopped shredding the crust of his pizza.

“Uh, what?” he asked, alarmed.

“Those fuckers are still picking on you,” Bob said mildly. “We’re figuring out a game plan.”

“Oh!” Gerard said, shocked, and wow, he really didn’t know what to say. “I, uh. Thanks? Fuckers always pick on me, though. No big deal. There’s nothing I can really do about it.”

“Hmm,” Patrick said. “I did hear you were sassing Ted at lunch the other day.”

Gerard squinted at him. “Did you just say sassing?”

Patrick grinned and tugged at the brim of his hat. “Shut up. But seriously, Ted’s gang is sort of pissed. I’m just worried, that’s all.”

“Oh, come on,” Gerard scoffed. “They were fucking with that kid, it was bullshit. Someone needed to do something.”

Patrick was snickering again, just a little. What the fuck was so funny, Gerard wanted to know. Social oppression and the entrenchment of the hetero-patriarchal norm wasn’t funny. It was fucking tragic.

“No, it’s not—you’re right,” Ray said earnestly. “But that’s what we’re saying. No one should do that to you either, you know? But Isaac’s dad’s the mayor. Ted’s family is basically the police department. They could get away with murder without more than, like, a slap on the wrist.”

“I’m totally cool with you starting a revolution,” Bob said, stealing Gerard’s pizza crust. “Just, next time, get one of us to come with. You need back up. Muscle.”

“And you shouldn’t just walk around alone with those guys gunning for you,” Ray said, steepling his hands and glaring at Gerard. “It’s not safe.”

“It’s really not that big a deal,” Gerard protested. Wow, okay, the last thing he was expecting to have to deal with in Vermont, for the record, was fending off attempts to give him a personal guard. He focused on stripping a crimson leaf to its veins. Another leaf was stuck in Ray’s hair, bright yellow against the brown. “Seriously, it’s nice of you guys, but they’re just hassling me. I’m fine. Really.”

“Hmm,” Bob said, and the conversation dropped. Bob picked the leaf out of Ray’s hair and Ray went totally, completely scarlet, which effectively distracted him from the topic for the rest of the day, thankfully. Gerard couldn’t help but tease him a bit about it as they got their goggles and shit ready in Biology, and Ray got dithery and vague. It was hilarious.

Gerard couldn’t quite shake the feeling of unease, though, that maybe Ray and Bob were right, that he should be taking this more seriously. But it really *wasn’t* a big deal. Ted and his gang might have the run of the town, but they were just kids.

Over their disemboweled frog, Ray looked at Gerard sideways and frowned. His hair was pulled back in a giant pink scrunchy borrowed from the teacher—Gerard had snagged a sparkly red one, himself.

“So, listen, I know you think we’re all just crazy, but you really should be careful. Where’d you go yesterday, after school? We were all sorta worried Ted had grabbed you, but you showed up this morning,” Ray said, eyes concerned behind his goggles. He was methodically sucking the formaldehyde out of the body cavity with a pipette with a disgusting whooshing sound, and if he didn’t pay more attention, that shit was going to get everywhere. Again.

Gerard didn’t know how to respond, so he just went back to trying to pick the frog’s filamentous lungs out of the assorted heart and perforated digestive goop.

“Do you think this is a lung?” Gerard asked dubiously, picking up a gray membrane with his tweezers and squinting. “This is such a waste of life, I swear. I’m not learning anything, you’re not learning anything, and a frog is dead. It could have been out there, like, spawning tadpoles. Eating flies. Living the lily pad life.”

Ray hunkered down and peered at the strip of tissue. “Uh, I could be wrong, but I think that’s part of the . . . liver? Why are we even bothering. You know the teacher doesn’t give a fuck.”

“Because,” Gerard said primly, setting down the liver-lung. “The frog gave its life for us to learn the organs of the amphibian. And we will learn them. Or, well. Try. Anyway, I just—” he sighed and lowered his voice. “I just went out the back by the band room, you know? And waited out in the woods for everyone to leave. It worked pretty well. I’ll probably do it again today, I guess. So stop worrying, alright?”

Ray stared at him, mouth open.

“What?” Gerard asked, bewildered. “Is something in my hair?”

“You went into the forest? Seriously?” Ray waved the pipette in the air and gesticulated with it unhappily, voice rising in alarm. “The forest? *Seriously?*”

In the front of the room the teacher was typically oblivious, half-hidden behind her desktop and clicking away—apparently this had been her MO her entire Glen Fell career. Rumor was bondage porn was involved. The result was a senior bio class that was largely a chaos zone of burned pond scum and filched formaldehyde. Easy A, if you weren’t a target. Either way, it meant Ray could freak out totally unfettered and probably not get yelled at.

“Dude,” Ray hissed, leaning in. “Dude, you can’t go into the forest, *no one* goes into the forest.”

“Yeah, kind of the point,” Gerard said, puzzled, and mentally washed his hands of their poor frog for the rest of the period. Ray clearly wasn’t in the mood for learning, and, well, it wasn’t like the teacher would notice them slacking off. Ray had a point there, at least.

“No, man, that forest is bad news. It’s fucking creepy. It’s, okay, look. Don’t laugh. It’s totally haunted.”

“Really?” Gerard breathed, entranced, before he remembered Frank chortling about nitwits thinking the ruins were haunted, Frank hunkered down in his run-down mill house in a ratty sleeping bag and cold at night, alone. He blew out a disappointed breath. “Dude, hate to disappoint you, and myself, but I’ve been going out there for ages now, and I haven’t seen any ghosts. It’d be fucking cool, but no dice. Still, if it keeps people away, works for me.”

Ray shook his head and his ponytail bobbed wildly.

“No, I’m telling you, people have seen shit. I’ve, well. *I’ve* seen shit. Something, anyway. You know how it is, fucking go in on a dare, right? I went when I was a kid, and I heard *something*, I don’t know. I was out there with Patrick, you can ask him. It suddenly got cold, in the middle of July, see-your-breath fucking cold. And the wind picked up, and it sounded like somebody talking. It was really hard to hear, but it was freaky as hell. And Patrick said he saw somebody on the path, right fucking next to me, all fucking see-through and reaching out.”

How was that fair? Gerard had been going into the forest for weeks now, it seemed like, and all he’d seen was Frank, and a graveyard, and maybe he’d heard someone chuckling at him, but it’d probably just been the wind in the trees, or the sound of the river. He wanted to believe it was someone chuckling—definitive proof of life after death would be a nice thing to have, some days. Just in case—well, it’d be nice. And fucking wicked cool.

Maybe some of the envy showed on his face, because Ray scowled at him. “It’s not a game. I’m serious, the forest is bad news.”

“It’s not like you got *hurt*, though, right?” Gerard asked, shrugging. “I’m just saying. Even if you did see something, it doesn’t sound like it was a big deal. And you were just a kid, right?”

The bell, thank god, would be ringing soon, and then he could escape this formaldehyde hell and draw insipid art for Mr. Felts. And then go visit Frank, and maybe laugh about this, about Ray and his superstitions, about Bob’s bizarre guard-duty idea. Of course, first he had to somehow elude Ted and his dim minions. Maybe Bob had a point. Gerard rubbed at his sore jaw uneasily.

“I was twelve,” Ray muttered. “I wasn’t, like, an infant. And that’s not the point! I’m not the only one, Gerard. Shit’s happened to other people, too, for years and years. Once the baseball team went in there on a camping trip, but they left like ten minutes after sundown, screaming bloody fucking murder. They’d all heard voices. Some people saw shit.”

Okay, it was sort of weird, that multiple people had seen shit, but rumors built on rumors, right?

“Drugs, maybe?” Gerard suggested. “I dunno. I guess it’s possible. I’ve just never really seen anything out there.” Well, except for Frank, but he’d promised not to bring Frank up, not around Ray.

“Well, maybe you’re just not sensitive to that sort of thing,” Ray pointed out archly, and started putting away their dissection kit while Gerard stripped off his gloves and scrubbed at the latex

powder left behind. “Apparently some people just don’t see or hear anything, but dude, they still get cold, and if rocks are being thrown, they get hit. Just... think about it. Be careful.”

“It’s the woods,” Gerard scoffed. “So it gets cold sometimes.”

“Look, if you’re worried,” Ray said cautiously, stripping off his own gloves and washing his hands in the sink, “about, you know, those assholes ganging up on you, just. We’ll meet you by the band room, okay, and walk you home, me and Bob and Worm and Brian. They’ll leave you alone, they’re fucking cowards like that – they’ll never go after you if you’re in a group.”

“No,” Gerard said immediately. Fuck, he hated the smell of latex on his hands, and the crummy antibacterial soap didn’t get rid of it at all, and if it couldn’t get rid of condom-glove smell, then he sort of doubted it could get rid of dead frog germs. “No, okay. You don’t need to get involved. And you guys have marching band practice anyway.”

Ray looked frustrated, loosing his hair in a reddish thunderhead and shaking it out. Gerard couldn’t lie, it was impressive. “We’ll just meet you at the band room, don’t worry about it. You can wait and watch practice with us, talk to Mr. Curtis about chorus. We’ll go play some video games after, it’ll be great.”

Gerard rolled his eyes, still undecided. He really didn’t want to drag Bob and Ray, or any of the other band kids, into actually confronting Ted Sikowski. Ray was at least tall, but picturing him next to Noltes made Gerard a little queasy. Plus, there was Frank.

“The woods aren’t so bad,” he reiterated, more to himself than to Ray. “I really think it’s just... urban legends run wild, you know?”

Ray huffed out a sigh. “Yeah, I guess. I mean, you’re right, it’s not like I got hurt. And some people say that it might be Frank’s ghost out there, and I don’t think Frank would ever try to bash my head in with a rock or anything. But it was so fucking creepy out there. I don’t get how you can stand it, man.”

As Ray talked, Gerard felt all his internal organs go into a panicked mambo and he clutched the edge of the lab desk, black spots dancing in his vision.

“Who?” he managed to get out from between clenched teeth. “*Whose* ghost?” It was possible all the blood vessels in Gerard’s eyes had just popped; they felt like they were literally bugging out of his skull.

“Frank’s? Frank Iero?” Ray said slowly, clearly bewildered. “Remember, I told you about him at lunch the other day, the kid who disappeared when I was little. I guess it might not be his vengeful spirit, or whatever, but that’s what everyone’s always said – the whole haunted forest thing started up after he went missing, right after the searches stopped. I dunno. Hey, are you okay?”

Then the bell rang, thank motherfucking god, because Gerard had absolutely no idea what to say.

He gathered his things in a daze. Ray was still talking, his voice slow and indistinct, like Gerard was underwater and Ray was miles away, on the surface. Gerard stared at Ray’s mouth moving for a moment before turning and walking off. He wound up stumbling down the hallway, past the stairwell and towards the cafeteria. He fumbled in his pockets for his lighter as he walked, concentrating on that. On placing each foot after the other. On finding his Bic, and his pack of Marlboros.

Normally he would have camped out in the creepy basement or maybe the library, hidden in the

stacks of books and smoked furtively, but now he just wanted to get outside, away from everyone. He made it out without being caught by any adults or fellow students, kicked his way dully through leaves and dirt and wound up outside the band room. He leaned against the back of the huge old maple tree and chain-smoked four cigarettes, not seeing anything. His mind kept doing this leaping thing from thought to thought, disjointed and useless.

He focused on smoking, the physical sensations of it: the smoke in his lungs, the thin tube of paper and tobacco between his fingers. Keeping his hand steady was oddly difficult—he couldn't stop shaking. He fumbled the lighter, flicking it again and again until his thumb was raw and burning but in the end he finally got a light going despite the breeze and his own treacherous nerves.

All these clues and hints kept suddenly leaping out at him. Ray sitting beneath this tree, mouth full and gesticulating wildly with his hands, saying 'He fucking knew everything about music, man, I thought he wrote the book on cool.' Frank seeing Gerard for the first time, appearing out of nowhere on the path, ragged and dressed for a spring afternoon in the middle of October. Frank in the middle of the graveyard, begging Gerard not to tell anyone about him.

Nothing made any fucking sense. His head hurt, and fuck, he was smoking the filter. He dropped the ragged remains of the cigarette on the leaf litter and ground it out with his toe. Suddenly his problems with Ted seemed completely inconsequential.

Mikey. Mikey would know what to do. He pulled out his scuffed black Nokia—his mom had had a fit the other month when she realized he'd cracked the screen again, like it was his fault the new cellphones were so small and slippery and tended towards slinky-like suicide leaps down stairs—and fired off a text. He pulled out another cigarette and waited for a response. He could wait all day. He had nothing else to do, so long as Ted didn't show up and Ray didn't find him and Mr. Curtis didn't ask him to join chorus. It was nice to pretend he could just stay here forever, leaning against the tree, looking at the sky.

He didn't know how long it had been before the phone buzzed at him—another two cigarettes, at least. Gerard was starting to get light-headed from the nicotine, which was a fucking feat.

dont know what to do about what? blinked onto the screen, and he could just see Mikey, sitting up in bed and frowning at his phone. Fuck, he missed Mikey patronizing him all the time, rolling his eyes and sighing obnoxious, tolerant sighs.

ray says franks been dead for like 10 yrs. No point in beating around the bush.

There was a long pause. By the time Mikey responded, Gerard had gotten tired of standing and had slid down to the base of the tree and snuggled amidst the roots. It was actually pretty fucking comfy, if a little damp—he'd found the perfect spot for his ass and there was a little knurl to lean his head against. Like he could drift off Rip van Winkle style and sleep through all this bullshit and wake up with a wicked beard.

whats frank say?

That was not good advice. That was crap advice. Gerard scowled at the phone.

if thats even his name. maybe hes been lying the whole time?

why would he lie? And then immediately after. sorry, tests, g2g. if hes a zombie take pics

Gerard made a face at the phone and snapped it closed; it made a worrisome crunching sound that probably meant he'd fucked up the flippy-thing again. That hadn't been helpful at all. Fucking

Mikey, all, 'why would Frank lie.' Because, fuck, why would he? It didn't make any goddamned sense.

Frank obviously wasn't dead. He couldn't be. That was ridiculous. Gerard would have noticed. Frank was weird, sure, but he wasn't— except—

Except there was a lot of weird shit about Frank, and it was... Gerard could actually buy it, in a way. It made about as much sense as his serial killer or runaway theories, that Frank was some sort of undead entity.

Frank, living in the forest and popping out of nowhere onto the path and wearing the same scraggly jeans and t-shirt day after day. Well, okay, Gerard did that too. But still, he at least, you know, changed hoodies. But on the other hand—Frank was totally solid and non-see-through. Gerard should know; he'd tripped up against Frank enough times in the forest, and Frank was an awful big fan of invading Gerard's personal space. Maybe a zombie, he mused, grinding his last cigarette out thoughtfully. But even then, he was remarkably well-preserved for a rotting corpse.

Plus, he hadn't exactly gone after Gerard's living flesh. More's the pity. Gerard could go for Frank mauling him, only maybe with less teeth and more tongue, and okay, now was not the time to be thinking about this. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and scowled.

In the distance, the bell for last period was ringing, shrill and piercing, signaling Gerard had to leave his tree or be trapped, either by Bob and Ray and the rest of the marching band, or by Ted and his fucking friends. Gerard wasn't in the mood for admonitions to join chorus or questions about his woodland jaunts, and he definitely didn't feel like getting used as a punching bag again.

And, okay, he could admit to himself, he really wanted to see Frank. And fuck, if ghosts were real, Gerard would have been all over that, and Frank would have known that and told him. He would have told Gerard if he was dead, right? There was no fucking way. Frank was probably just going to laugh at him when Gerard brought it up, because Frank was a common name, and it was totally ridiculous to think his Frank was the Frank Iero of Legend, the missing boy from days of yore.***

He set off towards the forest determinedly, leaving the school and the rush of noisy Friday afternoon students behind. He thought he could hear music, somewhere beneath the distant noise of the parking lot and the angry chittering of a squirrel. Maybe the band was starting up, or maybe it was just a car radio. He stood there at the edge of the forest, staring at the enraged squirrel, trying to make himself take that next step.

"Just *move*," he muttered to himself, jittery and terrified and excited, and the squirrel seemed to agree, getting louder and louder, until Gerard finally raised his palms and gave in. "You win," he said, and took a deep breath, and then headed down the path. The woods were empty, for now, and it didn't take long for Gerard to reach what he thought of as their wall, the one Frank usually showed up by. It was the perfect height for slouching against, and had smooth rounded stones. Gerard took a moment to close his eyes and breathe and try to regain some semblance of calm.

"Hey hey!"

Gerard's eyes flew open and he stifled a squawk of alarm. Frank was standing in front of him, clutching a guitar case, and his beam faltered to a slightly bewildered smile in the face of Gerard's stare.

"Uh, what's up?" he asked, setting the guitar down and hopping onto the wall beside Gerard. He bumped their shoulders together, confused but still cheerful. "Everything okay?"

Gerard shook himself. Frank, totally solid, totally hot. Totally normal. There was no way. “No, yeah,” he said, offering a smile back of his own. “Everything’s cool. School sucks, though.”

Frank nodded. “School always sucks, bro,” he commiserated, and held out his fist to be pounded. Gerard looked at Frank, who had to be kidding with the brotastic fist-pounding thing, but Frank just waggled his eyebrows and waited. Gerard sighed and awkwardly bumped his fist against Frank’s. It was a brief moment of contact. It would have been easy to dismiss the chill of Frank’s skin as poor circulation, or hypothermia, or *something*.

Something like being dead, Gerard thought. Maybe he is. Maybe he’s dead. He leaned against Frank, who looked confused but pleased with the contact, leaning back into him and smiling. Before he could think too much about it, Gerard shoved a hand out blindly and wrapped his fingers around Frank’s arm, just below the elbow.

Frank immediately tried to tug his arm away, but Gerard had frozen, breath caught in his throat.

“Gee—what? C’mon, man, what are you doing?” Frank said, with a brittle laugh. “Let me go.”

Back home Gabe had a pet snake, a Colombian red-tailed boa named Beatrice, and sometimes they’d all get stoned and watch old kung-fu movies in Gabe’s living room, the boa meandering around the couch and looping across Gerard’s shoulders, winding down his arm. That’s what Frank felt like, like Beatrice, cold-blooded and taut beneath Gerard’s palm. Not icy, not frozen. But—Gerard watched himself rub his thumb across the tattooed saint. Cool. Like a stone lying in the shade.

Frank made a strange, strangled noise and jerked free. Gerard stared at him, oddly aware of how hard his heart was thumping in his own chest. It couldn’t be—but—



art by formerlydf

“Okay, seriously,” Frank hissed, folding his arms against his chest and huddling in around himself. “What the fuck’s going on, Gerard?”

Okay. There was probably a subtle, tactful way to approach this.

“Are you a vampire?” Gerard asked carefully, and instead of joking or rolling his eyes, Frank stopped glaring and just froze. Seconds passed, and he wasn’t saying anything, none of the lines or excuses Gerard expected. He was just staring at Gerard with huge eyes and a panicked expression.

“Oh my *god*,” Gerard said, hushed and delighted, and was just about to reach over and feel Frank’s non-pulse when Frank exploded into action, flinging himself backwards and away from Gerard. Gerard frowned at him.

“No, I—a *vampire*? No!” Frank said, waving his arms over his head. “Jesus, Gerard. What the fuck, a fucking vampire? Seriously?”

“Oh,” Gerard said, disgruntled. Okay, it had been a long shot, but Gerard liked vampires; vampires were awesome. Also, Frank was dead and cold-blooded and lived in the forest, it wasn’t *that* weird a thing to think. Although he admitted that Frank was walking around in sunlight, which shot a giant-ass hole in that theory. Fuck. “Well, what are you then?” he asked grumpily. “It’s not like you told me. You could have, you know. I mean, you’re Frank Iero, right? If you’re not a vampire, what’s going on?”

Frank’s eyes bugged out and he scooted away from Gerard. Gerard frowned and tried to subtly inch along after him, which didn’t work so well, since Frank just leapt to his feet and backed away, like Gerard was going to leap up and start trying to suck *his* blood.

“Goddammit,” Frank said finally, voice hoarse. “Fuck, Gerard, I didn’t—I didn’t want... Who told you? Just, look. Stay calm, okay, you know I’d never hurt you or anything, right?”

“Of course not,” Gerard said, bewildered. “I mean, if you wanted to eat me, it would have been totally easy. You didn’t have to drop me in a fucking creek first.”

Frank didn’t seem to have heard him, which was maybe for the best. He just paced and gnawed at his fingernails and never took his eyes off Gerard, just looked at him beseechingly, which was weird.

“Who told you? It was Toro, wasn’t it?” Frank asked, almost more to himself than to Gerard. “God, that fucking kid—I should have known, I should have—”

“What?” Gerard asked, now totally bewildered, and then he fucking noticed—he should have noticed *five days ago*. Frank was pacing back and forth through drifts of dead leaves. And he wasn’t making a sound. If Gerard closed his eyes, all he could hear was Frank muttering to himself, like hearing a voice from a television or headphones. There were no footsteps, no dead, crackling leaves, just Frank raving on about conspiracies of silence or something. He opened his eyes, and Frank was there, walking back and forth on top of a bunch of crinkly shit, and he didn’t even... he didn’t even cast a *shadow*. Gerard was the most oblivious fucker in the entire world, holy shit.

Frank finally noticed him staring and stopped mid-stride, mouth twisting.

“Gerard?” he asked, voice wavering.

“You *are* Frank Iero,” Gerard squeaked out. “Holy fucking! Fuck! You—fuck! You’re totally... I dunno, undead? Immortal? What are you? Jesus, Frank!”

Frank tried to say something, and Gerard knew he should try to calm down, but he couldn’t, couldn’t even stop himself from bouncing to his feet and waving his arms excitedly in the air.

“No wonder you never ran into those fucking mud puddles!” Gerard continued, elated, and automatically whipped out his cellphone to tell Mikey. Holy shit, this was *so cool*. Mikey was gonna flip, he thought gleefully, then reconsidered mid-type. Or possibly freak out. While he was dithering over what to type, he finally noticed Frank still hadn’t moved. In fact, he looked—okay, he looked pretty distraught. Gerard slid the cellphone back in his pocket, feeling strangely ashamed.

“Gee,” Frank said after a moment, his voice breaking. He was staring at Gerard with an almost alarming intensity, like every iota of his being was focused on Gerard, just on Gerard. Gerard stuck his hands in his hoodie pouch and waited uneasily. “Just, please. I’m sorry, I—I wanted to tell you, I just didn’t... I don’t have anyone to fucking talk to out here, and you’re the first person that’s

ever just thought I was a kid, a normal fucking kid, and—I didn't want you to *leave*, I—”

“Why would I leave?” Gerard asked, and sidled a few steps closer, now that it seemed like Frank wasn't going to run away or whatever. “I mean, seriously, dude, this is so cool!”

Gerard leaned over and poked Frank in the chest a couple times, felt the thump of a sternum beneath his fingers. Frank had frozen again, motionless, mouth opening and closing, and when Gerard lifted the hem of his shirt to poke his side—finally getting to see the tattoos was totally just a bonus—Frank snorted with helpless laughter before batting his hand away.

“You're *ticklish*,” Gerard said, delighted. “And *solid*. What are you, a zombie or something?” He bounced on his feet, leaning in a little closer.

Frank stared at him. “What? No! I'm a vegan, dude, that's gross!”

“Well, if you're a zombie it's not like you have a choice,” Gerard offered, rather reasonably, he thought. “It's not like a moral dilemma. You wouldn't condemn foxes for eating bunnies, right? Circle of life, man. Or, uh, unlife?”

Frank looked really silly with his mouth hanging open like that, and if he kept staring at Gerard like that, Gerard was gonna do something stupid, like attack his face with a triumphant ‘The undead are real! My life is validated!’ kiss. This was the best day *ever*.

“I'm not a fucking zombie!” Frank finally squeaked out, voice high and outraged.

“Oh,” Gerard said, a little disappointed. Zombies were sort of a favorite of his. Maybe Frank had an alien symbiote? Like the black oil aliens in the X-Files. Either way, if he was Frank Iero, he looked about ten years younger than he should, so *something* had to be going on.

“I have a body, it's—over that way,” Frank continued, flapping his hands in the general direction of the river before turning back and looking at Gerard with huge, earnest eyes. “Are you—I know this is weird, dude, but please don't—”

“*Really?*” Gerard breathed. “Where? It was a long time ago, so it's probably all skeletal by now, right?” He noticed Frank's eyes getting bigger and bigger, and reevaluated what he'd just said. “Oh, dude, fuck, sorry. Was I being insensitive? I didn't mean to be.”

There was another long pause and then Frank buried his face into his hands and his shoulders started shaking. Gerard squinted. Was Frank fucking laughing at him?

“Dude,” Frank said between his fingers, the words nearly unintelligible through the giggling. “Are you *kidding me?*”

“I'm serious!” Gerard protested. “I don't wanna be, like, rude or anything.”

Then he had to wait an hour or so for Frank to stop laughing, a little wild and hysterical, hunched over and clutching his ribs. Gerard took the time to catalog all the ways he'd been a moron not to notice something was up, because sometimes the light shone right through Frank's shoulder blades—how had Gerard missed that before, *seriously*—and then Frank's laughter sounded suspiciously ragged.

Gerard hovered next to him awkwardly and then settled for putting a tentative hand on Frank's shoulder.

“Frankie?” he said uncertainly. “I, uh. What's wrong? Seriously, I really am sorry, if I hurt your

feelings or anything.”

Frank lifted his head from his hands and stared at Gerard, and Gerard had just enough time to register that Frank looked worried, or—not worried, something stronger than worried. Terrified. Gerard didn’t know what to do, so he just hugged Frank and tried to make a soothing noise, and then Frank’s face wavered from horror to incredulity, and then out of nowhere came this blinding, brilliant, smile and Gerard couldn’t even breathe for a second. Frank huffed out something between a laugh and a sob and flung himself at Gerard, burying his face in Gerard’s neck, nearly toppling both of them off the wall entirely.

“Whoa!” Gerard said, and then awkwardly patted Frank’s back and tried to think unsexy thoughts, because holy fuck, there was a hot guy on top of him. His fantasies didn’t usually involve the hot guy freaking out so much, though. “Uh, there there. Frank, it’s okay. Um, are you, uh, okay? Do you need anything?” Thoughts of donating blood or life force passed through his mind for a moment—how *cool* would that be? So cool, as long as Frank didn’t actually, like, drain him or whatever, but he trusted Frank not to do that. Frank might be dead or supernatural, but he wasn’t evil. Gerard could tell.

“Gerard Way, you are so fucking weird,” Frank said into Gerard’s neck, but he sounded pretty delighted about it, so Gerard let himself wriggle happily, at least internally. “I can’t fucking believe you. You’re not—you’re not scared at all, are you?”

“Of you?” Gerard asked incredulously, and then snorted. “Uh, no? Hate to break it to you, Frankie, but you’re not super scary.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Frank mumbled, ducking his head a little further into Gerard’s hoodie and snuffling. “I’m fucking terrifying, okay.”

“Uh huh,” Gerard said, and let himself squeeze Frank back a little. “You and your expired Diet Coke and your bridge of doom. I’ll alert the presses.”

“Fuck off,” Frank said indignantly, and drew in a quivering breath that seemed to rattle the trees and send a cascade of leaves around them. He was shaking, just a little, and Gerard was finally reviewing their previous conversation and was coming to the conclusion that he’d been kind of an asshole.

“Frank,” he said, finally, and Frank pulled away, rubbing at his face and not meeting his eyes. “You know... I would never just, fucking leave or whatever, right? I, uh, I mean, I like you. A lot. And,” he added hastily, when Frank’s head shot up, “you’re a fucking ghost! Or something else, I don’t even know. That’s totally awesome except, um, in the way I would rather you not be dead? Except you have to admit it’s kind of *totally awesome*.”

Frank looked skeptical, and he still had one hand clamped on Gerard’s arm, like he was afraid Gerard might suddenly tear off in the opposite direction. Gerard remembered again how fucking thrilled Frank had been to see Gerard that first time, how Frank constantly reached out to touch him and wow, he really was an asshole. If Frank was dead... Gerard felt abruptly sick.

He must have died when he was just eighteen years old, on the brink of going to college—his whole life stretched out ahead of him. He must have died in a white t-shirt and ripped jeans, alone in the woods. Gerard couldn’t wrap his head around that part of things. Frank could be dead, but he couldn’t have *died*.

But he had, obviously, and for all Gerard knew he was the first person in over a decade to hug Frank, to talk to him or joke with him. No wonder Frank had freaked out. Jesus, Gerard was a jerk.

“Hey,” Gerard said softly. “Seriously, it’s okay. I don’t discriminate against the dead. It’s okay, Frankie. I am totally pro-the dead. I’m not going anywhere. I promise.”

Frank looked up and when he laughed, it sounded all clogged and choked, but he was grinning again.

“Yeah? I should have known, you giant morbid freak,” he said, and wiped at his nose. Ghost snot! Gerard thought, entranced, and wondered if he could subtly offer his hoodie sleeve for a handkerchief to collect a specimen. Then he immediately felt like a jerk when Frank continued. “It’s just—usually people don’t really see me like you do, just some kind of freaky cloud or a voice or whatever. I mean, some people do, but it’s not like they stay to talk to me, you know? Much less ask to see my fucking *body*, you goddamn ghoul.”

“Hey,” Gerard said feelingly. “I said I was sorry!”

Frank punched him in the shoulder without looking up, and Gerard couldn’t even be mad about how it actually sort of hurt, because a fucking ghost had just fucking punched him in the shoulder. *So cool.*

“It’s okay,” Frank said, lifting his head and smiling faintly. “My corpse is pretty awesome, I’m not gonna lie. I mean, who gets to see their own skull? It’s pretty badass.” He made a wiggly hand gesture indicating the general badassness of his cranium.

“People who get MRIs?” Gerard suggested, then backpedaled rapidly when Frank glared. “Not that that is in any way cool. Radar technology, what the fuck ever. Who needs it?” Frank shook his head, and Gerard had to admit he probably did have an awesome skull, what with those cheekbones and that jaw line and the curve of forehead he could see now.

“Do you ever do, like, Hamlet and Yorick scenes?” he asked, unthinking.

“No!” Frank said. “Who would do that? Oh my god, *you* would. You would totally do that.”

“Maybe?” Gerard hedged shiftily, and subtly changed the subject. “The point is, I mean, you couldn’t have thought I’d have minded, right? You should have told me ages ago! I thought you were fucking homeless, man. I was going to kidnap you and make you live with me in my closet.”

“You *what*?” Frank spluttered, raising a hand to hide his smile when Gerard scowled. “Dude, seriously? You thought I was just living out here?”

“It was a totally reasonable assumption!” he said defensively. “I didn’t have all the information! If you’d just been upfront about it—I mean, what’d you think I thought?”

“I couldn’t,” Frank interrupted, and then looked away, and his face was all in shadow so that Gerard couldn’t see his expression. “Gerard, I wanted to, but I couldn’t. I mean, what if you’d just thought I was crazy, or if you’d run away—Fuck, Gee, what would I do if you left?”

“But I wouldn’t! I won’t!” Gerard said, exasperated. “I told you, you’re not scary. You’re awesome. It’s awesome.”

“Is it?” Frank said weirdly, staring at Gerard, and Gerard had to abruptly steel himself not to look away or lean back. Frank had never looked at Gerard like this before, intense and otherworldly. He seemed almost luminescent, hollow, like the skin of a paper lantern, and his eyes were bright and distant. Not human.

“It *is*,” Gerard gritted out, and folded his arms over his chest. He wasn’t scared, he wasn’t. Frank

could fuck off with his fucking freaky-deaky ghost-routine.

Then Frank sighed abruptly, scowling a little and shoving his hair out of his face, and he was just Frank again, rolling his eyes and long-suffering.

“I need a fucking cigarette,” Frank grumped, and laid his head on his knees, holding out a hand imploringly while Gerard fished in his pocket for the battered box of Marlboro Reds.

“How can you smoke, by the way?” Gerard asked, pleased when his voice came out steady and normal. “Do you even taste it, really?”

“This is the end of all normal conversation, isn’t it?” Frank said mournfully, and lit up without answering. Gerard watched to see if he could see the smoke move down Frank’s throat, into his lungs, but he could only see smooth, opaque skin. He wondered if Frank could get hickeys. “We’re never gonna talk about anything else ever again. I’m just ectoplasm to you now.”

“Ectoplasm?” Gerard squeaked, and then, belatedly, said, “Uh, I mean, no, of course not. I would never objectify you like that.”

Frank scowled at him.

“Such a liar,” he muttered, and stole Gerard’s pack of cigarettes, but Gerard saw a faint glimmer of a smile lurking around the corners of Frank’s mouth, so he figured he wasn’t accidentally being a jerk again. Frank was probably used to it by now anyway, he figured. Still, Gerard should probably change the subject. Then he remembered.

“Oh!” he said, rustling in his bag and emerging triumphantly with a stack of comics. “I brought you these, um. Here. Guess you can’t get out to the comic stores much, right? Hah.” Crap, he was talking about the dead thing again. This was useless.

Frank didn’t seem to mind, though, just snatched Gerard the comics out of his hands, and then dug gleefully through the bag for more.

“Normally I just swipe what I can off campers and shit, but damn!” He clutched the *Seven Soldiers of Victory* to his chest, beaming and looking like any other human comic geek. A hot, totally out of Gerard’s league, geek, to be honest. “This is fucking—Gee, have I told you lately how awesome you are? So fucking awesome. I don’t—how did I get so fucking lucky, man?”

“Aww, dude,” Gerard said, and kicked his feet against a stump, trying not to beam. “I just, you know, didn’t think we could still be friends if you hadn’t read about Zatanna and the new Spider. I guess you, uh, can’t leave the forest or whatever?” He wasn’t prying into Frank’s deadness, per se. Just making polite conversation. Right.

“Obviously not, or I’d have followed you home and set up camp in your closet,” Frank said, pawing through the bookbag for more and crooning to the smooth plastic. Gerard scowled as he watched one of the pages crumple slightly in Frank’s enthusiastic hands. Frank continued absently as he flipped pages, “I’m totally stuck here. Ghostly territory, ends at the edges of the forest, et cetera, et cetera, blah blah. It’s pretty boring. Oh my god, dude, you have the Defenders series? Sweet!”

“You better not fuck those up,” Gerard grumped, a little annoyed to have so thoroughly lost Frank’s attention but at the same time sort of pleased for the opportunity to ogle Frank busting a nut over Gerard’s comic book collection without fear of being spotted. Also, Frank fucking haunted a forest. He rolled that over in his mind gleefully, then got distracted by Frank’s indignant snort.

“Of course not! What do you think I am?” Frank glared Gerard, and god, it was fucking awkward to stare into someone’s eyes, he didn’t know what all the movies and his aunt’s collection of romance novels were all about. It was awkward, and weird, and filled with this expectant *waiting*, and Gerard wound up having to huff and look away and feel like a necrophiliac.

Was it even necrophilia if you weren’t attracted to the body, but to the, uh, spiritual material? What the fuck *was* Frank anyway? A strangely solid nimbus? Could Frank even have sex?

“Like you don’t have pizza sauce all over them anyway, asshole,” Frank muttered, peering at the panels in the dimming light. He glanced up at Gerard, then looked down again quickly, fidgeting with the binding on one issue and, Gerard noted indignantly, crumpling the pages.

“On, like, *one page*,” Gerard pointed out, and then sighed in defeat. Comics were for enjoying, anyway, except maybe first editions and special editions, and okay, so maybe Frank couldn’t really fuck them up any worse than they already were, unless he did some kind of ghost ninja reading kung fu with them and then dropped them in a river.

“So, seriously, who told you?” Frank asked. He still wasn’t quite meeting Gerard’s eyes. “Or did you figure it out all on your lonesome?”

Gerard was a little sheepish that he *hadn’t* figured it out on his own—if anyone was going to uncover an undead ninja ghost zombie, it should have been him.

“Thought we weren’t talking about it anymore,” Gerard grumbled and stared at his muddy Converse. He could practically hear Frank rolling his eyes. “Ray was lecturing me on the evils of the forest,” he said reluctantly. “And your name came up.”

“Yeah?” Frank said companionably, and Gerard could hear him leafing through pages. When he glanced over out of the corner of his eye, it took a moment to register Frank as anything more than a pale blur. Peripheral vision, Gerard thought. They’d talked about it in biology, how you saw things differently from the side than you did head-on, something about rods and cone cells and the color purple.

“Yeah,” Gerard said, swallowing around a strange lump in his throat, and forced himself to lean against the cool solidity of Frank’s shoulder. “Apparently you scared the shit out of Ray and his friend Patrick five years ago. He’s still all shaken up about it.”

“Five years?” Frank said, finally looking up, a small frown on his face. “I don’t... really, it was five fucking years ago?”

“I guess,” Gerard said, slowly. “Ray said he was twelve, when he saw you. I guess Patrick was maybe ten or eleven. So, yeah.”

“Doesn’t seem that long,” Frank said slowly, scratching his chin. “Or it seems longer. I dunno. But I remember, yeah, little Ray Toro and his friend, sneaking around the woods with their flashlights. Five years, wow.” Frank hunched his shoulders and stared back down at the bright, glossy pages. “I didn’t mean to scare them, you know?” he said softly, flipping the pages. “I was just trying to say hey.”

“I don’t think they saw you really well,” Gerard offered hesitantly, and Frank shrugged.

“Probably not,” he said, then shook himself, grinning up at Gerard. “Fucking kids, man. They come in every now and then, all *Are You Afraid of the Dark*, with flashlights and s’mores and shit, and get all shocked when I actually show up.” Frank gave a big, shark-like smile, all teeth. “Hey, I

aim to please. Sometimes I even steal their shit, their comics and whatever.”

“Low, Iero,” Gerard whistled, and made himself shake his head in mock-disapproval.

“Oh, whatever, some kids love it, right?” Frank said, which Gerard had to concede was probably true, for the most part. “If they didn’t want to get fucked around with, they shouldn’t have come in the motherfucking haunted woods. I have a duty to scare folk shitless. It’s like a moral imperative.”

“Mmm. Justify your petty theft all you like,” Gerard said, snapping open a back issue of Miller’s Batman. “You’re just as bad as Peeves, man.”

“Okay, one? It’s not petty theft,” Frank said, and stole Gerard’s comic and waved it under his nose. “I need comics! For my mental health. It’s extenuating circumstances or some shit. And two,” he said, leaning back and narrowing his eye, “Did you just call me a perv? Because I’m pretty sure that camp of girls were over eighteen. And I wasn’t, uh.” Frank started to stammer as Gerard glared. “I didn’t do anything!” Frank backpedaled. “There were right there! Changing! And I’m all cold and shit so their nipples were all hard, and then I guess I made a noise or something and they ran away screaming like fucking banshees. Tits all over the place.” Frank drifted off dreamily. “I miss sex,” he said a little sadly, and then Gerard choked on his own spit, and decided the better part of valor was to attack Frank’s appalling pop culture ignorance.

“Peeves,” Gerard said faintly. “Peeves is the poltergeist in Harry Potter.”

“The what in the who, now?” Frank said, frowning, and that was Gerard’s afternoon sorted out. By the time it was getting dark, Gerard had about caught Frank up to the *Half-Blood Prince*—around the *Goblet of Fire* he finally thought to ask if Frank wanted to actually borrow the books and read them himself, or whatever. Frank stared for a moment before bursting into laughter—which, whatever, stupid ungrateful fucker—and motioned Gerard to continue with his super-awesome condensed version. While he talked, Frank played quiet lilting melodies on the guitar and finished off the rest of

Gerard’s cigarettes, occasionally piping up with questions and what he obviously thought were extremely witty comments about wands and horcruxes.

It was actually easy to forget Frank was dead, most of the time. It just seemed so normal, and then it’d hit Gerard all over again like a fucking brick to the head. Dead. Frank was dead. People went somewhere after they died, obviously. They didn’t just disappear. It fucking blew his mind.

When Gerard had to leave at the end of the day, Frank walked him to the edge of the woods, and then looked at Gerard with a strange, bemused expression. Then he leaned in, wrapping a hand around the back of Gerard’s neck.

Gerard had a brief heart attack.

“Hey,” Frank exhaled, nose to Gerard’s. “Hey, you.”

“Hey,” Gerard squeaked, and almost thought he felt Frank’s lip ring cold against the corner of his mouth. The wind was blowing, just enough to cut through the last of the day’s warmth and scatter dead leaves from the trees above. Wisps of fogs were coalescing in the fields and curling along the entrance to the path in the twilight, damp around their feet, and Gerard thought that probably this was as perfect a moment as his life would ever provide, with Frank’s mouth inches away.

“Thanks,” Frank said, and Gerard tried not to go cross-eyed looking at him.

“For what?” Gerard asked, voice hoarse and nearly soundless, hopeful, and then suddenly Frank

shook himself, and stepped back. Gerard made a low protesting noise in his throat before he could stop himself, and then felt his cheeks heat with embarrassment.

“For being, you know, not a screaming girl or whatever,” Frank mumbled, gnawing at a fingernail. “You should probably go.”

Gerard stared, but it wasn't like he could call Frank out. Because, okay, that totally *seemed* like the set up for a kiss, but what if it wasn't? What if Frank had forgotten the bounds of normal behavior out in the forest, living with the rabbits and ducks and campers?

Maybe ghosts didn't even kiss people. Maybe kissing a ghost killed you. Who the fuck knew. Frank probably didn't even have a sex drive. He was dead.

“It's not like boys don't scream too,” Gerard pointed out sullenly. Fucking tease asshole of a ghost. He had to have known that was the set-up for a fucking kiss, he *had* to. “But, yeah, I should get going. Mom's probably waiting for me.”

“You could come back later tonight, though. If you wanted,” Frank said nonchalantly, and now he wasn't looking at his shoes, he was looking at Gerard's shoes. It would be just Gerard's luck to have a crush on a dead guy with a foot fetish.

“I could,” Gerard said, and stuffed his hands in his pockets, trying not to scowl. “I guess. I mean, if you want.”

“Yeah?” And Frank was peeking up through his bangs, the asshole. Gerard tried to glare at him, but from the way Frank beamed he suspected it had come out as more of a dopey smile. Goddammit. “So what time do you want to meet, then? Visiting hours at the hospital end at ten, right? You could come out after that. I can make a fire and shit, it'll be awesome.”

“Um, yeah,” Gerard said, a little surprised Frank remembered about the visiting hours. “Sometimes Mikey gets the nurses to let us stay later, though. I dunno, I could probably be out here at maybe... midnight? Is that okay?”

“Of course it's okay, what the fuck else am I going to be doing,” Frank said, rolling his eyes. “Hate to break it to you, but midnight isn't actually the witching hour. I'm not off, like, possessing pumpkins or Ouija boards each night.”

Gerard could feel his eyes get huge.

“I didn't even think of that!” he exclaimed in a hushed voice. “Oh man, are you affected by the time of day? I mean, you were all insubstantial that one night, right? I was sort of drunk, but I think I remember—” Oh fuck. If everything that night had actually happened—fuck. He buried his face in his hands. “Shit, I threw up through you!” he moaned. “Oh, Frank, that's so gross, fuck. I'm so sorry!”

“No kidding,” Frank muttered, but he was smiling as he said it, a funny crooked half-smile Gerard glimpsed from between his fingers. “No sweat, I forgive you.”

“I can't believe I threw up *through* you,” Gerard repeated dolefully, and the only thing that kept him from sprinting off through the night and never coming back was that it was equal parts horrifically embarrassing and awesome. “So does that mean you can walk through me?” He reached out and thumped Frank's arm, but Frank remained stubbornly solid.

“Christ, Gee,” Frank said, and shoved his shoulder. “You'll have to find out later, fucker. When you come back. You'll be back, right? To see me walk through walls if nothing else.”

“Really?” Gerard said, clutching his hoodie closer to himself and beaming. “Through walls?”

“Walls, trees, your face. Whatever.”

“*Really?*” Gerard squeaked, and Frank rolled his eyes.

“Oh my god, fucker, go, you’re going to be late!” he said, and Gerard totally was, and his mom was going to kill him, so he made himself start jogging off, away from the forest and towards the lights of the school parking lot. He kept looking over his shoulder, though, and Frank was still standing there at the edge of the woods, hands in his pockets.

Gerard waved—like a giant dork, but he was too excited to really care at this point.

“Bye, Frankie!” he hollered. “See you later! *Don’t fuck up my comics!*”

Even from the parking lot he could tell Frank was flipping him off indignantly. He couldn’t stop grinning, not even when he got home and his mom looked at him weirdly and started muttering about the apocalypse again. Oh man, he could not *wait* to see Mikey. They had so much research to do.

Chapter 6

Mikey rolled his eyes.

“What?” Gerard said defensively. “Okay, fine, I won’t bring any test tubes. But I’m still ordering the EMP reader off eBay.”

“You’re so lame,” Mikey said hoarsely, but he was grinning, just a little. Gerard had his mom’s laptop balanced carefully on his knees, and they were watching streamed episodes online of the Paranormal Investigative team scouting out an abandoned textile mill. Gerard had spent the ride to the hospital texting Mikey non-stop, and Mikey seemed to have provisionally accepted that his brother wasn’t a delusional paranoid schizophrenic. He was a little put out that Gerard hadn’t taken any pictures, though.

A camera, that should totally be on Gerard’s list of supplies. He scribbled it down in his notebook.

“You make fun, but I have an obligation to science,” Gerard said loftily, and squinted at the screen again. “You think I should bring a tape recorder? For EVP?”

“I thought you could hear Frank without the aid of electronics?” Mikey asked, deadpan. It was like he could roll his eyes with his entire body. Maybe his brother had supernatural powers of sarcasm. It was possible. *Anything* was possible.

“It’s a brave new world!” Gerard said grandly, and Mikey rolled his eyes. Again.

“So. Lame,” he repeated, rubbing absently at his chest. “So. How’d Frank die?”

Gerard busied himself with the mouse. “Don’t know,” he muttered, then brightened. “Oh, look. Thermal imaging! Hey, that video recorder you got for last Christmas has some weird settings, right? You think it has heat sensors?”

Mikey glared at him and made the universal sibling sign for ‘if you steal my shit I’ll fucking end you’: narrowed eyes and a tight jerk of the head, followed by the jaw clench.

“I won’t break it, jeez,” Gerard said, offended, and Mikey sighed.

“Be careful, Gee.” His voice was faint and soft, but Gerard had gotten used to listening to his brother speaking in whispers and half-drawn breaths. He heard. “If Frank’s really dead... be careful with him.”

“Huh? Frank’s not going to hurt me,” Gerard said, startled into looking up. Mikey was staring at him with bruised, solemn eyes. Gerard wanted to wrap him in ten thousand quilts and take him home and feed him beer and Hot Pockets and lame late-night TV. He hated the hospital lighting, sterile and unforgiving, throwing stark shadows everywhere. He didn’t know how Mikey stood it, but the doctor said maybe Mikey could go home next week, just come in every other day for treatments, so. There was hope.

“That’s not what I meant,” Mikey replied slowly. “You know what I meant.” Gerard feigned confusion and scrolled through the next commercial break. The team was headed to a haunted duck pond next. That actually sort of almost applied to Gerard’s situation with Frank. Fucking outdoorsy ghosts.

“Maybe I’ll be out of this fucking hospital next week,” Mikey said. “Maybe I could—” He broke

off and coughed carefully. Gerard shoved the notebook and pen at him and scowled.

“Okay, moratorium on talking, or you’ll be stuck here forever,” he said, and folded the pen into Mikey’s hand. Mikey wrinkled his nose and sighed. “Hey! Maybe next week you can meet Frank!”

Even Mikey’s silences had an eye-rolling, long-suffering aura about them. It was uncanny.

That was the idea, he wrote in his spidery handwriting. *You think Frank would mind?*

“Why would he mind?” Gerard asked, and sighed when Mikey raised an eyebrow. “I mean, yeah, I guess it’s kind of a secret, but it’s you! I’m sure he knew I’d tell you.”

There was a pointed silence.

“Fine,” Gerard huffed. “I’ll ask him tonight. We’re meeting in the forest, you know, and he’s going to make me a bonfire, and walk through walls. It’s going to be awesome.”

Then Mikey drew a picture of two stick figures sitting in a tree with hearts for eyes and one with a vapor-trail body that was apparently supposed to imply ghostness, and Gerard had to scribble it out and spend the rest of his visit carefully explaining that it wasn’t like that, shut up shut *up*, and then Nurse Ratched came in and yelled at him for making Mikey laugh, and Mikey smirked at him the whole time Gerard was getting chewed out.

Just for that, Gerard was totally stealing his camera.

It really sucked, though. Now that Mikey had brought it up, Gerard couldn’t stop thinking about it. He couldn’t just focus on how fucking awesome it was that ghosts existed when he kept getting tripped up on the fact that Frank being a ghost meant that Frank had, at some point, *died*. Which was less awesome and more like his heart collapsing in on itself.

He scowled at his reflection in the kitchen window and made sure to wedge a bottle of gin into his bag alongside the marshmallows and investigative supplies. He was ready to go, but once outside he found himself lingering on the porch, hesitant to step out of the pool of the light into the dark street.

Finally he had to stop dithering and just forced himself to go. He stopped in the school parking lot and fumbled through his bag for his flashlight, glad he’d remembered to pack one. It was one thing to walk through the empty streets of town, and it was something else entirely to leave the streets and approach the dark mass of the forest. To be honest, the thin beam of light didn’t seem nearly adequate to the task, but Frank would be waiting, and Gerard didn’t have time to find another, or put together a candelabra or a lantern or whatever. So he just shouldered his bag of ghost paraphernalia, took a deep breath, and left the pavement.

He stopped halfway across the field to check the temperature again on the little thermometer he’d pried off the birdbath in the backyard. 38 degrees Fahrenheit. He held the flashlight in his teeth as he carefully recorded it in his notebook, along with the time (12:19 AM) and cloud cover (minimal).

When he got to the edge of the woods, Frank was there waiting for him, grinning crookedly.

“You rang?” he asked, doing a passable impression of Lurch for someone his height, then bounced on his heels and flung his arms around Gerard’s neck as soon as Gerard crossed the boundary. Gerard tolerated it for a second and then shoved Frank off, laughing nervously.

“I was afraid you weren’t going to come,” Frank said, rocking back on his heels, eyes never leaving Gerard’s face. “Like, maybe you’d think I was a fragment of underdone potato or something.”

“Even if I did,” Gerard said, surreptitiously checking the temperature again, peeking in his bag at the thermometer. 33 degrees, holy fuck. That was fast. “I’d still have come back to make sure, you know? Plus, if you’re a potato, you’re the most awesome potato ever.”

“Aww, Gee, you say the sweetest shit,” Frank said, eyes crinkling happily. “You’d totally be a kickass spud yourself.”

Gerard smiled stupidly down at his bag.

“Hey, want me to carry that for you?” Frank said, bouncing a little closer. “I mean, we’re not going far, just into the woods enough that no one can see the fire from the town.”

“It’s just a backpack,” Gerard said hastily, clutching the bag protectively. “I can carry it. But, uh. Thanks.”

“No, I know,” Frank said, leading the way down the path. Gerard hefted the bag on his shoulder and shone the flashlight around nervously. “Just thought I’d help, if you wanted. What all do you have in there? It looks heavy as balls.”

“Uh,” Gerard said guiltily, and then, fumbling for a change of subject, waved his flashlight around nervously. “You know, I just brought supplies and stuff. Marshmallows. Hey, how do you get around out here? I mean, I guess you don’t have to worry about tripping on shit, but it’s still pretty dark.”

“Well... yeah,” Frank replied, snickering. “Well spotted. It is in fact nighttime, genius.”

Gerard aimed a kick at the back of Frank’s leg and nearly tipped over into a bush. It was the thought that counted, though.

“I can see in the dark, obviously,” continued Frank, oblivious to the ninja-revenge attempt taking place behind him. The jerk. “Well. Actually, I don’t know if that’s it, exactly. It’s more like... light and dark don’t matter so much anymore?”

“Dude,” Gerard said reverently, and dug out his little notebook to write all that down. He wished Mikey were here—Mikey would be awesome at figuring out how to test and quantify all this shit. Gerard was having to use shorthand just to scribble this all down, though, so hopefully the notes would be legible when he presented them to Mikey later.

Frank was getting way ahead of him, and Gerard was fucking useless in the woods even when it was light out. Frank didn’t say anything as Gerard jogged to catch up, just raised a quizzical eyebrow and then dragged Gerard off onto a new path, one that wound up a steep hill. Gerard wheezed at Frank unhappily and Frank laughed and shouldered Gerard’s bag, tugging him onward by the sleeve. Somehow they missed all the rocks and trees and outstretched thorny branches, as though the forest was parting before them, and then finally they were clearing the woods.

They were on top of a rocky outcrop overlooking the river, frothing white and furious fifty feet below them. There was a crescent moon in the sky, and so many stars that looking at the sky almost hurt Gerard’s eyes after the darkness beneath the trees. There was a giant stack of firewood waiting, and a perfectly crafted campfire, pyramidal logs waiting for a match. Frank immediately let go of Gerard’s sleeve and bounded towards it.

“You know how to make a campfire, Gee?” he called over his shoulder, rustling around mysteriously.

“Oh, sure,” Gerard said dryly, digging in his bag for the Seagrams. The temperature had dropped slightly, but he had a feeling that was because the outcrop was out in the open, or something. Fuck, maybe he should have environmental controls? This science shit was hard. “I mean, you just... set the wood on fire, right?”

Frank huffed out a laugh.

“Well, get your ass over here and learn, city boy,” he said, and Gerard hurried to scribble down the rest of his observations, including *pyromania*??? in the list of symptoms he’d drawn up. Others included: *chilly as fuck (drop of 5 degrees Fahrenheit)*, *night vision (??)* and *trapped in forest (might be able to get him untrapped—hypothesize later?)*.

“Whatcha doin’, Gee?” Frank asked, suddenly right in front of him, staring down and blocking out the stars. Gerard snapped the book shut with a guilty feeling, which was ridiculous. He wasn’t doing anything wrong.

“Um. Nothing. Hey, that was fast,” Gerard observed inanely. There was a fire already roaring merrily in front of them, casting flickering orange shadows on the grey rock.

Frank frowned at him and hunched his shoulders a bit. “What’s going on, Gee?” he asked, and his voice was definitely unhappy. “Are you... You know I wouldn’t do anything, I mean. I wouldn’t hurt you. I didn’t bring you out here to hurt you.”

“Hurt me?” Gerard frowned, fighting the urge to clutch the notebook protectively to his chest, or to sit on it or something, and then realized what Frank was talking about. “Oh. Oh! No, don’t be a moron. Sorry to disappoint, but I’m still not scared of your pansy ass.”

“Huh,” Frank said, smile flickering back onto his face. “Well. You should be. I’m terrifying. Come closer to the fire, man. I’m pretty sure it’s getting cold out by now, right?”

“Uh, yeah, a bit,” Gerard replied disbelievingly, and then busied himself digging around in his bag looking for nothing for a second. Okay, maybe he was bothered. Not in, like, a scared way. Just... it was disconcerting, that was all. Gerard could barely feel his nose, it was that fucking cold out tonight, and Frank apparently had no idea, couldn’t feel it at all. Well, of course he couldn’t. Gerard pulled out his bottle of Seagrams and took a quick swig before shoving it back in the knapsack. “Nice fire, man.”

“Thanks.” Frank preened, nudging a log into a slightly more flammable position with his foot before sitting down besides Gerard. “Hey, you said you brought marshmallows, right? Marshmallows are key, man, you gotta have fucking marshmallows with a fire like this. Not having marshmallows offends the gods of camping, in my opinion. Calls down dark forces. Anarchy! Mayhem.”

“Yes, I brought marshmallows, jeez, calm down.” Gerard rustled around in his bag—there they were, under the camera. Slightly squashed and old as hell, but probably still good. “I mean, it’s not like you can eat them.” That Gerard knew of. “Uh... can you?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Frank scoffed, snatching the bag from Gerard’s fingers and ripping it open with his teeth. “Of course not. I’m dead. I don’t eat. I don’t drink. I don’t sleep, not really. I smoke, but, you know, that’s different. I can almost remember how it tastes, though. Marshmallows. Well, vegan ones, anyway. But they’re all better burnt, right?” He handed Gerard a branch with like,

twelve fucking marshmallows covering the twigs at the end. It was like a campfire menorah. Gerard struggled with it as he tried to inch out his notebook again without Frank noticing. The fire was going to totally mess up his temperature readings, dammit. And how did Frank know he couldn't eat? Did he want to and just couldn't? Did he not even want to? And he had that sleeping bag back at the mill house, so what was that about? Had he tried—

Frank waved a be-marshmallowed stick in his face and glared. "Seriously, Gerard. What the fuck is going on. Is that—is that a thermometer?" he asked incredulously, catching the edge of Gerard's knapsack and looking in.

Gerard gnawed his lower lip. He was going to have to come clean, he guessed. Although Frank might have already cottoned on to his cunning scientific scheme anyway, what with all the glowering and the pawing through his bag. The discovery of the Ouiji board elicited a particularly terrible noise. Also, physical violence.

"I'm sorry!" Gerard squeaked, holding his arms in front of his face protectively as Frank beat him with his own branch of marshmallows. "Stop hitting me, asshole, I'm just trying to help!"

"I'm surprised you're not fucking waving an EMP reader in my face and flinging Tarot cards at me," Frank spluttered, and gave Gerard another vicious whack before he abandoned the marshmallows and started pulling shit out of Gerard's bag and waving it around in the air. "You are such a jackass. What the fuck are you even doing with this compass? Are you trying to find your way to the goddamned north pole? What is this?" He was shaking the compass in Gerard's face now, voice rising with each word.

Gerard edged closer—he could see the compass needle spinning wildly in Frank's hand. "Well, uh. The EMP reader's still in the mail?" he offered apologetically, trying to unobtrusively get a better look at the compass. "I mean, it's for science, anyway. For discovery! The afterlife! But, um. I'm sorry? I just wanted to know, I guess. I—it's the *afterlife*! Don't you want to know more about it?"

"What, am I just an experiment to you?" Frank bit out. He looked—upset, and hurt. Gerard abruptly felt sick.

"No!" Gerard protested. His throat felt funny, tight. Frank's eyes were—not empty, but hollow. Like looking through a dark doorway, and seeing a long hallway without an end. "*No*. It's—I think—you're kinda my best friend, Frank." He paused and stared at his feet and tried not to shiver. "But, dude, you're a *fucking ghost*. I mean, that's so cool! You can't expect me not to want to know more, and you said you didn't want to talk about it, so, I. Thought I could figure shit out on my own, you know?"

He'd also thought—well, if he could figure out what it meant to be a ghost, how it worked, then he could help Frank. Help him stay visible, help him leave the forest, help him figure out how to eat marshmallows again. But he didn't want to say that when it would sound like he was making excuses, especially when some part of him was selfishly jumping up and down over ghosts being real, on there being life after death, because that meant if—if anybody died, they wouldn't just be gone. Not forever.

But he hadn't meant to treat Frank like an experiment, like he wasn't human. Except. Fuck. That was sort of how he'd been acting, wasn't it?

Frank didn't respond to him at all, just went back to rummaging through the bag, and Gerard felt like he was going to throw up. He watched Frank miserably, hunching his shoulders and pulling his knees up to his chest, away from the fire. Maybe he should apologize again. Maybe he should just slink home in the dark. Fuck.

Then Frank lifted out the little thermometer with the cheerily smiling bluebird painted on it, and his expression flickered. He looked at Gerard from the corner of his eye. Gerard tried not to wring his hands.

“So you think I’m cool, huh,” Frank said, voice neutral, but a tiny smile was unfurling on his face and Gerard felt his whole body melt with relief. “I don’t know who I thought I was kidding, thinking you liked me for me. You just came out here to hear more about the Great Beyond, you giant asshole.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Gerard said, edging closer to the fire and fumbling around for his marshmallow stick, almost shaking he was so relieved. Frank handed the branch to him wordlessly after a few seconds and Gerard flushed, hoping Frank’s dead-o-vision wouldn’t let him see how fucking embarrassed Gerard was at the moment. Who the fuck beat someone with marshmallows, anyway? “I followed you around in the fucking woods and fell in a creek—a motherfucking creek, okay? And that was before I knew you were a ghost or anything. I would have come out here no matter what. I mean, even if you were a serial killer, or, well, maybe not that. But, like. A vampire. Or a zombie. Or... or just a normal kid. I don’t know.”

Gerard trailed off awkwardly, staring unhappily across the river and trying not to shiver too obviously.

“Your marshmallows are on fire,” Frank commented after a moment, and Gerard jerked his eyes back down. His candelabra of marshmallows had gone up like a fucking torch, and he wasted a couple minutes flailing it around uselessly before just giving up and jabbing it in the fire and watching the remains crackle and bubble and burn.

“Well,” he said, staring gloomily at the blackened husks. “You, uh. Did say they were better burnt.”

“Oh, sure,” Frank said, giggling. “Eat up.” Then he tossed the bag of fresh marshmallows over. Gerard started prying off the incinerated blobs off his stick, wondering if it was better to just abandon this one to the fire gods and start over entirely. Frank ignored his plight, fishing the compass back out of the knapsack and eyeing it uncertainly. The needle was spinning wildly, north suddenly unfixated.

“You know, it doesn’t bother me that you have questions,” Frank commented, just as Gerard had gotten his marshmallows situated again. “Just *ask*. You don’t have to sneak around taking notes and shit.”

“I don’t... I can stop,” Gerard said weakly. He valiantly tried to keep his eye from straying back towards the compass needle, which appeared to be oscillating between west and southwest, a frantic red-tipped blur. Frank snorted, cocking an eyebrow, and Gerard frowned. “I mean it,” he insisted. “You’re not a game or a science experiment or anything. It doesn’t even matter. I’ll... I’ll pretend you’re totally alive, just a weird hermit hobo like I thought before. I don’t even care that you’re a ghost. Honest.”

“Uh huh,” Frank drawled, running a finger along the compass rim. North came slightly more unglued. “My face is up here, genius.”

Gerard guiltily jerked his eyes back up. Frank grinned.

“You know, this is actually sort of awesome,” he said, coming back to sit down by the fire, propping his legs up on one of the burning logs. “I didn’t know I did this to compasses.”

“Have you tried with other magnets?” Gerard asked before he could stop himself, and then bit his tongue and busied himself getting a new marshmallow perfectly skewered on his toasting stick.

“What, you didn’t pack any extras in your bag of tricks?” Frank teased, voice carefully light. “Seriously, don’t pretend I’m alive. I’m not. I mean, I am sort of a fucking hobo; I’ve been wearing this outfit for like ten years, so, you know, that’s fair. Oh, go ahead and get out your fucking notebook, you dweeb. Christ.”

Gerard got out his notebook. Only because Frank had asked. Obviously.

“Go on,” Frank said, shooting Gerard a sideways look. “What do you want to know? You want me to walk through a tree or something? Walk through you?”

Gerard choked on his own tongue, because, holy fuck, Frank, like. Inside him. It made his brain fizzle in unexpected directions and wow, time to change the subject a bit. “What was dying like?” he blurted out, and then wanted to erase time, because, wow, way to ask a loaded question right out the gate, Gerard. You moron.

Frank took his feet out of the fire and shrugged. “Well, you know, I fucking died,” Frank said, examining his nails. “What else is there to say?”

There was *so much more to say*. How did Frank die, what was it like, was there a light? Were there guardians? Did anyone weigh his soul? Why was he a ghost, why hadn’t he moved on? Were there lots of ghosts out there, and if so, why hadn’t Gerard seen any? Gerard wound up just making a frustrated noise. Frank snorted and shook his head.

“I told you, just spit it out,” he said resignedly, but there was a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “I don’t mind. You’ll just creep around making notes, otherwise.”

“But I don’t want to offend you or anything,” Gerard said earnestly. “Like, I dunno, I want to know! But it seems really—” Gerard’s mind went blank. “Um, personal. So, uh. I don’t *need* to know.”

Frank rolled his eyes and patted the log next to him. The fire was roaring merrily, casting warm, dancing shadows on the surrounding rock, but they seemed to bend around Frank, refracting strangely.

“Sit the fuck down, already. You’re too far away,” Frank said, a challenging note in his voice.

Gerard stood up and shuffled over, huddling closer to the ring of warmth. Fires only ever warmed the front of you, how inconvenient was that? If you wanted your ass not to get frostbitten, you had to rotate yourself like a rotisserie chicken. Having Frank on his right side wouldn’t exactly help matters, but he wasn’t complaining. When Gerard sat down next to him, Frank smiled a little into one of his hands, like he hadn’t expected Gerard to actually do it.

“My neck broke.” Frank said next, unexpectedly, and Gerard sucked in a sharp, cold breath. “And it was like... hmm. Like pop rocks.”

“Breaking your neck was like pop rocks,” Gerard said blankly, notebook forgotten.

“Pop rocks in soda,” Frank agreed. He’d taken hold of his own marshmallow stick again and was poking at the fire with it, sending sparks flying up as he talked. “Or, no, like. You ever do that experiment in Chemistry class? Where you burn sugar with some kind of chlorate, and it goes up in this fucking crazy flame? I loved that shit. Dying was like that.” He paused. “Well, for me, anyway.”

“Did it hurt?” Gerard asked tentatively, and Frank smiled lopsidedly, shoving the branch he held further into the fire.

“Nah,” he said, eyes focused on the flames. “It was just fucking confusing. That moment, that, uh, flash? That’s the last clear memory I have for weeks. Maybe longer. I told you, I’m bad at keeping track of time.”

Swallowing, Gerard pressed a hand to his eyes for a moment. Maybe Frank would think it was the smoke. He scooted a little closer to Frank and Frank slanted a look at him.

“I imagine dying is a little disconcerting,” Gerard said, and didn’t ask how he’d broken his neck. Frank laughed and shrugged again. ‘What can you do,’ his shoulders said, and there was a wry tilt to his smile, and Gerard wanted to wrap Frank up in his coat and never let him out of his sight ever again.

“Can you feel this?” Gerard asked suddenly. Frank raised an eyebrow. “The fire,” Gerard clarified, gnawing at his lower lip. “I mean. The heat. Can you feel temperature differences?”

And apparently Frank had somehow managed to sneak his cold dead hand under Gerard’s shirt without Gerard noticing until it was too late, because there were suddenly cold fingertips trailing along his lower back. Gerard shrieked and writhed away, winding up falling backwards off the log onto the cold ground with a jarring thump.

“You asshole!” Gerard spluttered, shivering wildly. Frank’s hands weren’t totally freezing, not like ice or anything, but the weather was already cold as hell, and that had just been unfair, insult to injury. Not to mention it’d tickled like a motherfucker.

“I’m always cold,” Frank said with a half-smile, leaning over Gerard and smirking. “That’s what I feel, all the time.”

“So... you can’t feel the fire, then?” Gerard asked, frowning. He was still lying on his back, staring up at Frank and the stars, and the thought of Frank being cold all the time made his chest hurt in ways that had nothing to do with all the wind being knocked out of him when he fell.

“I can feel you,” Frank said, still smiling crookedly down at Gerard. He held out a hand and when Gerard reached up to grab it, his smile widened. Gerard forgot for a moment what they’d been talking about, because, jeez. Dimples.

“Actually, I can feel the fire too,” Frank continued once Gerard was upright again. He hadn’t let go of Gerard’s hand, not that Gerard was focusing every iota of his attention on that or anything. “But not—not like it’s real. It’s, um. Only on the surface? I don’t know how to explain any of this,” he laughed, a little incredulously. “I’ve never had to explain it to anyone. I don’t even think about it, usually.”

“You’re doing a good job. I mean, it’s tough shit to put in words, I bet.” He tentatively hugged Frank towards him so that Frank was plastered to his side, almost in Gerard’s lap. Frank made a startled, happy sound and pressed his face into Gerard’s shoulder for a moment.

“Is this, um. Is this warmer?” Gerard asked, and manfully didn’t shiver when Frank’s arm dislodged his hoodie a bit and snuck beneath it, curling around Gerard’s side.

“Gerard Way,” Frank said, and seemed to run out of words. “Yeah. Yes.”

They sat that way for a few minutes longer, the fire hot on Gerard’s face and casting otherworldly shadows against the trees on the opposite side of the river

“This is cold for you, though, isn’t it?” Frank said reluctantly, starting to pull back.

“Maybe if we got closer to the fire?” Gerard asked, trying to keep his teeth from chattering. It wasn’t that cold. Compared to, say, Hoth. He wanted to go for his thermometer and see if it was actually subzero out here, but there’d be time for that later. He tugged the hem of his hoodie lower, grimacing.

“Any closer and you’ll actually be on fire, dumbass,” Frank laughed and stuck his face back against Gerard’s side, fingers trailing hesitantly along his neck. Gerard couldn’t help but shiver, which sucked, because Frank immediately backed off.

“I’m not cold!” Gerard lied between his teeth. Frank looked unimpressed. Gerard switched tactics. “My other side?” he said, widening his eyes. “Totally burning up. You’d be doing me a favor.”

He’d tell Frank to get in his lap, because his knees were almost painfully hot and actually only a spark away from being on fire, but he didn’t think he could quite handle that without having an aneurysm, or an erection. Frank looked skeptical, but he apparently couldn’t resist the invitation to warm up a bit and shuffled around to Gerard’s left side, snuggling in beneath his arm.

“Let me know if you get too cold, though,” Frank said, voice drowsy and lazy. “I don’t want you to get pneumonia. That shit fucking blows, I used to get that all the time.” Frank was totally fucking snuggling with him. Gerard was blatantly being used for his body warmth, and he was so okay with that. It was sort of sad that this was the most action he’d gotten in, like, years, but he wasn’t going to complain. He could use a drink, though, if his perfect dream guy was going to lounge about all sweet and dead and unavailable in his arms for the rest of the night.

“You know not everyone can see me like you do, right?” Frank spoke up as Gerard tried to maneuver his backpack without dislodging him. “I mean, not as clear as this.”

“I got that impression, yeah,” Gerard agreed, and held the Seagrams bottle so that it caught the firelight. He caught himself just before he offered some to Frank. Frank didn’t drink. Right.

“I’m not really sure why,” Frank said thoughtfully. “I mean, you can’t help but wonder, but I dunno. I can affect how people see me to some degree, if I concentrate or whatever, but it’s mostly them, not me.”

“Huh,” Gerard said. “Well, maybe... maybe I can help you figure that out?”

“Yeah, with your EMP reader. Dork,” Frank said fondly, and Gerard hit him with the notebook. Frank grinned and then started talking again, getting a distant look on his face. “The first year or so after I died was the hardest for me. It was hard to concentrate, to figure out what was going on, you know?”

Gerard couldn’t help but shiver, and not from the cold this time. Fuck, that sounded miserable. He drank straight from the bottle again and Frank made a face.

“Dude, that shit is foul. It’s like drinking pine tar.”

“Nah, ‘s good.” Gerard grinned and exhaled pointedly in Frank’s face, breath coming out as a white cloud. “Tastes like Christmas.”

“Christmas is not a beverage,” Frank said, rolling his eyes. “Anyway, yeah, it took me a while to figure out how to be, um, corporeal? I was pretty scattered right after I died, and I couldn’t leave my corpse for, like, the longest fucking time. And can I just say, that was sorta weird.”

“Creepy,” he commented, and drained half the bottle in one go, because holy shit.

“Oh, you totally love it, you freaky fuck,” Frank giggled.

Gerard was about equal parts fascinated and fucking disturbed, to be honest. And one hundred percent sure he didn't want to be sober for this conversation. He was such a crappy scientist.

“You, uh, watched yourself decompose?” Gerard asked, voice maybe squeaking a bit as Frank's fingers spiderwalked along his side, only marginally warmer than the wind.

“Watched fishes eat my eyes,” Frank agreed, and Gerard made a noise he hadn't known was humanly possible. “It was just my body, chill out!” Frank said, sounding a bit affronted.

“Gross, gross gross gross grosssssss,” Gerard moaned into his hands. He hadn't brought enough alcohol for this. There wasn't enough alcohol in the world for this. “Gross. I am never eating fish again.”

“Damn straight,” Frank sniggered, poking Gerard in the side, because he was an asshole and Gerard was never letting him leech body heat ever again, even if he did have dimples. “Meat is murder.”

Gerard flailed out a hand and smacked Frank in the side of his head.

“Oh, come on, you want to see my body. Don't lie,” Frank leered, snickering. Gerard sort of did. But now that the reality of Frank sleeping with the fucking fishes had just been shoved into his face, Gerard was a little less confident about the whole thing.

“Anyway, those first couple weeks, if I tried to get a few fucking feet away from my body, I'd just... wind up back in the same place. No matter how hard I tried. Always the same place.” Frank hesitated a moment, propping his chin on his hand and furrowing his brow. Gerard furtively reached down for his notebook and pen. “I think it's sort of how I remember dreams being,” Frank said finally. “I haven't dreamed in ages, but you know the way you suddenly go from standing in the kitchen making, like, a gumball pie, and then all of a sudden you're cutting a piece and you're serving it to Bon Jovi on stage at Madison Square Garden and he's blowing a bubble and climbing into it? Stop laughing, asshole. But it's like that. No transitions, just. You're one place, then you're not.”

“Bubble gum pie,” Gerard said, trying not to giggle. “Okay, right. Does that still happen? The, uh, yo-yo effect back to your grave?”

“It's not so much a grave. And nah, I'm better at concentrating now. I can walk further, obviously. Can't go on forever, but I don't get poinged backward, either,” Frank said, waving a hand nonchalantly. “And I don't lose as much time as I used to, but it still happens, you know?”

“Not really?” Gerard laughed disbelievingly. “Sounds sort of like being fucked up. Hardcore fucked up, I mean. Heavy duty shit.”

“Only without the potential fun parts, yeah,” Frank agreed. “Actually, that's a lie, there's fun parts. I rode a bear once. That was pretty fucking awesome. And there's always campers to dick around with, but it'd be more fun if I wasn't stuck in a goddamned forest, I bet. I shouldn't complain, though. If they'd actually found me and buried me, I'd be stuck in a graveyard somewhere like Sally.”

Gerard startled upright. “Sally's real?” he spluttered, outraged. “She's a ghost too? Why didn't I see her?”

“Oh, she’s shy,” Frank replied offhandedly, blowing his bangs out of his eyes. The wind was really starting to pick up. “And she’s, you know, really fucking old, both of you’d probably have to be concentrating really hard for you to see her. Even I don’t always see her. She’s just not always there.” Frank got kind of a blank look on his face. “I hope she doesn’t leave soon. There was another girl, for a little while, but she’s gone now,” Frank said flatly, then looked at Gerard and beamed. “But I have you now, at least.”

Gerard looked at him and felt a faint twinge of unease. Frank didn’t seem to notice, sitting up and peering at the fire.

“Hold up, needs another log,” he said, and stood. Gerard still felt cold.

“So, you said I’m, what, better at seeing you than other people?” he said, fiddling with his hoodie and leaning in closer to the coals, holding out his hands.

“Better than most,” Frank said absently, stacking the logs in some bizarre arcane configuration. “It’s different for everyone I run into, like I said. Some people see me but don’t hear me, some people hear me but don’t see me. Some sad fuckers just get a weird feeling and freak out and run away.” When Gerard stayed silent, he glanced up and then sighed, long-suffering.

“*What?*” Frank asked, sounding bemused, and reached into the fire to adjust a log. “C’mon, Gerard, we’ve been over this. Just spit it out. We don’t have all night.”

“It might help us understand more, what makes me able to see you normally, if, um. You could. Can you go more ghostly around me too?” Gerard asked, excited and nervous at the same time. As long as Gerard’d known Frank, he’d looked pretty much normal, like any other teenager. He didn’t necessarily *act* normal, and he sometimes looked subtly off. But nothing like what other people had seen, apparently. “Like, could you go see-through or something? I don’t know. Nevermind.”

“No, sure,” Frank said. “You’re so cute. You want me to float, too, Princess?”

“Oh shut up,” Gerard said, mouth twitching. “If you’re just gonna make fun of me.”

Frank scrunched up his face, and at first Gerard just thought it was more mockery, but then he noticed the edges of Frank’s t-shirt blurring, and when Frank opened his eyes, he looked—like glass, like if Gerard held him up to the fire he’d throw Frank-colored gleams of light.

“Holy shit,” Gerard breathed, and reached out a hand before drawing it back, hesitant. Frank rolled his eyes and reached out and grabbed Gerard’s wrist. Gerard could feel his own pulse, beating faster and faster, and then the strangest fucking sensation. Like getting cold all at once, but not cold, exactly. And it was focused in one place in his pulse. Frank was looking at him with half-lidded eyes, and Gerard could feel his veins throbbing. “Holy shit,” he repeated, weakly, and Frank took his fingers out of Gerard’s skin. In the next breath he was firm and solid again.

“I don’t have to try as hard with you,” he said, flexing his fingers. Gerard stared at his own wrist. “To look alive, be solid, all that,” Frank clarified. “I don’t have to concentrate as hard.”

“Why not?” Gerard swallowed. His wrist looked perfectly normal. Gerard felt like it should look different, now. “What—why’s there a difference?”

Frank grinned, showing all his teeth. “You tell me, Gerard Way.” Then he sighed, and rubbed his head. “I better get you home,” he said. “There’s storm front coming in. It wasn’t supposed to be here until tomorrow,” he scowled.

Gerard protested and whined and brandished the travel umbrella he’d stowed away in his bag, but

to no avail. Frank was adamant on Gerard not dying a miserable, snot-related death, and so Gerard had to submit to being hustled home beneath the quiet trees. Before Gerard left, Frank reached out a hand and touched Gerard's cheek, fingertips melting into his skin.

"Just," Frank said, eyes bright. "Thanks. Seriously. I can't believe I met you. I'm never letting you go."

"You're about to let me go right now," Gerard grumbled, and wondered if he should kiss Frank now. It would be the perfect time, right?

"It's a metaphor, jackass," Frank laughed. "I just, you know, don't want you ending up like me. You're going to SVA. You're gonna be fucking famous, Gee."

And Gerard didn't even know what to say. He'd told Frank about how he'd applied to SVA earlier that week, the first day they'd met. He didn't realize that Frank thought it was such a big deal.

"Well... thanks," he said, and leaned into Frank's touch, and it felt so weird, the cold spreading beneath his skin, into his bones, intimate, and—Frank yanked his hand away and Gerard nearly fell over.

"You're gonna get fucking soaked if you don't hurry," Frank said, and shoved at Gerard's back. "Get going, genius."

"Okay, okay," Gerard muttered. Jeez. But he couldn't keep up his indignation when Frank was leaning up against the edge of the path, watching Gerard with huge eyes.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

"Bye, Frankie," Gerard said, giving in and offering Frank a small smile, and Frank smiled back, all dimples and shiny eyes, and Gerard didn't feel cold at all.

He got home just in time, hurrying down the empty streets in a daze and feeling the wind pick up, cold and cutting, and fell asleep listening to the first raindrops hitting his window, the light from the TV flickering against the rain-streaked glass.

Rain made the classroom darker, full of strangely flung shadows and watery light. Gerard had slouched to school beneath his useless umbrella, feet cold and wet, face numb, and arrived with smudged eyeliner spiderwebbing down his cheeks and his clothes thoroughly, miserably damp.

It was like a totally different room now, gray and filled with the sound of the wind flinging rain against the windows, as if the storm was trying to reach inside the building and find Gerard, make sure he was completely and thoroughly soaked. Fucking rain.

Mrs. Hall was graphing something on the chalkboard, the grating of the chalk blending with the white rain noise into a seamless gray whole. He wondered if the rain bothered Frank, if Frank even went solid when Gerard wasn't there to see him. If it felt strange to have water slide through your skin. Shit he shouldn't be thinking about right now, probably.

Ted seemed to be in a particularly foul mood that morning, hair plastered to his head and flannel dripping. He'd shaken himself when he'd wandered past Gerard's desk, spattering his notebook with watery blue splotches. Then he spent the rest of class kicking at the back of Gerard's chair, an irregular jarring thump Gerard had just managed to force himself to endure when it ceased abruptly.

“Your make-up is running, fag,” Ted sneered, leaning over the back of Gerard’s desk. Gerard fought the urge to scrub at his cheeks.

“I know,” he said, gritting his teeth. Fuck, it was cold in here. It was hard to concentrate, to acknowledge reality after last night. He rubbed at his wrist absently, felt the delicate bones. He wondered what Frank was doing now, if he didn’t ever sleep, didn’t dream. Did he just—stop being? Or was he always there, always half awake. Maybe being dead was like dreaming all the time.

He caught himself doodling Frank’s HALLOWEEN tattoos on his own knuckles and had to stop before Ted or Isaac noticed. Fuck, Frank. He wished he could have skipped school, stayed with Frank in the forest all day, even if it was raining and cold and miserable. He had to stop thinking about it, or he’d start beaming and being ridiculous and fiddling with his hair and recreating that blowjob scene from *Ghostbusters* in his head, and that wasn’t healthy for anyone.

He wound up entertaining himself by drawing the girl across the row from him, which seemed safe enough. She was sitting in front of the window and looking like she might doze off at any moment. The rain was throwing strange shadows over her tanned skin and corkscrew curls. She was totally stacked, Gerard noticed—he wasn’t blind. But more than that, there was something about her face, broad and clear, with swooping arched cheekbones like Japanese calligraphy. It caught his eye and glimmered in his hindbrain. He bit his pen, thinking. There was something about it that reminded him of the scroll of a violin or a viola.

“What the fucking hell are you doing,” Ted said in his ear, chair screeching forward. Gerard froze, hunched over his paper. “What are you goddamn drawing my girlfriend for? What the *fuck*, you’re—you’re supposed to be gay!”

“Bi, actually,” Gerard said, mind totally blank—and holy fuck, that had been the wrong thing to say. There was actually a throbbing vein in Ted’s forehead, Jesus. “But I wasn’t, I was just—she has interesting lines, it’s not like—“

“Don’t look at my girlfriend’s *lines*, you sick fuck!” Ted said incredulously. Mrs. Hall was going to notice what was going on any second now, and then Gerard was going to beat a quick retreat to the highway and hitchhike back to civilization. Or maybe, like, hide out in the Trumbull Research Center and feed off the extra pudding cups the nurses brought Mikey.

“The lines of her *face*, Jesus!” he hissed back, trying to scoot his chair as far forward as it would go. The girl in front of him was pointedly ignoring this attempt, but Ted’s chair followed Gerard forward until all Gerard could do was lean up, away from Ted’s looming, hateful face, the edge of the desk pressing in a hard bruising line against his ribs. “The lines of her face are just, you know, interesting, and different—“

“*Different?*”

Gerard had never heard someone whisper and bellow at the same time before. And oh, fuck, of course the girl in question noticed something was going on, and yeah, Gerard finally got on the clue bus, because she was in fact the girl who sucked face with Ted every day in the hall. He’d just never actually noticed her face during those occasions. Ted’s groping hands sort of tended to dominate the tableau, and plus, Gerard tried not to look too closely at that particular clinch if he could help it. The girl was frowning at both of them, now. Gerard couldn’t blame her.

“Baby, don’t you pay him no mind,” Ted said immediately, in a surprisingly syrupy voice. The girl ignored him, shooting Gerard a cool look.

“You like my... lines?” she said to him, raising an eyebrow, and holy shit, okay, she really was gorgeous and this was *awful*. Gerard should totally have stayed in the forest and caught pneumonia and avoided this whole clusterfuck.

“Of your face,” Gerard moaned and tried to duck his head as far down into his hoodie as possible. “Not other, uh, lines, or curves or whatever—not that your other lines aren’t nice, I mean, it’s just. I.”

Ted made a low growling noise behind him and Gerard tried to edge further up in his seat, but his ass already had bare minimum contact with the chair; he was holding himself upright purely by clutching at the desk.

“Settle, class!” Mrs. Hall trilled without turning away from the board.

“Can I see it?” the girl asked, pursing her lips. “The drawing, I mean.”

“I, uh,” Gerard said intelligently, and oh Christ, Ted was literally breathing down the back of his neck.

“Tanya, let it be,” Ted growled. Gerard glanced over furtively to see if anyone else had noticed what was going on, and yes, sure enough, Noltes was staring at him, face terrifyingly blank. Tanya took advantage of Gerard’s rodent-like paralysis to snag his notebook.

“Hey now,” she said, and Gerard turned, startled at the tone in her voice. She looked at him from under her lashes, twirling a curl with one finger. Gerard, if possible, felt himself tense up even more than he already was. “This is real nice—Gerard, right?” she drawled, smiling slow at him. “Can I keep this, Gerard?”

Gerard literally wanted to hide under his desk or pull his hoodie over his head and scuttle out of the room. He made a vague gesture with his hand that he hoped conveyed this, but apparently Tanya either missed the subtleties or chose to ignore them, because she carefully tore the paper from the notebook and folded it into her purse.

“What the fuck, Tanya!” Ted exploded behind him, thunderous and outraged, and apparently not even Mrs. Hall could ignore it.

“That will be enough,” Mrs. Hall said frostily, peering at the room over her spectacles, a tiny ineffectual Mephistopheles. Like Clarence from *It’s A Wonderful Life*, only on the other side, the side of the fallen angels and cheerful sadists. Gerard really shouldn’t have ever been born. It would definitely have been better that way.

Ted leaned even farther forward—seriously, by this point neither of them were even in their desks any more. The rain had picked up, and thunder, almost too low to hear, thrummed through the room like a counterpoint to the adrenaline and dread in Gerard’s veins.

“You’re fucking dead, Way,” Ted said in Gerard’s ear, quiet enough that Mrs. Hall only glanced at them briefly before turning back to her asymptotes and away from the unfolding disaster.

“Yeah,” Noltes said, and leaned on his desk, biceps flexing menacingly. “Way dead.”

There was a long pause. “Christ, shut up, Noltes,” Ted said, slumping back in his desk and grinding a palm into one eye. Gerard would have been sympathetic—good minions clearly were hard to find—if Ted wasn’t such a mouth-breathing homophobic murderous prick. “Ike,” Ted hissed, clearly disgruntled. “Ike, what the fuck, man, where’s the support? Where’s the back up? Noltes is fucking useless over here.”

Gerard kept his head forward, but he heard Noltes grunt noncommittally and Isaac whisper back, “I’m taking notes, idiot, shut the fuck up.”

Ted made an outraged noise, but Gerard was busy trying to look subtly out of the corner of his eye, hoping for an opportunity to snag his notebook from Tanya’s desk and bolt while the Jock Trio was distracted. Tanya noticed Gerard’s glance, and her eyes widened as she smiled at him. Ted, attention apparently recaptured, made an awful noise behind him.

“Tanya,” he hissed. “You’re *encouraging* him!”

The bell finally, finally rang and Gerard shot to his feet before getting dragged backward by Ted’s hand on his hoodie.

“Where you goin’,” he snarled.

“I heard some girls like guys with that whole nonlinear sexuality eyeliner thing going on,” Isaac said, sounding interested as the class swirled around them, students pouring out into the hallway. Gerard looked longingly after them. “Didn’t know it was true, mind.”

Tanya stood up, statuesque and lovely even in the gray morning light. She rolled her eyes and tossed Gerard his notebook. She pointedly ignored Ted’s attempts to get her attention, looking supremely bored.

“Shut the fuck up, Ike,” Ted said, turning to look at his minion, betrayal written all over his face. *Et tu, Brute?* Gerard thought, and then had to work really hard on not bursting into hysterical giggles. “What the fuck do you know, she’s just trying to rile me up, aren’t you, baby? S’ real cute, actually.”

“That’s totally it, probably, hah, I mean, that’s the only thing that makes sense, right?” Gerard babbled, tugging his hoodie free of Ted’s grip and backing away. Straight into the brick wall that was Noltes. Fuck fuck *fuck*. Noltes looked down at Gerard and smiled big and white, like a fucking shark. He had surprisingly nice teeth.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Tanya said, examining her pink nails, cool as a fucking cucumber, and she was clearly evil incarnate. Gerard was sort of in awe. “I think he’s cute. Sweet, too.”

Gerard could literally feel his will to live draining out of him. Which was lucky, because judging by the shade of apocalyptic red Ted was turning, his life was about to end anyway. Maybe he could go haunt the forest with Frank.

“Get out of my way, Noltes,” Tanya said, sliding past Noltes with her friend.

“Baby,” Ted said, chasing after her. “Baby, you gotta be fucking kidding me, right? Right? Baby, he’s leading you on! He doesn’t even *like* girls, goddammit!” And Tanya sailing off, back ramrod-straight and head high, totally ignoring him.

Isaac laughed and hiked his bag on his shoulder.

“Run along to class now, Gerard,” he said, nodding at Noltes. Noltes moved out of the way, slightly, enough that Gerard could edge past him towards freedom. “I’m sure we’ll be seeing you later, though. Ted’s a little touchy about his girl.”

Noltes just kept smiling, eyes following Gerard across the room as he bolted out the door.

Gerard spent a really fantastic English period with Ted staring murderously at the back of his head

the entire time, completely silent. It was really, really fucking creepy, especially since Gerard had sort of gotten used to the whole constant droning of insults and condescending pet names. This silence was new and terrible. Gerard was starting to think he could hear Ted's eyes bulging.

And fuck, even though Gerard had about a thousand other things to worry about—ranging from how to get to English without one of the goons next to him shoving him in a locker to how he'd get out of the school building later without being beaten to a pulp and shoved in a *coffin*—he still couldn't get Frank out of his head. Which was really stupid, since what he should be thinking about was how to rectify this godawful situation. Tanya, now that he'd noticed her, was everywhere, and she apparently was having a great time waving languidly at Gerard and winding up her Neanderthal boyfriend, which, super. Thanks for that, Tanya.

Gerard was pretty sure she was just winding Ted up, anyway.

Mostly sure.

The rest of the day sucked serious ass. Gerard had never been so grateful for a Friday in his entire life—he was looking forward to a weekend respite from being shoved into water fountains and having his notebooks stolen and generally fearing for his life.

“You call this lying low?” Ray hissed at him disbelievingly, as though it was in any way Gerard's fault he'd just gotten tripped into a mud puddle. Oh God, he was totally going to get ringworm and go bald, he just knew it.

“Well, technically, I am,” Gerard said, pulling himself into a sitting position. “And, anyway, this is *not* my fault!”

Ray just clucked his tongue and dragged him upright. “You take him outside, I'll get the food,” he told Bob, who shrugged and pulled Gerard to his feet and out of the mud puddle with a disgusting squelching noise. It wasn't even worth the effort to go inside to one of the bathrooms and try to clean up. Gerard would just bask in misery and mud for the rest of his classes; it was that kind of day.

Chapter 7

They all retreated outside to huddle at the tables beneath giant umbrellas. Everything was soggy and damp. Especially Gerard. Being outside was unexpectedly nice, though. The wind had died down and there was just a gentle haze of rain surrounding them, cutting them off from the rest of school.

“So,” Worm said, finally breaking the silence. Gerard looked up from inspecting his gross, muddy hands. “I heard Ted wants to kill you.”

“Is this news?” Gerard mumbled, and hunched his shoulders.

“Well, more than usual,” Worm said. “Like, before he just wanted to put you in a coma? But now he wants you dead.”

Gerard took a deep breath, but before he could explain, Bob unexpectedly spoke up.

“Ted hit on Betty Ann last Tuesday during some party, and now Tanya’s getting back by flirting with whoever she thinks will piss him off the most. Plus, she thinks Gerard looks sort of hot in eyeliner.” Bob sipped his coke and flipped a page of the November *Rolling Stone*. Gerard could feel a muscle jumping in his eye. “You’re really shitty at lying low, you know that, Gerard?”

“How did you even *know that*?” Gerard boggled, gripping the wood of the table like it might fly away. “And she does *not*.”

Bob shrugged. “I listen. And she does. Oh, speaking of, have you noticed Ryan following you yet? Because it’s getting kind of pathetic.”

“What? Who?” Oh god, was someone else trying to kill him too? But no, Bob jerked his head to the right of Gerard, and when Gerard craned his neck and looked behind him, he was staring straight into the eyes of the bandana kid. The kid’s eyes widened and he immediately blushed and disappeared into the damp crowd of kids standing outside the band room. If Gerard didn’t know actual ghostly entities, he’d suspect supernatural work was afoot.

“Um,” he said, nonplussed. “That’s Ryan? Has he—has he been following me all day?”

“All *week*,” Patrick said with relish, which, great. If Patrick had noticed something besides his sheet music, Ryan must have really been obvious with the stalking. Gerard looked back over again and saw Ryan scurry behind one of the tuba players, all long scarecrow limbs and big eyes, like Dali had decided to draw a Lisa Frank kitten instead of elephants, or something.

“But why?” Gerard asked, bewildered. “Why the fuck is Ryan following me?”

“Because someone’s got a crush,” Ray singsonged, appearing out of the rain with a massive tray of food, carefully protected from the rain by about ten thousand plastic plates. Gerard glared.

“If you sing that kissing in a tree song,” he said darkly, shivering and miserable, “I will end you.”

“You know, Ryan Ross’ sudden desire to wear eyeliner makes sense, now that I think about it,” Ray laughed, and Bob’s eyes widened in mock-understanding. “Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, right?”

As though Gerard’s life wasn’t hard enough, now he had Bob batting his eyelashes at him. Gerard

scowled and snagged a bottle of Diet Coke from Ray's stash, shoving over a few crumpled, soggy bills in return. He drank his soda moodily as Bob and Worm descended on Ray—apparently Ray had some kind of wonky cafeteria mojo that let him get extra fries and pudding if he wobbled his lower lip. Whatever.

“Seriously, though, *do* you like Tanya or something?” Ray asked as he doled out food. Gerard eyed him in bafflement. “I mean, she’s been going around implying you give great head.”

Gerard froze, soda halfway to his mouth, staring at Ray in horror. “She what?”

“Yep,” Ray said. “History was like the land of TMI. And of visions of Gerard’s messy, untimely death.”

“And of lies!” Gerard objected, clutching the table in terror. “Why does she hate me? I didn’t even know her name until this morning!”

“Kinky,” Bob said around a mouthful of fries. Everyone looked at him and he raised an eyebrow and smirked. Gerard no longer had a sort-of crush on Bob. Bob was a *jerk*.

“It’s not like I actually even hit on her!” Gerard protested, and he wanted to call Mikey and whine, but Mikey would just tell Pete and Pete would think it was hilarious and make fun of him forever. “It was just a sketch.” He toyed morosely with the label on his Coke. Now that he’d noticed, he could see Ryan hovering at the periphery of the band group, staring at them. Creepy.

“Dude,” Ray answered, looking at Gerard pityingly. “Tanya’s dating *Ted Sikowski*. She probably thinks a romantic good time, is, like, Ted giving her a breath mint after a blowjob. I don’t think he even knows her birthday. And you drew her portrait! You practically proposed to her. She was showing everyone the picture in Calculus. She wants to have ten billion of your babies.”

“Ted Sikowski is a fucking jerk,” Gerard said, outraged all over again despite himself. Even Tanya, who was apparently the devil, didn’t deserve to be treated that way. “Why does she date him? Who dates someone like that?”

“Ten billion babies,” Ray hummed. “Here, eat this.”

“You’re such an asshole,” Gerard replied, scowling at the little paper boat of chicken strips. “We are no longer frog dissection buddies. Our frog dissection buddy days are over.”

“Baby, don’t be like that.” Ray leered, and Patrick laughed and Bob teased them both about Gerard’s admirers hunting Ray down, and except for the impending doom, it was sort of nice. Gerard spent the rest of lunch idly eating rubbery pieces of chicken, listening to Ray and Patrick work through some sight-reading piece and making faces at Bob. Bob stared impassively back until Gerard accidentally sneezed mid-cross-eyed attempt #7, after which Gerard declared victory and Bob admitted defeat.

When they all stood up to leave, though, Gerard’s shoes squelched, his wet jeans chafed, and Ted and his goons were probably lurking somewhere inside the building, hoping to catch and throttle him.

Well. It wasn’t like Gerard was going to learn anything in fucking art class anyway.

“You guys go on,” he muttered, shouldering his muddy bag and shaking his bangs out of his eyes. “I’m going home.”

“What!” Ray exclaimed, scandalized. “It’s pouring, Gerard! You can’t walk home in that, and

besides, you have classes. Two more classes!”

“I’ll give you a ride,” Bob said laconically, digging in his pocket for his keys and ignoring Ray’s sputtering. “Fix the attendance sheets for us on Monday?”

“No!” Ray said indignantly, and Bob shrugged and jerked his head at Gerard before heading towards the parking lot at a quick jog. Gerard smiled helplessly at Ray, who looked like he was about to burst into a lecture at any second about the sanctity of the attendance office – Gerard had heard several iterations of this over the week – and followed Bob hastily. He’d hear the rest at the sleepover that night, he was sure of it.

The rain really had picked up while they were eating lunch. Over the short distance from the band room to the parking lot, a lot of the mud Gerard’d been caked in earlier completely washed off. His umbrella was useless, catching the wind and blowing inside out and nearly taking out Gerard’s eye as he wrestled it closed again. As Bob struggled with the door to his sedan, swearing, Gerard glanced over at the forest. Frank must be extra cold today, he thought, and shivered in his soaked clothes.

“Door’s open,” Bob said, and Gerard finally managed to beat his umbrella into submission and then folded himself into the car.

“Sorry about the mud,” he offered hesitantly, and Bob waved a hand in dismissal.

“Car’s seen worse. And I needed an excuse to get out of Calculus. We had a quiz today.”

“Well. Thanks anyway,” Gerard offered. “I just... really need a weekend away from school, right now.”

A weekend away from Ted (and Tanya), and all the potential for blood and pain that came with them. Bob seemed to agree, shooting Gerard a worried look, then changing the subject to the sleepover that night. Fuck, Gerard had forgotten that was tonight tonight. He’d wanted to go see Frankie. But he supposed it wasn’t like he’d get far in the woods with it pouring like this.

“I know where you live now, Way, there’s no escaping it,” Bob told him, eyes crinkling in a smile, and Gerard realized he was really, sincerely looking forward to going, even if Ray did spend the whole time lecturing the both of them on attendance.

He just wished Frank and Mikey could be there, too.

Once in the house Gerard found himself annoyingly fixated on all the windows. The branches tapped invitingly at the panes, like the forest itself was beckoning Gerard out, but the rain was coming down harder now, lashing the glass, and Gerard had just gotten warm and dressed in dry clothes.

“Frank,” he said, frustrated, staring out the kitchen window. What was Frank doing now, what did he do all day? Was he out tormenting already tormented campers—if anyone was camping in this weather, they had to be fucking miserable. Or maybe Frank was just sitting alone in the ancient mill house, talking to Sally, playing guitar. Maybe he was reading Doom Patrol again. Gerard could picture that, Frank tucked up in one of the corners, flickering and pale, turning the pages and murmuring over Crazy Jane’s personality snaps, over Cliff’s clenched metal jaw.

Or maybe Frank just... stopped existing at all, for a while. Maybe he’d snapped back to his grave—no, not a grave, he’d said it wasn’t a grave. Fuck.

By the time his mom got home from the salon to pick Gerard up, Gerard had re-organized all his

comics, DVDs, and graphic novels by the color of their covers, had sent Mikey approximately thirty-four texts, and had drank three pots of coffee and was about to bounce off the fucking walls. His mom didn't seem incredibly amused.

When they finally got to Mikey's room in the Research Center, Gerard flung himself onto the bed and buried his face in Mikey's shoulder.

"My life," he announced into Mikey's sleeve, "is a wasteland."

Mikey snorted and patted Gerard's head.

"I can't believe you've already managed to rack up a reputation for being good in bed," he said, sounding cheerfully aggrieved. His voice was clear, only a little bit hoarse, and Gerard couldn't help but smile a bit. "Your life is so hard. Is that mud in your hair?"

"It's not funny," Gerard insisted, and heaved a giant sigh and flopped over on his back, staring moodily up at the ceiling. He hoped he was getting mud and dirt all over Mikey's pillow. "Her boyfriend is going to kill me. With antlers."

"Maybe your boyfriend can protect you with his ghost mojo," Mikey reasoned, and Gerard narrowed his eyes at a ceiling tile.

"Okay, one? Frank's not my boyfriend." Which was another reason his life was a wasteland, to be honest. "Two, he can't leave the forest anyway, so it's a moot point, shut up."

Mikey hummed noncommittally and started flipping through the stack of comics Gerard had brought.

"Mikey," Gerard said, pained. Mikey raised an eyebrow, not looking away from the page. "Miiikey", he repeated, drawing his brother's name out mournfully, and Mikey sighed.

"You're such a dope," he said fondly. "Frank clearly likes you. You had a campfire date in the middle of the woods."

"Yeah, but," Gerard protested, "He doesn't—I don't—"

"He snuggled up next to you and stuck his hands in your shirt," Mikey pointed out patiently.

"He's a touchy-feely guy!" Gerard retorted sadly. "I mean, he'd probably be all handsy with anyone, he's stuck out in the woods all alone. I'm just a warm body to him! I mean, he likes me, I guess, like a friend, but if he *like* liked me—" Gerard wriggled over so he could stick his face back in Mikey's shoulder. If Frank wanted him, Gerard had given him plenty of opportunities to show it. There were so many times they could have kissed, it was driving Gerard a little crazy thinking about it.

"Well, maybe he thinks that about you, too," Mikey said, in an obnoxiously reasonable tone of voice. "That he's just a dead body to you. And if he scares you away, he probably doesn't have anyone else to talk to for, like another twenty years or something, right?"

"Shut up," Gerard muttered weakly. Shit, twenty years. "He should know that I wouldn't, like. Leave him. Even if he wasn't a ghost. Which is so cool, who would leave? Boggles my fucking mind, Mikey."

"I just want you to know," Mikey said, turning another page and smiling slightly, "that I support your weird dead-guy fetishes. You have my blessing."

“It’s not a fetish!”

“His cold ghost hands are all you can think about,” Mikey said, waving about his phone like it was some sort of proof. “I have text messages to prove it.” Damn.

“I hate you,” Gerard said, and hooked his chin over Mikey’s shoulder so he could see the pages better.

“Hey, maybe you should just let him know how great you are at giving head. Tanya could be a character reference.”

“I will disown you,” Gerard threatened, and then said, “Turn the page, already, you’re almost at the part where Steph unmask the Mayor.”

“Thanks,” Mikey said, rolling his eyes, and turned the page.

The weekend went by way too quickly. The sleepover was pretty awesome, even if all the sleepless nights finally caught up with him and Gerard had woken in the morning with marker all over his face, because Bob and Ray were dicks. At least it’d been Crayola and not Sharpie. Gerard spent the rest of the Saturday moping with Mikey and wandering around the hospital’s research wing and wishing he could send Frank texts about the creepy basement they found and the two interns that they’d interrupted in some kind of weird clinch that involved hospital masks and bandages. Like, way to play doctor, guys.

He’d passed on the Dinosaur Jr. concert that night, citing exhaustion and lingering resentment over the facial graffiti, but then on Sunday Bob had kidnapped him again, all polite smiles to Gerard’s mother and throat-cutting gestures when her back was turned. So Gerard wound up being hustled out to the car, forced to be sociable all day.

Ray’s mom really did make awesome pizza, though. And now Gerard had a ride to school, because Ray didn’t approve of him walking alone when Ted and his gang were gunning for him—Gerard kind of hoped the whole thing might have blown over by now, but Ray and Bob weren’t so sanguine. Anyway, Gerard didn’t have to walk to school anymore, which was definitely a plus.

Bob and Patrick re-enacting Gerard’s epic Halo failures Monday morning in the parking lot, though, was a huge red minus. They were all squashed in Bob’s car, smoking and waiting for the bell, and Gerard, for once, really wished the damned thing would just ring.

“I didn’t even know someone could die that many times in a row,” Ray said in a hushed voice, and Gerard flipped him off. Again. “And in such a short time, man. Like, twelve regens in a under a minute? That has to be some sort of record.”

“I hate you,” Gerard said, smiling helplessly. “I told you I can’t play video games. I told you, and you made me play anyway, and acted all surprised when I sucked.”

“Yeah, but,” Bob said, “this goes way beyond sucking. It was almost beautiful. Like art.”

“So much hate,” Gerard reiterated, rolling his eyes. “Can we go inside yet?”

Ray hummed thoughtfully and peered out the window at the parking lot.

“Yeah, give it another couple seconds and I think most everybody’ll have already headed in.” Time enough to finish off last cigarette and brace himself for the day. Ray called the coast clear,

and hustled out of the car a minute or so later.

“I gotta get in to Attendance soon anyway, or Gertie will flip.”

“I still think you’re all wrong. Nobody’s going to do anything on school grounds,” Gerard grumbled as they hustled out of the car.

“Just try not to tongue Tanya during Geometry or anything,” Bob suggested, and Gerard spluttered futilely. Unfair. Totally unfair. Gerard wasn’t tonguing anyone at any time. He shot a glance back at the parking lot, at the woods behind them. He hadn’t had time to sneak out and see Frank all weekend.

“C’mon, I’m going to be late!” Ray hissed, and Gerard turned back towards the school again with a heavy sigh. Fucking Mondays.

The day actually went surprisingly smoothly, other than Ted asking politely how his weekend had gone, his eye twitching alarmingly, and Tanya blowing him a kiss in the lunch line. Like Gerard wasn’t already doomed enough. But Gerard had caught up on all his homework on Saturday night, and he thought he might have aced the make-up quiz in history, so life was going pretty good, for once. Well, except for Noltes and that Ryan kid dogging all his footsteps.

Then a scowling, towering man stopped him on his way to art class, stepping into his path and staring down at him, ignoring the brush of other students in the hall.

“So you’re the Way kid,” he said, looming over Gerard. Gerard squinted at him in confusion.

“Uh, yessir?” he said blankly. “Can I... help you?”

“Tuck in your shirt, boy,” the man said, and oh, fuck, Gerard knew him now, it was the baseball coach. Ted’s uncle or whatever. Great. Now that Gerard squinted, he could see the family resemblance. “I just like getting a chance to meet all our new students, make sure they’re not troublemakers. You’re not a troublemaker, are you, son?”

“...no?” Gerard tucked in his shirt, and then said, “Um, I... have to get to class,” and scuttled down the hallway, glancing back at the guy uneasily. Wow, there was someone he never, ever wanted to get detention with. Maybe he should stop skipping classes.

Art was boring, as usual. They were doing pointillism studies now, and Gerard zoned out during the slideshow on Seurat and stared out the window. Today he was going to bite the fucking bullet and talk to Frank, like, really talk to him. No bullshit. No almost-kisses. Even if Frank was dead, he couldn’t jerk Gerard around like this; it wasn’t fair. It was fine if Frank didn’t want more, if he didn’t want Gerard. That’d be par for the course, really. But Gerard had to know for sure or he’d drive himself crazy wondering. Gerard wasn’t going to be able to focus on figuring out Frank’s forest dilemma if he was wondering miserably every other second whether Frank even liked boys, or if he liked Gerard, or—fuck, he was making himself crazy now, and Frank wasn’t even here.

Patrick and Worm met him outside the classroom door after the bell rang, looking shifty and upset.

“Uh, hi?” Gerard said, eyeing them suspiciously. “How’d you get up here so fast? Don’t you have Library Studies this period?”

“Got out early,” Patrick said, and Worm took Gerard’s arm and started hustling him down the hallway, opposite the direction he’d have normally taken. “So we’re taking you to band practice with us. No, no protesting, just blind obedience, thanks.”

“But!” Gerard protested, and got shoved into a stairwell. “But why?”

“Ted’s on the warpath,” Worm said, looking worried. “He’s been spreading rumors that your ass is grass. Guess Tanya must have said something to set him off, but he is... not in a good mood.”

“So now you’re trying out for band,” Patrick said, tugging on the brim of his hat and smirking. “How do you feel about tubas?”

Luckily, the band director wasn’t too upset about having his time wasted or his ears abused by Gerard’s tuba-playing skills, or lack thereof. In fact, he and Gerard actually had a pretty decent chat about the possibility of Glen High eventually developing a choral section. Gerard sang him a couple showtunes, which produced a smile and some snapping fingers. Actually, to be honest, it was a little distressing how interested Mr. Stewart was in getting the trumpets to play along with ‘Luck Be A Lady.’ Gerard didn’t actually want to be in a chorus; he was just trying to avoid being pummeled to death in the school parking lot.

He escaped the band room after practice started up in earnest. The 1812 Overture followed him across the field, the big bass drum booming like thunder. Frank was waiting for him at the edge of the path, bobbing his head to the music and whistling along, slightly off-key; when Gerard got closer, he saw with each beat Frank was kicking his foot against an invisible barrier, his foot bouncing off it relentlessly.

“What would happen if we planted more trees in this field?” Gerard asked curiously. “Would the boundaries of the forest move out too?”

“And hello to you too, Gerard,” Frank snorted, tackling Gerard into a hug as soon as he crossed over into ghost-territory. Gerard hummed happily and fought the urge to bury his nose in Frank’s hair, which was lucky, since Frank let go pretty fast and started waving his hands around and nearly took out one of Gerard’s eyes as was. “C’mon, this way, we’re headed in new and exciting directions today. Fuck the path, right? Anyway, I have no fucking clue how this shit works. You could stage a daring tree-planting expedition later, though. You and Johnny Appleseed.”

“I could be Gerard... Pinecone?” Gerard offered, dodging a low-hanging branch. “I dunno, it was just an idea. Maybe we could steal some saplings from a nursery or something.”

“We,” Frank said, finger-quoting the word. “You mean ‘you.’ Try not to get yourself arrested, Nature Boy. I’d miss you if you went to prison. Anyway, hurry up, no time to shilly-shally about today.”

He disentangled Gerard from some demented hawthorne branches and took him by the hand, started tugging him along.

“‘Shilly-shally’?” Gerard laughed, delighted when Frank shot him an exasperated look, smile twitching at the corners of his mouth. “Seriously, dude? *Shilly-shally*?”

“What, Sally says it all the time. It’s a totally valid fucking phrase. But fine, get a fucking move on, dickbag,” Frank said, smiling for real now, teeth brilliant white in the afternoon sun. “Happy now?”

“Ecstatic,” Gerard assured him, eyes fixed on their linked hands. “So, uh, what’s the rush? Don’t we have all afternoon?”

“Yeah, but I want to show you my body, and it’s kind of out of the way.” Gerard missed a step and

would have gone sprawling into a mud puddle if Frank hadn't caught him deftly by the back of his hoodie and yanked him upright again. "I figured I wouldn't make you ask to see it," Frank continued nonchalantly. "You'd've probably sprained something."

"I was going to work up to it!" Gerard protested uneasily. A dead body was great on paper, but he wasn't so sure he was up for seeing one that wasn't in a comic book. Gerard stared uneasily at his own hands for a moment. "It's not, uh. Messy, is it?"

"Hmm?" Frank asked, tugging him along, expertly skirting mud puddles and keeping to high ground. "Oh, no, it's just bones. I wouldn't take you to maggot-land or anything."

"Oh, good," Gerard breathed, and then regrouped. "I mean. I'm totally cool with this. It's cool of you. To show me, and all. It's like..." Gerard trailed off, uncertain what to compare corpses to on the general scale of friendship. It was a bit more intimate than showing someone, say, a weird scar. Maybe even more intimate than admitting you liked wearing lipstick and silk panties on occasion.

"Eh, you bring me some X-rays, we'll call it even," Frank said breezily, not meeting Gerard's eyes. He was still holding Gerard's hand, though, and the forest seemed to be slipping past them easily again. Branches and brambles didn't snag on Gerard's hair and clothes like they normally did, and he didn't trip on fallen logs or slip on piles of moldering leaves. Maybe that was why they were holding hands, just so Frank could pass along some of his ghost-mojo. That probably was it. But Gerard couldn't help tentatively tightening his grip on Frank's hand, on the guitar-calloused fingers, cool and slim and tattooed, and then Frank turned to look at him, raising an eyebrow.

"Uh. So. How... was your weekend?" Gerard asked quickly, heart thumping wildly. Frank was so fucking cute, fuck. It shouldn't be legal. Well, it wasn't, Gerard supposed, there were laws against necrophilia or whatever, but this wasn't necrophilia, he'd decided. More like spectrophilia. Gerard was going to Google more on that shit when he got back to the house.

"My... weekend?" Frank said slowly. "Right. Weekends. Well, it was just like every other fucking day, I guess. How was your weekend, Gerard?"

"Oh, you know, it was okay," he said nervously, and rambled on for a while about how he and Mikey got locked on a service staircase for twenty minutes at the hospital and how Bob had beat them all at Guitar Hero but Patrick was a fucking boss sniper and destroyed everyone at Halo, especially Gerard, dammit, and how Ray's mom made these awesome mini pizzas with English muffins and marinara sauce and tons of cheese.

"Sounds like fun," was all Frank said, and then he went all weird and non-communicative and wouldn't let Gerard draw him into conversation, even about the new Batgirl comics. But he didn't let go of Gerard's hand, so that was something, he supposed.

They were getting into wilder parts of the forest—which seemed stupid as soon as Gerard thought it. All the forest was wild, wasn't it? But this was different, somehow. There were no paths lined with old stone walls, no traces of litter, no signs of people at all. And the terrain was different, rocky and steep. The river was below them, a white froth of rapids, tossing up spray that got caught by the wind and throwing rainbows in glittering arcs across the narrow, twisted canyon. Even this high up, Gerard had a fine haze of water drops clinging to his clothes, dampening his hair.

"I figure my body got dumped in somewhere around here," Frank said, his voice so neutral and evenly toned that it took Gerard a moment to register what he was saying. "If it'd been closer to the mill, I'd have probably lodged on one of the little islands or something. I dunno. I don't remember that part of it very well."

“Dumped?” Gerard said slowly, because that sounded... that was a weird word choice, for a hiking accident or whatever, but Frank just pulled him on, voice bright and cheerful again.

“The river goes fucking wild in this part of the forest, you get all these gorges and rapids. Right at the bend up here you get a kind of cul-de-sac or something, right off the main river. And there I lie. Probably some flash flood'll knock me loose one of these years. C'mon, I won't let you fall, it's right up here.”

“You mean, dumped, like, you mean you fell in, right?” Gerard tried to say, but Frank was talking right over him, hauling him right up to the edge of the gorge and gesturing Gerard to lie down, flat on his belly in the moss and pine needles.

“Just scootch forward and look straight down,” Frank was saying, and Gerard felt his vision go oddly narrow. Tunnel vision. Gorge vision.

Directly beneath them was a little cup of boulders, away from the main tumble of the river, a small tributary that rushed in and got caught, was forced to slow down and trickle through the cracks in the rocks. Half submerged in the swirling water was Frank's body. Gerard could see the curved skull, the line of vertebrae and ribs. Some pieces were disarticulated--some were probably missing, some caught up in the rocks next to him. A rib, a white gleam of finger bones. Gerard felt something small and quiet trying to make its way out of his chest, a sob or a scream or a protest. Something. He wanted to climb down and tug the body out, away, into the sunlight. It was too lonely, there. Frank didn't belong in a place like that.

“Hey, whoa,” Frank said, his voice puzzled and incredibly far away, hard to hear over the roar of the river and the rush of blood in Gerard's ears. “Breathe, Gerard. I thought you'd think it was cool, don't—don't freak out on me. Gerard?”

“Frank,” Gerard said, and rolled on his side and Frank was leaning over him, silhouetted against the sky, eyes huge and concerned, and Gerard just shuddered and wrapped a hand around the back of Frank's neck and tugged him down. “*Frank*,” he said again, helplessly, and Frank had gone strangely stiff and still and then suddenly he just melted, hand tangling in Gerard's hair and mouth falling open. Gerard pulled him down, harder, arched and pressed their bodies together, and Frank was there, right there with him, there and not down at the bottom of the gorge, and they were kissing. Frank tasted cold and clean, like river water, and he was making startled, desperate noises into Gerard's mouth and Gerard couldn't breathe and finally had to pull himself away, panting and gulping in air.







art by sunlit_paradox

“Fuck,” Frank moaned into the line of Gerard's neck, mouthing shivery kisses along the jawline, and his hands were everywhere and Gerard felt his eyes start to cross at how good it felt, Frank's knee pressing down between Gerard's legs. And then, no, no, fucking no, Frank was scrambling away, why would he scramble away?

Gerard made an unhappy keening noise and tried to find a way to articulate his emphatic need for Frank to be back on top of him right at that exact moment, but Frank just stared at him, jaw open. Gerard blinked at him uncertainly. And then Frank found his voice and started shouting.

“What the fuck, Gerard, what the fuck was that!” Frank flailed a hand at Gerard incoherently. “You can't just—dude, what *was* that, I don't even...”

“I, um. Okay, my timing is off,” Gerard said in a tiny voice, remembering abruptly that he was inches from a giant cliff and that Frank's goddamned skeletal body was down there, waiting for him if he fell. “Really off. I just... Frank,” his voice wobbled a bit. “I just I like you? A lot. I...”

“What the fuck were you thinking!” Frank rocked back on his heels, glaring. Gerard stared up at the sky miserably. Fuck. He was never listening to Mikey again.

“That I wanted to kiss you? I don't know!” Gerard snapped, face flushing. But then... but Frank had kissed him back, hadn't he? Maybe it was just, just... make-out deprivation or something. Frank hadn't been able to help himself, and Gerard had taken advantage. “I dunno, I sort of thought you liked me too, I guess. I'm sorry—”

“Oh, don't even do that to me,” Frank snapped, running his hands through his hair, and Gerard dazed out a little, staring at his forearms, the lean lines of them and the tattoos curling around them. “Gerard, you're not—this is really, really stupid.”

“Stupid,” Gerard repeated frostily, and started to sit up. Fuck, there was no way he could find his way home from here, and now it was going to be so awkward, for hours, and he *was* stupid. “Stupid. Right.”

Frank made an intensely frustrated noise, and then leaned down and tilted his head, and Gerard blinked at him, confused. And suddenly their mouths were pressed together again, but this time it was slow and sweet and almost tentative, just their lips together, and then Gerard opened his mouth, just a bit, and Frank shuddered and bit down gently on Gerard's bottom lip, a sweet shock of almost-pain, and Gerard got hard so fast he was almost dizzy. Then Frank was backing away again, eyes dark.

“You make it so hard,” he said seriously, and then rolled his eyes at Gerard, who'd let out a nervous bark of laughter. “Oh, shut up. But man, seriously, I can't. I can't fucking do that to you.”

“You can do anything to me,” Gerard said hopefully, confused but willing to let it all slide. Frank

smiled at that, wicked and bright, but when Gerard leaned up the fucker backed away, shaking his head. “Ugh, fine, what are you even talking about? If I let you explain, will you, um. Will you let me kiss you again?”

“Gerard,” Frank said, closing his eyes. “You fucker. I’m dead. Do you even get that? I’m dead. I’m stuck in a forest. I’m a dead guy stuck in a forest; you can’t go around kissing me like that, you just can’t.”

“I get that you’re dead,” Gerard said slowly, eyeing Frank warily. “But it’s not a big deal, really. I mean, you’re still you, right?”

“I don’t even know what Halo is!” Frank yelled, and Gerard blinked. What the hell did Halo have to do with anything? “Don’t you get it?”

“It’s a video game?” Gerard offered, eyes wide. “For Xbox? It’s kind of stupid, I suck at it. I don’t know, there’s this whole backstory about fighting this alien race called the Covenant, but that’s not really the point of playing from what I can tell. It’s all first-person shooter—”

“What the hell is an Xbox!” Frank’s voice had gone all upset and high-pitched, and Gerard bit his lip. He didn’t even like video games, okay, this was fucking ridiculous. “Look, there’s no possible happy ending here!” Frank was pacing now, arms wrapped tightly around himself. “The world has fucking moved on, and I’m goddamned stuck here, and I don’t—I’m trying to be sensible for once in my fucking existence, okay? You’re going to get older, and I’m stuck here. You don’t want to do this, I promise.”

Gerard shoved himself back up to a sitting position and glared at Frank. “Well,” he said stonily, crossing his arms over his chest. “I still think that shit doesn’t matter, not really. And if you’re trying to let me down easy, don’t bother. Just fucking say it.”

“What?” Frank said, like Gerard was the one that didn’t make any sense. “Look, you’ve got a life out there, is all I’m saying, and I don’t. I don’t have anything out there. I can be your friend, for now—I have you for now, but you can’t just fucking—it’s going to be hard enough watching you go, Gerard.”

“Wait,” Gerard interrupted, relieved. “Wait, you think I’m going to, what, I’m going to leave you? That’s what you’re worried about?”

“Well, you are eventually,” Frank started to say, but Gerard interrupted, beaming.

“See, but that’s the thing, we’re going to fix that anyway! Seriously, Frank, we’re going to figure it out, and you’re going to be able to leave the forest and it’s all going to work out, honest. There’s no reason not to make out, see?” He bit his bottom lip and peered in what was hopefully a sultry way up at Frank through his bangs.

“You’re a prick,” Frank said sullenly, but his eyes zeroed in on Gerard’s mouth when Gerard causally wet his lips. “And dammit, Gerard, you don’t know that. You can’t know that. You’re just getting your hopes up, and it’s not going to work, and it’s just... it’s just going to make it worse.”

“It will work,” Gerard said determinedly, taking a step closer, heart pounding. He ignored the way Frank groaned and buried his face in his palms, because Frank was clearly just hung up on some tiny little technicalities that didn’t matter in the long run. “Look. You like me, and I like you, and we’ll figure out the rest as we go, okay? I’m gonna—is it okay if I kiss you again?”

“Gerard,” Frank said incredulously, and Gerard waited impatiently, bouncing on his heels and

staring at Frank's mouth. Frank caught him at it and slung his arm over his eyes. "Look, okay, even assuming—which is a big fucking assumption, by the way—that we work shit out and I leave the forest. You're going to get older, and I'm stuck in this tiny fucking teenage body. Forever."

Gerard hadn't thought of that. That... okay, that did sound kind of awful. "Are you not going to want me when I'm old and all?" he asked tentatively, wincing, because yeah, he'd probably get old and gross and wrinkled, lose his hair and shit. Frank was going to be eternally gorgeous and perfect and—and Frank was staring at him like he was an idiot.

"Don't be stupid," he hissed, looking offended, and Gerard felt a triumphant, delighted smile creeping on his face without his permission. But he couldn't help it. He didn't think he could stop smiling if he tried. "Dammit," Frank said, looking resigned. "Look, just... you're not thinking."

"Believe me, I am," Gerard said, sort of embarrassed, but sort of completely not. He tugged at the hem of his hoodie. His dick had lost interest in the proceedings as they argued, but it didn't take much thinking about Frank on his knees or about his hands, about Gerard's hands in Frank's ghostly pants, for it to perk right the fuck back up again.

"You are killing me," Frank groaned, and he actually did look pained. "And I can't believe I just said that. Gerard. Jesus, just... at least admit there's some fucking issues, okay? There's a lot of fucking issues. I sincerely fucking doubt I'll ever get out of this damned forest, for one thing. And you don't belong here, in this tiny backass town. You're going to be a famous artist someday, I know it. You're going to go to college. And that's—that's good, you should go. I don't want you to stay."

"Frank," Gerard said, frustrated, and sat up. "Look, I don't care about college, I'd fucking stay. Be a park ranger, or—" But Frank's face was closed off and far away, like he wasn't even listening, and Gerard deflated. "Fine. Fine, if that's what you want. But for the record, I think you're being stupid. But I'll respect it."

For now. Gerard wasn't giving up, not yet. There had to be a way to bust Frank out of this ghost-prison deal, and Gerard would figure it out. In the meantime, Frank was a sucker for Gerard's body heat, and Gerard was totally going to exploit that like a motherfucker.

"But I'm not going away, either. You're stuck with me. As a friend!" he clarified as Frank's eyes narrowed. "Frank, you're like. I've never had anyone like you. You can't just make me go away. I won't ask for more than that, but please, man. Don't shut me out."

"Okay," Frank said quietly after a moment, "Goddammit. Okay." And he sat back down next to Gerard, dangling his feet over the canyon edge. When Gerard leaned against him, he sighed but didn't pull away.

"I should have known seeing my bones would get you all worked up," Frank said after a few moments of silence. "You giant freak."

"Oh my god, I was going to say something today anyway!" Gerard said, outraged. "I just. It, well, it like, gave me impetus to speak up, I guess, and... and you're laughing at me."

"You're so fucking weird," Frank giggled, shaking his head fondly. "I love it. You're like, the weirdest asshole on the planet, I swear."

"I'm not," Gerard grumbled. Frank was clearly way weirder. Turning down make-outs for no good reason. Weird and *evil*.

"C'mon, Gee," Frank said after a moment, smiling crookedly. "Gotta get you back home before you turn into a pumpkin."

"I guess it is getting kinda late," Gerard admitted regretfully. He stayed quiet most of the way back, and then spoke up as they got into what looked like a more familiar section of the woods—and how fucking weird was that, that Gerard was familiar with sections of the woods. He shook himself. Focus, Gerard.

"You know," he said tentatively, remembering what Mikey had said, about Frank being alone, and only having Gerard. And Gerard liked having Frank to himself, but it really wasn't fair. Gerard had friends, and he should share. Everyone should get to partake of Frank's awesomeness. "I bet, uh. I bet Ray would like to see you again. Maybe Patrick and Bob, too. What do you think?"

"Hunh?" Frank said, eyeing Gerard like he'd started doing the Macarena and talking in verse, or something. "Look, Gerard, do I really have to go over the whole 'can't leave the forest' thing again now? Do you *like* watching me bash myself against walls?"

"Well, it does look pretty cool," Gerard said thoughtfully. "Like you're a really intense mime or something. Uh." Frank was glaring pretty hard now. "Nevermind. I just meant... I could bring Ray out here, if you wanted. Tell him what's going on. I think he misses you."

"Really?" Frank said wistfully, and then shook his head. "I dunno, man, what if he flips out?"

"What's he gonna do," Gerard asked, rolling his eyes. "Call Bill Murray?"

"He might blame you," Frank said seriously. "And tell other people, and they might think you do devil-worship, or that you're insane, and that's if Ray even sees me at all. People don't—they don't always react so good to dead people, you know? There's running, and screaming. It kinda takes a toll on a guy's ego."

"Hey, I didn't run *or* scream," Gerard pointed out, and Frank smiled at him.

"You screamed a little," he pointed out, snickering.

Gerard rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well, totally not the same thing! You startled me, it wasn't like I was fucking scared."

"That's true," Frank allowed, and something about the way he was looking at Gerard made him feel weird and warm, like he wanted to simultaneously hide his face in his hoodie and pin Frank up against a tree trunk. "But that's different. You're different."

"In a good way?" Gerard asked diffidently, tugging at the hem of his hoodie, and Frank smiled at him.

"The best way."

Gerard was about to explode from blushing, he didn't even know, so he just hurriedly continued and ignored the way Frank was looking at him like he was something great, something amazing.

"Yeah, but Ray and Bob, they're good guys, too. I don't think they'll freak out. I mean, they might freak out? But they wouldn't freak out for real. They're my friends."

Frank hummed thoughtfully, and he didn't look entirely convinced, but he didn't look super upset or anything, either.

"I won't tell anybody if you're not comfortable with it," he assured Frank, in case that was the problem. "But think about it, yeah? They'll love you, honest. You're a ghost! It's pretty much the coolest thing ever, and that's on top of you being, you know, uh. You. You'd be amazing even if you were alive."

"You're just trying to butter me up so you can get in my pants, aren't you?" Frank said, eyeing him suspiciously, but he was clearly fighting a smile.

"Is it working?" Gerard asked hopefully, and Frank rolled his eyes.

"Get the fuck out of here, asshole," he said, but he was smirking playfully and wrinkling his nose, and he *liked* Gerard. Gerard hadn't expected it to make life harder, Frank actually liking Gerard back, but this was beyond torture, knowing that Frank wanted him too and that he had some weird ghost-hang-up that was keeping them from dating, or whatever.

He dithered by the edge of the woods a while longer, wondering if he could swing a goodnight kiss somehow, but Frank just snickered, eyes shining, and then just... disappeared, melting back into the shadows of the forest. Totally gone between one blink and the next.

"Whoa," Gerard said, hushed, unable to keep from beaming. His not-boyfriend was *so cool*. But he really was going to be late to visit Mikey, and he didn't have time to stand here staring moonily at the forest, hoping for a glimpse of Frank between the trees.

He'd gotten a good way across the field, back towards the school, and was just dreamily lighting up a cigarette when he heard something. The crackling of something large, footsteps in the darkness. A deer, maybe? But then he saw it, a figure in white and red emerging from behind one of the parked trucks and coming towards him. It took a minute, of seeing it but not taking it in, before Gerard understood what was going on, and fuck. *Fuck*.

"There you are," Ted said, terrifyingly casual, hands in his pockets. "Thought you'd never show. You campin' out or something, city boy?"

Noltes was standing at his shoulder, and Isaac was looking bored beside him. But there were only three of them. It wasn't the whole team, or anything. There only had to be three of them, Gerard's stupid internal voice said, while Gerard stood perfectly still, watching the sun hang on the horizon for a brief red moment before disappearing.

Chapter 8

"Uh," Gerard said, swallowing a lump of panic, fiddling with his hoodie. How had this afternoon gone so stupidly, terribly wrong all of a sudden? "No, I just... I like hiking, I guess?"

"You like hiking," Ted laughed nastily. "Well, ain't that sweet. You're acclimatin'. It's cute, ain't it, guys."

Noltes grunted and Isaac looked at his watch pointedly. Ted glared at him, then turned to Gerard again and stalked forward. Gerard fought the urge to shrink back, but fuck, the dude was tall.

"See, I got worried when you didn't show up after school," Ted said, not touching him, just hovering. A muscle in his jaw jumped. "I had some things to say to you."

"Missed me?" Gerard said, pretty proud his voice didn't break, or waver. Well, much anyway. He hoped Frank wasn't watching this—this would drive Frank nuts, being stuck in the forest while Gerard got menaced by meatheads. "I'm touched."

"Then," Ted mused, ignoring Gerard's babbling. "We saw you sneakin' away to hide in the woods. You're a smart little fucker, aren't you? But you had to come out sometime."

"You took your sweet time, though," Isaac said lazily, with an edge to his voice, like it was somehow Gerard's fault he hadn't scheduled a mugging into his afternoon.

"But this works out real nice anyway," Ted said reasonably to Isaac. "This way we can have a little chat without anybody... interrupting."

Okay, that... that was upsetting. Even more upsetting was that Ted had stalked forward and gotten in Gerard's face, and Gerard wanted to point out he had bad breath, but he was *really* disconcertingly tall from this close up.

"Now, Ted," Isaac drawled, looking at his watch again. "This little venture has taken longer than you said when you dragged us out here, so if you could stop with the dramatics, that'd be just great."

"No, the dramatics are fine," Gerard assured them, and tried to lean backward on his heels. "I dig them, they're, uh, fascinating. Good monologuing, really, just—"

Fuck, okay. Now his mouth was filling with blood, and Ted was shaking his hand and smiling dreamily. All Gerard could feel for a second was a shocked numbness that quickly flared into all-encompassing, bright pain.

"I've wanted to do that for days," Ted said happily. "You're a squirrely little fucker, you know that, Way? But you had to realize we'd catch up with you sooner or later."

"Focus, Ted," Isaac said crossly.

Ted huffed but moved back and stood with his arms crossed, a happy, terrifying smile on his face. Dumb violence clearly got his rocks off. Fucking creep.

"Look here, Gerard," Isaac said, sighing and rubbing a hand over his face. He looked utterly reasonable, standing in the field beneath the evening sky. The first stars were coming out, and everything was perfectly still, no wind, no movement from the trees or bushes. Gerard's mouth

tasted like blood. “What Ted’s trying to say is, you need to work with us, okay? We’ve got... a reputation in this town. We have to uphold it, and you have to respect it, or there’s consequences. It’s the way things work around here. Most people figure that out on their first day here, but you seem like you needed a little help. Noltes, could you kindly grab ahold of his shoulders? Gerard’s looking a bit tuckered.”

Noltes smiled and Gerard took a couple quick steps back, he couldn’t help it, but Noltes was faster, startlingly fast for his bulk, and had Gerard’s arms pinned behind him, wrenching his shoulders back, before Gerard could even think to move. Not that he had anywhere to go.

“You see,” Isaac continued conversationally, motioning Ted forward, and Gerard hung helpless from Noltes’ hands while Ted grinned at him and swung his fist into Gerard’s stomach. Isaac kept talking, distant and unaffected as Gerard gasped for breath. “My daddy’s the mayor. And Ted’s daddy? Ted’s daddy, he’s the sheriff. People can’t go around sassin’ us, especially not people like you. It looks bad for everybody. You understanding yet? This sinking in? You’ve gotten the wrong end of the stick since day one, Gerard Way, and we can’t have that. Ted. Ted, that’s enough.”

Ted finally stopped throwing punches and he and Isaac waited solicitously for an answer. Well, Isaac did, Ted just sneered. Gerard’s arms, twisted behind his back, hurt. His mouth hurt. His stomach hurt, and throbbed, but he wasn’t going to throw up, he wasn’t.

“Think you went a bit overboard, Sikowski,” Isaac sighed. Blood kept spilling down Gerard’s mouth and he just wanted to crawl away and go to sleep and wake up when this all made sense. “Again. Look here, Gerard.” Gerard opened his eyes and found he was still furious after all, still had a hot spark of anger pulsing in his temples. He glared. “That’s better,” Isaac said, smiling. He put a finger under Gerard’s chin, amused and cheerful again. “Glad to see you’re paying attention. Now, none of us want to be here, but you get it now, don’t you? You’ll be more respectful from now on, and we won’t have to waste time with these little... reminders.”

“You guys are fucking *nuts*,” Gerard slurred, struggling to get his head upright, peering at Isaac through his hair and trembling with adrenaline and pain and outrage. He spit out blood that splattered across Isaac’s white cleats. “I didn’t do a fucking thing to you, and what the fuck makes you think you can get away with fucking aggravated assault—”

“Stupid,” Noltes cut him off from behind him. Gerard bit down on a scathing comment, held it inside and fumed and beat back the little wailing voice in the back of his mind that was fucking terrified, alone in the dark with the monsters. Besides, the part of him that was furious was getting louder and louder.

Isaac looked down at his shoes. In the light of the bordering parking lot and the hazy moon, the white cleats were spotted black.

“I don’t think he’s getting the message, Ted,” he said, still maddeningly conversational. “And I don’t have all night, let’s just—”

“Here’s a message for you, you gay fucking freak. You stay away from Tanya,” Ted hissed suddenly, leaning in again. “Take your fucking faggot act and your fucking brother and go back to the city. Get the fuck out.”

Gerard stared at him.

“Tanya?” he said, voice creaking. “This is about *Tanya*?”

Even Isaac looked a little nonplussed.

“It’s about you disrespecting us, and our system,” he said firmly, and Gerard tried to raise a skeptical eyebrow.

“You heard me, you fucking bitch,” Ted said, lower lip thrust out, and Gerard really, truly, could not believe this was happening. “Everyone’s seen you staring at her in the halls, okay, and you thought I’d fucking stand for that? You? Taking *my* girl? She loves me, okay. We’re gonna get married.”

“But I’m not!” Gerard spluttered. “I don’t—it’s not’s not my fault your girlfriend wants more than some dumb fucking jock. You treat her like shit, what the fuck do you expect?”

Ted’s eyes went huge with outrage. “You did not just say that to me, city boy. You did not. I treat her like *gold*, goddammit,” and started to raise a fist again.

“Calm down, Ted,” Isaac said, sounding alarmed, pulling at Ted’s arm. “Gerard’s—Tanya wouldn’t do anything with him, but I don’t think—did you hear that?” Isaac said, for the first time sounding a little uncertain, looking around uneasily.

During the whole time Isaac’d been talking, the wind had been picking up, growing from a small, skirling breeze to something stronger, something fierce and howling and tearing at the seams of Gerard’s hoodie. Gerard had barely noticed, had had other things to think about at the time, but he was paying attention now.

“I don’t hear anything,” Ted said, but his eyes darted nervously, from Gerard to the forest, and the wind was drawing tears from his eyes. And there was a voice, words blown by the furious air, and Gerard could hear it now, clear and distinct. He made an attempt to edge away out from under Noltes’ hands. Noltes’ didn’t seem to notice, staring wide-eyed at the forest, but his grip tightened again reflexively.

“Do you see that?” Isaac said, voice rising with each word, and turned to stare at Gerard. “What did you do, Way?”

“Frank?” Gerard coughed, and tried again to pull free. His head spun.

“I’ll kill you,” the voice said, frighteningly calm and steady.

“Did you motherfucking hear that?” Noltes said, letting go of Gerard, who immediately fell to his hands with a muffled cry. Fuck, his fucking ribs, fuck.

“I’ll kill you all,” Frank said, and fuck, was this what a tornado was like? The wind all you could hear, the world ripping apart. Next to Gerard small bushes uprooted and tumbled away, tangling briefly in Ted’s legs before disappearing into the mist.

“Jesus,” he heard Isaac saying, and the fog was rising, erasing the baseball players and their red letter jackets and their staring eyes. “Move, Ted, you moron! Fucking run!”

“I don’t hear anything!” Ted’s voice was high and panicked.

“Frank?” Gerard said again, uncertainly, and tried to pick himself up before catching his breath in a hissing gasp. “Oh, fuck me,” he said hoarsely.

“You better fucking run,” came carried by the wind, and other threats, heard in snatches and whispers, and then there was the sound of pounding feet, and engines catching and turning over, tires peeling out of the parking lot. The wind died down, eventually, carrying away the last of the mist and Gerard, huddled around himself in the dirt, muddy with his own stupid blood, saw Frank

at the edge of the forest, leaning against the empty air like he was pantomiming being stuck in a box of air, hands outstretched in front of him.

Fuck, poor Frank. “It’s okay,” Gerard managed to call out. “S’ok, Frank.”

“Gerard,” a voice ghosted across his cheek on the breeze, the cold October wind. “Gerard.”

“I’m okay,” Gerard called again, trying to ignore the throbbing in his jaw. He checked with his tongue and wondered if he was imagining one of his molars feeling a bit loose. Fuck, he’d worry about it later. He stumbled back to the edge of the woods, and it seemed to take ages before he got there and crossed the threshold. As soon as he did Frank collapsed on him, biting cold, wrapping his arms around Gerard. Cold was good, though. Gerard could actually stand a bit more coldness and numbness in his life at the moment.

“They hurt you,” Frank said, and the wind picked up again as he put a hand to Gerard’s battered face. “They *hurt* you, how fucking dare they—”

Gerard tried to say something, anything, but he couldn’t stop shaking, suddenly. His mouth hurt, and it was freezing, and something was seriously wrong with Frank.

“I’ll fucking kill them,” Frank snarled, and the moon clouded over. He curled up, curled around Gerard, hands running over his skin, under his shirt, tracing the line of his back. “They can’t—you’re mine, they can’t have you.”

“It’s okay,” Gerard soothed frantically, voice muffled by Frank’s neck. “Really, it’s not that bad. I’m fine!” He leaned back, tried on a smile. Frank didn’t seem to notice, or maybe it just wasn’t a very good attempt.

“It can’t happen again,” he said, eyes gleaming and full of trees. “Not to you. Gerard, I’ll kill them first, I promise.”

“Nobody’s killing anybody!” Gerard said, alarmed, and then he reeled like Ted was still there punching him, like an actual physical fist was driving itself into his belly again, because Frank was laughing, wild and deranged.

“You’re so fucking young. Why not? People kill each other all the time. They did it before, they could do it again. I could, I would. I’ll fucking kill them. I won’t let them touch you, not you. I *won’t*.”

“Frank,” Gerard whispered, and Frank just shook his head and fuck, Frank was dead, dead because someone had killed him. How had Gerard not known that? He hadn’t wanted to know, an ashamed small part of him whispered. Because he was a coward. He took a deep breath and wrapped an arm around Frank’s shoulders, and vowed to himself that later he’d ask questions.

“Frank, I’m okay, it’s okay, Frankie, look at me. They didn’t kill me, I’m okay,” Gerard rasped, wiping blood from his chin, and Frank just pulled Gerard closer, wrapping a hand possessively around his waist and glaring over Gerard’s shoulder at the field, at the squat gray shape of the school in the distance.

“You can’t go back,” Frank pronounced, in an eerie, level voice. “I can’t reach you there, you’re not safe. I couldn’t... you were almost too far away, in the field. You have to stay here.”

“Frank, man,” Gerard said, abandoning his soothing voice in alarm. “I... I can’t. You know I would, but I can’t. Not forever.”

Frank hissed and tightened his grip—no, holy fuck, he was actually letting his hands slide inside Gerard’s waist, freezing and intimate and okay, okay, a little creepy when Frank was so out of it, so upset.

“Frankie,” Gerard tried again, and tried to catch Frank’s eyes. “Frank, I’m okay! You stopped them. I’m fine, look at me. Frankie, look at me.” Gerard hesitantly put a hand against Frank’s face, uncertain if Frank was entirely solid, if Gerard’s touch would smudge Frank’s skin like charcoals or smoke. But Frank just turned his face into Gerard’s palm and let out a long, shuddering sigh.

“They hurt you,” he said quietly, and yeah, Gerard did hurt. He hurt, ached, wanted to curl in a ball, but Frank would be upset, so Gerard was going to take one for the team and ignore it, for now.

“Hey, they’ll totally leave me alone now, right?” Gerard said as cheerfully as he could. “I’m under the protection of the dead. They’re gonna think twice before trying anything else. Bet you five packs of Marlboros and a trade issue of *Birds of Prey*.”

Frank snorted, almost smiled. He was still a watercolor version of himself, bleeding out into the world around him—into the trees, the dirt, the sleeves of Gerard’s hoodie. But he was looking at Gerard now, instead of through him.

“Aw, man, your poor face,” he said quietly, and started wiping the blood off Gerard’s chin. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t—it must hurt like a bitch.”

“S nothing,” Gerard said carefully, and tried on another smile. This one fit better. “Don’t be sorry. You weren’t the one hitting on Ted’s girlfriend,” and seriously, seriously, it was almost sort of funny and suddenly he couldn’t help but giggle, even though it made his ribs protest vigorously. Ow ow, fucking hilarious, but *ow*.

“You *what?*” Frank said incredulously, and Gerard flapped a hand helplessly.

“I didn’t do it on purpose, I don’t like her!” I don’t like anyone but you, he didn’t say, but maybe he should say it, maybe he should just go all out and admit he’d totally fallen for Frank way back when he still thought Frank was just a creepy serial killer hermit hobo. Maybe then Frank would accept their weird non-traditional love and kiss Gerard better.

“Do you hear that?” Frank said suddenly, halting Gerard’s ruminations. Gerard looked around anxiously—he wasn’t actually totally sure the threat of ghostly vengeance was going to keep Ted and his goons away—but there was just the empty field, silent except for the sweep of the wind. Then Gerard did hear something, and felt it, too: the muted thrum of a phone on vibrate. He fished his phone out of his pocket with clumsy, numb hands.

There were a lot of missed calls, and an assload of texts from Mikey.

where r u mom is goin nuts

if zombie frank & u ill be pssd not that u have ny brains

srsly where the hell r u

gerard

And there was a random picture of an ice cube tray with weird penis and boob shapes from Gabe, which Gerard would deal with later.

still alive, he wrote. His fingers didn’t seem to be working quite right, maybe because of the cold.

Frank hooked his chin over Gerard's shoulder and watched him type, not commenting, and Gerard settled back into his arms with a sigh and pressed send.

A few minutes passed. An owl flew by in a silent wave of air, white wings overhead, and Frank pressed his cheek against Gerard's. Gerard would have been totally into it except his cheek really fucking hurt, even beneath the wave of cold, and he was trying to think of a polite way to ask Frank to molest the other side of his face when the phone buzzed again.

not for long. mom is on warpath.

Gerard snorted, because, whatever. Being late wasn't really his biggest concern at the moment, and after the last hour, it wasn't like his mom really scared him anymore. Well. Not much. Hmm.

He stretched painfully, wriggling free of Frank's grip, and Frank scowled at him.

"So you can control the weather, huh?" Gerard asked conversationally, trying to work up to telling Frank he really had to leave, if only for a little while. He rubbed his arms—Jesus, he just couldn't get used to the cold. He needed a fucking parka out here.

"Sort of. I guess. Mainly just wind and stuff when I'm really mad, or whatever," Frank said dismissively, like he hadn't just admitted the coolest thing ever. Gerard beamed at him. Which, ow, but he couldn't help himself. "Are you going?" Frank continued, still in Gerard's personal space. "Don't go. You should stay. Stay here, it's safer."

"Um," Gerard said, wincing. "It's a little chilly? And also, my mom's apparently freaking out. I have to get back."

"I'll make a fire!" Frank said. Gerard knew Frank wouldn't actually kidnap him or anything, but, well. A ghost wanted to kidnap him. Gerard definitely needed supplies for that one. A sleeping bag at the very least. And a tent. And a fuckton of coffee.

"I'll camp out with you later," he offered tentatively. "But I really gotta go, man. My mom and Mikey are going nuts, you know?"

"You can't leave," Frank insisted, looming now—who knew such a short guy could loom?—and his face was terrifyingly blank, and the trees had begun thrashing around in the wind again, unseen torrents of dead leaves crackling and popping in the air. Gerard wasn't altogether sure Frank would *let* him leave. "You can't go," he insisted again, and maybe this was what everyone else saw, the cloudy form and burning eyes, and an implacable, reasonless voice to go with it. "It's not safe. Stay with me. Don't go."

"Frank," Gerard said helplessly, and reached out, found Frank's arm, solid and so cold it burned his fingertips. He hissed in a breath but held on. He worked on keeping his face straight. "Frank, you—you're kinda freaking me out?"

Frank stared at him a moment longer, motionless but for the breeze whipping tendrils of smoke from around his body, and then sort of slumped back into stillness. "Sorry," he said.

"Just, you know, it's not a big deal," Gerard offered, and Frank huffed, a quiet sound in the suddenly still forest.

"I wish I could go with you." And his voice was small, raw. Gerard felt like a total dick.

"We'll figure it out," Gerard promised, voice thick. "Tomorrow, I'll figure it out. I've got tons of comic books, dude, and the internet. And the scientific method! Something. Don't... maybe we

can create, like, a tiny portion of movable forest? That you can move around with? I think we have a wheelbarrow somewhere in our garage.”

He managed to get himself to shut up. Frank was staring with both eyebrows nearly to his hairline, and it was almost his normal ‘you’re fucking crazy, holy shit, stand still or you’re going to be stuck in that hawthorne bush forever’ expression, so Gerard counted it as a win.

“Tomorrow,” he repeated, emphatically, and then couldn’t help himself. “Wheelbarrows! It’ll totally work.”

“You’re such a *freak*,” Frank said, and shuffled forward and wrapped his arms around Gerard and just clung there for a moment.

Gerard shivered. “Um,” he said hoarsely. “Can I?” He knew he’d said he wouldn’t, but it had been such a shitty fucking night, so he just pressed his lips gingerly to the corner of Frank’s mouth, heart pounding. Frank seemed like he was going to turn his head and kiss back for a moment, and then he pushed Gerard away, shaking his head and smiling crookedly.

“Save it for Ted’s girlfriend, Romeo,” he quipped, and Gerard sighed. He’d just have to work a bit harder at convincing Frank he wasn’t going anywhere, he guessed. And that Frank wasn’t stuck in the forest forever. Anyway, Gerard’s mouth currently hurt like a bitch, so it probably wasn’t the best time to plot make-outs.

“I didn’t hit on her,” he protested tiredly. “Everyone’s *insane*.”

“Glad to hear it,” Frank smirked. “I mean, I totally buy you as a player, don’t get me wrong.” Gerard spluttered at him and Frank laughed, wrinkling his nose and grinning, and everything seemed awesome, except for the way Gerard’s entire body ached and he sort of wanted to curl in a ball and cry. Frank seemed to notice after a moment, which was annoying. Gerard had been working really hard on being all stoic and unaffected and smiley.

“Well,” Frank said. “I guess you should go. Get some Tylenol or whatever. But be careful.” Frank stared at him intently and Gerard sighed. “Please, Gerard. I know this is fucking foreign to you, but *please*.”

Gerard would be more insulted, but, well. He supposed he didn’t have the best track record.

“Yeah, sure, I promise. I’ll be careful. So careful. So, uh. Kiss for the road?” he asked hopefully, dithering at the forest edge, and was delighted and surprised when Frank darted forward and pressed his lips to Gerard’s, cold and soothing for a brief, blinding moment before he disappeared with a gust of wind and dead leaves.

“Sometimes that trick is *really annoying*,” Gerard told the empty woods, smiling foolishly before he began trudging home.

Gerard tried to avoid letting his mom see the bruises, but of course she came stomping up to his room after she got home, clearly all set to chew him out for missing the hospital visit. And then she went into horrified, worried Mom mode, which was worse than being yelled at any day.

Still, once he’d convinced her not to call and bitch out the superintendant and principal and everyone else in the entire world, it was kind of nice. She brought him an icepack made out of frozen peas, and a wet washcloth, and fixed him a bowl of his favorite ice cream.

He hated seeing his Mom upset, though, so he stopped whining after a while. Especially since she started making noises about him transferring schools, or moving back to Belleville. He couldn't leave Glen Fell now. Even if the school was full of violent, sociopathic Nazis in letter jackets. Leaving... just wasn't an option, and not only because he wouldn't abandon Mikey up here, either.

Her overreaction wasn't all bad, though. He was totally down with her being hovey and upset when she said he could skip school the next day.

"You should rest," she said the next morning, poking her head in his room. "You look like a wreck. Did you get any sleep at all?"

"Just fucking uncomfortable," Gerard said grumpily, pawing through a pile of dirty hoodies and trying to pick out the least muddy. Having a boyfriend that lived in a forest was hell on his ability to pass off clothes as vaguely clean. Maybe tomorrow should be a laundry day. "I ache all fucking over. Makes it hard to sleep."

"Well, you should have gotten Advil or something." She vanished down the stairs and came back a moment later with a glass of water and a handful of pills. "Here. You could use a breather. I'll write you a note for the school, okay? Go back to sleep, baby."

"You're the best, Mom," Gerard said fervently, and she gave him a kind of sad smile and even leaned in to kiss him on the forehead, like she used to do when he was little and had the flu.

"I'll see you tonight. There's Beefaroni and things in the cupboards. Try not to drink all the coffee."

"Me? Never?" Gerard retorted a bit guiltily as he slid back in bed, and she laughed and closed the door. Gerard settled in to snooze away the day and lounge about his bed in his pajamas and watch bad daytime television for a little while. He had to deal with Frank later, the things he'd said and what they meant, but for now he was just going to relax, goddammit.

Of course, he was just dozing off when the pounding started. It began as a polite rapping that Gerard could barely hear, but quickly crescendoed into loud, rhythmic thumping. Fucking drummers.

"Way! Don't make me throw rocks at your window! C'mon, you fucker, we're going to be late!" Bob hollered, voice just barely muffled, even though he was outside and a story below. Fuck. Gerard draped his comforter around himself and shuffled downstairs, feeling grumpy and pathetic. His body protested every step he took. He opened the door a crack, peering out at Bob miserably.

"I'm not going to school today. Sorry, man."

"What's wrong with your voice? You sick or something?" Bob shoved the door open and then froze, eyes wide.

Gerard sighed. He hated this, that he had to feel weird and embarrassed, like he was a victim. It wasn't his fault this town bred creepy hateful vicious bastards. Gerard was just unlucky enough to be temporarily living here.

"Fuck," Bob said after a moment, looking furious. "I knew something like this was going to happen. Did Ted jump you when you left the band room?" Gerard dithered, unsure whether or not he should admit he'd actually been jumped after he left the forest where he'd been visiting his dead not-quite-a-boyfriend, Frank Iero. Maybe now wasn't the time to bring that up. Bob took his conflicted expression for a yes, though, and scowled. "Jesus, what an asshole. Do you need some

ice or something? You should be icing that.”

“Thanks, Mom, I’ve got ice.” Well, peas, actually, and then corn, and then they’d run out of frozen vegetables and had to resort to trying to freeze actual water in baggies and shit, because they’d left their ice cube trays back in Belleville and kept forgetting to buy new ones. But still. “Really, I’ll be okay. It’s just bruises.”

“Hmm,” Bob said, and then nodded to himself, like he’d come to a decision. “Come on, get in the car.”

“Huh?” Gerard said, tightening his blanket around himself in alarm. “No, I’m not going to school today. I told you, I feel like shit.”

“That’s nice,” Bob replied serenely, pulling out his phone and squinting at it as he typed. “But we’re not going to school, we’re going to Toro’s. This avoidance shit clearly isn’t working. We need a new plan.”

“But I want to sleep,” Gerard protested reflexively. He was kind of stunned, to be honest. Bob just shrugged at him, clearly at peace with his own madness.

“You can sleep when we get there. But, call me crazy, I don’t like the idea of you on your own here all day. If Ted’s creepy enough to hunt you down after school, who knows what the fuck shit he might pull. He’s a dick, and a psychopath.”

Gerard snorted. “Dude, I don’t think he’s going to, like, actually hunt me down. And he’s already fucked me up enough, right? I mean, I’ll just stay out of his and Tanya’s way for a while. It’ll be fine. And really, you shouldn’t miss more school, so, wow, I really appreciate the effort, but—”

“Gerard,” Bob said, interrupting him with a smile. “Get in the damn car.”

Gerard got in the car.

“Yeah, but, I don’t want you guys to get on their shitlist too!” Gerard protested, and Bob glanced away from the screen for a moment, rolling his eyes. Gerard briefly considered taking advantage of this and charging in to kill him, but his little guy was still stuck in a corner and he couldn’t figure out which direction to go to get out of the hallway and to whatever ledge Bob was on, so really, it was pointless to bother.

“What, they’re going to just go around punching all of us? Can’t keep it up forever. The school’d have to do something eventually.”

“Well... yeah, maybe. I mean, do you really think you can reason with those guys?” Gerard paused thoughtfully. “Well, Isaac, you might be able to, if you convinced him it was going to fuck up his college applications.”

Then the front door slammed, which was weird, since school didn’t get out for like another two hours, and a few moments later Ray bounced into the den, smiling and carrying a couple bottles of Coke.

Gerard dropped the controller in horror.

“See!” he yelped, chest going tight with guilt. “See! I told you!”

“Ray,” Bob growled, and got up, fists clenched. “What happened.”

“Well,” Ray said cheerfully, tossing Bob a Coke. “Ted asked me where my faggot boyfriend was, and so I called him a homophobic prick! And, uh, probably a tiny one! I mean, a tiny prick. Like, he has a tiny penis.”

“We get it, Toro,” Bob said, mouth twitching.

“And, well, then he punched me. Bam, right in the eye, and now we’re both suspended for the rest of the day, and I have detention tomorrow.” Ray flopped down on one of the beanbags. “Hey, are you using that icepack, Gee?”

“You hit Ted?” Gerard squawked, and nudged the icepack over.

“Nah. I mean, I would have tried to, but I was on the ground and all. Anyway, apparently Noltes and some other kids say I started the fight, and so the principal kicked us both out.”

“I am... oh, god, Ray, I’m so sorry. This is all my fault.” Gerard stared down at his hands. Maybe he should have stayed in the forest and eaten bugs and moss after all. At least then no one else would have gotten hurt because of him. And Ray, missing class. It was like the apocalypse.

“Don’t be a tool,” Ray said, still cheerful, but with a slight edge to his voice. “If you think I’m going to let him say that shit about you, especially after he fucking attacked you the night before, you must not think I’m a very decent friend. Or a decent person.”

“It’s not that, I just,” Gerard spluttered, and felt his cheeks get hot. “Ray, that’s not what I meant! I just wish you hadn’t gotten hurt.”

“Well, I wish Ted wasn’t a douchebag,” Ray said lightly, shrugging. “I don’t regret it or anything. I wish I *had* hit him.”

Gerard eyed him in disbelief. “But now you’re missing *class*.”

“There are more important things than class,” Ray sniffed, and Bob did a slow clap.

“Took you long enough, Toro,” he said. “Now can we actually start figuring out what to do about this bullshit?”

“You were playing Halo,” Ray pointed out dryly. “You could have been strategizing all day!”

“Yeah, well. We were getting in the mood. For strategy.” Ray gave Bob a look, and Bob sighed. “Oh, shut up. C’mon, I couldn’t resist. Gerard’s been stuck in that corner for like ten minutes. I’ve killed him so many times. It’s great. He makes these ridiculous noises every time he dies, watch.”

“Can we stay on topic?” Gerard interjected moodily, watching his little video game dude die. Again. He couldn’t stop thinking of Frank’s face as he asked what the fuck an Xbox was, how frustrated and lonely he’d looked. It sucked, and he’d rather talk about Ted and his goons than think about it any longer, which was saying a lot.

“Right,” Bob said, setting his controller down and steepling his fingers. “Okay. So, they’re less likely to attack any of us if we’re in a group. Therefore, no one goes anywhere alone.” He narrowed his eyes at Gerard. “And this time, I mean it. No sneaking off to wander around in the forest or whatever.”

Ray shot Gerard a significant look. “Yeah, Gerard clearly needs to just chill with us in the band

room 'til practice ends. It's common sense."

Gerard stared at them, heart thudding uncomfortably. He couldn't stay out of the forest. That was just... not an option. "Uh, what? Guys, I'm not in band. That doesn't work."

"We'll get you a gong to ring in the back with Bob, it'll be great," Ray said stubbornly.

"But," Gerard replied helplessly, and then folded. He'd just—he'd figure something out. He had to.

His life was a wasteland. Gerard felt confident in asserting this—he'd read that shit in English last year. And okay, it was actually an excellent poem—Gerard really loved the thrumming echoes of the lines, the dissonance and discordance and confusion. But the thing was it kind of mirrored his life to an uncanny degree at the moment, except with less of the World War and more of high school. Which was more similar than one might think.

Gerard'd gotten to school that morning and promptly been called to the front office for skipping class. When he showed her the note his mom had written, figuring it was a misunderstanding, Gertrude had just squinted her beady secretary eyes at him and said, "Not for Tuesday, Mr. Way. We were informed that you missed two classes last week. We do not tolerate that kind of behavior in Glen Fell. You'll serve a detention for each missed period with Coach Sikowski. Meet him at the gym immediately after the last bell."

Ray shrugged helplessly and Gerard hid behind his coffee mug and submitted to his fate, even though it was totally unfair. He'd kind of been looking forward to banging a gong in the band room with Bob, but he guessed that was off the table. He was a little worried that detention in Glen Fell was going to be the epitome of hell on earth. They'd probably make him shuck corn or polish antlers or something.

The only good thing about the whole situation was that Ted and his group had backed off. In fact, Ted was doing a bang-up job of pretending Gerard didn't exist at all. He was just giving a wide berth to certain sections of the halls and classrooms because some minutiae of high school existence happened to be demanding his attention in the opposite direction. Right.

Isaac, on the other hand, was watching Gerard intently. Gerard would feel the itchy sensation of someone's eyes on the back of his head, but he'd learned not to turn around. It'd just be Isaac, with a pinched, narrow look on his face, totally ignoring the teacher's lecture in favor of staring at Gerard like he might—Gerard didn't even know what Isaac thought he might do, actually. He didn't think Isaac knew either; he just kept opening his mouth like he was about to ask something, then closing it again, disgruntled. It was really fucking unsettling.

And Noltes pretty much just turned tail and ran when he came across Gerard in the hallway, leaving Bob and Ray blinking as Gerard shrugged and made a confused, innocent face. Because really, Gerard looked like someone had attacked his face with a shovel. There was no good explanation for the most massive tank of a human being ever to be fleeing from him. Well, there was, but not really one he could share with Ray and Bob. It was totally possible the jocks had realized Gerard had a badass ghost protector, or maybe they just thought Gerard had super psychic powers or something, or that they'd had a mass hallucination of ghostly vengeance and rage. It was hard to be sure.

But anyway, even knowing that, the abrupt change in their behavior was unsettling. Tanya blew him a kiss in the lunch line and it just made Ted stomp over—to Tanya, not to Gerard—and hiss something in her ear. But that was it. Nothing else. No blow up, no smacking Gerard's lunch tray

out of his hands, nothing. And after that, nothing Tanya did provoked Ted into responding, not even her trying to borrow Gerard's notes in Spanish.

"Well," Bob said, peering after Noltes, who was hugging the wall and edging past the three of them with wide eyes. "We're still driving you home after detention."

"Aw, c'mon," Gerard sighed, exasperated. He waved a notebook at Noltes, who flinched and made a beeline for the stairwell like the hounds of hell were after him, instead of someone flapping a notebook with zombie elves drawn on the cover. "Look, they're clearly done messing with me. Don't worry about it. I'll be fine." Gerard really needed to go check on Frank this afternoon, reassure him that he was okay. Bruised, but intact. And, okay, so maybe he wanted to renew his campaign for make-outs. Plus, he had some theories he'd developed during the most boring history lecture ever that he wanted to test. There had to be a way to let Frankie leave the forest. Gerard just needed to experiment a bit.

But Bob was making his 'I'm Really Unimpressed With Your Semblance Of Logic' face and Ray was cheerfully ignoring Gerard entirely, talking over his protests and describing a band playing in Burlington next weekend that was apparently fond of spitting fake blood everywhere. Which did sound pretty cool, in all honesty. Anyway, Gerard supposed he could always sneak out of his house at midnight or something—Bob hadn't quite descended to posting a guard detail outside his house. Yet.

Except Gerard had forgotten, again, the depths of misery and despair that Glen Fell could plummet to at any moment.

Detention here was basically like being drafted into Satan's Boot Camp. The gym coach made him trundle all over the fucking school with goddamned barbells and gym mats, sneering at him the whole while as he staggered around beneath impossible loads of shit, and when Gerard made one tiny, very legitimate complaint, he set Gerard to running fucking laps. For what felt like hours. Like this was the goddamned middle ages. Gerard would have preferred being drawn and quartered, honestly. It would have felt the same in the end, and it'd have been so much quicker.

"Oh my god," Worm said in a hushed voice an hour later. Gerard was slumped against the wall of the band room, just outside the door, concentrating very hard on forcing air in and out of his tortured lungs. He winced and conceded defeat; Bob was going to have to give Gerard a ride home, because Gerard didn't think his legs were going to carry him more than a few more steps before they dissolved into puddles of plasma and death. "Your face. It's... wow. You're really red, dude."

"Are you dying?" Ray asked, concerned. "Man, that really sucks, I just had to do my detention in the library with Mr. Giacinto."

Gerard wheezed unhappily and let Worm haul him into a vaguely upright position. He couldn't fucking believe he had to do this again tomorrow. He was seriously going to die—he didn't mean to be flippant, since death wasn't funny, but his lungs felt like they might be on fire. It was miserable, and he needed to re-write his will. And figure out how to meet up with Frank in the afterlife. Jesus, he was going to hurl.

"Laps, huh," Bob said sympathetically, and tossed Gerard a water bottle. "You're just lucky you took care of your Phys Ed requirement back in Jersey. I had the prick for gym class last year, and he's a total psychopath."

Gerard believed it. "My life is a wasteland," he said in a tiny, pathetic voice, hoarse with despair and agony.

“Yep,” Bob said, and smiled brightly. The asshole. “C’mon, let’s go study for history. Test tomorrow.” Gerard moaned and let himself be dragged off to 19th century American Reconstruction hell.

That night, Gerard had every intention of slipping out of his house and meeting with Frank—he set his alarm for 1:11 AM and everything. But he didn’t wake up until Bob threw things at his window the next morning, and every movement of every limb was like agony. Also, Bob was seriously going to break that damned windowpane one day. What was he throwing, bricks?

“Acorns,” Bob said sagely, and stole a sip of Gerard’s coffee. Gerard growled and snatched the travel mug back.

“I hate this town,” he said morosely, watching the high school get closer and closer. “I hate it. There is nothing good about it.” Which wasn’t true, but *felt* true, especially at the moment.

“Mmm. So,” Bob said, squinting at their study guide, which he’d taped to the steering wheel. “What’s the difference between a copperhead, a carpetbagger, and a scalawag?”

“I hate you.” Gerard glared and lit up a cigarette. Maybe the nicotine would shake some memory loose. “Um. One’s a snake, one’s... in the upholstery business? And the other... is a salamander.”

“I can’t argue with that. We’re doomed,” Bob said, and stole Gerard’s cigarette philosophically. Gerard banged his head against the window and sighed.

The history test went about as shittily as possible. Gerard actually had to resort to using a comic strip to illustrate one of the short answer questions. Hopefully he’d get points for creativity, but he suspected he’d taken a few liberties with Robotic Ulysses S. Grant, which would probably result in some docked points.

And then detention was even worse than it had been the day before. The coach was a total dick—he was Ted’s uncle, only about ten years older than most of the students there, and clearly thought he had better things to do with his life, which, way to take it out on Gerard, meathead. Not Gerard’s fault he’d drank his way out of the major leagues and had to come back to this shithole.

He set Gerard to cleaning the locker rooms, which, wow. Wow. There could not be anything more foul on the face of the Earth, and by the time he escaped he was a little loopy from the bleach fumes and probably also from being infected by the biological weapons the baseball team and coach were brewing up in the showers. Gerard was no stranger to bizarre substances growing in abandoned coffee mugs, but this was a whole new level of fungus-filled wrong.

He staggered out of the gym, vision swimming slightly, and drank in the sweet, sweet outdoor air gratefully. No bleach and athlete’s foot here.

Except there was the baseball team, running laps in front of him, circling the parking lot like sharks. The assholes were making it look so goddamned effortless, moving like evil android machines through the chill afternoon air, barely breaking a sweat. The coach was standing near the equipment shed, tall and broad-shouldered, cap shading his eyes. He was watching the players run with a frown on his face. Then he spotted Gerard and his frown deepened into a scowl, curled upper lip and all.

Gerard blinked, because, okay, sure, he’d skipped class, but what the hell? He hadn’t done anything to merit *that* kind of look. Maybe he’d thought Gerard was ogling the players or something, fuck if Gerard knew. The coach made as though he was going to stalk towards Gerard or say something, and Gerard immediately fled towards the band room before he was asked to

clean something else or, god forbid, to start running with the team.

Gerard literally could not think of anything he wanted less than to stagger around behind Noltes and Ted and Isaac. There probably were worse things in the universe, but the horror of that image drove them out of his mind.

Unfortunately, fleeing to the band room meant he was intercepted by Ray and Bob, and then he was stuck hanging out with them the entire afternoon, again. Which wasn't, like, a *hardship*, not at all. It was actually sort of amazingly great. But Frank wasn't there. Bob kept having to snap his fingers in front of Gerard's face, dragging his attention away from the windows and back to the conversation. He was a little worried the guys were going to think he had some mental deficiency, but hopefully they'd just attribute it to the lingering bleach fumes or exhaustion or something.

He still hadn't managed to sneak away to see Frank since Monday night. And on Friday, when he was finally supposed to have an afternoon free, he found himself being fucking stalked by Coach Sikowski, who trailed Gerard all around the cafeteria and then finally announced with great satisfaction that Gerard had detention for using 'inappropriate language on school property.'

Probably why Ted had been laying off lately. He'd gotten his uncle to do his dirty work, the bastard. Gerard definitely preferred being punched now and again and being flicked with spitballs to running laps, dammit.

So that was another afternoon lost, and Gerard had run so many laps by the time he got out of school he'd actually had to beg out of visiting hours with Mikey, even though he felt like a jerk. He'd just felt so fucking *sore*. So of course he spent all day on Saturday with Mikey to make up for it, and then, because Gerard could not catch a break, Bob and Patrick and Ray had been waiting on his porch when they'd gotten back that night.

Gerard's mom, the traitor, had just raised her eyes and smiled, ruffling Gerard's hair before disappearing into her room, letting them drag her oldest son off for god-knew-what torture. Violent video games, at the very least. Bob and Ray had fucking hovered over him all Sunday, too, dragging him out to one of the corn mazes, which were as fucking creepy as advertised—actually, it'd been pretty sweet, if only Frank could have been there too.

By the time he'd made it home, it was already dark and he hadn't finished any of his homework for the week, and a chill rain was settling in.

Fuck, he'd missed too many days in the forest already, and he wasn't going to miss another, he just wasn't. Frank had to be getting worried—the last time he'd seen Gerard, he'd still been bleeding. It'd been so easy to sneak away before, but now people noticed when he was missing and shit. It was weird, and nice and sort of a pain in the ass, all at the same time.

He was stuck with only one possible conclusion: he was going to have to come clean to Ray and Bob.

Frank hadn't wanted anyone else to know, not yet, but Gerard was running out of options. He kept sleeping through his alarm at night, and he couldn't afford to skip any more school—the detentions were sapping not only his will, but also his ability to live, and it seemed like Coach Sikowski was going to be ready as it was to pounce on any possible infraction. He didn't want to add to that unnecessarily.

Now that he'd made his decision, he just had to find a way to word it so that they didn't think he was insane.

Chapter 9

“So,” Gerard coughed, fiddling with his scalpel nervously as he gathered his courage. Ray glanced up from his tray of frog and fish bits. They were supposed to be doing comparative anatomy or something, but the organs had gotten a bit... mixed during the dissection process, and he and Ray were basically winging it now. “So, uh. Do you remember that guy you were talking about at lunch? The one who went missing?”

“Yeah,” Ray said slowly, abandoning the monstrous frog-salamander-abomination-with-gills he was constructing and peering at Gerard through his goggles. “Frank. Why?” Ray abruptly looked concerned. “Oh, Gerard, are those fuckers giving you a hard time again? I thought they’d backed off.”

“Huh?” Gerard asked, leaving off prodding what might be a swim bladder with his pencil. Ted was still doing the ‘oh, look, a Gerard-shaped hole in the fabric of reality’ schtick and Isaac had stopped staring at him quite so often, probably because midterm exams were coming up and he couldn’t afford to miss that much of lectures anymore. “Oh, no, they’re still backed off, mostly.”

Noltes had gone back to shoving Gerard into walls with his massive shoulders, actually. Gerard couldn’t decide if this was because he had the memory of a goldfish, or if he’d decided that Gerard couldn’t pull any creepy supernatural shit on the school grounds. Either way, it wasn’t a huge deal.

Ray moved like he was going to put a hand on Gerard’s shoulder and Gerard reeled away, horrified. Taking his fish-covered hand back, looking slightly abashed, Ray said, “We won’t let them disappear you. Don’t worry, Gee.” He looked ridiculous, big earnest eyes and giant goggles and hair up in two pom pom ponytail holders, and if they weren’t both holding sharp implements and covered in dead things, Gerard would have totally hugged him.

“Thanks, man,” he said quietly, and then tried to gear himself up for another go at the ghost-talk. “But, uh, that’s... not exactly why I brought it up. I just, um. Well. Remember that shit you said, about seeing Frankie’s ghost?”

“Oh, that,” Ray said, sounding a bit embarrassed. He went back to poking the mass of entrails. “I didn’t exactly see his ghost, man. It was just... you know, smoke. Coldness. It was weird. I dunno, maybe I imagined it.”

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you,” Gerard said in a hushed voice, biting his lip. “I... you didn’t. I’ve been going into the forest, and I’m telling you, you didn’t imagine it. It was Frank.”

“Look, don’t fuck around,” Ray said, and Gerard grabbed his hand, ignoring the cough of ‘faggot’ from the lab table behind them and the really disgusting squelch of formaldehyde and worse things between the latex of their gloves.

“I’m not!” Gerard said, trying to sound as serious as possible. “It’s the truth, and I can prove it, I can. Just, trust me. I didn’t want to tell you before, because I thought... well, it sounds crazy, right? But I’ve got to get back to the woods this afternoon. I just... I have to. And I thought, well. Since you guys are so gung-ho on following me everywhere, you could come too. If you want.” Gerard cringed and tried to smile hopefully at the same time, and probably just wound up looking demented.

Ray, to his credit, didn’t shake Gerard off. He did look at Gerard consideringly, though, like maybe he was about to call a mental health professional and obtain Gerard a nice pretty white

straightjacket.

It was probably for the best Gerard hadn't brought up the 'also, I want to date your dead friend' thing yet.

"Look, Gee, I..." Ray started, sounding doubtful, but Gerard cut him off.

"Just come out there with me, just once," Gerard said, with his best smile and biggest, most pleading eyes. "Just, you know, if I'm crazy, I'm crazy. And if I'm not, well... what's the worst that could happen, right?"

"You're fucking crazy," Bob said two hours later, stomping his feet in the puddles of mud and dead leaves, scowling at the empty path. "There's no one out here, Way. Now can we go back to Ray's? I'm starving."

"He always shows up," Gerard replied absently, wringing his hands and peering through the pale columns of tree trunks, sunlight streaming between them and casting sharp shadows everywhere. Frank didn't appear from any of them. "He always does, eventually. He'll be here in a second." Maybe Frank was freaked out by Bob and Ray being there, but Bob wouldn't be left behind once Ray'd clued him in to what was going on. Or... Frank had said sometimes he just lost time, like he stopped existing, went somewhere else. Just stopped. Sally's ghost was fading away, what if Frank had faded too? What if he was gone forever? Fuck, Gerard should have just skipped school and submitted to more detention. It'd have been worth it—worse things would be worth it. If Frank had faded... fuck, Gerard couldn't even think about it.

"Frank?" he called again, cupping his hands around his mouth and fighting back what felt a lot like tears. Ray and Bob were staring at him, he could see them out of the corner of his eyes, and he didn't care, because fuck. Fuck, Frankie. "Frankie, c'mon, man." His voice cracked miserably and his shoulders slumped, and then Ray let out what sounded a lot like a shriek and Gerard was engulfed in freezing cold and falling down on his ass in the mud.

"You came back," Frank said into his neck, and Gerard breathed in an aching lungful of air. "You came back."

"Don't be stupid," Gerard said finally, voice thick. "Of course I did. Where were you?"

"Where was I?" Frank snorted, leaning back finally. He looked like he always did, same ragged t-shirt and jeans and curl of tattoos peeking out around his neck and arms, and he was the best thing Gerard had ever seen. "Where were *you*? It's been... it's been a couple days, right?"

"Yeah," Gerard said, smiling helplessly as Frank leaned into him, running his hands over Gerard's arms like he might disappear, like he wanted to soak Gerard in. Probably he'd just missed Gerard's body heat, but still. It was really fucking nice. "Yeah, I'm sorry, Frankie, I didn't mean to. Shit got kind of intense at school." Fucking detention. "And," he coughed a bit nervously, because Frank seemed not to have noticed yet, but it was only a matter of time and it was probably better to bite the bullet or whatever. "Uh, I brought some people with me?"

"Hmm?" Frank said, and started patting Gerard's pockets, making a face. "C'mon, man, I know you've got smokes. Hand 'em the fuck over."

"Holy shit," Ray said in an even higher voice than usual, and Frank's head shot up.

"So," Gerard said hopefully into the ensuing silence. Ray was backed up against a maple tree and

was staring at Frank, like—okay, like he was a ghost. Fair enough, but it wasn't as though Frank was pulling any *Poltergeist* shit. He was just shaking Gerard down for cigarettes, like usual. Bob was just watching him with narrowed eyes and his arms crossed over his chest. "Uh, can you guys see him too, then?"

"Well," Bob said, eyes somehow going even narrowed-er. "I see some dude crawling all over you. Doesn't look like a ghost to me."

"I don't, huh," Frank said, grinning sharply and rocking back on his heels. Gerard abruptly got a bit worried, and, okay, maybe he wasn't really used to not being the entire focus of Frank's attention. But that was the point, right? Gerard didn't want to be the be-all, end-all of Frank's social circle. Frank deserved to have more than just one crazy dude stalking him in a forest. But Frank had a really weird look on his face, like maybe he was going to go all ninja-translucent and push Bob in a puddle, and that would be really, really bad and definitely put a crimp in Gerard's plan for them to all be best friends forever.

"Frank?" Ray squeaked finally, edging closer, eyes huge. "I don't—is that you?"

"Toro," Frank said warily, waving a hand, and Ray edged a step closer. "Wow, you weren't joking about the hair," he said to Gerard out of the corner of his mouth.

"But I don't—it doesn't *look* like you," Ray said weakly, voice wobbling alarmingly. Whatever he saw had to be really damned out there, because he was white as a sheet of printer paper, eyes all dark pupil.

Frank shrugged laconically, but Gerard could see the tension in the lines of his mouth and shoulders. "Yeah, well. It's still me." He shoved his hands in his pockets and offered a wan smirk. "How you been? Heard you still play guitar."

"Oh my god, it's really him," Ray gushed, and rushed forward and then came to a stop again, wrapping his arms around himself and looking conflicted. "Fuck, Frankie, we all thought you were—well, I guess you are dead. This is so weird."

"Tell me about it," Frank offered, smile genuine now, if still a little sad. "Sorry about last time you were out here, dude. I don't mean to come off all terrifying and shit." He paused, considering. "Well, not most of the time."

Ray looked sort of sheepish, to be honest, and then turned to gauge Bob's response. Bob was staring at all of them like they'd gone insane. "So... you can see him? How is that fair?"

"I can see him," Bob said, long-suffering and annoyed. He eyed Frank suspiciously. "He looks like a normal dude."

"Hey now," Frank laughed, and wiggled his tattooed hands. "Normal? Don't insult me. Normal ain't what I was going for, man."

"Oh," Ray said, gnawing at his thumb and regarding Gerard and Frank with wide eyes. "I kind of... I see mostly smoke, still. Like, in the outline of a person." He sketched a vague shape in the air with his other hand. "And maybe, uh, a skull? It's pretty fucked up, dude."

"Really?" Gerard piped up, interested. "That's so cool! I wonder why Bob and I can see Frank and you can't. Have you ever seen any other dead people, Bob?"

"Why is my life suddenly a Shyamalan film?" Bob grumbled to himself, and glared at them all.

“No, I mean, okay, our sample size is currently three, fine, but two of us can see Frank perfectly well, and one of us sees a freaky Metallica skullbeast thing,” Gerard pointed out, and Frank sighed and went to fetch him his notebook. Gerard took it absently and started scribbling. “There has to be some commonality, right? What makes Bob and me different? Maybe it’s something in the water in Glen Fell. Bob and me are both outsiders, right?”

“Well, maybe, but maybe it’s genetic?” Ray looked fascinated, edging closer. “I mean, fuck, it could be anything.”

“Okay, guys, this is fun and all, but he’s not a ghost,” Bob said firmly. “Look at him, he’s just a guy.”

“Frank, don’t ghost out on Bob yet,” Gerard proclaimed imperiously, clutching Ray’s palm and trying to will ghost-feelings through their skin. “I want to see if we can get Ray to see you.” He darted forward and took Ray’s hand. “Maybe you can see him if I, like, share my ghost-vision with you?”

“And how would you do that?” Frank said dryly, coming up behind them and looming, making ogre-like faces at Ray.

Gerard would have chided him—Ray was totally on the verge of flipping out, Gerard could tell—but he was busy concentrating. He gritted his teeth and felt a muscle in his jaw jumping.

A moment passed, during which Bob muttered direly about their sanity.

“Nope. Still just a freaky smoke beast,” Ray said, staring at Frank.

“Well, maybe you should let go of him and let me try, brainiac,” Frank pointed out, tugging at Gerard’s arm.

“Or, uh, we could both try at once, maybe?” Gerard suggested. “I mean, it’s easy for you to go solid around me, right? So maybe if you concentrate on me, and I concentrate on him, that’ll help.”

Frank sighed and slid his hand over Gerard’s, grabbing Ray’s wrist, and then Gerard got the weirdest sensation, like... he’d never had an IV, thank fucking God, but Mikey had, and he’d said it’d felt weird, a chill that tingled and spread through his veins. That’s sort of what it felt like, Frank’s hand on his wrist bleeding out cold and shivery in lines along Gerard’s wrist, throbbing.

“I can sort of...” Frank trailed off, then blinked. “Huh. It’s like—finding the right chord. Weird.” He shook himself, like he’d been doused in cold water, and there was a strange thrumming sensation.

“Holy shit,” Ray said, jerking upright, and Gerard was a little concerned his eyes were actually going to pop out of his skull. “It’s... it’s really you, you’re. Fuck, Frank!”

“It worked?” Frank said, and then “Whoa!” Ray was hugging him and maybe there was the tiniest incredulous smile creeping onto Frank’s face. “Holy fuck, that actually—wow. Um, hi.”

“I didn’t remember you being so fucking short,” Ray said, wiping at his face and beaming. “Dude, you have no idea, I was so fucking worried about you. And you’ve been here the whole time!”

“Can you still see him even though I’ve let go?” Gerard wanted to know, flipping to a new page in his notebook. Maybe he hadn’t needed to be in physical contact with Ray at all. Maybe Frank had just needed to concentrate more. Shit, they should check that out later. Maybe when they introduced Mikey, except maybe since Gerard had been able to see Frank, Mikey would too.

Maybe they shared a ghost-sensing gene.

Bob had left off grumbling and was now actively looming, regarding Frank and Ray's closeness with obvious misgiving. "I still think you're all fucking crazy," he said darkly. "Way, did you slip Toro something in Bio?"

"So who's this fucker, anyway?" Frank asked interestedly, peering over Ray's shoulder with a worryingly evil smile.

"This is Bob Bryar," Gerard said nervously, wondering if it was too soon to drag Frank off Ray. It wasn't like Frank belonged to Gerard or anything, but still. They'd just met for the first time in years, they should probably take it slow. That was all. Gerard didn't think he was overreacting—Bob clearly felt the same way, even if it was because he thought everyone was having a psychotic episode. "He's good people."

"Gosh, thanks." Bob raised an eyebrow and shot Gerard a grin. "Rousing endorsement."

"The best people," Gerard amended, grinning back, and then blinked when Frank stalked forward. "You've, uh, you've heard me talk about him before?" he continued hesitantly. "Bob drives me places and defends me from evil. Um."

"And he doesn't believe in me, huh?" Frank purred, still smiling, and Bob eyed him warily.

"It's not that he doesn't believe in you," Gerard clarified hastily, sharing a worried look with Ray. "It's, uh, I mean. You know, even *I* didn't think you were a ghost for ages."

"Well, let me help clarify," Frank said cheerfully, and then shoved his hand *through Bob's chest*.

"Whoa," Ray said, impressed, and Gerard was simultaneously a little jealous—Frank had only ever dipped his fingers through part of Gerard's wrist, what the hell—and afraid Bob was going to herniate something. Was it safe to do that? Wouldn't it chill the blood and lower the body temperature, give someone hypothermia or whatever?

"Bob, are you okay?" he asked worriedly, hovering uselessly next to the two of them. He shot Frank a dark look. "Dude, is this necessary?"

Bob made an unintelligible noise that Gerard translated as some version of 'what the motherloving fuck' and then gritted out slowly, "I believe you. Get your fucking hand out of my body."

"Aw, but it's fun!" Frank said, and then when Gerard's mouth fell open in dismay, he relented and pulled his hand free, patting Bob's head for a moment. "There there, no harm done."

Bob coughed a couple times, spitting out what looked like ice crystals onto the ground.

"Okay, so you're dead and also a dick," he said after a moment, frighteningly mild. "Glad we've got that established."

"Or you could be on mind-altering drugs," Frank pointed out, still smiling and looking altogether more evil than Gerard was used to. "Maybe you're hallucinating. Maybe this is some fucked up dream. Or, ooh, a nightmare, would we call it a nightmare? I don't know, you seemed like you liked it."

"Frank!" Gerard said, exasperated.

"Gerard!" Frank mocked, and then sighed and slouched over and leaned against Gerard's shoulder.

“Can I have a smoke now? Are we done proving my undead credentials?”

“Do you always go around shoving your fist into random people?” Bob inquired, edging in front of Ray and smiling benignly at Frank. It was sort of terrifying.

“That’s how I roll,” Frank agreed, smirking back at Bob and wrapping an arm around Gerard’s waist. “Don’t worry, I’m clean. Disease-free, that’s me.”

Gerard shoved the pack of cigarettes at Frank and fumbled for a lighter. Maybe once Frank had some nicotine, he’d calm down a bit and stop goading Bob to commit some sort of ghost-murder or whatever.

“Okay!” Gerard said, twisting his hair in his fingers, watching Frank suck on a cigarette. “Okay, so, now you’ve all met, and you guys can stop freaking out when I go run off into the forest every now and then, right? Because I—”

Ray cut him off. “I don’t think you should run off anywhere, especially not alone,” he said, worried and ruffled with it, frowning. “Those assholes could still catch you coming out or going into the forest, you know.”

“No, I know,” Gerard replied impatiently, flapping a dismissive hand. “But that’s not—”

“What assholes?” Frank said, attention caught, the cigarette forgotten and glowing between his fingers. Gerard sighed and stole the cigarette back. Apparently they were talking about this. He’d really rather just not. “Who are we talking about?”

“These fuckers from school keep giving Gerard a hard time,” Bob said, eyeing Frank. “Don’t know if you noticed, but he’s kind of banged up.”

Gerard felt the moment Frank got it, when he went still and tense. He shot Frank a sideways look, nervous for some reason.

“The guys from the field,” he bit off, staring at Gerard. Gerard’s jaw was still sore, and he knew his face still had some pretty spectacular bruising going on, but he’d been so fucking busy this week he hadn’t really had time to worry about looking pretty or whatever. Now that Frank was staring at him, though, he flushed uneasily. “They’re still bothering you?”

“It’s not a big deal,” he started and Frank shook his head furiously.

“No, Ray and the unbeliever are right. It’s a big fucking deal.”

Gerard huffed out a frustrated breath. “His name is Bob,” he pointed out, and Frank rolled his eyes.

“I don’t care if his name’s Beelzebub.” Bob laughed, and Frank stuck out his tongue before continuing, face serious once more. “They followed you once, they could again. They were waiting for you last time, waiting for you to leave. It could happen again.”

“You saw it happen?” Ray asked slowly, and Frank nodded.

“Stuck in this goddamned forest and couldn’t help.”

“You helped!” Gerard protested, but Frank shook his head.

“Not enough. And if they’d just been a little bit further away when they jumped you, I couldn’t have helped you at all. You could have died, and I couldn’t have—I’d rather not see you, and know

you're okay. Don't come out here alone."

Gerard flung his hands in the air, exasperated. "They just wanted to knock me around. They're assholes, Frank, but they're not completely evil. And they've backed off lately anyway!"

"Sometimes people lose control," Frank said quietly, and Gerard blanched.

"Well, we'll just come with you, then," Ray said into the ensuing silence. "They probably won't bother three of us, right? We can do camping trips and shit, it'll be great. I mean, I'd say invite Patrick and Worm too, but they might kind of freak out. I don't know. The fewer that know about Frank, the better, maybe. I like you a lot, Gerard, but I totally thought you'd finally huffed too much bleach during detention and lost it."

"You want to come back?" Frank asked, sounding startled, and Ray rolled his eyes and made a duh expression.

"Well, so long as you promise to keep your hands to yourself," Bob grumbled. "But there's really no way around it. Way's been pining for you all week, and if we don't come back, he'll just sneak around at night by himself like a lunatic."

"I would not!" Gerard protested shiftily. Dammit.

"At least now we know why he kept staring out the window and sighing," Bob continued, ignoring Gerard's outburst. "I thought maybe he'd fallen for Tanya after all."

"Who's Tanya?" Frank asked, eyes narrowed, and Gerard gestured a giant 'No no no ABORT, DELETE, SAY NO MORE' with his hands, but Bob got a look of unholy glee on his face. And then Frank said, "Oh, *that* girl. Ted's girlfriend."

And Gerard was doomed. Bob wound up retelling the epic story of Tanya's unrequited love, with Frank listening raptly and Ray giggling behind his hand. Gerard groaned and sullenly took a drag off the cigarette. It had been a giant mistake to introduce these two.

"Gerard, you heartbreaker," Frank said, fluttering his eyelashes at Gerard. Gerard blew a puff of smoke at Frank and scowled. "I had no idea you had such oral prowess."

"Are we done dissecting the reasons my life sucks?" Gerard asked pointedly, flushing. He actually didn't know if he had any oral prowess at all, which he really, really didn't want to bring up at the moment. "I had something to say earlier."

"Oh, by all means," Bob said politely. "We're done now."

"Thanks," Gerard said, glaring. He was going to put salt in Bob's coffee tomorrow morning. But no, fuck, he could never desecrate coffee that way. He'd have to think of something else.

"Anyway, like I was *trying* to say earlier, we need to start thinking long term." He could see they weren't following him. He ground out the cigarette butt and waved his hand around, gesturing at the surrounding woods. "I mean, this? This isn't going to work. I'm glad we're all getting along and planning camping trips and shit, but that doesn't help Frank forever. We have to think about forever."

They still didn't seem to be following him, but now Frank was staring at him, and Gerard could feel himself flushing.

"Go on," Bob said.

“Well, what we really need to do is get Frank *out* of the forest, right?” For a number of reasons. Not least of which was that it figured in Gerard’s campaign to have Frank actually kiss him again, instead of just looking at him like he really, really wanted to. Because that was eventually going to drive Gerard crazy. He shook himself. Focus, Gerard.

“Now, I have a couple of ideas.” He gestured them all to sit down on the stone wall and whipped out his notebook from his pocket.

An hour later, Frank had vetoed animal sacrifices—which, fine, Gerard hadn’t especially wanted to mess with killing anything anyway, and Bob had flat-out refused to do any ritual of any sort.

“If ghosts are real, who knows what the fuck else is,” he said firmly. “I’m not calling down any dark demonic powers or crazy gods. And no one else is either. No fucking spells. Write that down in your notes.”

Gerard made a meaningless scribble in the margins and sighed mournfully. Bob was probably right, Frank’d come back as like a zombie or something. But it still was so cool it seemed like sort of a shame not to try it.

“Ugh, fine,” he grumbled, flinging up his hands and accidentally sending his pen winging off through the air. Frank sighed and got up to fetch it again. “So what have we got?”

“The wheelbarrow plan, the tree plan,” Ray ticked off on his fingers. “The moving Frank’s body out of the forest plan, and the creepy blood talisman plan, which I still think should be avoided.”

“Well, we don’t have to use *your* blood,” Gerard pointed out. “We can just try with mine.”

“No blood!” Frank shouted from the bushes, voice muffled and strange, and then he re-emerged with Gerard’s pen in his teeth.

“I’m not even going to ask,” Bob said gravely.

“Okay, let’s try taking home some saplings tonight,” Gerard said, taking his pen out of Frank’s mouth and tapping it against the page. “And we’ll come back with a wheelbarrow later this week. I’m... it’ll be tricky getting Frank’s body, so let’s do the easier stuff first, yeah?”

“I like the wheelbarrow idea,” Frank said brightly, looking over Gerard’s shoulder at the notebook. “I’m serious, man, cross out anything that involves blood. That shit’s not okay.”

“Pen’s out of ink,” Gerard said shiftily, and shoved the pen in his pocket, making a mental note to remove it later so he didn’t cause an epic disaster when they eventually got washed. “Anyway, I’m gonna ask Mikey to start thinking of ideas too, so we might have other stuff to try later. But this stuff’ll do for now.”

“Well, we should probably get going, then,” Ray said, standing up and brushing twigs out of his hair. “Mom’ll worry, and we have a quiz on Dickens tomorrow, and I haven’t even started it yet.”

“He’s a quick read,” Gerard told him, shrugging. “I’ll catch you up in the morning, if you want.”

“I do like your summaries,” Bob said thoughtfully. “But we really should get going. I want to get some extra practice in tonight.”

“Drumming is serious business,” Ray teased, and Bob nodded. “Indubitably.”

“Go, go. Get on with you,” Frank said sadly. “Leave me to my eternal torment and nightly

solitude.”

“Oh, shut up,” Gerard said fondly, and then bit his lip and shuffled his feet. Somehow it felt kind of odd asking if Frank would mind giving him a good-bye kiss with Bob and Ray watching. Getting rejected in front of people was kind of worse than getting rejected in private. And, well. It was weird. What if Frank said yes and Gerard got overexcited and mauled him? Bob and Ray would be traumatized. They might accept ghostly friends, but even they probably weren’t down with necrophilia. Spectrophilia. Whatever. “Um.”

“Night, dude,” Frank said, eyes twinkling, and Gerard waved awkwardly.

“See you tomorrow,” he replied weakly, and Frank heaved a giant sigh and then flung himself on Gerard, tackling him back into the mud.

“Ack! Frank! No!” Gerard spluttered, laughing and groaning at the same time, trying not to get too hot and bothered. Which wasn’t too hard, considering he was lying in a giant puddle. “It’s cold, you fucker!”

Frank blew a raspberry on his cheek and Gerard squawked indignantly, and then in the midst of Ray and Bob laughing and the wind blowing and Frank pretending to help Gerard back up, somehow Frank snuck a kiss just below Gerard’s ear. His lip ring was a bright touch of icy cold, and his lips were soft, and Gerard sucked in a startled breath and choked on it, coughing wildly.

“Thanks, Gee,” Frank said, smiling slightly and showing him at Bob, who pounded Gerard helpfully on the back and then grimaced and wiped his muddy hand off on a tree. “I didn’t think—but you were right. I’m glad you told them.”

“You should trust me more,” Gerard said, heart tight, and Frank huffed out a laugh.

“Suppose so,” he said, and then flapped a hand at them. “Go on. I’ll see you later.”

Unfortunately, the sapling plan seemed to be a bust. They’d uprooted three tiny tree-shrub-things and carried them out of the forest in the hopes that that would tweak Frank’s boundaries somewhat, but so far, no luck.

Gerard talked hopefully at his for a while, but Frank failed to manifest before him, and there weren’t any signs of other paranormal activity afoot – no cold spots, unexplained gusts of wind, or magnetic twitches to compasses. But Gerard decided to carry around his little uprooted bush for a while longer just in case, dumping it into a coffee cup with some soil. Maybe Frank just needed some time to get acclimated to his new plant conduit, right?

His mom raised an eyebrow when he took Ferdinand in the car with him to go see Mikey, but subsided when he said, “Art project.”

“Oh, obviously,” she said dryly, and then settled down to a good session of cross-examination about school and whether those kids were still bullying him and how he’d done on his history test and whether he was eating enough. It was uncanny. Gerard had no idea how she’d even known he’d *had* a history test. Maybe she was bugging his room.

“Mom powers,” was all she said when he inquired suspiciously, and he wrinkled his nose at her.

“You’re in a good mood,” he commented, and she smiled.

“Dr. Costa says Mikey’s doing much better,” she told him, and Gerard immediately brightened.

“The beta keratins are working?” he asked hopefully. “Is his FEV up? Can he come home soon?”

“We’ll see, but his lung capacity’s increased. It’s good news.”

It was good news. Mikey looked better, color in his cheeks, and he wasn’t waiting for them in his room when they got there. He sitting by the window of the main entrance, and he pulled out his earbuds when he saw them, standing up and shoving his hands in his pockets.

“Hey,” he said when Gerard reached him. “Did you bring me flowers, Gee? You shouldn’t have.”

“Look at you!” Gerard beamed, and let his mom flutter over Mikey for a while before she went off to pester Dr. Costa some more.

“So. This is Ferdinand.” He shoved Ferdinand in Mikey’s arms, then thought better of it – potential allergens, after all – and took the coffee-mug-cum-flower-pot back. “And he’s not flowers. He’s an experiment.”

Mikey raised an eyebrow. “Cool.”

Gerard waited, but he didn’t say anything else. “Mikey,” he whined, and held out a moment longer before folding. “Aren’t you the littlest bit curious?” Gerard wheedled, and Mikey shrugged and then started fiddling with his iPod like a big faker. He was totally curious as hell, and Gerard knew it.

“You suck,” Gerard said severely, and Mikey smiled, tiny and smug and familiar, and Gerard folded. “Ugh, *fine* Okay, here’s the idea: maybe taking some of the woods *out* of the woods will let Frank float about all over the place, right? Like, expand his range of forest all the way out here.”

“I dunno,” Mikey said, poking Ferdinand with an insultingly dubious expression on his face. It was autumn, okay, none of the plants in the woods looked especially healthy at the moment, although Gerard admitted maybe Ferdinand looked especially tattered right now. As Mikey prodded it, a leaf drifted off the tiny sapling and landed on the floor with a sad air of finality. Maybe it just needed to be watered with something that wasn’t diluted coffee.

“It hasn’t worked yet,” Gerard admitted. “But that doesn’t mean it won’t work *eventually*. Maybe Frank just needs to learn to pick up the frequency. Maybe it’ll help if we keep talking to it, you know?”

“So it’s like, what, a short-wave shrub?” Mikey asked doubtfully, and Gerard nodded, excited.

“Yeah! Exactly. Or, like, a transporter beam frequency, and he just has to lock onto the pattern. I mean, it’d be cool if we could use the plant to communicate, but it’d be *cooler* if he could use it to beam place to place.”

“Hmm. Do ghosts and Star Trek really mix?” Mikey mused, and Gerard pursed his lips thoughtfully.

“Well,” he said. “There was that one Next Generation episode, but the ghost turned out to be an anaphasic alien, and it kind of sucked anyway. So that doesn’t really apply, I guess. I don’t know. The plant hasn’t said anything. Maybe it’s a dumb idea.”

“Nah,” Mikey said, and picked up the pot again. “Tell Frank I said hi,” he told the wilting stem, face very solemn, and Gerard sort of thought maybe he was making fun of him, but it was hard to

tell with Mikey sometimes. Then they had to go eat dinner in the cafeteria with Mom and Dr. Costa, who spent the entire time discussing Mikey's breath capacity and the reduced percentage of trapped air in his lungs on an exhale, and very obliquely whether or not he'd go back to school that year.

Gerard tried not to listen, sneaking bits of french fry and green bean into Ferdinand's pot. A bit of extra nutrients couldn't hurt, Gerard hypothesized, and Mikey nodded and widened his eyes earnestly. Which definitely meant Gerard was being mocked, but he didn't mind too much, especially since the wind started to pick up outside halfway through their whispered conversation about who would be the best artist to do graphic novel adaptations of each of the Star Trek series.

"I bet that's Frank," Gerard whispered, pleased, as the branches outside the cafeteria windows lashed about in the wind. Mikey didn't even bother to raise an eyebrow. "It could be!" Gerard said defensively. "I mean, I feel colder, too. Do you feel colder?"

"Maybe a bit," Mikey allowed, and then he got a kind of evil look and Gerard clutched Ferdinand warily.

"So," Mikey said, shooting the adults a look before leaning in towards the plant conspiratorially. "Does Frank know about how you draw super-detailed comics of him fighting zombies all day long?" The window panes rattled, which was a total coincidence, Gerard was sure of it.

"Mikey!" he hissed, and Mikey grinned.

"Shirtless zombie fighting," Mikey continued, because he was a bastard. "And he doodles your name in his notebook too. Mr. Gerard Arthur Way-Iero. With hearts everywhere. I've seen it."

"I hate you," Gerard said mournfully. "Shut the fuck up."

"Language, Gerard," his mom said, shooting him a dirty look, like she hadn't spent the entire car ride there cussing him out about his history grade, which she *didn't even know yet*. Apparently she thought she could convince the doctor they were fine upstanding young gentlemen or some shit. She was toying with her hair and Gerard belatedly realized she had make-up on. Huh. Gerard decided to ignore the implications of that for a while—he had enough to worry about without thinking about his mom's love life, thanks.

The wind moaned around the hospital for the rest of the night, and tossed dead leaves across the beams of their headlights as Gerard and his mom headed home. Gerard couldn't decide if he wanted that to mean Frank had heard them or not.

Aw, hell, Gerard thought, scowling, when the next day Frank met them at the edge of the woods, grinning uncontrollably. Gerard had nearly forgotten about the conversation he'd had with Mikey entirely—that day he and Bob had talked during History, and Bob had haltingly admitted he had seen a ghost once before. He'd been in the hospital room with his Nana when she'd died, after a long torturous struggle that Gerard only gleaned was torturous because of how Bob's silences were a lot quieter and smaller than usual.

Gerard was now almost completely positive that being around death had something to do with being able to see ghosts. He'd been there when Mikey died, too—well, technically. That's what the paramedics had said, anyway. He'd stopped breathing and Gerard couldn't get him to start again, not even with his inhaler, and in the spaces between his own heartbeats, he'd felt something in that stairwell, before the ambulance came and everything got loud and bright and busy.

Something had happened, and he didn't want to think or talk about it too much, which Bob seemed to understand.

But he had to wonder what it meant—if being there when someone died altered you in an indefinable, small way, brushed you with the void, took some insubstantial cover off of your eyes. He was shuffling along with Bob and Ray after band practice, ignoring the prickling in his eyes, and then Frank hit him in a wave of dead leaves and smugness, and the solemn mood was knocked right out of Gerard, and he couldn't even mind. Even being humiliated and awkward and completely, utterly, embarrassed was better than looking at his own memories.

“Gerard *Arthur* Way, is it?” Frank said innocently, and then cackled in delight. Gerard buried his face in his hands. He almost wished the stupid plant plan hadn't worked at all. Goddammit. “No, wait, I'm remembering it wrong, it's Mr. Gerard Arthur Way—I—”

“Oh my god, shut up, Mikey is such a liar, okay!” Gerard snapped, aware that he was flushing bright red and that Bob and Ray were looking at each other and raising their eyebrows. Fuckers. Except he couldn't be too mad, because Frank was grinning at him, bright-eyed, and he looked... well, happy. Not annoyed, not freaked out by Gerard's crushing. Happy. Gerard didn't know what to do with that.

He decided to focus on the practical aspects of the whole embarrassing debacle. “Hey, so you *could* hear us, then, right?” he exclaimed, and fuck, that was one step closer to getting Frank out of the forest, right? He punched the air, stupidly overcome for a moment. “I knew it! Fucking awesome!”

“Yeah,” Frank said, smile crazy-wide. “Tell Mikey I said hi back. I mean, I couldn't hear fucking much, but it was sort of clearer if you guys were talking to me, or at me. At Fernando, whatever.”

“Ferdinand,” Ray piped up. “Mine's Fernando. Gerard's is Ferdinand.”

“Oh, sorry, my mistake,” Frank drawled, rolling his eyes. “What's Bob's weed called?”

“Alpha Specimen Sample Three,” Bob said dryly, and Frank giggled.

“But you couldn't talk back,” Gerard noted sadly, the rush of success fading. “And you definitely couldn't materialize.”

“I was lucky to hear you at all,” Frank replied, shrugging. “And I definitely couldn't hear Ray. I could pick up Bob a bit, when he was drumming.”

“Huh,” Bob said, eyeing Frank. “You know, I don't know that I like the idea of you spying in on us in our houses.”

“Why not?” Frank grinned. “You get up to some crazy shit, Bob Bryar? What did I miss out on? Was it porn? Fuck, you guys, I really miss porn. If it was porn you gotta move those plant things closer.”

“I'm not exposing Alpha Specimen Sample Three to your depraved necrophiliac tastes, fucker,” Bob protested. “She's young and innocent.”

“Hey, it's not necrophilia if I'm the dead party in question,” Frank grinned, and Gerard decided he wanted to nip that conversation in the bud if at all possible.

“Okay, so, anyway, it's time to start the Beta Experiment, right?” he said hastily.

Five hours later, Beta Experiment: Operation Wheelbarrow Full of Dirt was declared a disaster. Gerard's arms ached from shoveling and everyone was caked in mud. Every time they'd tried to push Frank across the forest boundary, he'd gone springing backwards, exploding dirt everywhere and disappearing for a couple moments before re-materializing in a flurry of dead leaves and curses.

"Fucking ow," Frank said glumly, breaking the silence that had fallen over the four of them. He was rubbing his arms like he was trying to warm up, and he looked like he'd been drawn in pale, shaky chalk, dusty and scraped. Gerard was having to work hard at not running over and flinging his arms around him, holding him together.

"No kidding," Ray said, scrubbing at his eyes; he'd gotten a faceful of dirt and gravel earlier, and now he looked kind of like the Swamp Thing, dead leaves straggling from his hair. Pretty cool, except Gerard suspected he was rocking a similar look, which, while being awesome, wasn't especially attractive. Frank was sitting there with his head on his knees, smudged but still gorgeous and pristine, and Gerard was a hideous mud-monster. Great.

"Okay, so, now what?" Bob asked, kicking aside the wreckage of the wheelbarrow, and then he pointed a finger warningly at Gerard. "Don't even try to say anything involving the word blood, Way."

"I wasn't going to!" Gerard protested, which he *wasn't*. Everyone had raised a ginormous fuss when all he'd wanted to do was make a really tiny cut on his palm and rub it on a twig. Apparently that'd be enough to call down Satan or the dread lord Cthulhu or hordes of zombies. Whatever.

"No bodily fluids," Frank agreed tiredly. "But I'm guessing the next experiment involves me."

"They all involved you," Ray said, frowning, and then his face went blank. "Oh."

An awkward silence fell. Gerard lay in his pile of mulch and sticks and god knew what else, staring up at the gray, distant sky.

"Frank," Ray started, sounding tentative, and Frank looked up from his knees, eyes narrowed.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"But..."

"So we're gonna need a way to get down the cliff to the body," Gerard interrupted, closing his eyes.

"You never said anything about a cliff," Bob pointed out, disgruntled, and Gerard sighed. He'd thought that might be a stumbling block.

"It's more of a gorge, actually," Frank pointed out, from closer than Gerard had thought he'd been. There was a rustling noise, and then the sensation of someone sitting next to him, snuggling down in the forest detritus.

"A gorge, right. My mistake," Gerard replied gravely, and opened his eyes. From the corner of them he could see Frank, sitting with his knees drawn to his chest, pale and far-away. Gerard moved his arm slightly, so that it came in contact with Frank's ankle, and heard a quiet sigh. "So," he said after a moment. "We'll need either some way to get down, with, um, climbing gear or something, which, I dunno, sounds kind of like a bad idea."

"Glad I didn't have to say it," Bob muttered.

“Or,” Gerard continued doggedly. “We need a harness or a net on a really long pole, maybe? To bring some of the bones up to us.”

“Does it matter which, uh, pieces we get?” Ray sounded kind of ill. Gerard understood; he was a little nauseous himself, which was why he was still lying down despite the fact there were probably leeches or something crawling through his hair by now.

He pondered for a moment; he hadn’t really considered whether specific bones might be more effective. “You know, I’m not sure. Let’s just... go with small stuff for now. We don’t want anything that might, um. Attract attention.”

“Are we going to be messing up a crime scene?” Ray wondered, and Gerard could feel Frank bristling next to him. “Maybe we should just call the police, if we know where the body is.”

“It’s been over a decade,” Frank said, dry and chill. Gerard breathed carefully and wondered if he was imagining the sky getting darker. “It’s not a crime scene. It’s my body.”

Except Frank had implied he’d been killed. That his body had been dumped somewhere, which meant that he hadn’t died in some hiking accident. Someone had thrown him in the river, like garbage. Maybe Ray was right. Maybe they should call the police. The FBI, something. But now didn’t seem a good time to bring it up.

Then Frank said, shrugging, offhanded and darkly sardonic, “Besides, no one cares anymore. Don’t bother anyone. Why waste the man-hours, right?”

And Gerard’s throat physically hurt with all the things caught in it, the things he wanted to say and didn’t know how to articulate. That it didn’t matter about anyone else, that Frank cared and that was enough, that he shouldn’t have to be alone out here, forgotten. That Gerard cared, cared so much, and that there had to be people with questions, holes in their lives—Frank’s friends, his family. Even just people like Ray, the people whose lives Frank had touched, who would always wonder and worry about what happened to Frank Iero, the kid who wrote the book on cool, the kid with his whole life ahead of him.

But it all lodged behind his teeth, tight like a trapped sob, and shit, he really couldn’t stand all these damned mood swings in his day. It couldn’t be healthy.

After a moment, he gathered himself. “Okay. Okay, Frankie,” Gerard said quietly, and Ray and Bob didn’t say anything at all. “We’ll figure something out.”

Chapter 10

The next day, they all trekked out to the gorge and Frank waved a hand out sardonically over the empty air.

“Behold my tomb,” he intoned sepulchrally, and Gerard winced.

“Fuck,” Ray said, rubbing his arms, peering down through his hair. “Jesus fuck, Frank, how’d you end up down here?”

“What, you want the whole sordid story?” Frank asked, smirking. He sat down at the edge of the cliff, kicking his feet as Gerard wrestled with the fishing line. He’d asked if Frank could bring a piece up, but Frank had gone sullen and sharp, told Gerard that he’d have fucking moved his own body where it’d have been found if he could have, he’s not that fucking dumb. Best he could do was move some rocks around, protect his body from the river a little.

Gerard tried not to be hurt. The bitterness in Frank’s voice wasn’t for him. He knew that. He did. He’d just... Anyway, he’d thought that might be the case, so he had a little basket thing he’d found in the house, and a fishing pole from the garage. He could lower the basket and maybe he’d ask Frank to go down and move that for him instead, if Gerard couldn’t snag anything himself.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want,” Ray was saying earnestly. “But, I mean, did you fall or something?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Frank said, picking up a rock and chucking it across the gorge. “Yeah, you could say that. I fell.”

Gerard bit his lip until he tasted blood, and then he gave up. “Frank,” he said, staring at the snarled fishing line in his hands. They’d kissed here, right on this ledge, but he couldn’t think about that now.

“Oh, come on, Gee,” Frank said coolly, leaning back and looking over his shoulder. When Gerard glanced up, he raised an eyebrow, smirked. “You’re a smart guy. You have to have guessed.”

“Not the details,” Gerard replied quietly. “I thought you didn’t want to talk about it.” But that sounded like an excuse, now. He hadn’t wanted to look at the whole picture. He was a coward like that. He didn’t know if he could bear knowing the details. But Frank knew them—had lived and died by them. Gerard could at least face that it had happened.

“Go on, then,” Frank said, staring at him. “I’ll fill in the holes as you go.”

Gerard lay down on his stomach at the cliff edge, looking down. Frank was next to him, radiating cold air, and Gerard could feel him staring. Gerard didn’t want to say anything. He started lowering the wicker basket, swallowing.

“Your neck was broken,” he said, lowered the basket another couple feet. “Someone—probably more than one—person attacked you. I think—from, uh, some of the things you’ve said, that maybe they didn’t mean to murder you? But they did, even if it wasn’t on purpose. And they covered it up. Threw your body in the river.” It was hard to keep his voice from shaking, and he couldn’t see anymore, eyes too wide to keep the tears in. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he’d known that was how it’d happened, but he’d never articulated it, even to himself. Fuck. Fuck.

“Gold star,” Frank replied into the silence, startling Gerard. The basket snagged on an outcrop

when he jerked his arm, and he bit his lip, tried to concentrate.

“I knew you didn’t run away,” Ray said quietly, and Frank shrugged at him.

“Fuck,” Bob said succinctly. “Who did it? They should have been arrested. They should be in fucking jail. Intent or not.” And Ray looked distraught and horrified and angry, pacing and wringing his hands. Gerard just felt numb and terrified. It was like the world had been broken somehow, jagged and treacherous.

He drew in breath to speak, and then Frank cut him off. “Christ, you’re taking a fucking ice age over there. Let me help you with that.” And without further ado, Frank jumped off the cliff.

“Well, that was alarming,” Bob noted, edging a bit closer and peering cautiously down. “Fuck, that—that is a body.”

“Yeah,” Gerard said tersely.

“My body,” Frank corrected, his voice rising over the crash of the river and echoing weirdly off the walls of the gorge. He was crouched next to the skeleton, patting the skull with a proprietary air. “Nice, right?”

“Sort of, uh. Not what I remembered,” Ray replied faintly, wincing. Gerard could sympathize. This was pretty damned weird, and he’d had a while to adjust to the idea. He unwound another couple inches of fishing line, concentrating on that instead of the white gleam of bone, instead of wondering—he wondered if there was an empty grave somewhere with Frank’s name carved into a tombstone. That’s what people did when they couldn’t find the body, right?

“It’s not fucking neurosurgery, Gerard,” Frank called up to them, and Gerard sucked in a startled breath. “Just drop the fucking basket and I’ll scoop something up—what do you want, a hand?”

“Well, I mean, yeah, your help is definitely going to be important, I don’t think I can maneuver the basket mys—oh,” Gerard said, and dropped the basket, only managing at the last second to snatch the string back up before it fell into the river or something. “Oh. You mean a *hand*, a hand. Right, um. That would work. Lots of small bones that could, uh, have washed away easily. On their own. In case we get a crime team out here later, or something.”

“No crime teams,” Frank yelled back. Gerard looked away from Frank’s bent form, biting his lip.

“Do you think we could get arrested for tampering with evidence?” Ray asked nervously, twisting a lock of his hair.

“We’re minors,” Bob said. “We should be fine, long term. But we should probably call the police at some point.”

“Yeah, because the police were so useful last time,” Frank said from behind them, and Bob yelped and jumped straight up in the air. “What? Go on, haul ‘er up, Gerard.”

“Look, this time you’ve got us. We can help the police catch the fuckers that killed you,” Bob said, clutching his chest and glaring. “Also, stop appearing out of nowhere like that, you little shit. I know you do it on purpose.”

“You’re just so pretty when you squeak in terror,” Frank said sweetly, and clapped a hand on Bob’s back.

“Nice phalanges,” Gerard whispered weakly, staring at the basket of jumbled bones, and then

shook himself and looked up. “Frank, Bob’s right. Whoever did this... they shouldn’t get away with it. They should be in jail. We should call the police.”

“Not up for debate, thanks.” Frank poked at the basket. “Man, are you guys seriously going to carry my body parts around? That is some freaky serial killer shit. We *definitely* don’t want the police involved.”

“Frankie,” Gerard said, exasperated, and Frank threw his hands up in the air.

“What, you want to go hunt down Mark Sikowski and his goons? Be my goddamned guest, but I’m pretty sure they’ve cooked up an alibi or two by now. And if you think ‘my buddy Casper told me they done it’ will hold up in court, have fun with your meds and padded walls, my friends.” Frank dropped his hands and stopped glaring, started eyeing everyone warily instead. “What? Has the American legal system changed that much since I died? Is evidence from Slimer admissible now?”

Gerard had to sit down. He considered putting his head between his knees; he thought he might throw up.

“Sikowski,” Ray said slowly, staring. “Mark Sikowski killed you? *Coach* Sikowski?”

“I’ll kill him,” Gerard heard someone say, then realized it’d been his own voice. Fuck. “I mean, I —” Gerard didn’t believe in the death penalty, didn’t believe in the solution to violence being more violence, but he kept flashing on an image of the Coach’s face, and it summoned up a visceral response: the deep desire to bash the fucker’s head in with a rock. He wondered if he could actually do it, actually be capable of murder. The fingers in the basket were so fucking small. Coach Sikowski was a mountain of a man, even now, hair thinning and a slight paunch to his waist, and Gerard’s brain was way too good at painting a picture of it, of a teenaged Mark towering over Frank, sneering.

“He’s still here?” Frank asked, voice strangely hollow.

“Fucking baseball coach,” Bob said succinctly.

“Oh, that’s—that’s *great*,” Frank stated, eyes queerly bright. “I’ve been rotting away in the woods. He’s playing baseball. Molding young minds. Great.”

“He can’t get away with it,” Gerard said, and he still couldn’t quite recognize his own voice. It was like hearing a recording of himself on an answering machine. He didn’t sound tangled and torn, like the way he felt in his own head right now. He sound collected, confident. Bob and Ray were looking at him like he was making sense. “We’re going to do something. I don’t care if we’re arrested for fucking with the crime scene. We can’t let him get away with it.”

“Uh, newsflash? He did. He got away with it.” Frank waved a hand in front of Gerard’s face, snapped his fingers. “Hello? I know you’re lost in visions of avenging glory or whatever, but I really don’t care anymore. I’m dead. What the fuck does it matter? He can’t take it back. Nothing can fix it. And I don’t want you guys getting in trouble.”

The sky had been a brilliant, painful blue when they’d set out that afternoon, and now it was gunmetal gray, the clouds so close Gerard felt like he could reach up and touch them, and there was a cold wind whipping down across the gorge, moaning and chill. So, the whole ‘not caring’ thing—obviously a lie. Even without the meteorological tells, Gerard would have known that. There was no way Frank didn’t care.

“What about your family?” Gerard continued stubbornly, ignoring the twinge of guilt when

Frank's shoulders automatically hunched, his eyes wide and surprised. "Don't they deserve to know what happened? See the fucker go to jail?"

"They don't—it's been years," Frank said hoarsely, and then rubbed his hands over his face and glared. "This is not up for fucking discussion, Gerard. Back. Off."

"No," Gerard spit out. "It's wrong. He should be in jail. We have to make this right—we can't bring you back to life, fine, but we can send his ass to fucking prison. Who else was there? Tell us exactly what happened, where it happened—" And then Bob was tugging him back, because apparently he'd decided to get in Frank's face and was stalking forward, forcing Frank back, and okay, it was fine if Frank fell off the cliff, he was immaterial and all, but Gerard supposed it would be a little worse if he accidentally took a step too far himself.

"Both of you fucking cool it," Bob growled. "Let's just... shelve the discussion for now, alright? Christ, you two."

Frank crossed his arms over his chest and looked thunderous—literally, actually, there were storm clouds building and the first cold drops of rain falling. Great. Gerard just clutched the basket of bones to his stomach and waited for Frank to cave.

"I'd like to know exactly what the fuck you think you're going to be able to accomplish here, but fine," Frank grated out. "Whatever. It was him and, fuck, George Lenton, Clay Noltes, Tim Barrows. That whole fucking group, Jesus, close-minded smalltown fucks, I'm sure you know the type."

"Yeah," Gerard said, trying to keep the edge of outrage and determination in his voice, when suddenly he just felt really small and stupid, like a jerk. He got out his notebook and started scribbling the names down, ignoring the way the rain was picking up, splashing down on the page in round, wet drops like tears.

"I was out in the woods—I wanted to practice, my dad always yelled about the noise, and. Anyway, I had my guitar. They followed me, started shoving me around. Sound familiar, Gerard? Maybe you'll be a little more fucking careful now, what do you fucking think?" Gerard didn't look up, shivering. "'Cause shit got out of hand. I fell, hit my neck on a wall. Mark pushed me harder than he meant to, maybe, or maybe he did mean to, and just didn't think—it doesn't matter. Bam. I'm dead. They all freaked out, dumped my body in the river, took off. I'm a little shaky on the timing of events, to be honest, sorry to fuck up your investigation, there," Frank said bitterly, tilting his head and scowling at Gerard's notebook. "They might have stashed me in the millhouse for a while first. I'm not sure. But I wound up in the river, and, eventually, here. Home sweet fucking home."

He made a sweeping gesture that encompassed the desolate area, the stands of leafless trees and endless roar of water, the gray rock below and gray sky above. No one said anything, and the silence stretched out, significant and tense.

"Wait, Tim *Barrows*? Isaac's brother?" Ray spoke up suddenly, voice almost drowned out by the river, but it got louder as he continued, indignant and surprised. "Shit, do you think Mayor Barrows was involved in this, too? Holy fuck. That'll definitely shake up his plans for re-election. And Ted's uncle committed murder. Do you think... I mean, his brother's the sheriff! He was a cop even back then. Jesus! Holy *fuck*. It's like the whole town's in on it. This is fucking *nuts!*"

"Look, let's just... focus on the facts for the moment, okay? Frank, do you remember exactly where the original fight took place?" Gerard asked calmly, hyper-aware of his own heartbeat. He knew this fucking town was creepy, he'd known it from the very start. And he'd been right: whole

town was run by goddamned murderers. Who all knew about this? He couldn't—he'd have to think about it later.

"Wait," Frank said, yanking away Gerard's notebook. "Wait, this Ted kid is a fucking Sikowski?" He had Gerard's shoulders now and was doing the creepy 'burning-eyes, vengeful ghost' face.

"It's okay! Honest, it is, Ted's been steering clear of me since you went all ghost-Rambo on him the other night," Gerard was trying not to give in and shiver, or look afraid, because it was just Frank, okay, it was an angry, undead Frank, but it was just Frank, and Frank would never hurt him. He tugged on the notebook again, trying to steal it back.

"Frank went what, now?" Ray asked, hovering beside them both and looking a strange mix of upset and intrigued—Gerard's life was sort of a train wreck at the moment, he supposed. You couldn't help but gape in horror and fascination. On one hand, obnoxious violent homophobes. On the other, crazy vengeful spirits of dead hot boys. At any rate, Gerard snatched the distraction with both hands.

"It was fucking wicked," he told the others enthusiastically, hamming it up. "You should have seen it! It was like a tornado of undead rage. I think Noltes pissed himself."

"No wonder those assholes have backed off," Ray said, snickering. "Frank can be fucking scary, man, I should know. But... you know..."

"Know what?" Frank asked, eyes narrowed. He'd backed down a bit, started to look a little calmer, but he was still glassy and radiating winter cold, and Gerard just wanted to abandon the conversation, stick his head in the sand and forget all of this. It'd be so much easier.

But he couldn't. It was wrong. It was *wrong*, and someone had to do something. And they were all Frank had. It was their responsibility. He tugged the notebook out of Frank's limp hands and started scribbling again, possible plans of action.

"Well, the coach has been giving Gerard a really hard time lately," Ray said hesitantly, looking between the two of them and wringing his hands. "I mean, he's had detention with him every day for the last week."

"Mark's messing with Gerard?" Frank said slowly, deliberate and cool, and then smiled, said with a terrifying amount of cheer, "I'm going to rip out his spleen and shove it up his ass." Which to Gerard's mind was an overreaction, like, wow.

"One thing at a time, you lunatics," Bob said, deceptively mild, prying Gerard away from Frank, which was good, since Gerard thought he might be getting frostbite all the places Frank's hands had been touching him, Christ. "Let's just see if our 'carry around corpses' theory works. If Frank can leave the forest and whip up tornados of rage, I'll feel a lot better, to be honest."

"Fine," Gerard said, shamefully happy to leave the topic, and then he rallied himself a bit. "But we're talking about it later!" he said firmly, and Frank rolled his eyes and kicked Gerard in the shin.

"*Fine*, Sherlock. Whatever. I'm starting to think you're stalling. What, don't want to touch my mortal coil?" Frank picked up the basket of bones and rattled it in Gerard's face, smirking evilly. Dick. Bastard. Gerard hated him.

"I am *not*," Gerard muttered, and then summoned up his courage and shoved his hand in the basket, not looking, just grabbing the first thing his fingers touched.

It was... it was lighter than he'd expected, and warmer, too. Warmer than stone would have been. He looked at it, lying small and white in his palm. A metacarpal, he thought, or a phalange. Fuck if he knew. He'd look it up later. He closed his hand around it, feeling oddly protective, wanting it to warm up to his body temperature after years of being down there in the cold and wet.

"Woah," Frank said suddenly, chin on Gerard's shoulder. "Huh. That feels... really funky." His eyes had gone soft and dreamy, suddenly, like he hadn't been acting like a total vengeful spirit moments before. "Hey, Gee," he said, leaning into Gerard's neck and rubbing his face against it like a cat, giggling. Was Frank fucking stoned? "Like the way you handle my bone, man."

Gerard went bright red and coughed. Wow, not the time. Not the fucking time for this.

"Okay, gross," Bob announced after a moment, and then picked up a second phalange gingerly, his hand covered by his sleeve. "Don't even think about rubbing up on me, Iero."

Frank hummed and stuck his nose behind Gerard's ear. "Your loss," he said brightly, and Gerard was starting to get worried he might do something embarrassing.

Ray warily took a third bone, and Frank finally detached himself from Gerard, full of well-being and smiles and apparently completely willing to forget the previous conversation about how he'd been murdered by a fucking group of assholes that were still wandering free. Gerard was having a little more trouble getting his mind to shift gears, but the way Frank kept looking at him, dreamy and speculative and oh Jesus, that was totally a *leer*, and they were in *public*, Bob and Ray were going to notice! He glared at Frank, who just bounced happily, and evilly, and licked his lips. Gah.

Luckily, Bob and Ray were a bit distracted by handling dead body parts. After some debate, they decided to snag a couple extra tiny bones, just in case, and then lowered the rest back down in the basket.

"So," Bob said. "Nothing left to do but try this shit out. Let's get a move on, yeah?" And they all trooped off, Gerard trying to adjust his pants subtly as they went. Fucking adorable horny ghosts.

Speak of the devil. "Man, this is great," Frank enthused, bouncing along the path beside Gerard, crunching acorns gleefully. "You hear that? I can hear myself walk! I'm not even trying, man, I feel so fucking solid. Do I look more solid, Gee?"

"You... sorta do," Gerard agreed, and couldn't help beaming back. Frank didn't look more solid than he normally did, exactly, but there was something different about him. The light was falling on him differently. He was casting a shadow, and he had more color than he usually did, Gerard was almost positive. Before, he'd been pastels and chalk and charcoal. Now there was a sort of richness to the colors in his skin, in his hair and eyes. It was pretty amazing.

"Well, before we all jizz our pants in excitement, let's see what happens when we actually try to leave these godforsaken woods, right?"

"Buzzkill Bob strikes again," Frank said sadly, and then hip-checked Bob into a tree trunk, giggling.

Gerard kept the small finger bone clenched tightly in his fist as he stepped out of the forest and into the grassy field behind the school. Ray and Bob followed, and then they were just waiting as Frank dithered at the forest's edge.

"Have you even tried yet?" Ray asked finally. "Come on, Frankie, just take a step. It can't be as bad as the wheelbarrow, right?"

“Never mention the wheelbarrow ever again,” Frank muttered, gnawing his lower lip, and then he sighed, closed his eyes, and took a step forward. Then another, and then Gerard couldn’t help it, he let out a whoop of triumph and rushed towards him, flung his arms around Frank and laughed.

“We did it!” he whispered gleefully into Frank’s neck, and then danced them around in a circle.

“Gerard,” Frank said shakily, and clung to him a moment before peeling himself free and looking around, eyes huge. “I can’t fucking believe it.”

“Awesome,” Ray said softly. “Hey, how’s it feel?”

Gerard let go of Frank, stuffed his hands in his pockets and tried not to beam too much. Frank wavered as Gerard stepped back—physically wavered, like a candle flame. He shook his head, looking confused.

“It’s weird. I feel... all stretched out, I guess? It’s a little hard to concentrate. Let’s keep going, see what happens.”

Frank faded as they walked, all the color leeching out of him, and he flat out refused to get in Bob’s car, said something about it moving too fast to keep up. So Gerard waved Bob and Ray off and set off towards his home on foot, Frankie tagging along beside him and babbling about the lack of trees. By the time they got to Gerard’s house, Frank’s voice was husky and blended with the wind, the rustle of dead leaves on the street. He was more evening fog than boy; Gerard could barely see him anymore. But his voice was cheerful, and he kept pointing out how things had changed and stayed the same—a silo had fallen down, a farm had been turned into a subdivision, and Mrs. Middleton had apparently been using the same Halloween decorations for the last two decades.

It was like trying to walk a puppy. Frank kept getting distracted and bounding off to rifle through someone’s mailbox or to peek in a window, or just staring around himself, eyes everywhere but where he was going, and he kept walking through Gerard by accident, leaving him shuddering in a wave of tingling cold.

Fifty billion years later, Gerard finally managed to herd Frank into his house.

“So, this is my room,” he said nervously, shuffling in. Frank was barely visible at all anymore. He was just a blur in the corner of Gerard’s eye, a patch of chilly air, but Gerard could imagine him bouncing forward easily enough, all bright smile and curious eyes.

“Sweet Tarantino posters!” Frank said cheerfully, and then the stack of DVDs on the floor by the dresser toppled over. “Oops, sorry. Wow, wait, are these *movies*?” A case popped open, DVD shining in the light. “Holy shit, the world got so fucking cool after I died.”

Gerard laughed, startled, and began struggling out of his hoodie—the damned thing was covered in prickly sticks and dust and other outdoorsy debris. Gerard’s wardrobe would seriously benefit from his sort-of-boyfriend no longer being exclusively forest-dwelling.

“Hey, they remade *Dawn of the Dead*? Seriously? Was it any good?”

“Amazing, actually, but I really prefer the slow zombie trope, you know?” Gerard said, pawing through his closet and finding a ratty King Coopa t-shirt he was pretty sure belonged to Mikey. It was a little too small, but it smelled clean. “I mean, fast zombies, it’s scary, but it’s a totally different feel, less of the crushing weight of despair and inevitability, more of the ‘holy fucking shit, we’re all gonna die in a spray of bodily fluid, run for your lives,’ you know?”

“I do not know,” Frank said gravely, and there was a squeak of bedsprings, so he’d probably

launched himself at the bed. Gerard understood; if he'd been stuck in a forest for a decade, he'd be pretty fucking excited to have access to a bed himself. "But I would like to. I don't think I've ever seen a fast zombie movie. Can we watch it?"

"Totally," Gerard said, beaming in what he assumed was Frank's direction. Watching zombie flicks in his bedroom with a hot boy that liked him, who also happened to be a fucking *ghost*. Gerard had honestly never imagined his life being this awesome. Though he did sort of wish Frank was more visible at the moment. Not being able to tell exactly where he was or what he was looking at at any given moment was... stressful. "Uh, I'm going to change into my pjs, if that's okay?"

"Knock yourself out," Frank said, sounding amused.

"I... don't suppose you'd close your eyes."

"Not a chance in the world," Frank agreed complacently, and Gerard sighed and shuffled half-into the closet, contorting himself to expose as little skin as possible. He was pale and awkward and only Mikey, and his mom, he supposed, had ever seen him without a shirt on, let alone without pants, and Frank was... well, *Frank*.

"This is the worst strip tease I've ever seen," Frank commented after a couple minutes. "Like, ever. I think I saw one nipple, for three seconds. I want a refund."

"You want me to throw your metacarpal into a lake?" Gerard said crankily, trying not to blush, and then squeaked as a rush of cold air pressed against his cheek.

"Gee, you're fucking adorable," Frank said in his ear, so close Gerard automatically leaned in, but there was nothing to lean against. No lips, no body. Nothing. "But I'll respect your personal boundaries. I solemnly swear not to sneak in your bathroom while you're taking a shower. More than once."

Holy shit, Gerard hadn't even thought about the potential havoc he was unleashing upon the world by taking Frank's bones out of the forest.

"No!" he said sternly, a little more breathlessly than he'd have liked, and stomped over to the bed. "No spying on people in the nude without express permission! That's just creepy."

"Oh, murder and life-after-death and carrying around pieces of a skeleton, *that* he's okay with. It's the voyeurism that's creepy. Got it. Makes total sense."

"Who are you even talking to?" Gerard inquired snippily, and began hunting in his blankets for the remote control. He thought he saw a shadow move by the window and glanced up. "Hey, uh, are you okay? Is this working alright for you?"

"Kinda tired," Frank said, closer than Gerard had expected, again. His voice was—not staticky, exactly, but it sounded like tiny bits and pieces of the things he said were missing, like the sound wasn't all coming through. "It's getting harder to concentrate."

"Oh," Gerard said, disappointed. "I... thought maybe it might get easier, over time."

"Nah, I just need to get used to it. It's—easier if you're holding the bone in your hand, I think? If it's touching your skin. You should make it into a necklace or something."

Gerard went and got the bone back out of his jeans pocket, staring at it. "Yeah, because *that* won't get me arrested or sent to therapy for the rest of my life."

“You could just stick it in your underwear,” Frank suggested, voice low and amused. “Sure, the repercussions if it gets found might be worse, but who’s going to find it, right?” Gerard squawked indignantly and flailed out a hand to hit where he thought Frank might be. He stuck the bone in one of his pajama pockets after checking to make sure these weren’t the ones with the holes in them.

“Fiiiiine, I guess a that’ll work for now,” Frank sighed, and his voice did sound a little stronger, actually. Fuck, Gerard really was going to have to figure out how to carry the damned thing later on, if skin contact worked best to boost Frank’s signal, or whatever. Maybe he could duct tape it to himself.

“You know, you’re kind of sending mixed messages, here,” Gerard said after a moment of wriggling around and poking at the DVD player. He’d finally gotten the menu pulled up; gore was dripping across the screen and Frank was making appreciative noises about the clarity and the lack of a need to fast-forward through previews. “First you say we can’t make out because you’re dead and my heart must go on, or whatever. Now you’re trying to get me to strip and telling me to stick your bone in my pants.”

“I *am* dead,” Frank argued, and his voice was light and cheerful, except Gerard had heard that tone before, and he didn’t buy it. “I’m not exactly boyfriend material, Gee. You living boys, you’ll only break my heart.”

“Never,” Gerard said, more seriously than he’d meant to, and for a moment he thought Frank might have disappeared, because there was only silence in the room, so of course Gerard had to fill it by babbling like a lunatic brook. “We just met recently, really, so maybe it’ll take you a while to believe it, and I’m okay with waiting, honest. But I know what I want. I’m willing to take a risk on it. And we’ve already done more than you thought we could, right? You can leave the forest, now, and I—well, all of us—we can take you with us wherever we go, and not just, like, a sappy ‘memory of you,’ but actually *you*, so that’s not a problem anymore, right?”

“Gerard,” Frank said, and if Gerard closed his eyes he could see it perfectly, Frank lying in the bed next to him, on his stomach, head propped on his hands and eyes huge and mouth perfect.

“It’s not exactly like you can introduce me to your parents,” Frank continued, after a moment. “I still—I still think it’s a bad idea. It’s not—you won’t get to be normal, not with me around. Not if you want to, I dunno, go steady or whatever.”

“Like I was ever going to be normal anyway,” Gerard said, thumping his head back on the pillow, frustrated. He jabbed a finger in Frank’s direction, towards a sort of glum-looking shimmer in the air. “I do, okay, I do want to go steady with you, and go to the movies, and all that shit. And I will totally introduce you to my mom sometime; I don’t even care if she thinks I’m insane. Alright?”

Frank barked out a laugh. “God, you’re just—look. I don’t mean to, uh, assume, but at some point you’re going to want to have sex, right? You’re fucking seventeen! It’s been a while, but I remember how it goes. And I—if you laugh, I’ll go fucking poltergeist on your ass—but Gerard, man, I don’t know how much I can give you.”

“Well, this may surprise you, but I am, in fact, down for some experimentation in the area of, uh, non-traditional sex,” Gerard admitted, and man, he was definitely blushing now. Ah, well. Fuck it. He’d just propositioned his undead best friend. Blushing was probably a normal response, given the circumstances. “But, I mean, do you—I mean, you like kissing, right? And you still feel the things you did when you were alive, just... differently. And your experience, it’s changing, like, you can leave the forest and you’re more solid now. We can practice. I think it’s worth practicing.”

“Oh, a seventeen-year-old doesn’t mind practicing sex, wow. I am overcome with shock. Hold me

before I swoon into a faint.” But Frank was laughing and Gerard was felt a wash of chill air, all along his side, and that meant—well, apparently he could blush harder, that was good to know. They were spooning, sort of. Fucking awesome.

“So...” Gerard managed, biting his lower lip. There was a mirror on his closet door, and if he looked across the room he could see himself in it, splayed out on the bed, laying on his back. And the slightest distortion of air beside him that must be Frank. Mirror-Gerard looked rumped and dazed, hair sticking in all directions and too-tight t-shirt rucked up, showing a pale slice of belly. He put a hand there, on his exposed skin, and watched himself in the mirror, shivering. “Can you see me right now?”

“Yes,” Frank answered. “But—oh my god. That is—fuck, Gerard, that’s not fair, I can’t—”

“I’ll stop if you want,” Gerard managed to say, not quite believing in his own daring as he slipped his hand beneath the waistband of his pajamas, into his boxers. “Um. I’ve never really... done this with someone else here, before.”

“So this is all for me, huh,” Frank breathed, and Gerard nodded, hair falling in his eyes, his cheeks hot.

“I mean—if you don’t want me to, I—”

“Don’t you fucking *dare* stop now,” Frank growled, and there was a feeling almost like—Gerard arched his neck into Frank’s touch, felt the quick sting of teeth. “Do it for me,” he said lowly, voice crackling like static, and Gerard bucked his hips and gasped.

“Fuck, Frankie,” Gerard said, voice high, shivering. “I wish I could touch you.”

“Experiment for another time.” Frank’s voice was right in his ear, panting—almost. Part of Gerard wanted to ask what it was like, if it was just muscle memory, the panting thing, because Frank didn’t need to breathe anymore, right? But when he opened his mouth all that came out was an inarticulate moan.

“I want to see,” Frank demanded hoarsely. “Please, Gerard.” The television flickered briefly, and Gerard shuddered, already so close to the edge it would have been embarrassing, except he could just barely feel a cold rush of air, in the shape of a hand, tracing his cheek.

“Yeah, okay,” he said, and arched his back, lifted his hips off the bed so he could shimmy out of the flannel pants and Batman boxers, and heard Frank curse, but he sort of thought it was a good curse, so he didn’t stop. “Do ghosts jerk off, Frankie?” he heard himself ask, cock twitching at a particularly cold brush of air. Fuck, okay, now that was kinky—Gerard could already tell he was going to develop inappropriate reactions to ice cubes and air conditioners. “Do you, ah, touch yourself? Like this?”

“I did,” Frank said, ghost of a whisper. “At first, I did, but it wasn’t—it’s not the same. God, Gerard, you’re so fucking warm.”

“Not hot?” Gerard asked, half teasing, because of course he looked fucking ridiculous, Mario Brothers t-shirt and cock out on an empty bed, pants around his ankles, talking to no one. But suddenly he couldn’t quite breathe, because Frank, Frank had to be kissing him, right now, like a cold rush of air, like gin and winter and mentholated smoke.

“So hot,” Frank said into Gerard’s mouth, and a chill grip suddenly enveloped his cock, his balls, and Gerard almost shrieked, but it came out as a high startled moan, because it was almost so cold

it hurt, but it was so good, and smooth, and *fuck*, it was Frank's hand, even if he couldn't see it. Frank's tattoos, blurring as he jacked Gerard off. Gerard couldn't figure out what to do, trying to buck into Frank's hand and away from the chill all at once.

"You like that?" Frank asked anxiously, hand slowing, and fuck, Gerard was going to have to find *words*.

"Yes?" he managed. "It's just—oh, *fuck* yes." And okay, either he was totally getting used to the cold, or Frank was warming up, but either way Gerard was definitely liking it. Frank's hand not just skimming his skin, but dipping through it—so *intense*. Gerard almost couldn't stand it.

He could see himself in the mirror, eyes wide, mouth open and panting, but he couldn't see Frank, and it was so fucking—he didn't even know what to think, because he didn't like watching himself, but he liked to know Frank was there, watching him, seeing the look on his face, the way each twist of Frank's wrist made Gerard's back arch and his mouth fall slack.

"Fuck yeah, you like it," Frank said in a wondering voice, and then sped up his strokes, and Gerard lost control for a moment, tossed his head to the side and thrust up his hips and just *keened*.

"You fucking *love* it. Look at me." And Gerard couldn't breathe for a moment, but Frank repeated it, and Gerard managed to drag his eyes open, saw himself wrecked and wild in the mirror, staring into his own eyes. "Come. Do it, right, for me, Gerard, I want—please, let me feel it." And his voice was shaking, broken and yearning, and Gerard did. Came right on command, toes curling and eyes screwed shut, and it was so cold and so *hot*, the rush of semen and chill of air, so goddamned good.

He went limp after, gasping for breath, and Frank was panting something in his ear, the words indistinct and fuzzy. As though Gerard was capable of listening. Gerard was barely capable of *consciousness*. But then Frank sounded upset, what the fuck was there to be upset about? He managed to pry open his eyes, to focus on something besides how fucking good he felt.

"Frank," he mumbled, flapping a hand around, wanting to tug Frank in closer, to wrap around him, and thought he felt what might be cold lips brushing his cheek.

"Gee, I can't, not much longer—" Frank whispered hoarsely, voice going in and out like cell reception on a mountain road, and then his voice cut off entirely. Gerard opened his eyes, even though he already knew. The room was lukewarm and empty. Frank was gone.

Mirror-Gerard was looking totally debauched, dick out and messy, hair going all directions. Gerard stared at himself dejectedly, then gathered all the sheets and covers around himself in a sweaty cocoon. He'd hoped Frank could spend the night. It would have been nice—kind of boring for Frank watching Gerard sleep, or whatever, but Gerard had plenty of comics, and movies, at least. And then maybe they'd have had morning sex, when Gerard woke up again. Gerard had always thought morning sex sounded nice, and—

Holy fuck, he realized. Frank hadn't gotten off. Gerard had gotten off—and *how*—but *Frank* hadn't, and that hadn't even occurred to Gerard until just now. He felt like a total selfish jerk. He was just as bad as Ted. He'd meant to try and reciprocate at some point earlier, to try to touch Frank somehow, or, like, will him into solidity, maybe even attempt a blowjob. But it turned out having someone else touching your cock was really fucking distracting. And now Frank was gone.

On the television screen, a zombie was flopping around in a mall fountain, floundering murderously until the moment someone shot him between the eyes. Gerard watched for a moment, miserable, and then flailed around in the mess of sheets and discarded clothes until he found the

remote and managed to at least mute the gore-fest. Then it was time to hunt down his cell phone and have a minor panic attack at his little brother. There was a lot to panic about.

Like, for one thing, had that even been real sex? Was Gerard still a virgin? He meant, well, it'd *sort* of been sex. Two people participating, even if it was kind of non-corporeal. Gerard had hopes for the eventual corporeality of both involved parties, except what if he'd done something *wrong*? What if Frank—Frank had seen him naked, oh god. This was the most awkward of all awkward things to ever happen to him.

Mikey was no fucking help. He just sent back an extremely unhelpful series of numbers and symbols and capital letters, and then followed that up with another text that just said, *DO NOT WANT TO KNOW, EVER.*

Gerard was still staring at the phone screen indignantly when another message popped up with a contrite little beep. 'srsly ur ridiculous. he adores u, even i kno that. just tell him sry. can he even get off neway?'

It was *not that simple*, Gerard seethed, and texted Mikey as much, but his heart rate was going back to normal, and he felt a little less panicked. Mikey oversimplified things and made fun of him, but that was comforting, normal. And maybe, just maybe, Mikey was right. Frank had sounded kind of alarmed and upset before he'd gone zinging off into the night—like a rubber band back to his corpse, Gerard guessed. Maybe Frank was just as embarrassed as Gerard was.

Gerard rubbed his eyes, pulled his pants back up and checked to make sure Frank's bone hadn't fallen out of his pocket, and then went stumbling about the room, cursing as he ran into shit. He finally hit the light, and then found Ferdinand sitting on the windowsill, not on the bookshelf, like he'd thought. Ferdinand was leaning drunkenly in his coffee cup, a few last leaves clinging pathetically to his stem.

Gerard picked the plant up and eyed it. "Um, Frankie?" he said, coughing and shuffling his feet. "I just, uh. You left kind of quickly, which I... hope wasn't intentional? I dunno. Anyway. I... just wanted to say that it was awesome. Really awesome, like, wow, awesome is so inadequate. And I'm totally sorry for, um, not reciprocating." Jesus, he was talking to a plant and blushing. "I feel really awful, but, uh. If you want to try later, that'd be... nice. So. I hope you had fun anyway?"

He stood there a moment, cupping the little plant in his hands and staring at it, willing Frank's voice to emit out of the stem, or for Frank himself to appear. But nothing happened, not really. The wind picked up a bit, but that was it.

"Goodnight, I guess," he sighed, and set the cup down on the window ledge, then crawled back into bed. He fell asleep way easier than he'd expected, content and wound in dirty sheets.

It was totally brutal going to school the next day, though, having to focus on navigating the halls and listening to lectures and taking notes, instead of skipping off to the forest to molest Frank against a tree, or something. He was stuck in goddamned English, where they were reading *Frankenstein*, for fuck's sake. It was like the universe was mocking him.

Gerard sort of wished he'd brought the metacarpal or whatever with him—he bet Frank would have gotten a kick out of the discussion, at least. But he'd thought he should play it safe for once. Getting caught with the skeletal remains of a boy who'd been missing for over a decade was probably the one way his standing at this school could plummet any further.

At least Ted was still quiet today—he was still watching Gerard, unhappy and wary, but he didn't approach, didn't kick the back of Gerard's desk or hiss anything under his breath. He just sat next

to Tanya, passing notes with her, and that was just fine with Gerard. They could raise a pack of hateful backwoods, small town hell-children, for all Gerard cared. He was getting out of this town and out of their lives forever this summer, hopefully. And Frank was coming with him.

God, Frank. He really hoped Frank was down to try the whole sex thing again tonight. Gerard sort of couldn't stop thinking about it—he'd replayed the whole scene in his mind and come to the conclusion that Frank probably had been having a pretty good time, even if he hadn't technically gotten off, which was great but had the unfortunate effect of making it really uncomfortable to sit still in class.

He'd finally had to go for a celebratory 'probably not a virgin' cigarette between classes, feeling happy and at peace with the whole world, even grinning and waving at that weird Ryan Ross kid. Ryan made a squeaking noise, went bright red, and fled into the girl's bathroom.

Gerard watched him flee, feeling oddly fond. Ryan's crush was kind of cute, even if he did act kind of like a creeper about it. He shook his head and turned to go—the halls were already practically empty, he was going to probably be late for History if he didn't sprint or something—and then he ran smack into someone's chest as he rounded the corner.

His pack of Marlboros tumbled out onto the floor at his feet, red and blatant. Coach Sikowski stared at it for a second, and then looked up with a smug smile. Then his expression slowly shifted, probably because Gerard had bared his teeth and was practically snarling.

To be honest, he'd actually sort of forgotten about Mark Sikowski, about what he'd done. Gerard couldn't believe himself—that should have been at the front of his brain the entire fucking day. But then, he'd been pretty distracted. He was technically no longer a virgin, for one thing, and he still hadn't really gotten to talk to Frank about it. And then there was all the mundane bullshit of a typical school day to deal with, a group project in English and a pop quiz in math, and pizza at lunch. Murder had seemed very far off, very distant and unreal—more like a story arc in a comic book than something that had happened to someone he really knew.

But it was all coming back to him now, in a sort of misty red haze of anger as he stared up at the broad, hateful face of the coach. How dare this fucking bastard, how *dare* he—

“Smoking on school property, Mr. Way?” The coach scowled down at him. “Underage, too. You think I don't have better things to do with my time than discipline you?”

Gerard glared up at him, tried to broadcast 'I'm not a-fucking-fraid of you' with every fiber in his being. This fucker had killed Frank, picked up Frank's body, dumped him in the deepest, darkest part of the forest, in a river where no one would find him. He'd gotten away with it. But he wouldn't forever, Gerard would make fucking sure of that.

When Gerard didn't respond, Sikowski's eyes tightened. “Pick them smokes up,” Sikowski growled, crossing his arms over his chest. “And you answer me when I'm speakin' to you, Way.”

“No,” Gerard gritted out, and crossed his own arms over his chest, heart beating so loudly he thought you could probably hear it from the parking lot. “You want them so much, pick them up yourself.”

“You little shit,” the coach breathed, nostrils flaring, and he advanced a pace, overtly threatening. “You're lucky detention's all I can give you.”

And just like that, something inside Gerard snapped, and he was barely conscious of taking a threatening forward step of his own.

“What,” he said between his teeth, glaring, remembering that forlorn gorge, the pile of bones tucked away there, forgotten, alone. “What else would you give me, huh? You gonna break my neck too? Bring all your friends and get me alone, you fucking coward, is that how it works? You make me fucking *sick!*”

As Gerard’s voice rose, the coach’s face went pale, and then red, and Gerard had a moment where the outrage and hate dimmed enough for him to realize that maybe he shouldn’t have said any of that—that maybe he should have kept his damned mouth shut for once in his life. And then Mark Sikowski’s left hand was tight on his wrist and his right was clamped over Gerard’s mouth, and before Gerard could do anything or scream or bite, he was being dragged into the empty stairwell.

It was like his brain fizzled shut, turned off. He knew he should be kicking and screaming and biting, he knew that, but for a few second his brain was just full of white noise, buzzing with disbelief and shock. He was in school. He was in public. This shouldn’t be happening; it didn’t compute.

By the time he started struggling, Sikowski was already shoving him into the wall and swinging his fist. Gerard had a second to think how much he looked like Ted in that moment, and then his fist connected with Gerard’s jaw and everything went bright and black with a sickening crunch.

Chapter 11

It was like being caught in an ocean current, tossed briefly back into consciousness only to be sucked back beneath the waves moments later, raw and tumbled and confused. He woke up a bit as he was being shoved into a trunk, and his hands were tied behind his back, what the fuck? His head hurt, he was bewildered and didn't know where he was, and the coach was looming over him, face twisted. Gerard opened his mouth to shout, or yell, but Sikowski must have hit Gerard again, maybe, because there was another bright shock of pain and the undertow dragged him back down.

Then he was suddenly being dragged out of the truck, stumbling, and it was getting dark. He didn't remember the ride at all, had no idea how long he'd been out. But it was dark outside, which didn't bode well, he thought. It'd taken him a moment to even realize he wasn't in Jersey, that this wasn't Belleville. His brain was sluggishly rebooting, throwing out random outdated thoughts. Vermont. This was Vermont. He'd missed the test in Biology on the anatomy of amphibians. Ray was going to be so upset.

Sikowski didn't give him much time to orient himself, just shoved him along a path, muddy and steep. Most of Gerard's focus was on keeping his feet beneath him, but he noticed the coach kept looking over his shoulder like he was being hunted. He started pushing Gerard to go faster, but Gerard's vision was swimming and he couldn't keep up, had a suspicion he didn't really want to.

"Fuck you," he slurred, and thought about running, thought about losing himself in the trees and dead leaves, but the coach just laughed, ugly and deep, and gave him another hard shove.

His hands were still tied, and when he fell he couldn't catch himself; he sprawled in the mud and leaves and felt tears stinging his eyes. Shit, he had to figure out what was going on. Something awful was happening, but his head fucking hurt, and he couldn't think. These weren't Frank's woods. He knew that. Why did he know that, but not what was going on? Where was he?

"How'd you find out?" the coach asked, and Gerard glared at him from under his muddy bangs, tried to struggle back upright without moving his head too much. Fuck, he was going to throw up. He wouldn't have answered the asshole's question even if he knew. "Ted said you liked to dick around in the woods after school, I shoulda known—you fucking freaks are all the same." A pause while Gerard started feeling more and more nauseous. "You saw him, didn't you? I fucking knew it. They all said I was wrong, but I *knew* it."

"You killed him," Gerard said faintly, and then threw up.

"Aw, hell," Sikowski said, and waited for Gerard to finish before hauling him up gingerly. Apparently they'd finally reached their destination now, some rustic hunting cabin in the middle of nowhere, where no one would ever find his body. Just like Frank. Fuck. Fuck. "I didn't kill him. It was an accident, dammit. I never meant to kill anybody, and Iero can just shut the hell up about it."

Gerard was pretty sure he had a concussion. A head injury would at least explain why Sikowski was talking nonsense, Gerard thought dimly, and tugged experimentally at the knots on his wrist. The coach spotted him doing it and scowled, dragging him inside the cabin and slamming the door shut.

There was a chair next to the fireplace, heavy carved wood, decorated with deer—fuck, people out here were fucking obsessed with deer—and Sikowski shoved him into it, then tied him in place, cussing under his breath all the while. He was in an old t-shirt and a ballcap, and the resemblance to Ted was striking—it was like watching an older Ted with a broader jaw, a thicker neck. But Ted

had never looked so vicious, even when he was bashing Gerard's face in.

"There," he grunted. "Scream all you want, kid, nobody's gonna hear you out here. You sit tight, now."

"What?" Gerard said, startled. He supposed he should have realized he wasn't going to be tied up and then bashed in the head with a brick, talk about a waste of time. But who fucking knew with this guy. "Where are you—"

But the door was slamming shut, and Gerard could hear the sound of the bastard walking quickly off through the fallen leaves. Then nothing. Not even the sound of the truck starting, which meant Sikowski was probably right. He was far from anything in earshot, far from any road; no one was going to hear him if he shouted, or screamed.

The dick hadn't turned on the lights in the cabin, and the last of the sunlight was fading. Gerard stared at the darkening windows, breath coming quicker, but he couldn't panic, he couldn't fucking panic. He had to—there had to be something he could do, except he fucking hurt all over, and he was tired, and it was getting colder.

Mikey was going to be so mad at him if he died out here. He made a nauseating effort to try to rock the chair over or something—maybe he could get free, find a weapon. But the chair was fucking heavy, and possibly even tied to the wall. It wasn't moving more than an inch, at best.

Okay, he thought. Okay, okay. Time to shout. Might as well try.

But Sikowski had been telling the truth. An hour later, Gerard'd gotten tired of trying for volume, his throat hoarse and sore. He had a head injury—he couldn't sleep, he knew that much from all the late-night medical dramas he'd watched. So he sang the Misfits, and showtunes, and the theme song to the Thundercats, anything he could think of, feeling crazy and alone and forgotten, voice scratchy and shaky.

Next thing he knew, though, there was light streaming in the windows again. There was a disorienting moment of complete confusion—the last thing he could remember was running late to class, coming back from a smoke. And then—fuck. That murdering inbred fuckwit had fucking *kidnapped* him. Gerard was in a cabin, some weird fucking rustic cabin decorated with dead animals, and there were voices coming from outside, getting louder, and he still couldn't move, and he hurt. And fuck, it was so fucking cold, but not the good kind of cold, not the Frank-kind. His shoulders were wrenched behind his back, his mouth tasted like stale bile, and he really, really had to pee. Shittiest morning ever.

"How could he know?" one of the voices said, sounding exasperated. "Mark, you goddamned moron, do you even know how badly you've fucked things up?"

"You didn't see the kid's face," Mark said darkly. "He *knows*. And Ted says he spends a lot of time out in the woods, the fucking freak. Iero told him. I knew he'd tell someone eventually. I tried to warn you."

"Goddammit, are you goin' off about that ghost story again?" the other man said, and then the door was opening, and Gerard could see two men standing in the light. Mark Sikowski, and an older man Gerard had never seen before, but his identity was apparent enough anyway.

Great. Fucking fantastic. There was *another* Sikowski here, because Gerard hadn't been doomed enough already, and this one probably had a badge and a gun and plenty of professional experience with covering up murders, and was probably actively out there keeping Gerard's family and friends

from finding him. Just *great*.

“There’s no such thing as ghosts,” the sheriff continued, rubbing at his temples tiredly, like he had a headache. Gerard had no sympathy whatsoever. “Worst thing the kid could have done was find the body, until you fucking snatched him. Now we’re all fucked. Did you think of that for one goddamned second?”

“Don’t act so superior,” Mark sneered. “You never go in those woods either, and you know why. You know damned well why. Ever since we dumped that little asshole’s body—”

Gerard made an involuntary noise of rage and both men went quiet. There was a heavy, thick silence as all the eyes in the room turned towards him. Gerard mentally berated himself—he should have tried to act like he was unconscious. Everyone knew that. You played dead until the bad guys gave something away, something vital. But he was having a hard time just keeping himself from shaking so badly his teeth rattled.

“Shit,” the sheriff said. “Great, Mark, he’s awake. *Now* what? You could’ve at least blindfolded him.”

“Well, obviously we should drug him until we figure what to do with him,” Mark growled, and then went to a drawer in the kitchen and came back with a hand towel, approaching Gerard with a smirk. Gerard glared, trying not to give in to panic as the blindfold went over his eyes. He couldn’t see. Fuck, he couldn’t see. And here he’d thought things couldn’t get any worse. And now they wanted to drug him, too. Gerard wasn’t drinking anything these bastards gave him, no matter how thirsty he got or how much his tongue felt like soiled sandpaper. He had to stay on top of his game, and not think about his mom, or Mikey, or Frank, who all had to be going crazy. How long had he been missing? Fuck, he had to keep calm.

“Jesus,” the sheriff muttered. “At least get the boy some water. We’re not fucking animals, here.”

A hand came down on his shoulder, and Gerard’s heart convulsed and his whole body jumped as he tried to edge away.

“Sorry, kid,” the sheriff said, sounding gruff and almost sincere. “Real sorry about all this. You shouldn’t have gotten mixed up in it.”

“*He* kidnapped *me*,” Gerard managed to say, and fuck, hearing his own voice, scratchy and scared and young, somehow made it seem so much more real. He breathed in, trying to keep the tears out of his voice. “I didn’t get mixed up in shit. Just—please, just let me go.”

The sheriff sighed, and Mark laughed darkly, and then they both moved away. It was driving Gerard crazy not knowing where anyone was, but he could hear them talking, voices low and combative. Then the sheriff came back with a cup of ice-cold water, and it turned out Gerard couldn’t resist drinking after all, even if it was drugged. It just tasted like water, though. He wished there was more.

And fuck, Gerard still had to pee. His brain was swelling, and he was going to get a bladder infection, and some assholes were probably going to murder him. He struggled a bit more with his bonds, squirming, and then thought, what the hell, might as well ask. Mark made some snide remark, but then the sheriff snapped at him, which, hey, Gerard totally supported, especially since afterward Gerard was helped up and led to the bathroom. He considered trying to make a break for it, but he was feeling queasy and dizzy just at standing and staggering around a couple feet, and besides, he was blindfolded. He’d probably knock himself out on a doorknob before he got anywhere. At least this way he got to stretch his legs a bit before they tied him back to the chair.

They both left a little while after that, and now that Gerard was marginally more alert and awake, he was going sort of insane with boredom. He almost wished they'd come back. Sure, he was fucking terrified, but he was also stuck staring the insides of his own eyelids for hours on end, with nothing but his own thoughts to distract him from how uncomfortable he was.

He wondered what Mikey and his mom were doing. They had to be frantic by now. He hoped Mikey didn't panic and relapse, just because Gerard had been an idiot and provoked a known killer. Though in Gerard's defense, they had been in public, in broad daylight. It's not like Gerard could have known Sikowski was *that* crazy.

Crazy enough to wallop Gerard on the head and drag him out to the woods to die. Fuck. Fuck. Gerard thought maybe he understood why Frank didn't want to talk about his family or friends from before. He kept imagining his mom and dad at the funeral. His mom crying. Mikey white and silent. Mikey alone. At least Mikey would know about ghosts, that Gerard was out there somewhere—but what if it didn't work that way? What if not everyone became a ghost? What if Gerard would just be gone?

He had to stop thinking about it. He was going to hyperventilate. Deep soothing breaths, he reminded himself, and tried to focus on slowing his heart down. He'd just... think about X-Men for a while. No one died in X-Men forever, not really. It was just a matter of time before someone resurrected you, or shoved you in a parallel universe.

Someone came by in the afternoon, interrupting his mental rundown through all the X-Men story arcs. He thought it was afternoon, anyway—the light was warm and rich around the edges of the blindfold. Whoever it was didn't say much, but they helped Gerard up and took him outside to pee again. He felt stupidly, pathetically grateful just for that. He fumbled open the button of his jeans, not even caring that the guy was looming behind him, menacing and silent. At least Gerard wasn't going to piss himself, small comfort that it was.

He hadn't had anything to eat since yesterday morning. That couldn't be good. He was weak; he wouldn't be able to fight back if he had to. Not that he could anyway, all tied up like this, with his vision spinning. But it would've been nice to know that if circumstances aligned themselves just right, he *could* fight, or at least attempt an escape.

Time passed really fucking weirdly when you couldn't see or hear anything. It was almost like sensory deprivation, except for how he was way too intimate with this fucking chair and the ropes around his wrists. He couldn't tell if his aching head was from caffeine withdrawal or, like, brain hemorrhaging. By the time his captors showed up en masse at nightfall, when the air was cooling, Gerard was almost glad of the company.

Then they started debating what to do with him, and he abruptly reversed his opinion.

"I'm telling you, the boy knows what we did," Mark snarled, and Gerard could hear him pacing. "He knows about Iero! I had to do it. I had to get him out of there, before he told anyone else."

"Great, Mark, just lay it all out there for him like that," a different voice said, tight and exasperated. "Right now this is just about your dumb ass getting us all arrested as conspirators to a *kidnapping*. You *idiot*. So shut the fuck up for once."

"You don't know shit, Tim," Mark said, scowling. "I'm telling you, this boy goes in the forest, and he's just like Iero, look at him. Fucking freak. He's been messing with my nephew, too. And he's a fucking liability. Something has to be done, and we all know what."

Gerard wanted to snarl at Mark to shut up about Frank, to say he didn't even deserve to know

Frank's *name*, but for once in his life he managed to bite his tongue. He just huddled in on himself and started painfully, carefully, testing the bonds on his wrists for the eleven thousandth time.

"Well, you sure as shit shouldn't have done this," the guy—Isaac's brother? Tim Barrows, maybe?—said. "Now the Feds are involved. We'll be lucky if we don't all go to jail—my father wants this mess straightened out without any more bodies, so just stand down, man."

"We can't let him go," Mark argued viciously, and he was standing right in front of Gerard, saying that. Gerard could smell the sweat of him, the cologne, and his throat kind of hurt with how hard it was not to cry. He wasn't going to cry. He *wasn't*. If they killed him, he'd be buried in a different forest, away from Frank. Fuck fuck fuck. "He knows about Iero, and he knows all of our names. We don't have a choice."

"How the fuck—" the man next to Gerard said exasperatedly. "If there was anything *to* know, which I'm not saying there is, mind, how the hell would this kid have the slightest fucking clue?"

"I told you, the little fucker hides out in the woods! Iero told him everything, he must have," Mark said, and he sounded crazy, fanatical. Apparently Gerard wasn't the only one who thought so, because the sheriff snorted.

"Yeah, that'll hold up in court. Christ, we would have been fine, Mark! I can't *believe*—" Then there was a sound, something fell over with a hard clatter on the wooden floor, like maybe someone'd kicked over a chair, and Gerard couldn't help but jump, heart pounding.

"I'm done cleaning up after you, Mark," the sheriff said tiredly. "I'm done. We're taking this boy home. We'll dope him up—I've got a good stash in the truck from the last bust we did. No one'll listen to him, even if he does talk."

Mark snarled and stalked towards Gerard, Gerard could hear him coming, and then suddenly his head flew backward, slammed against the wall and everything went bright and sparkling with pain. Before he could think he was throwing up, heaving desperately and choking on it and dimly aware that people were yelling. He hoped he'd at least got some of it on Mark.

"Jesus," he heard from far away. "Calm down, Mark. We'll say you found him in the woods on a hunting trip—you said he likes the woods, right?—it'll be fine. He hit his head hiking, trippin' out on drugs. We don't want to do anything stupid, Mark, he's just a kid."

"No," Mark said wildly. "No, he knew about Iero before today. He knows. He knows it was me, he knew—fuck, Scott, he knew we broke that fucking kid's neck. We have to let Iero know—we have to let him know what happens to people he tells. And then no one else will ever go in the woods. No one'll talk to Iero again. We'll be safe."

Gerard felt a swell of triumph at that—fuck you, Mark, Frank's out of the woods now. Even if Gerard did die, at least he'd done that, right? He'd saved Frank.

"Mark," someone was saying. "You're not a murderer, man, you just—we made a mistake. You didn't mean to. Let's just—"

"This kid knows. And he won't forget," Mark continued, sounding strangely serene now. "We have to kill him. It's the only way."

Everything went kind of still and quiet, even though people were still talking around him, arguing loudly, but Gerard was in some sort of bubble of shock. It was strange to hear someone say that out loud, and to know he honestly meant it. Mark meant it. Gerard was going to die. Mark was going to

kill him, just like he'd killed Frank. Gerard was never going to get his own comics published, or show Frank what an X-box was, or even introduce him to Mikey. He'd never see his dad again, or meet his new girlfriend. Gerard hadn't been ready to meet her, not yet, and now he never would be, and it wasn't fair. It wasn't *fair*.

And Gerard was just sitting here, letting it happen. He had to at least try to do something.

He started rubbing his wrists together again, panting harshly, and god, his head hurt, but he'd gotten his wrists almost loose and half the blindfold had slipped down. The first thing he saw, vision blurry and indistinct with pain and tears, was Mark glaring at him, holding one of the pokers from the fireplace. Someone was holding him back, but as Gerard watched, he shook them off and stalked forward.

"Fuck," Gerard said thickly, struggling to a sitting position, raising his chin. His voice trembled, and he was covered in vomit, but this bastard had killed Frank. He'd thrown him in a river and left him to rot, and Gerard wasn't going to beg. They weren't the best last words ever, but he was tired, and he couldn't think of anything better. "Fuck. You."

"You little shit," Mark said, face going red, and then the door was kicked in. Everything got very loud and confusing, and Gerard kept waiting for the pain, and the flash of light, like Pop Rocks, but there was just more scuffling and shouting.

One voice rose over the rest, and if Gerard turned his head he could see who it belonged to: a man in a suit, with dark circles beneath his eyes and a pink Hannah Montana tie. He'd shoved Mark into a wall, teeth bared in something like a smile. Someone was next to him, gun out, shouting orders.

Gerard stared, not entirely sure he wasn't hallucinating or brain damaged. It was the tie that really threw him. Maybe he'd already died? Frank had said dying was confusing, and this was pretty fucking confusing.

"Miss me, fucker?" the man was sneering, and then finally the woman with him hissed in his ear and he let Mark slide down the wall. She kept her gun trained on Mark as the other man stepped back, straightening his tie and smiling tightly. "Right, by the books. Totally. I'm Special Agent James Dewees with the FBI, this is Agent Molly Hand, and you fuckers are all under arrest for the murder of Frank Iero and the kidnapping of Gerard Way. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. Sound good to you folks? Great." His partner was glaring and he made a 'What?' face at her. "Aww, c'mon, the books are boring, Moll."

Men in flak vests had swarmed into the room and were cuffing people, not being especially gentle about it. Holy shit, it was just like in the movies, Gerard thought, dimly fascinated.

"We never meant to kill Frank," one of the men was saying as he got cuffed—Isaac's brother, maybe. "It was manslaughter, not murder. Jimmy, you gotta—"

"I don't *gotta* do anything except put your ass in jail, and if you didn't all murder him personally, well, then you're accessories. Not to mention the kidnapping charges. And go ahead, get all the lawyers you want, dickweeds. I look forward to reaming your asses in court."

There was a lot more noise after that, but Gerard was busy gulping in huge breaths of air. He wasn't going to die. He'd thought—he'd really thought—

"You okay, kid?" Agent Dewees said, crouching down and looking Gerard in the eye. "Let's get you out of these ropes, get you some water. Molly, we got some water?" His partner tossed Dewees a bottle without looking, and Dewees snatched it, handed it to Gerard after he'd sliced off

the ropes. Gerard couldn't make his hands work, fingers numb, and the guy just smiled encouragingly and closed his hand around Gerard's, helped him drink. Then he started cutting Gerard's feet free.

"How the fuck did the FBI get involved in this?" Gerard asked weakly after he'd polished off the bottle, and Dewees grinned up at him. The Hannah Montana tie was a bright, blinding pink, and Gerard was both fascinated and horrified. Mark was outside, shouting threats, sounding truly, one hundred percent insane, and Gerard was starting to feel a little crazy himself.

"Murder on federal land, my friend," Dewees informed Gerard, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "And, well. Frankie was my best friend. I've been waiting for this call for almost eleven years—had people keeping an ear out for me. Knew the little bastard would turn up sometime." His voice was sad, but fond, and he seemed to be looking through Gerard for a moment, distant.

Gerard wasn't sure what to do. His head hurt, and now the FBI were involved, and Frankie's friend was here. Should Gerard say something about Frank's ghost? He had no fucking clue, but he really didn't want to get hauled into a psychiatric ward at this point. Mark had already been carried off frothing, and Gerard was close enough to hysteria already. Talking about dead people would probably just make it worse.

"How long have I been here?" Gerard asked finally, cradling his hands to his chest, wincing as the feeling really started coming back in them. He shook them loose gingerly, then touched his swollen jaw, the back of his head where it'd hit the wall. Fuck, he wanted his mom there, with a sharp suddenness so intense it ached.

"Yeah, you took quite a knock to the ol' noggin, huh?" Dewees said sympathetically. "No sweat, we got EMTs waiting. We'll fix you right up." He paused, and then patted Gerard's knee. "And it's been two and a half days, buddy. You've held up swell. Look, I gotta run for a second, take care of some things, but my partner Molly'll stick with you for a bit, alright?"

His partner was a lean blonde with a harried look on her face, and she crouched by Gerard's chair, eyebrows drawn together. She was Dewees' polar opposite, quiet and professional, but when she caught him staring wistfully at his empty bottle of water she immediately went and refilled it. Gerard was so grateful his eyes welled up.

"Thank you," he said, and took a tiny sip, then another. They sat there for a while in silence, and Gerard started wondering how far they were out in the woods, if the EMTs were taking this long to get here. He could really use some painkillers. There was a pretty steep path—maybe that was the problem? At any rate, the silence in the room was getting awkward, and he really didn't feel like staying in his own headspace right now. He fiddled with the bottle and glanced up at the agent. She stared straight ahead.

"So, uh," he said awkwardly. "How'd you guys find me?"

"Don't worry about it. Just stay calm. The EMTs are on the way, Mr. Way," she said stiffly, and when Gerard looked disappointed, she sighed, offered him a half smile. "If you must know, it was a classmate of yours that tipped us off. He told us he saw the coach talking to you in the hallway right before you failed to show up for History."

"Ryan fucking Ross," Gerard laughed hoarsely, head pounding. "Jesus, I can't believe it."

"Well, even that tip didn't help much. If it hadn't been for the sheriff's son," she continued, shaking her head, "we probably wouldn't have found this place for another day or two."

“What?” Gerard said, not quite believing his ears. Maybe it’d been an auditory hallucination.

“Don’t worry,” she said awkwardly, and patted him on the shoulder. “We did find you. Everything’s okay. You’re safe now.”

“No, I know,” Gerard told her, shaking his head. “But *—who* was it that told you about this place?”

“Edward Sikowski,” she said, looking nonplussed. “One of your classmates. He contacted us, told us about this property—it’s not on any map. We’re sort of in the middle of nowhere, kid.”

Dewees bounded back into the room, grinning and beckoning people in, interrupting Gerard’s moment of total shock. “Medics are here! Bet you’re ready to get out of this hellhole, huh?”

“Ted. Ted saved my life,” Gerard stated blankly, stuck on that. “You have got to be fucking kidding me.”

“Huh? Oh, the Sikowski kid, right. Seemed pretty surreal for him, too,” Dewees agreed. “Said he didn’t like you much, but he didn’t think a person should die for being an emo-fag loser in high school, pardon my language. Wouldn’t have expected something so civilized from one of Mark and Scott’s relatives, but hey, people, right? Surprise the shit out of me all the time. C’mon, medics, sick kid this way, hurry it up.”

“This trail is complete shit,” the paramedic grumbled. “It’s two miles of pure mud. So shove it.” And then she was shining a light in Gerard’s eyes, asking him to count for her in a kind voice, and before Gerard knew it he was being carried on a stretcher up a winding path through the trees, then shoved in the back of an ambulance.

“I’ll be contacting you with some questions later,” Dewees said, smiling at him from the door of the ambulance as the woman worked, cleaning Gerard’s head of dried blood and setting up an IV or whatever, since apparently Gerard was dehydrated as all get-out.

Dewees had a nice smile, one that made the skin beside his eyes fan out into laugh lines, and there was an earring with a pink skull on it peeping through his straggly blonde hair. Gerard could see why Frank had been friends with this guy.

“For now, get some rest, kid.” Dewees paused, then said, in a softer voice. “Your buddies told me you were the one to find the body, so. You know. Thanks. I owe you one.”

Then he slammed the door of the ambulance shut, and Gerard could faintly hear him yelling through it, telling people to move out. And now—which was really stupid, Gerard, thought, because now he was safe; he’d won, and he was in a nice warm ambulance and, Frankie’s killers were going to jail, but—he was shaking, and he couldn’t stop..

“Shock, honey,” the woman said, and coaxed him to lie down again. “Just rest, okay. Been a long couple days.”

Gerard didn’t remember agreeing, but he must have, because soon she was gently shaking him awake.

“Sorry,” she said apologetically. “You’ve got a nasty bump to the head, there.”

It was a long drive to Burlington, the closest city with an actual decent hospital, and Gerard suffered through falling asleep and being woken up again several times, his pupils checked and his awareness of the current president ascertained. The adrenaline had left his system, and he’d finally got painkillers, and he was no longer thirsty, and it was easy to dip in and out of dreams, so much

that the paramedic almost became part of them.

Then when they finally arrived at the hospital there was a swarm of people, bright lights and noise everywhere, and it took him a moment to register that he wasn't still dreaming, that that really was his mom's voice shouting somewhere off in the distance, and then a set of double doors came bursting open and Donna Way stormed in, Mikey on her heels. There was a crowd of people shouting behind her, but all Gerard saw was her for a moment.

Her hair was flat and lopsided and her make-up had run down her face in raccoon tracks, and it was his mom.

Gerard struggled to sit up, holding out a hand towards her, but he was still mostly strapped down.

"Mom," he said, thick and choked, and the paramedic said, "Ma'am, if you'll just—we only want—okay, but briefly, we have to—"

She batted the paramedic aside and took Gerard's hand, and said, "Gerard Arthur Way, if you *ever* fucking scare me like that again—" and then burst into tears.

"Momma," Gerard said, horrified, and she kissed his forehead, getting tears and mascara everywhere, probably. The only other time he'd seen her cry was at funerals, and it hurt, somehow, hurt worse than his aching temples or anything else, seeing her like this and knowing it was on his account. "Momma, it's okay."

"I know, baby," she said, voice still watery, but firm, and kissed him again, ran her hand over his cheek, his arm. "You're gonna be alright. You're safe."

Mikey had taken advantage of the distraction of the paramedics and all the shouting to eel his way through to Gerard's side and climb up on the stretcher next to him. The doctors had followed and were trying to coax Donna to leave, rattling on about the tests, and when she could see him next. The paramedic was explaining how Gerard was essentially fine, mostly dehydrated, with minor head injuries, and they just had to check that out, be sure nothing was wrong—it wouldn't take long! Gerard zoned most of it out, focusing on his mother's hand tight in his own, and Mikey warm and snuffling at his side.

"Hey," Gerard said quietly, smiling suddenly and unexpectedly. "You're not in the Center!"

"I told you," Mikey said into his shoulder. "I told you I was going to get out this week. You idiot."

"You won't be out long if you don't stay put when I tell you to," Gerard's mom snipped, petting Gerard's hair. "You were supposed to stay in the waiting area."

"So were you," Mikey said serenely. Gerard bit back a smile as his mother made an exasperated sound.

Gerard didn't notice at first. His mom and Mikey were finally letting themselves be hustled out, glancing over their shoulders and waving, and Gerard had lifted his head to watch them go. That's when he saw it, in the corner of the room, next to the oxygen tanks and some mysterious coils of rubber piping. A shadow that didn't quite belong, that wasn't being cast by the trays of instruments or stands of saline. It looked like a silhouette, head tilted down, shoulders hunched.

It could have been Gerard's imagination. He was on a nice cocktail of drugs now, enough that the pain had ebbed and he could almost ignore the fucking IV—just as terrible as he'd always thought it'd be, silver and sticking out of his arm and creepily, disgustingly cold. But when the doctors wheeled him off for a CT scan, the shadow peeled off from the wall and followed them. Gerard

watched it drifting along, barely visible in the bright hospital lights.

It solidified a bit when Gerard made a noise, tried to say Frank's name, tongue thick and numb, but then a passing nurse did a double-take at the patch of wall where it was hovering, just the outline of a boy pacing, a slightly deeper darkness where the eyes would be. There was a sound like a sigh, and Frank faded again, paler than before. The nurse rubbed his eyes, muttering something about double shifts, and walked on.

"Sorry, Frankie," Gerard mumbled, and the doctor patted his arm.

"Almost done now," she said cheerily, which was a relief. Gerard wanted to get back to Mikey and his mom, to find a moment to talk to Frank, really talk to him, and find out how the fuck he was here at all.

But it turned out they weren't almost done, because none of the CT scans or whatever seemed to work. First because Gerard kept turning his head to watch Frank pacing, and then because, well, probably because of Frank again, he guessed, because after Frank kicked over a rack of X-ray slides in a clatter, he disappeared and the computers all miraculously started picking up clear images again.

Gerard finally got settled in a tiny, cramped room, wearing a totally embarrassing hospital gown that he really hoped Frank hadn't seen him staggering around in. He probably had, though. Dammit. His mom had fallen asleep in her chair, and Gerard felt awful about the huge dark circles beneath her eyes, even though he knew it wasn't technically his fault. But at least now Gerard could ask Mikey how Frank had gotten here and why he wasn't saying anything.

He was just standing in the corner, a faint dark outline of himself. Gerard got the impression he had his arms folded over his chest and was slouching. He could recognize a brood when he saw it—although fuck, that reminded him how badly he wanted a cigarette.

"Oh, yeah, Ray gave me one of Frank's fingers so he could come with us to see you," Mikey said after Gerard asked. He pulled the bone out of his pocket, seemingly totally at ease with handling what was probably part of a crime scene and *super illegal* to have in a sterile hospital setting. "He's had to be careful, though. He gave one of the ER guys a screaming fit earlier—I guess a lot of people here can see him? And last time he said something out loud, all these babies started crying. It was *wicked*."

There was a pointed snort from the corner of the room.

"Really?" Gerard whispered back, awed, and looked around for a piece of paper to start scribbling down hypotheses. "I wonder why. I mean, I guess we can't, like, go interview the screaming guy, but—"

"Frank, you were right," Mikey interrupted, shooting the corner a small smile. "He's a total dweeb." He glanced back at Gerard and patted his knee. "He said you'd say that," he explained.

Gerard had a lot of questions—could Mikey see Frank too? What had happened when Gerard had disappeared? Had the FBI taken Frank's body out of the forest yet? Why was Frank so fucking far away when he could be right here, next to Gerard, even if it was only as a shadow?

But Mikey was curled in the bed with him, and this time he was the one that had brought Gerard comic books and things to read, and as much as Gerard wanted to stumble out of the bed, holding this stupid gown closed over his ass, and tackle Frank's immaterial form, at least get a fucking hug or something, he couldn't manage to keep his eyes open for long. He drifted off to Mikey's quiet

voice, and the idea that Frank might be, just maybe, drifting closer.

He'd woken up with his side freezing cold the next morning, but Frank hadn't been there next to him when he opened his eyes—it was just his mom flipping through a magazine and Mikey on his other side, tucked up in the bed and drooling on Gerard's pillow. Then his mom had left to take a shower and get a change of clean clothes, promising to be back soon with his favorite travel mug of coffee, and it was just Gerard and Mikey and Frank's shadow on the window sill, darkening the morning sky.

The nurses kept coming in and out, checking his pulse and pupils, but there were brief, precious moments of alone time. Frank didn't approach, though. Just stood and stared. It was actually sort of creepy, and for some reason Gerard was having a hard time getting up the courage to break the silence between them. What would he say? Frank seemed so distant, almost angry. Maybe he'd thought better of whatever he'd been doing with Gerard, having a relationship, or dating, or whatever.

Fuck, Gerard really needed to say something. He had to at least try. He was pondering his approach when suddenly all his plans went to shit, because approximately ten thousand people were bursting into the room.

Gerard had been poking his Jello unenthusiastically, hoping the nurse would just take it and *go*, and then it suddenly went flying, green splotches everywhere, as Pete Wentz tackled him into a hug. Mikey made a squawking noise of indignation and rolled off the bed, rubbing at his face.

“Ow, you fuck!” Gerard croaked happily, and the nurse next to him tutted, and tugged away the tray, laughing, and wandered off to presumably get some clean-up supplies. “What are you doing here, Pete?” Holy shit, there were *tons* of people here, he could see Bob and Ray in the back, and Worm, and Patrick, and, inexplicably, *Pete*, who was sort of hard to miss, sprawled out on top of Gerard and Mikey like he was.

“What the fuck do you *think*?” Pete said, sounding fond and indignant, raspberriyng his cheek, and then let Gabe pull him up and off, which Gerard was sort of thankful for, especially since he thought he could hear Frank swearing in the corner and was a little worried about him being spotted, or making babies cry, or whatever. “Dude, your getting snatched was all over the news, especially after they found that kid in the woods, too. Gabe and I were gonna fucking hunt you down ourselves if those FBI assholes didn't get a move on.”

“Lucky they did,” someone quipped, head popping over Mikey's shoulder. It was that Disney-loving kid back from Belleville—Brendon, maybe? He was wearing a lavender hoodie and possibly lipgloss, and Ryan Ross was lurking by the door with Patrick and Worm and staring at him with huge eyes. Gerard suspected that he had just been replaced in Ryan Ross's affections. “Since we got lost, like, twelve times just trying to find your house.”

“Lost is a relative term,” Gabe said archly, sitting on the foot of the bed, flicking the remainder of the jello out of the way. “We took a detour and toured some lovely farms. And that farmer was a peach about the debacle with the haystack, very understanding.”

Mikey snorted, and Brendon started explaining something to him, waving his arms around, and Gabe chimed in, and it was all very disconcerting, seeing everyone there. Not just his friends from Glen Fell, but... well, his friends from his old life, too. And fuck, it was a weekday, how was everyone here anyhow?

“You guys know you didn’t have to come up here, right? I mean, thanks, but it was such a long drive, and—” Gerard blinked when they all rolled their eyes at him simultaneously. “I mean it! I mean, you’re missing school, right? And I’m totally fine.”

“No thanks to *you*,” Bob growled, arms crossed, and Gerard abruptly realized he and Ray were both glaring at him. Gerard shrank down in the sheets a bit. “You were supposed to *lie low*, asshole!”

“Some people were *really upset* when you went missing,” Ray hissed, ignoring Pete when he made an interested noise. “Like, wow, dude. You don’t even know how upset. *Supernaturally upset*.”

“Uh,” Gerard said, twisting the sheets in his hands. “How upset is that? Like, upset enough not to talk to me ever again?”

The lights flickered at that, and Gerard gulped.

“Upset enough to destroy a baseball field with tornado-filled rage, if that answers your question,” Ray muttered, and Gerard’s jaw dropped.

“We’ll deal with that later,” Bob promised, rolling his eyes towards Gabe and Pete, who were watching the conversation unfold with interest, and then he leaned down and wrapped Gerard in a hug, ignoring the Jello still splattered everywhere. “We were so fucking worried, Gerard. I’m glad you’re okay. You are okay, right? The news said they were treating you for minor injuries.”

“I’m really on the news?” Gerard asked, stunned, and Bob pulled back and snorted.

“Dude. ‘Teenage boy uncovers decades-old murder, is abducted.’ Hell of a headline, you know.”

“If Mikey hadn’t put our names on the visitor’s list, we’d be outside still with all the reporters,” Worm piped up, and then made his way over to the bed to thump Gerard on the shoulder. “You look like shit, Way. Did you really headbutt Coach Sikowski?”

“Uh, *no*,” Gerard laughed, startled. “I was kind of... I threw up on him? But that’s about it, really.”

“Nice!” Pete laughed, and high-fived him.

Eventually everyone came over and hugged Gerard, or thumped him, or touched his foot lightly. Well, only Ryan did that, actually—Gabe had, in contrast, kissed Gerard full on the mouth and called him *querido*, sparking a small electrical storm of flickering lights and beeping machines. Which made Gerard blush, just a bit, because, okay, it was nice knowing Frank was at least jealous, right? Even if it was just Gabe being Gabe.

The room was loud, and bright, and filled with barking laughter and boys shoving each other. Pretty much the exact opposite of the cabin in the woods, and Gerard soaked it all in, felt like Ferdinand, basking in the sun and stretching his roots and pathetic leaves. Well, like Ferdinand would do if Gerard had remembered to give him water him regularly and transplanted him into a better cup, he thought guiltily. He should probably do that when he got home.

After a while, Mikey had withdrawn from the rest of the group and was sitting in a chair in the corner where the shadows had gathered, knees drawn to his chest, watching it all with a small smile, and occasionally Gerard thought he saw him talking out of the corner of his mouth to Frank and was at once thrilled and totally jealous. *He* wanted to talk to Frank, but he was stuck trying to convince Pete not to abduct Patrick, even if he did wear adorable argyle and have the prettiest scowl.

But his headache was starting to come back, pain lancing at his temples, and while it was great to see people that weren't lunatic murderers or conspirators or doctors with needles, he was having a hard time following the conversation.

Ray seemed to notice and began herding all of the group together, hustling them out the door, talking loudly about how Gerard needed sleep and he sure as fuck wasn't getting it with these assholes around. Before he left, though, he came back to the bed and shifted from foot to foot in the suddenly quiet room. Gerard squinted at him, noticed belatedly how red Ray's eyes were. He looked sick, like he hadn't slept in days.

"I thought it had happened again," he said finally, and scrubbed his hand across his face, then flicked a glance across the room. "I'm glad—I'm glad you're okay, Gerard. I don't—you don't know how bad it was, here."

Before Gerard could say anything, Ray came up and tousled Gerard's head gingerly, then bounded out of the room, shutting the door with a quiet *snick*.

"It was pretty awful," Mikey said quietly, and he looked so small in that chair. Gerard was trying not to think about how it'd been in that cabin, knowing he was going to die, knowing all the people who'd be left behind. It was one of the worst feelings he could imagine.

He'd survived, though. Granted, it had been through sheer fucking luck, but he'd survived. He'd gotten to come back—to see his mom again, and Mikey, and Ray and Bob and *everyone*.

Frank hadn't. He hadn't gotten that. No ride in the ambulance for him, just forensics guys hauling his bones out of a gorge a decade too late. Frank had come back, but to a world he was no longer a part of, one where he was set apart and lonely and feared.

"I'm sorry," Gerard said, throat scratchy, not sure who he was apologizing to or what for. Mikey snorted, and looked over his shoulder, and then Gerard shivered and the world got slightly darker, and colder, and he breathed in shakily, reaching out his hand to feel nothing. "I'm so fucking sorry."

"Not your fault, Gee." Frank's voice in his ear. "Not that I'm not furious, you asshole. But it's not your fault."

"I'm sorry, Frankie," he whispered, and fuck, he was crying again, wasn't he, and Mikey was looking studiously away. Cool fingers were wiping his cheeks, and Frank said it again, and again, soft and fond, voice scraping against Gerard's heart. There was so much he wanted to say, but a few seconds later, the door was swinging back open. Frank melted away just as the nurse bustled in and oh fucking Christ, started pulling out his IV, which distracted him from his tears handily enough by introducing stark bodily horror instead.

Gerard nearly vomited, but Mikey was there raising an eyebrow and Gerard managed to swallow down the bile and just glare. Just because Mikey got IVs all the time didn't mean it still wasn't the *worst thing ever*. There had to be better technology out there for this shit by now, he ranted, trying to ignore what was going on with his arm and the needle and his wrist and the *blood*. Where were the hyposprays and tricorders, dammit? Mikey was grinning at him, and he thought he heard Frank giggling, and even the nurse was chuckling. Suddenly the whole ordeal was over and Gerard was being offered a Batman band-aid, 'for being so brave.' Ha ha, hilarious, Gerard didn't say. ...still, it was a pretty cool band-aid.

He was finally allowed to change out of that damned gown afterwards, too, so that was a plus, and then he was discharged, under strict orders to return if his headaches got worse, or if he had

problems with his vision. The doctor gave instructions to his mom and Mikey—Gerard just knew Frank was listening too, and he mentally groaned when the doctor forbid caffeine for the next few weeks. Dammit. He had a sneaking suspicion Frank was going to be a better enforcer of that rule than either his mom or his brother.

It wasn't like Gerard could see when Frank disappeared a few moments later, when they got outside—he was even more difficult to make out in the bright morning sunlight—but he could sense it, somehow. Probably it was just his imagination, but the air just seemed emptier. As Gerard's mom went to go return the wheelchair, Mikey leaned over and said, "He hates cars, man. He'll be back at the house."

"See," Gerard said triumphantly, snuggling down in his hoodie and reveling in the feeling of being in clean, ass-covering clothing once more. "I knew you'd like him."

"Yeah," Mikey agreed, smiling, shoving his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "He likes you a lot, too."

Gerard went bright red. Luckily his mom got back in the car at that moment, and he was prevented from totally embarrassing himself and going all middle school and breathless and 'Did he say something about me? To you? What'd he say, what'd he say!' Though from the smirk on Mikey's face, Gerard suspected that he might be broadcasting it loud and clear anyway.

He slept through most of the car ride home, and apparently the local cops that weren't corrupt dickheads had been routing the reporters or something, because their house was dark and empty, which Gerard was glad for. There'd been a couple of them at the hospital, pointing their cameras at him and shouting questions, and it had been totally weird and really uncomfortable. He wasn't sure how he felt about being on the news for something like this. Bob and Ray had been featured too, apparently, teenage boy detectives gone deadly serious.

It sounded like something Gerard would have daydreamed about, once upon a time: being on TV for an act of great bravery and intelligence and daring, but now that it'd happened, he—well, he had better things to worry about than being suddenly popular, or whatever. He had friends, now, anyway.

The house creaked welcomingly at him as he staggered up the porch stairs on Mikey's arm—Gerard thought maybe he and the house had reached a truce, over these last couple weeks. He patted the porch railing, and it didn't give him any splinters, or collapse beneath a wave of termites. Gerard would take it.

He got to the kitchen and collapsed in the chair with a sigh. His mom shot him a look, and then set the coffee pot brewing.

"Don't get your hopes up," she said as he perked up, straightening in his chair. "It's decaf, buddy."

"Ugh," Gerard huffed out, disgusted. Decaf. It was a crime against humanity. But at least it smelled good. Smelled like heaven, even if it was impure swill masquerading as true coffee.

"No caffeine for at least two weeks," Mikey reminded him, kicking his ankle under the table and not looking up from his phone. He was texting furiously, his thumbs a blur, his eyebrows knotted together in concentration.

"The doctor said four weeks would be better," Gerard's mom commented, poking around in the fridge, then straightening and pouring Gerard a cup of lies. "But I know better than to hope for that."

“Damn straight,” Gerard muttered and took the mug mournfully. “Two weeks on the nose. Not a fucking second longer.”

“Some people might take issue with that,” Mikey said airily. “They might want you to be a little more careful with your brain. It’s a delicate organ, you know.”

Gerard glared and kicked out under the table, swearing when he missed and hit a chair leg. But he was smiling helplessly, just a little, at the idea of Frank caring and hovering over him like that. Where *was* Frank, anyway? He glanced around the kitchen furtively, but all the shadows looked normal. His mom sat at the table with her own cup of coffee, and they all were quiet for a moment, drinking and texting and staring at each other. Finally his mom stretched, getting up to put her mug in the sink.

“Baby, I’m sorry, but I have to get back to work,” his mom told Gerard, coming behind him and running her fingers through his hair, nails scratching gently. “I’ve missed a lot of hours, and the girls—”

“It’s fine, Mom,” he assured her, and leaned his head back against her for a moment, closed his eyes. She smelled like hairspray and nail polish remover and home, and the kitchen was warm and full of dancing light from the windows.

“Well, there’s soup in the fridge,” she said, sighing. “Heat it up, keep hydrated, okay? If your head starts hurting, take the pills the doc gave you. I’ll be back tonight.”

“You cooked?” Gerard squawked, eyes flying open, and Mikey snorted.

“I wouldn’t make you eat what I cooked, kiddo,” she laughed, fetching her purse and hovering by the door. “But Mrs. Toro’s been bringing over food every day—the lady can cook a mean casserole.”

“Cool,” Gerard beamed, and she smiled back at him. It was nice, seeing her smile, even with her face all lined and worried, her hair still kind of squashed, flatter than he was used to. He guessed the girls at the salon would take care of that pretty quickly, though. She waved, blew them a kiss, and then paused at the door, looking back.

“Hey, Gee, how about tonight we re-do your hair?” Gerard felt himself brighten. He loved when his mom did his hair. It’d been a while. Months, maybe. Maybe longer. She was good at it, and added all these cool streaks of darker color, and never stained his ears or his neck, and it was nice. It was always nice. He’d missed it. “Starting to see some roots, baby. It’s embarrassing.”

“Yeah, well,” he said. “I’ve been busy!”

“Me too,” she said softly, and then shook herself. “But tonight, right? Pencil me in.”

Gerard saluted and she left, honked the horn as she backed out the driveway, and then Mikey stood up, too.

“Where are you going?” Gerard asked, puzzled. “I thought maybe we’d watch some Buffy.”

“Out with Pete and Gabe,” Mikey said serenely. “They want to try to find some cows to tip. And besides, you need to, um, rest. Without me here.”

“Mikey,” Gerard chastened, puzzled. “Cow tipping is a trick. You can’t really tip cows. They’re actually very aware of their surroundings.”

“Don’t harsh the fun, Gee,” Mikey admonished, pushing his glasses up his nose. “Anyway, maybe we’ll just try to ride them. You know Pete.”

“Do you have to go already?” Gerard asked, feeling a bit miffed. He’d been looking forward to actually having Mikey at home with him.

“Yes,” Mikey said firmly, wrinkling his nose. “But I’ll be back. Um. Text me. Without details.”

And that was it; the kitchen was empty again. Gerard sighed and drained the rest of his faux coffee, then shuffled upstairs to wrap himself in his quilt and doze. He was getting tired again, he guessed, and the doctor had said to nap as much as possible. It was just he’d sort of thought his homecoming would be a bit more exciting than this.

He opened the door to his room, had a moment to realize the metal of the doorknob was ice-cold, and then a hand grabbed him by the neck of his t-shirt and dragged him in. He had an instinctive moment of panic, Mark’s face flashing before his eyes, but then Frank had Gerard’s face in his hands and was kissing him. His brain went from panic to zero to sex at light-speed, so fast he was dizzy.

Chapter 12

“You idiot,” Frank said into his mouth, and then kissed him again, messy and rough. His hands had drifted down, sliding through Gerard’s hoodie and shirt and touching skin, cool and making Gerard gasp into his mouth. “I fucking—Gerard, can I? I just—I need—”

Gerard’s brain fizzled for a second, and when he came back to himself he was shucking off his hoodie and panting and saying, “Yes, anything, *yes*.”

“I’m not—” Frank panted, and then backed up, watching Gerard hungrily. “I’m not sure if—I don’t know if it’ll work, but I want to, just—let me, please.”

He looked so solid, so fucking real, and Gerard had to pause in scrambling out of his jeans, ignoring the twinge in his skull, to lean over and kiss him. He missed Frank’s mouth, wound up kissing down the line of Frank’s jaw instead, along his neck, the scorpion tattoo there. Frank tasted cool and sweet, and nothing like salt or skin. Like spring water, or marble, and Gerard drank it in, got distracted with it, with dragging his teeth along Frank’s throat, along the still line where the pulse should be, until Frank keened and dropped to his knees, dragging Gerard’s jeans down with him.

“I was so fucking—Gerard, I was so afraid I’d never, that you’d—” Frank leaned in and nuzzled at the crook of Gerard’s thighs, and Gerard’s knees were going to fucking give out, except Frank’s hands were cupping Gerard’s ass, the curve of it, holding him up effortlessly.

Gerard had always imagined blowjobs being wet, kind of sloppy and messy, but this was just smooth and perfect and had that chill of October and Halloween and wind and he bucked his hips, moaning, and Frank just—just *took* it, no resistance. Some distant part of himself observed how he was begging and panting for it, taking Frank’s hair in his hands, tangling it in his fingers. He was being pretty fucking loud, couldn’t help it, and this was probably why Mikey had fled. Sometime later he’d be embarrassed that Mikey had known this was going to happen, but not now. Not while Frank was looking up at him, cheeks hollow and god, his hands, squeezing and tracing where Gerard’s ass met his thighs and drifting tentatively upward.

“Oh my god,” Gerard groaned, and Frank pulled off for a moment, eyes dark.

“You can fuck my mouth, you know,” he said, low and dark, and then Gerard’s eyes rolled back in his head for a second and he heard Frank laugh, the cold air of it brushing against his cock and making it, oh God, that much harder not to come. “No gag reflex. Just do it, I want you to.” And his mouth closed over the head of Gerard’s cock and his tongue traced the slit and Gerard did, just bucked his hips up, over and over again, and Frank moaned around him. Gerard could feel it, buzzing through his cock and down into his bones, into his blood, and just like that he was coming and Frank made a startled, hungry sound.

Gerard sank slowly to his knees, Frank easing him down, and leaned his head against Frank’s shoulder, panting.

“Gerard,” Frank said, sounding dazed. “I can taste you, I can—oh, fuck, I can feel it.”

“Really?” Gerard murmured, and tongued the scorpion again. Fuck, tattoos were so hot. He’d never get one himself, but he loved Frankie’s, so much. “I thought you couldn’t taste anything—”

He pondered finding his notebook, but Frank seemed to anticipate this, snorted and flipped Gerard

over, easy and smooth, catching the back of his head in his palm to keep it from hitting the hardwood floor.

“No taking notes during sex,” Frank said firmly, and Gerard couldn’t help but pout, just a bit.

“Maybe later,” Frank relented, giggling, and kissed Gerard again, and this time it was wet, and salty, and Gerard tangled his tongue around Frank’s and drank in the taste of it, of himself.

“So hot, Frankie,” he said in between kisses, and Frank made a low noise of agreement.

“Is this okay?” Frank said, pulling back, cool fingers tracing the knot at the back of Gerard’s skull, soft and soothing the slight ache. “Are you okay? Does it hurt?”

“No no,” Gerard protested, and dragged Frank’s head back down. “No stopping now. Sex. You said. You promised.”

Frank rocked his hips against Gerard, and Gerard could *feel* it, the cold button of Frank’s jeans against his thigh, so good, and fuck, so real.

“Sex,” he agreed, and then sat back up on his heels, tugged off his shirt, and Gerard’s eyes got huge, he could just feel it. Shirtless Frankie. Fuck. Frank was pale and gorgeous and staring down at him, hair falling into his eyes. Ink was curling over his skin and a dark line of hair led down into this pants and Gerard *wanted*, fuck, wanted even though he’d just come down Frank’s throat. He made a strangled noise and struggled to get his fumbling fingers to work, to undo the button of Frank’s jeans.

“Let me,” Frank giggled, and snuck his cold fingers beneath Gerard’s, popped the button, and fuck, that was—that was Frank’s cock, taut and thick and perfect. Gerard traced it with his forefinger, eyes wide, and Frank closed his eyes for a moment, humming, before cursing and leaning back, rummaging in a pile next to Gerard’s dresser.

“I got—I stole this from the pharmacy. It’s so fucking awesome being able to go places now; I’m like a ninja,” Frank panted.

“You were always like a ninja,” Gerard said absently, and fuck, if it wouldn’t be such a goddamned effort, he’d lean up and try to taste Frank, right now, except he didn’t think his stomach muscles could handle it, and there’d be time later. “How do you—how do you have an erection, how does that work?” he mused, letting his fingers dance down, cup Frank’s balls. “You don’t have blood, right?”

“Oh my god, shut up,” Frank groaned, and leaned back down and bit at Gerard’s lower lip, and, well, it was an effective argument. Gerard shut up and opened his mouth, let their tongues play together, wet and smooth, and then he heard the faint snick of a cap opening. Frank’s fingers played gently around the base of Gerard’s cock, wet and cold, and then, startlingly, *warm*, and tingling, and Gerard gasped into Frank’s mouth, eyes flying open.

“Warming gel,” Frank said smugly, and started working Gerard open, his fingers slick and careful and perfect. Gerard made a choked noise and fuck, he was getting hard again, already. It’d only been, like, a minute. It should have been totally embarrassing, but all he could think was yes, yes, yes. He’d done this to himself in the shower a couple times, but this was so different: Frank leaning back and watching, eyes dark and intense, as his fingers slowly disappeared inside Gerard. And Frank had—had sort of been inside Gerard before, the way their flesh melted together, the way Frank could walk through walls, but this was different. Gerard could feel it, feel himself stretching to accommodate Frank—it was so different from how Frank had pushed his fingers through

Gerard's wrist. It was cold and hot and intense, and it was Gerard letting Frank inside, actively responding, not just passive, not this time. Frank's mouth had fallen open slightly, dazed.

"Gerard," he said, low and husky, and the lights flickered. "Fuck, you're letting me—oh, fuck, *look* at you."

"Frankie," Gerard panted, and moved his hips upward, fucked himself on Frank's finger, and it felt *so much better* than when he'd fingered himself, which had just been awkward and uncomfortable and kind of gross. This was—this was filthy and intimate, and every nerve he had was tingling. It burned, almost, and Frank was so cold, and the gel was *hot*, and it wasn't quite pain, it was something better than that. He couldn't stop moving, making helpless noises.

"I thought—" Gerard managed, and then Frank added another finger and he lost his train of thought, shuddered and spread his legs wider. God, okay, Frank was *way* better at finding his prostate than Gerard had been. "Oh, fuck yeah, just like that, Frank."

"Like that?" Frank said, practically purring, so fucking pleased with himself, and Gerard tried to glare, but didn't think he quite managed it based on the way Frank was smiling at him, shark-like, all teeth. "This works for you?"

"Yes, but," Gerard tried again, "I'm just—oh, I just thought you didn't—didn't want to do this, and I thought you were mad at me—"

"I want to do this," Frank cut him off, leaning in. He cupped Gerard's cheek with his free hand and kissed him, cool and sweet and God, Gerard felt like he was burning up. "Fuck, I always wanted to do this."

Gerard's eyes had fallen shut at some point, but he snapped them open at that. "Yeah?" he stuttered, almost feeling shy, which was kind of ridiculous given that he was writhing around naked and erect with Frank's fingers in his ass. "Really?"

Frank rolled his eyes, looking fond and annoyed, and said, "Well, obviously." And Gerard was going to point out that it hadn't been obvious *at all* and that he hadn't been sure if Frank would want him, or just want him because Frank was all lonely and trapped away from all other possible sexual possibilities in the woods, or—and then Frank twisted his fingers, and Gerard just wound up hissing, "Oh, *fuck me*" instead.

"On it," Frank agreed, and pulled his fingers free. He shucked his jeans off and god, he was naked, fuck. Gerard pressed a hand against his cock and thought, not yet not yet not yet. Wait. God, Frank was beautiful. "Fuck, what'd I do with the goddamned—oh, I'm standing on it. Okay, okay. Hey, baby, you ready? Gerard, I gotta—god, look at you, you're ready, right?"

"There's a bed, over there. We're on the floor," Gerard said, sort of dazed, but then Frank was already guiding his cock inside and oh fuck, this was way different than fingers. Frank made a noise like he was dying and pushed all the way in, and wow, that was, okay, that was so perfect Gerard's toes were curling. He could be anywhere: the floor of the forest, a fucking cave, a gym locker, he didn't care. His eyes fell closed as he canted his hips and hissed out a long, pained breath. God, it felt so—

"I love you," Frank said, and pulled all the way out, and then slammed back in, and Gerard's cock jerked again, and oh god, he couldn't come again, not yet. Frank had barely started fucking him.

"What?" he managed, and Frank kissed him, and pushed his hips forward. "Oh. Ohhh. Yeah, Frankie, like that, oh fuck. Fuck!"

“I don’t care—I don’t care if you get old and don’t... don’t want me anymore,” Frank murmured into Gerard’s cheek. “I love you, right now, and I want—I don’t want to miss it, just because—I was scared. I love you, you fucking crazy motherfucker. Oh, god, you feel so good, Gerard, I’ve never, not like this.”

He sounded so fucking wrecked with it, and Gerard couldn’t fucking stand it, how much he *felt* right now, physically and mentally, and he still wanted more, and he was going to fucking explode, and also, Frank was *insane*.

“I’d never not want you! It’s more like you would—” Gerard started indignantly, and then arched his back, scrabbling at the floor with his hands. “Oh my god, like that, what—what are you, oh *fuck*, Frank.”

“This is,” Frank said, and sucked on Gerard’s nipple, slid his hands beneath Gerard’s back and held him up, thrust in again and made a pleased, low noise when Gerard thrashed. “This is where you say you love me back, asshole.”

“Well, obviously,” Gerard managed, smirking up at Frank, and then felt his face go slack as Frank’s cock went deeper, fuck, deeper than—oh god.

“Not good enough,” Frank laughed, and his eyes were so bright, and fuck, Gerard loved him, he did.

“I do, I fucking—I love you so fucking much, you—*Frank*,” Gerard choked out, and came again, in a slow, painfully bright pulse that seemed to go on and on and on. When he could focus again, Frank was staring at him, at his face, and Gerard hoped his wasn’t too stupid and ridiculous, and then Frank’s eyes went huge and he said, “I think I—oh god—” and collapsed on top of him with a shocked, rough moan.

“Don’t disappear this time,” Gerard mumbled blissfully, wrapping a leg around Frank’s and closing his eyes.

“Oh my god,” Frank said into his neck. “I just—sex. Wow. You.”

“Articulate,” Gerard teased. Frank didn’t move his head, just lifted a hand and flipped Gerard off, then snuggled closer, humming contentedly.

“Frankie,” Gerard said after a moment, running his hands up and down Frank’s back. “I think—you’re totally—fuck, dude, that’s cold, you’re inside me.”

“Sort of the point,” Frank mumbled, and then said, sheepishly, “Oh,” and pulled off a bit, so that his chest wasn’t quite so melded into Gerard’s own. “Sorry.”

“S’ok,” Gerard said, smiling up at him. “It’s pretty awesome. Just, you know, chilly.”

“We need to get you some electric blankets,” Frank laughed, and kissed him lazily, their tongues tangling.

“Come on. Bed, Gee. Pillows,” he coaxed, tugging Gerard to his feet. Gerard staggered around, feeling like a baby deer for a moment, and then collapsed in the blankets. His head hurt, vaguely, but not enough to pay attention to, and his ass felt... well, sort of awesome, actually, each movement sending off tiny sparks and reminding him what’d just happened. He rolled his hips experimentally and oh, fuck yeah, he was going to want to do that again, like, yesterday.

Frank was staring down at him, eyes half-lidded, like maybe he agreed.

“Hi,” Gerard said, biting his lower lip and smiling helplessly, and reached up a hand to drag Frank down next to him, wrapping himself around Frank’s body. Being naked was awesome if the other person was naked, too. Or maybe it was just awesome with Frank.

“Hey, did you come this time?” he remembered to ask. “Can ghosts come?”

“If that wasn’t an orgasm, I don’t know what is,” Frank said, nuzzling him. Gerard fought the urge to purr, and then, well, what the hell. He gave in and made a delighted noise that got deeper and huskier when Frank bit down, just a bit. He arched his neck, hoping for more attention—he was discovering he really, really fucking liked it when Frank bit him, when he could practically feel himself bruising.

But instead Frank’s head popped back up, eyes evil and mouth curled in smirking delight. “Let’s just hope you don’t get pregnant with my ghost babies, right? Maybe I shoulda stole us some condoms.”

“...uh,” Gerard managed, brain immediately flashing to the ‘zombie baby eating its way out of its mother’s stomach’ from Dawn of the Dead, and Frank laughed, loud and bright.

“Kidding, Gee,” he giggled, collapsing back on top of Gerard and kissing his nose, then his cheek and the corner of his eye, and then finally his mouth. “You loser.”

“Shut up,” Gerard said. Anyway, now that he’d thought of it, Frank still hadn’t actually gotten to see the new remake yet. He fumbled around in the sheets to see if the remote was where he’d left it. “Hey, wanna watch some zombies?”

“Best boyfriend ever,” Frank hummed, and then leaned off the bed, scrounging around, and emerged triumphant with a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

“Fuck yeah,” Gerard said, making grabby hands, and Frank lit one up and passed it over, and Gerard beamed at him. They snuggled down together, using one of the many abandoned coffee mugs on the nightstand as an ashtray, watching as the opening credits rolled.

There was still a lot of stuff they had to talk about, Gerard knew. Like what it meant to be dating a dead guy, and how the trial over Frank’s murder was going to go down, and how he was pretty sure Frank was still freaked out about Gerard being kidnapped—fuck, Gerard was pretty goddamned freaked out about it himself. But for now, he was pretty content to cuddle down in the bed with his boyfriend—Frank had called Gerard his *boyfriend*—and watch a group of blood-splattered seven-year olds charging a sedan.

“Dude,” Frank said, eyes wide. “That kid just tore out that man’s *throat*.”

“I know, right?” Gerard replied sleepily, curling his arms around Frank’s back. “It’s awesome.”

And it was, awesome and perfect, like a dream. Frank continued to exclaim excitedly about the zombie speed and blood spatter, and Gerard eventually drifted to sleep, sound and deep and content for what felt like the first time in years.

His mom knocked on the door softly what must have been a few hours later, because the movie was over, the menu screen just replaying itself over and over again on the screen. Frank was running his fingers through Gerard’s hair, and it felt amazing. He made a pleased noise, and then the knock came again.

“Gerard, you want some dinner?” his mom asked. “You should probably get up and eat, honey.”

Gerard came completely awake with a start at the sound of her voice. Oh, fuck, he was naked, and not a virgin anymore *at all*, and now he had to go make small talk with his mom. Jesus. He managed to tumble out of bed and scramble into some clothes, wincing a bit and flushing, and oh *God*, it was going to suck to sit still at the kitchen table, wasn't it?

Frank was completely unsympathetic, the dick, just giggling at him and then giving him a really distracting sort of considering look, like maybe he was remembering why Gerard was sore, too, and he liked it, a lot. Then he kept craning his head around the door and making ridiculous leering faces, while Gerard poked at his casserole and tried not to blush too obviously. Mikey totally didn't help with the way he kept waggling his eyebrows at Frank.

At least he could beg out of dinner pretty easily, claiming he was still tired, and his mom bought it instantly, just ruffled his hair and said they could work on his dye job another night. Maybe blue or green streaks this time, if he wanted. Fucking awesome.

“Man,” he said happily as he followed Frank up the stairs towards what would hopefully be a really awesome reprise of earlier that afternoon, “I should get kidnapped more often.”

Frank went stiff and stopped for a moment at the top of the landing, looking back at Gerard, and Gerard replayed what he'd just said and blanched.

“Not fucking funny,” Frank bit off, and stomped soundlessly off into Gerard's bedroom.

“That's not—I didn't mean it like that,” Gerard protested, embarrassed, because, well, obviously he didn't want to fucking get kidnapped again. That shit had been awful. He was just looking at the silver lining, that was all. But Frank's shoulders were still tense, and he wasn't joining Gerard on the bed now, not even after a couple minutes had passed. He just stood scowling at Gerard's bookshelf, hands behind his back.

“You know,” Gerard started tentatively, feeling a bit stung, “you don't have to stick around all the time if you don't want.” Frank turned his head and stared at him, and Gerard flinched. “I mean, if—if you want to go hang with Bob or Ray for a while, I'd totally understand. You don't have to just, I dunno. I mean, it has to be boring watching me sleep, at least.”

“Yeah, no, I think I'll stick around,” Frank said icily. “You've got the self-preservation instincts of a fucking lemming. Someone's gotta watch out for your ass, since *you* sure as hell aren't going to do it.”

“That's not fair,” Gerard protested, sitting up and glaring. “I didn't—I'm not that bad. Don't act like I'm—I'm some fucking incompetent. I can take care of myself.”

“Oh, yeah, of course you can,” Frank laughed. “How stupid of me, it's almost like I think you almost died just because you couldn't keep your fucking mouth shut around a goddamned meathead you knew was a psychopath. Oh, *wait*.”

That wasn't fucking *fair*. “I was mad,” he hissed. “I just wasn't thinking, it's not the same thing! I can take care of myself, it's not—I mean, I'm fine, now, and you're acting like I'm not.”

Frank's fist were clenched and he lowered his head, and then reached out and shoved a stack of books to the floor, braced his hands on the bookshelf and looked like he wanted to knock the whole thing down. Well, fuck.

“Fine,” he said tightly, and Gerard watched him warily. “You know how fucking close you were to

not fine? You know what that would have done to me?”

“Yes, I fucking know that,” Gerard said, and fuck, his voice was shaking and stupidly thick, because he didn’t—he didn’t want to think about that, okay. It made him feel like he was going to throw up and like there wasn’t enough air, and he shouldn’t feel like that, because he was okay now. He fucking hated it, the way his voice wobbled, but then Frank turned around and finally got on the bed, wrapped himself around Gerard.

“I’m so fucking angry,” he confessed, and then buried his face into Gerard’s hair. “I couldn’t—it was my fault, this never would have happened if it wasn’t for me, and you were gone, and I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.”

“It’s not your fault,” Gerard said immediately. “That doesn’t even make any sense.”

“Yeah, well, it feels that way anyway. Doesn’t have to make sense. Just... fuck. I was so fucking mad at you for not having that fucking bone of mine with you, you know? And then even after I knew you were okay, I still was stuck in that hospital as a fucking--I couldn’t even talk to you, couldn’t say a fucking thing. And all I could think was, why the hell, Gerard, why wouldn’t you have it with you?”

“It seemed like a bad thing to have on school property,” Gerard said in a small voice. He remembered Frank in the hospital, the misery you could see radiating out from him, even when he was as insubstantial as a shadow. “But I’ll—I mean, I won’t do it again. I’ll get a necklace, or whatever. Duct tape it to myself. I don’t know.”

“Duct tape,” Frank scoffed, but he was finally smiling again, and he’d relaxed, was nuzzling Gerard’s neck. “If I thought making you eat a finger bone would be a long term solution, I’d feed it to you in a fucking heartbeat, you know?”

“Kinky,” Gerard murmured, and then Frank tilted his head back, smirking, and rubbed his knuckles over Gerard’s lips, and Gerard made a little involuntary pleased noise, pressed his mouth to the double L and the O. “God, Frankie, your hands. Did I ever tell you that? I love your fucking hands.”

“Yeah?” Frank said, sounding startled and delighted, and he felt so real, so fucking solid and cool and everywhere, cradling Gerard against him. “That why you told me to go for a hand bone? Who’s the kinky one now, hmm, Gee?”

“Did you know some animals have a penis bone?” Gerard said dreamily and burrowed into Frank’s shoulder. “An os baculum. Uh, whales have it, and raccoons, and—”

Frank cut him off with a kiss, sweet and slow, and then pulled back, giggling and shaking his head.

“You’re so fucking weird,” he said fondly. “Wish I had one of those. That’d be hot. If I had a cock bone, I’d give it to you.”

Gerard sort of wanted to make an innuendo and then flip Frank and pin him to the bed, but he was getting tired again, physically and emotionally, and this was really nice, just lying together.

“Maybe in the morning,” he mumbled, and flapped a hand around until Frank seemed to get what he wanted and drew the blankets up around them. “You wanna put a movie on? I don’t want you to be bored. I’m just... really tired.”

“Nah,” Frank said, and tucked his chin against Gerard’s shoulder. “Maybe later. Go to sleep. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“Good.”

“Fucking awesome,” Frank corrected, and Gerard had to agree.

When the doorbell rang shrilly the next morning, Gerard was totally confused. Bob never rang the doorbell, and Gerard didn't have school this week anyway—he was still recovering. What was going on? He sighed and stretched a bit, rubbing his face against Frank's shoulder. Waking up with Frank here was awesome.

They were tangled together beneath the covers, and it was totally perfect—Gerard usually liked having a ton of blankets and pillows and shit to burrow in, but then it'd get too hot and he'd get grumpy and shove them all off, only to have to gather them back up again later. Rinse and repeat, ad infinitum. But now Frank was keeping everything the perfect temperature, and he was running his hands through Gerard's hair, which was one of Gerard's favorite things on the entire planet.

The television was on now, volume turned low, and Frank was watching, rapt, as Christian Bale shoved Heath Ledger up against a table.

“Good movie,” Gerard rasped, and Frank nodded, humming, then leaned down and pressed a kiss to the corner of Gerard's mouth, never taking his eyes off the TV.

“Morning, baby,” he said distractedly, and then slapped Gerard's hand away when Gerard tried to find out if ghosts got morning wood, too. “Hold up, in a second. Man, who is this fucking actor? Goddamned genius.”

Then the bell rang again before Gerard could decide whether or not to be offended—it *was* Batman, after all.

“You gonna answer that?” Frank said around a cigarette. Gerard huffed, stretching. He'd really been looking forward to morning sex, dammit.

But the house was empty at the moment, and it wasn't like Frank could get up and get the door for him. Mikey was back at the Center getting a check-up and another round of treatment, and Gerard's mom was at work. That left Gerard, and potentially the visitor could be someone important, a cop or something wanting to ask some questions, so Gerard really probably shouldn't ignore the bell in favor of getting laid. Which meant he had to get out of bed. Ugh.

He shuffled down the stairs, yawning, hoping it wasn't another reporter, or Bob checking up on him or some shit. Fuck, he wanted a *coffee*, but Frank had already vowed to withhold sex for weeks if he caught Gerard touching caffeine. This was cruel and unusual, but Gerard figured as long as he was getting a steady supply of orgasms, he could make it another thirteen days and seven hours without caffeine.

He opened the door and blinked in the bright light—fuck, it was gorgeous out. Bright blue sky, red leaves blowing down the street, chill in the air. Winter would be here soon, he thought.

There was a woman on the front step, and she looked oddly familiar. She didn't have a badge or a uniform or anything, though, which meant probably Gerard could have stayed in bed. Dammit.

“Gerard Way?” the woman asked. Her eyes were shadowed, and hazel-green. Gerard hesitated a moment before answering.

“Yeess?” he admitted, biting his lower lip. “But I'm not talking to any reporters, sorry—”

The woman smiled, suddenly, and Gerard blinked. He knew—he knew that smile.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “No, of course not. I don’t blame you. It’s just—I’m Linda Iero. I wanted to see you. I hope it’s not a bother.”

Gerard clutched the doorframe and stared. She was small. She looked like Frank, had his nose, his chin. It was Frank’s mom, and Gerard had *no idea* what to do.

“Um,” she said, blinking at him. Gerard supposed he sort of looked like someone had slapped him upside the head with a shovel. A shovel made of *panic*. “May I come in?”

“Oh,” Gerard said, forcing himself to let go of the door. “Oh, of course, sorry!”

He showed her into the sitting room, to the uncomfortable upholstered chairs with the doilies everywhere that none of his family had ever used, and hovered uselessly, fingers twisted in his hair. Frank had twisted his fingers in Gerard’s hair yesterday—fuck. Don’t think of that, don’t think of that, he told himself, feeling his cheekbones get hot. Not now. Fuck, he was pretty sure he had a hickey blooming on his neck, and he wasn’t even *dressed*, still wearing a ratty t-shirt and pajama bottoms with a hole in the crotch.

“I, uh,” Gerard offered weakly. “Can I get you something to drink? Tea? Coffee?”

Frank was upstairs, watching *The Dark Knight*, and Frank’s mom was down here, staring at Gerard like—like Gerard didn’t even know what. Gerard was about to vomit.

“No,” she replied quietly. “Thank you. They—they told me you were the one who found him. I just—I wanted to say thank you.” Gerard sucked in a breath, because—it wasn’t right; he hadn’t done anything. He hadn’t found Frank, not for her. He’d found Frank’s body. Something on Gerard’s face made Linda breathe in quietly, look down at her folded hands.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come.”

“No,” Gerard said automatically, and sat on the footstool, fought a wince, because wow, awkward. But that wasn’t the point. “No—it’s okay. I’m glad. I—I would want my mom to know what had happened to me, if—” he fell silent, unable to say it. The knot at the back of his head was throbbing again; he should probably have taken some painkillers when he’d woken up.

There was a noise from the hallway, and Gerard couldn’t help but glance over. It was Frank. He was blending in with the wallpaper, his face peering out between the painted vines and paper fruits, eyes huge and hurt. His hand curled around the corner of the doorframe, fingers clenching and unclenching.

Frank’s mom was staring at her feet, breathing carefully, so Gerard took a chance she wasn’t going to look up and met Frank’s eyes. He jerked his chin towards her, raised his eyebrows. *What are you waiting for?* Frank shook his head vehemently. Gerard frowned, and Frank shook his head again, slower, face set.

“I wish I could have done more,” Gerard said finally, as the silence stretched on. Frank was watching his mother, drinking her in as though to memorize every detail. “I wish—”

Frank’s mom looked up and smiled at him, a lopsided smile, and it was such a familiar expression that Gerard’s chest hurt. “You did plenty. They never would have found him, without you. James said they wouldn’t have ever caught those men.”

“James?” Gerard said faintly, bewildered, because he didn’t understand why she was smiling.

There were tears glimmering in her eyes, and she was still smiling even as she swiped at them.

“James Dewees. Agent Dewees, now. He was Frankie’s best friend, you know.”

“With the tie!” Gerard exclaimed. He’d forgotten that the agent had been Frank’s friend. To be honest, everything that had happened at the cabin all seemed like a nightmare now, hazy and confused. But he remembered Agent Dewees pretty well—the brightness of the pink tie, the skull earring peeping through his hair, the kindness of his smile.

“Yes!” Linda said, smiling in earnest now. “I saw that tie, too. James was always a bit... unique. But so was Frankie. He never belonged here. He was your age, you know.”

“I know,” Gerard said, staring at his hands. He couldn’t quite meet her eyes. He’d survived. Her son hadn’t. It wasn’t fair, and he knew it.

“You don’t belong here either, do you?” she murmured, smiling again, putting a hand on Gerard’s knee, and Gerard was forced to admit that she was right. Even if there were parts of Glen Fell that weren’t so terrible—still, he wasn’t going to be here forever, and he was glad. He’d be taking the best parts of Glen Fell with him when he went, as far as he was concerned.

“Frank could never wait to get out of here,” she continued. It was hurting Gerard’s head, to hear all the past tenses in her voice, to see how firmly she believed them. “To get back to Jersey. He hated this place. So. Thank you. I knew—I always knew he hadn’t run away. He wouldn’t have done that to me. I knew that. It’s—it’s good to be able to take him away from here at last. To be able to bring him home.”

She stood up, and Gerard automatically stood with her, hands fluttering helplessly.

“I think he’d have liked you,” she offered, tightening her coat around her, and Gerard tugged at the hem of his shirt, flushing. “I can tell. You’re an interesting person. Frank liked interesting people.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” he stuttered, and she smiled, drifting towards the door. She didn’t seem to see Frank in the shadows, though she passed within a fingertip of him, her hair stirring in a faint indoor breeze.

“I’m sure I’ll see you again, Gerard,” she said, and her mouth tightened. “At the trial, if nothing else. But thank you for meeting with me. I’m sorry for waking you.”

“It was no trouble,” Gerard said, and hovered by the door. “I’m—I’m glad to have met you. Not like this, I mean. I just—Frank seems like... like he was a great person. He had a lot of good friends. Ray Toro, James. I’m—I would have been honored to be friends with him.”

She smiled at him again, fragile but warm, and left.

“Why,” Gerard said, standing at the door, watching her go out into the grey, misty morning. She didn’t look back. “*Why* didn’t you—”

“It would only hurt her,” Frank said quietly, and hooked his chin over Gerard’s shoulder, watching her go. He was trembling, very slightly. “She wouldn’t—she wouldn’t have been able to move on. This is... good. She’ll be okay.”

“But,” Gerard started, because he didn’t think he could have done that, if it’d been his mom walking away. Frank sighed, let his forehead fall to Gerard’s shoulder.

“Come back upstairs,” Frank said, almost begging. He rubbed his face against Gerard’s throat,

biting at the pulse, and Gerard didn't know what to think, could barely think at all beyond the immediate visceral need to tilt his head back, give Frank more access to his skin. Frank bit again, hard, a sharp throb that made Gerard gasp, then led him away from the door, back up the hall, hands snaking around and inside Gerard's pants. This was so weird. It didn't feel quite right, somehow, but Frank wasn't giving him time to think. He lavished the wounded spot on Gerard's neck with a cool tongue, whispering in a thick, filthy voice, and Gerard reacted instinctively, moaning and bucking his hips.

As soon as the bedroom door closed behind them, Frank slammed him against the wall and started kissing him fiercely, but it was different somehow—not the kind of fierce Gerard liked, the kind he'd felt before from Frank. This was vicious and intense, raw, and finally Gerard shoved Frank back.

“Wait,” he panted, and willed his stupid dick to just hold on. “Wait, I—”

Frank looked at him, scowled and rocked back on his heels. “What,” he said. “Is something wrong?”

“Frank—” Gerard said hesitantly, rubbing at his mouth. Frank was staring at him, eyes hard and unfamiliar. “That was your mom down there. Shouldn't we—shouldn't we talk about it?”

“What's there to talk about?” Frank laughed, sharp and wild. “I don't—can't we just fuck, Gerard? Do we have to talk about fucking *everything*?”

“We've never talked about her at all,” Gerard said, heart pounding. He didn't want to do this, wanted to just—just give Frank what he wanted, sex, hard and fast and a place to forget—but it was Frank's *mom*. They couldn't just pretend she hadn't been there. “About her, or your dad. Or... or James. You never mention any of them.”

“What, you've been around a few fucking days and you think you *know* me now?” Frank growled, and Gerard couldn't help but flinch, but, well. He remembered feeling like he'd lost everyone for an afternoon, just an afternoon—the guilt and pain. It'd been fucking agony. Frank had felt like that for an entire decade. Gerard swallowed and didn't let himself look at the cruel tilt to Frank's mouth. “You don't know fucking shit. You're a fucking kid, Gerard, so just—”

“I know you care,” Gerard said miserably, took a step forward, even though Frank's eyes had gone dark and hollow, unfriendly, and the carpet beneath his feet crackled like frost. “I know you do. It's okay, Frankie.”

“It's *not*,” Frank spit out, and then his face crumpled. Gerard took a couple steps closer, then another. “It's not—I left her—she was all alone, Gerard, and I *left* her. You saw her, she was so fucking sad. It's my mom, and I did that to her, and I can't *fix* it, don't you get it? I can only make it worse, I can only—”

“Of course she's sad,” Gerard interrupted, and Frank had wrapped his arms around himself, looked smaller and more alone than Gerard had ever seen, and Gerard ached to wrap him in a blanket, to keep him safe—stupid, fuck, it was so stupid. Frank was dead, and there was no safety, but that didn't matter, not really, because Frank couldn't stay like this, all twisted up inside and blaming himself. “Frank, she lost you, you didn't leave her. They—they took you. Of course she's sad.”

Frank looked up at him, wavering, and Gerard couldn't help it. He was trying to go slow, but he *couldn't*. He crossed the room in two strides and wrapped Frank in his arms and felt Frank collapse against him, muffling quiet sounds like sobs.

“It wasn’t your fault, Frankie,” he whispered into Frank’s hair, ignoring the crackle of thunder outside and the dipping temperature. “Frank, Frankie, she loves you so much; it’s not your fault. She never thought it was. I could tell, couldn’t you tell? Just hearing her talk, she never stopped loving you.”

“She was all alone. My dad left, and she was alone. I should have been there,” Frank managed, and Gerard rocked him and told him again and again. *Not your fault. She loves you. She knows you didn’t leave her. You didn’t do anything wrong. I love you. You’re so fucking brave, Frankie.* He just kept talking and talking, until his voice was hoarse and meaningless. It was the same sort of comfort he’d whispered over Mikey’s bed a hundred times, when Mikey couldn’t breathe and there wasn’t anything Gerard could do but be there, say *I love you*, say—even if it wasn’t true—that it would be okay.

Finally Frank stopped shaking, just went limp in Gerard’s arms.

“Hey,” Gerard croaked, and closed his eyes, breathing in the pine and smoke smell of Frank.

Frank touched a finger to the sore spot of skin on Gerard’s neck, where Gerard could already sense a complete *monster* of a hickey coming up. “Sorry, Gee,” he said, voice soft, and Gerard offered him a crooked smile, the best he could manage.

“And you said you weren’t into human flesh,” Gerard joked, and leaned in, carefully kissed the corner of Frank’s mouth. “It’s okay. I kinda like it. I like, y’know. Seeing the marks you left. Helps me remember it’s not a dream.”

“Some dream,” Frank snorted, and turned his head so that their mouths met, and it became a real kiss, closed-mouthed and soft. “I am sorry, Gerard. I just—it’s my *mom*.” His voice cracked. “Do you think I should have told her? About...” He motioned towards himself vaguely.

Gerard bit his lip, and then slowly shook his head. “No, I think you did the right thing. Maybe someday, if you can figure how to dreamwalk or whatever, or if you think she’s ready—but I think you’re probably right.”

Frank had raised an eyebrow when Gerard said ‘dreamwalk,’ but then he sighed and dragged Gerard over to the bed. He pushed Gerard down and then did that thing where he lay half inside Gerard, their torsos overlapping, melding. They gathered up the blankets in a giant fleece and quilt pile so Gerard didn’t shiver himself to pieces, and were just quiet for a while.

Despite the stress of the last few minutes, the adrenaline and worry, Gerard was getting sleepy again. He guessed it was his body trying to repair itself, or whatever. The doctors had told him to sleep as much as possible, now that the first 48 hours since the concussive injury had passed without incident, and Gerard seemed to be following that instruction a lot better than anticipated. He wanted to stay up for all-night marathon sex or cuddling, or the decade worth of TV and movies Frank had missed, but mostly he just nodded off and woke up drooling on Frank’s shoulder. Frank didn’t seem to mind, though.

“You okay?” Gerard managed, dragging his eyes back open, and Frank smiled at him, crooked and sad.

“Nah,” he said, and kissed Gerard’s nose. “But I will be. You will be, too.”

“Good, ‘s good,” Gerard sighed, and burrowed closer. They’d gotten the blankets piled on enough that it was getting almost hot now in the center of their little cocoon.

“Warm,” Frank sighed, and Gerard would never get over it, the feeling of it. It was like being half-submerged in cool lake water, but each ripple went *through* instead of around you. “Gee, you’re always so warm.”

“I’ll be your space heater if you’ll be my AC,” Gerard mumbled, and Frank chuckled quietly, his mouth so close to Gerard’s ear that it made warmth curl in his lower belly, even as he shivered. One day, dammit, Gerard was going to be awake long enough to have really awesome marathon sex with Frank, and it was going to be fucking great.

“Totally,” Frank agreed when Gerard sleepily voiced this thought. “But I can wait for you to feel better. I’d rather you were awake for it, you know? And I’ve waited for years, Gee. I told you, I’ll be here when you wake up. Now shut it, I’m trying to watch a movie.”

Gerard growled and with a supreme effort, leaned over and bit Frank’s nipple, grinning smugly at the squeak this produced before he snuggled down and went back to sleep.

It was kind of weird how little had changed at school. The town was technically in a shambles, but after Gerard had recovered, he had to go to class, and make up that damned Biology test, and suffer through the terrible school lunches. Ted and his friends still held court in the cafeteria, still wore their bright red letter jackets. The band kids still ate outside. Art class was still awful and boring and a lead weight upon Gerard’s soul.

But there *were* differences—subtle ones. Gerard had sort of expected the world to fall apart after he’d been kidnapped, and rescued, and the patriarchal pillars of the community had been dragged off in chains. Instead, it was just quieter. Students huddled in groups, talked in low voices. Every now and then someone would laugh and the sound would ring out, echo, and then vanish back into the hush.

Gerard hadn’t really thought about what his classmates would think of the whole thing. He’d known his friends would be upset, and he’d thought the baseball jocks would celebrate—apparently not true, and wow, he hadn’t even taken *that* one in yet—but he hadn’t thought about how it might affect everyone else. If he’d had to guess, he’d have assumed it wouldn’t affect them at all. The people he’d never talked to, the people that hadn’t noticed him, not even to throw spitballs or hiss insults—why would they care?

But they’d seen him in the halls, even if they’d never spoken to him, and he’d disappeared on the way to class. They’d all known it had to be someone in their own town that’d taken him—probably someone *at* their school. School wasn’t safe. What a shitty thing to realize, to have driven home. Even after all the shootings on the news, the stories on the web... it was different. People never really thought it could happen to them.

Eventually everyone would probably go back to their typical high school behavior, the halls full of the sound of teenage conversation and jostling and cruelty, but for now everything was hushed, in a state of quiet shock. It was weird realizing that he sort of missed the familiarity of the status quo. He was never admitting that to anyone else, not even Mikey.

People mostly ignored Gerard now, gave him a slightly wider berth in the hallways, heads ducked down, like maybe they could catch abduction or post-traumatic stress, or whatever. He was fine with that—he had friends anyway, friends that stood by him. And, well, he supposed he was even more offputting than he had been before, since he now reportedly had a very unsettling tendency to talk to himself. *That poor creepy Way kid*, people were probably saying, *God knows what happened to him out in that cabin. He’s cracked from the strain of it.*

In reality, of course, it was just that Frank was wandering the halls with his hand in Gerard's back pocket, snickering and mocking people and watching everything with wonder, and it was *really hard* not to engage in conversation with him. Gerard had never seen anyone—well, not *seen*, since Frank went all shadow-ninja-invisible while they were on school grounds—so entranced by a fucking high school.

It didn't matter much when they were walking with Ray and Bob, because then Gerard could respond to Frank's asinine asides about the girls' locker room and argue that no, he *didn't* think it'd be a good idea for Frank to steal paint from the art room and paint 'The Chamber of Secrets Has Been Opened' next to the boys' bathroom. Frank had gotten way too into the whole Harry Potter thing, though he thought Harry himself was a little boring. The point was, while normally Gerard would have been all over some Fred and George-type pranks, people in school were fucking freaked out enough already and now wasn't the time.

Frank had seemed sort of surprised when Gerard had pointed that out, though.

"Well, it wasn't like *they* got fucking starved and concussed, the brain-dead fucking sheep," he huffed, glaring as Tanya and a passel of her polished, pastel cheerleading ladies-in-waiting strolled past, carefully ignoring Gerard. "They've got nothing to fucking complain about. Especially *her*."

"Please don't flip up their skirts again," Gerard begged. "She wasn't flirting with me, she was just being nice!"

"I told you, Gee, it was a trick of the wind," Frank retorted, cheerful again. "And you gotta stop being so down on yourself, she totally wants in your pants. You're *famous*. A total hero. And you've got that, you know—" Frank gestured at Gerard's face vaguely. "She probably only wants to shack up with people as pretty as she is."

"You think I'm pretty?" was all Gerard could think to say, beaming, and then there was a horrified cough behind them.

"I'm going to ignore that," Ted said, eyeing Gerard warily, and Gerard could feel Frank, silent and emanating chill air, like an open freezer of potential disaster. "Look—I just. I need to talk to you."

"He doesn't get to talk to you," Frank hissed, and Gerard flapped a hand at him in a way he hoped was subtle, and didn't just look like a muscle spasm. Frank made an unimpressed noise, but subsided—though Gerard knew it was only momentary peace. In another three seconds, Frank would probably shove his knee through Ted's dick. Which Gerard wouldn't mind too much, except—he was sort of curious what Ted wanted. Ted hadn't even mocked Gerard's mascara or awesome new collection of hickeys, not once. He'd barely looked at him.

"I'm late for Art," Gerard said out loud, hitching his bag up on his shoulder, watching Ted curiously. Ted seemed different, but in a way that was hard to define. He still had on all the typical King of High School Asshat accoutrements: the baseball cap, the sparkling enormous class ring. But he looked smaller, somehow, hunched in on himself. Which, you know, obviously—his dad and his uncle had just been arrested, mostly due to Ted's own involvement. Which still didn't make sense to Gerard. He'd have thought Ted would have cheered them on. A family tradition, fucking over the people that didn't fit in, that upset their heteronormative order.

"It'll only take a second," Ted insisted, crossing his arms over his chest and looking like himself, annoyed and superior, for the first time in weeks. "Christ, like you're really in such a hurry to listen to that geezer talk."

"No," Gerard admitted, but if Frank hadn't been there, growling subvocally at his side like a terrier

and clearly ready to leap on Ted and shove icy death up his nose, he'd have been a little more freaked out and worried about Ted wanting vengeance or whatever.

"Look," Ted ground out, looking frustrated and embarrassed. "It's just—I'm sorry, alright?"

"You're what?" Gerard's brain had come to a sudden, screeching halt. "*What?*"

"You're a freak, and a loser, and you'd better not ever even fucking look at my girlfriend," Ted continued, cheeks ruddy, staring over Gerard's shoulder. "But even little pansies like you don't deserve—you know. Uncle Mark's an asshole. He's always been that way, even when we were kids, so—yeah. And I'm sorry for..." He made an awkward punching gesture and Gerard blinked. "Anyway, just. Whatever."

"Yeah, well," Gerard said, surprised and ignoring Frank's indignant outburst about how he'd show Ted a fucking freak. "You're a dumb fucking jock, and a homophobe, and you made my life fucking miserable for weeks. But. Thanks, I guess. You know, for calling the cops." He shuffled his feet awkwardly. "They were your family, I mean—you probably saved my life."

Ted shook his head immediately. "Look, it's just... I don't want to be like Uncle Mark. I don't like faggots or anything, but I don't want anyone to die. You're... anyway. I wanted to let you know, and now I have. We straight?"

"Well, no," Gerard couldn't help but say and Ted barked out a laugh.

"Fucking hopeless, man," he said, rolling his eyes, and sauntered off down the hallway.

"That was weird," Gerard said finally, still staring long after the hallway was empty.

"You shoulda let me stuff him in a locker," Frank grumbled. "You're too fucking nice."

"I just don't want Bill Murray called out here to remove your pesky ass," Gerard reminded him, because they'd already had a team of paranormal investigators bounding around for a little bit, but apparently Glen Fell's ability to be staunchly unwelcoming to all outsiders came in handy, sometimes, because they'd left pretty quick.

"Hmmpf," Frank said, then, with an abrupt change of mood, poked Gerard in the side. "Hey, you know, you've already missed half of Art." Gerard eyed him. They'd missed maybe five or six minutes, tops.

"It's a nice day out," Frank continued innocently. "You wanna, I dunno. Take a walk? Might as well, right?"

"A walk, huh," Gerard said, smiling helplessly. "Got anyplace in mind?"

They turned around and headed down the stairs, out through the empty halls, past the classrooms stuffed full of miserable kids and droning adults. High school was just a phase you had to live through, and it was almost over, and really, in the long run, it didn't matter so much—Gerard could already tell. College wasn't far off, luckily, and, well. He wouldn't *always* let Frank talk him into skipping. Ray would have a fit, for one thing, and besides, Spring semester they were letting Mikey start taking classes again, and he had to be around for that.

"Oh, I have the perfect place in mind," Frank said, holding the door open for him. If anyone had been in the hall, it'd have looked like a Jedi mind trick, the double doors parting for Gerard without any visible touch.

“You see,” he continued, ushering Gerard out into the sunshine, “there’s this stretch of wall out in the woods I’ve always imagined shoving someone up against. But I’m not sure you’d be into it. I know you hate the outdoors, delicate flower that you are.”

“I dunno,” Gerard said, and bumped his shoulder against Frank’s, delighted when Frank made an oofing noise and flickered visible, sticking his tongue out at Gerard and crinkling his nose playfully. “I heard the woods were haunted, and I’ve heard I’m sort of a pansy, you know.”

“And who the fuck says that?” Frank laughed, threading his fingers through Gerard’s. “Nobody that matters. Fuck anybody who thinks so, Gee—you’re the bravest motherfucker I’ve ever met. You know that, right? I mean it. We’re going to take the fucking world by storm once we get out of here, you and me.”

Frank was smiling, Cheshire-wide and real, and he was walking through the field, kicking at grass and rocks and watching them skip, and holding Gerard’s hand, and talking about comic books, and movie deals, and all the awesome stuff they were going to do when they finally left this tiny shitty town.

“You know, Glen Fell sucks, and I wouldn’t wish it on anyone,” Frank said abruptly, just as they crossed over into the forest. “But I might kind of miss it. I mean, it isn’t all bad, right?” He glanced over and smiled.

“I can think of a few good memories,” Gerard agreed, smiling back and held Frank’s hand a little tighter as walked on through the fallen leaves.

“Just good?” Frank teased, eyes dancing, and then he started tugging Gerard along, speeding up. “Man, I must be doing this wrong. C’mon, Gee, let’s aim for fucking awesome.”

Gerard beamed back, tripping through the underbrush after Frank. Fucking awesome, he thought, seemed like a pretty damned attainable goal.





art by sunlit_paradox

End Notes

Once more, links to the art and mixes for the fic can be found here:
<http://novembersmith.livejournal.com/41235.html> at my master list on LJ. SERIOUSLY
AWESOME, GO CHECK IT OUT AND LEAVE THE ARTISTS/MIXERS LOVE.

Also, thanks to all the readers that made it this far. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as
I did writing it. <3 <3 <3

Works inspired by this one
[\[Podfic of\] The Anatomy of a Fall](#) by [klb](#)

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