

this loving feeling (it wears us out)

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this loving feeling (it wears us out)

by [Girl_rotting](#)

Summary

“Why? Why won’t you *ever* tell me what’s wrong with you?” Carlton’s voice is filled with frustration, and it sounds like nails on a chalkboard to Will.

What is wrong with him. It’s such a loaded question. Why does Will wake up screaming sometimes? Why can’t Will handle the cold? Why are there days when Carlton’s hands on him feel like being kept under water with no way up?

And why can’t Will tell Carlton the truth? How could Will possibly explain it without sounding insane? What is the human translation for being taken and kept in another dimension, violated, and possessed, only to then be violated yet again—

This part of him is something Will is never going to be able to share with anyone else. That nobody would understand.

Why won’t you tell me what’s wrong with you.

“Because you wouldn’t get it.” Will somehow manages to say it without gagging.

And then, Carlton goes in for the kill.

“Oh, but Mike does?”

OR

After leaving Hawkins to go to college in the great city of San Francisco, Will finally finds someone who loves him. The only problem is that the only person in the world who *knows* him, is someone else.

Notes

HAI ^^

this fic is my baby okay. If you guy aren't on twt, Carlton is a random extra's name that people have decided to panic over, incase he could be wills epilogue bf.

Well, i like capitalising on peoples suffering. Here's the epilouge bf fic! Don't shoot me mike will get his turn eventually

Apologising for any language mistakes blah blah english isn't my first language blah blah acting like i gaf about that language, writing is an ARTFORM and i will not let these rules (grammar and uhm. spelling.) DICTATE me!!! /j

enjoy i guess :/

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

Chapter 1: PROLOGUE: Will Byers, Carlton, and that guy on the phone

When the phone rings, Will picks up.

“Jane?” Will guesses, since about half of the phone calls he receives this early in the morning come from his sister, who still refuses to acknowledge the no doubt drastic time difference between San Francisco and wherever it is she stays these days.

“Not really,” a different voice answers, and Will’s stomach immediately drops to the floor. If that’s even possible.

“Hey Mike,” he answers, trying his absolute best to not sound strained.

Judging by Will’s intense reaction, one would think that Mike calling him from Hawkins is an unusual occurrence. It isn’t, and that makes it all the more embarrassing.

When Will moved away to California for college, all on his own, he figured that he’d use it to put some distance. Between himself and his trauma, between his sexuality and the conformist nature of Hawkins, and, of course, between him and Mike.

Two of those plans have worked out successfully so far. One hasn’t.

“Hey,” Mike’s voice sounds over the phone, too close to him, in a way that makes 2000 miles of distance seem like they aren’t nearly enough.

“Why are you calling me this early?” Will sighs, even though he knows that the real question he should be asking is *why is Will staying on the line?*

“Why did you pick up?” Mike throws back at him, and it hits in a way Will knows it shouldn’t, because he just asked himself basically the same question, and here goes Mike proving once again that he does in fact *know* Will.

“I have no idea, honestly,” Will all but groans into the receiver, and gets a muffled chuckle in response. “I thought you were Jane”

“Sure, you did,” Mike responds, and Will has to fight the urge to slam the phone back down. One thing Mike Wheeler will always have is the fucking audacity, Will will give that much to him.

Will settles for the much tamer reaction of rolling his eyes, “Just answer my question, Mike.”

“I don’t know, I guess. I wanted to know what you’d tell me if I asked.”

It’s such a simple answer, and yet it lights a thousand embers in Will’s chest. It’s stupid. Will doesn’t feel like that for Mike anymore, he hasn’t for a long time. He has a whole life in California, one that doesn’t involve Mike. He shouldn’t take the bait his easy.

Will takes it anyway, “Asked about what?”

“I don’t know,” Mike repeats himself. “Anything, really?”

It’s quiet for a moment, as they both sit with the fact that Mike is calling Will just for the sake of calling him. It’s a little funny, Will thinks. For Mike to be the one desperate to talk to Will now, when almost five years ago Will had been yearning in California, while Mike sat in Hawkins unbothered.

But it’s not like Will is unbothered now. He grips the phone, trying his hardest to not give into the conversation, a steady stream of *he’s just Tammy he’s just tammy he’s just Tammy* in his head when—

“What are you doing tonight?” Will’s own voice betrays his wishes.

“Oh, I’m hosting tonight,” Mike drops casually, and Will’s Jaw falls.

While Will, Max, Lucas, and Dustin all moved onto college or a life outside of Hawkins almost immediately after graduation, Mike made a different choice. He told Will, almost two years ago now, that he secretly had no clue what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. He knew that he wanted to do something that wasn’t him sitting in an office cubicle the entire day, but that was that. And Will told him that maybe, he didn’t need to know anything else just yet.

So, Mike stayed in Hawkins, while Will went to California. Of course, Mike couldn’t stand not having any serious responsibilities, because it left him with way too much alone time for him and his thoughts, so he asked Robin for a chance to work at the Squawk. And he likes it, Will knows he does, because he told him over and over again that listening to all the hosts perform for their shows felt a little like watching someone DM.

The fact that Mike is now getting the chance to slip back into that dungeon’s master role is warming Will’s chest just the tiniest bit.

“Holy shit, you are?” Will sputters, far too excited to feign nonchalance.

“Yeah,” Mike giggles. “Robin says that uhm, I sound sure enough of myself now? Like, confident, I guess. Although I think it doesn’t really sound like it, with how much I say, ‘I guess’ and all that. But she says it’s enough for me to not completely embarrass myself, so. That’s something.”

Will’s grip on the phone grows firmer. He adores the fact that two people that have shaped him and his life so much are now shaping each other as well. Even if Robin’s mentoring of Mike is no doubt a bajillion miles away from the advice that Will got from her.

“That’s— Amazing, Mike. I’m proud of you.” Will says and means it.

There’s another pause, though it’s less heavy this time, before Mike speaks again.

“Will you listen in?”

Will weighs the thought for a second. Calling Mike and talking to Mike is one thing. Listening to a random Indiana radio show just to hear his voice is another. He's not sure how appropriate it would be. But then again, *any* interaction he has with Mike could theoretically be seen as problematic, so who even cares.

"Can it reach San Francisco?" Will asks with a smirk and really hopes that he's being quiet enough to not be heard in the other room.

"Come on, you know me," Mike answers, and Will knows he's smirking too. "I'll just tweak with the station a bit and use the fancy shit that gets to Cali. Robin won't even notice."

Fuck Will's life. He's going to listen to that stupid radio show, "Well, when are you broadcasting?"

There's some shuffling on the other line, before Mike responds, sounding absolutely delighted, "9pm my time, so 6pm yours. Robin doesn't trust me with the slots where there's an actual audience yet"

Will's smile drops. 6pm. Tonight.

"I- I'm sorry Mike, I can't make it. I'm busy.

Silence. Then—

"With Carlton?"

The name lands like a fucking bomb. Because that's what it is, to both of them. Their friendship is fragile on a good day, not because they don't care about each other, but because they both know they care too much.

Will shouldn't even be talking to Mike like this; he knows that he should be seeking comfort in someone else when he wakes up in the early hours of the day. Because he knows that that someone, that his *boyfriend*, for fucks sake, is just a door away.

But Mike also shouldn't fucking despise Carlton this much.

Will exhales through the nose before responding. This is always where things go wrong with his and Mike's conversation, "Yeah Mike, with Carlton."

"What are you guys even doing at 6pm"

"Going out"

"To eat?"

"Yes, Mike"

"But you hate eating dinner that early," Will winces again at the reminder of how well Mike knows him. "You say it's practically—"

Lunch, Will thinks in his head.

“lunch”, Mike says out loud.

Will closes his eyes. Sometimes he honestly wonders where Mike gets his audacity from. What makes him think he has a right to criticize Will’s relationship? He doesn’t. Will has repeatedly implied as much; it’s just that Mike doesn’t care.

Sometimes Will thinks that he hallucinated everything. That he made up that conversation at the Squawk, where he essentially confessed to loving Mike in front of what was basically a football team. Dustin and Lucas didn’t get it, seeing as they both cornered him once it was all over to talk about his crush, and neither did Jane, thank the lord.

But Mike saw. He *knew*, and worst of all, he didn’t care. He looked at Will once, all sad and ruined, and made Will feel like shit, and grabbed his arm to tug him into a corner to just talk about it— only to then not say a single thing.

And that’s the way it’s been ever since. Three years of radio silence between them concerning the topic of love. Of crushing. Of confessing your most humiliating secret and it not even being acknowledged.

And maybe Will should be glad for it. That he and Mike can be friends. That Mike doesn’t hate him. But Will despises the fact that their feelings are this unspoken thing that Will never even got closure on. Logistically, he knows that Mike has never felt anything for him like that, but he also logistically knows that some of the things Mike does aren’t normal for a friend to do.

Like, for example; criticizing Will’s relationship like it’s any of his business.

“Why do you care?” Will mumbles, gnawing on his lower lip.

Mike just huffs, “I don’t care! I just don’t know if eating at six is...good for you”

“Good for me?” Will deadpans.

“You know what I mean”

Sometimes Will wonders how he hasn’t strangled Mike yet.

“It’s a fucking dinner Mike, I’m sure I’ll be fine”

“You’re not gonna eat anything”

“You don’t know that”

“I do,” Mike argues, getting more heated.

Will is so tired of this. Mike, in this bullshit one-sided competition with Carlton about who knows Will better, when literally everyone involved knows who’s winning. And yeah, maybe Will is a bit tired of it being Mike. Always.

He can't be blamed for being a bit annoyed by it. He doesn't know if that annoyance should be directed at Carlton, or Mike, or even himself, but he knows that right now Mike is the easiest choice, so sue him for wanting to prove Mike wrong.

"Well, I got up early today. Early breakfast means I'll probably be hungry enough for an early dinner too," Will grits through his teeth, even though he sort of knows that Mike is obviously and objectively correct and he's going to spend the night ordering a shitty salad at best.

Mike, apparently, is either oblivious to Will's irritation, or straight up ignoring it. He's quiet for half a moment, before Will hears Mike inhale like he always does before changing a topic.

When Mike speaks, he sounds infuriatingly soft, "Are you up because of nightmares?"

Will huffs. Mike is not the person he should be talking to about this.

"No," *lie*. "I have an early class," *lie*. "so, I should get going," *another lie*.

This time, Mike gets the hint. Will hears him scoff over the phone, before saying "yeah, alright. Go have fun in class, Will. I'll hear from you in a month"

It leaves Will gaping. The insinuation that it's *Will* that's making things weird between them has him seething.

"Fuck you Mike, I have *been* reaching out—"

The line goes dead.

Will slams down the phone.

Dinner with Carlton is sort of nice.

But then Will orders cucumber salad, and of course, Carlton notices.

"I mean, are you sure that's all you'll have?"

"Yeah, it's fine, really. I'm just not that hungry today," Will says, fiddling with the napkins on his plate as they wait for their food.

"Well, you're like, never hungry when we go out."

Because your mealtimes are more like the ones of a hobbit than a human, Will thinks, but doesn't say. Carlton doesn't know *Lord of The Rings*, or *The Hobbit* anyways. But it's not like they don't have any common interests. They do; it's just more about art with them.

It's part of the reason they bonded so fast, Will thinks. Talking about art with someone who is even more into it than him has been fun so far. Carlton doesn't just stick to drawing or painting and all that stuff. He goes to improv classes, and takes Will to watch plays with him, and he does a lot of pottery and sculpting and all that. Carlton is a good sculptor, Will thinks. He likes watching him work.

He thinks about telling Carlton that he's saving himself for dessert at home, a cheesy line that he's sadly heard Robin use more than once, but he decides that he would quite literally rather die than be that corny. Still, it's a funny thought.

One that seems to show on his face, apparently, because Carlton catches his eye and breaks the silence.

"What are you smiling about?"

"You," Will answers, and he's glad it's not a lie.

Carlton is glad about that too, apparently, judging by his smirk.

"Charming man of many words"

"You know me," Will chuckles, and feels Carlton gently kick his leg under the table.

"I do", he says, and it's supposed to sound cute, but Will thinks that Mike would probably kill himself if he heard that.

He shouldn't be thinking about Mike when he's getting dinner with Carlton.

"Yep," he says, popping the p.

The restaurant is quiet. It's this old Asian place across the street from their apartment that serves Uyghur food, and their clientele isn't the largest. Will goes here with Carlton a lot though, because the food is fancy and still cheap, and it's the kind of family owned restaurant where you can see kids doing their homework at the table next to them, so Will can tell the people making his food trust each other at least a little bit. It's a sappy thought, but Will thinks it, nonetheless.

That being said, the restaurant is quiet, which means that Will feels the need to break the silence.

"What did you do today? How's the flower going?" Will ends up asking.

Carlton is working on a sculpture for mid-terms, and their given creative direction was the very broad topic of florals. Obviously, Carlton couldn't just make a clay dandelion or something, so he set himself the task of somehow capturing a wilting flower with his sculpting, and Will had to listen to him complain about his own overachieving tendencies for the past few weeks.

"Oh, it's done!" Carlton grins. "You should look at the final product, you only saw the messy in-between"

“It wasn’t that messy,” Will mumbles, like he didn’t have to ask Carlton about what the puddle of clay was even meant to look like multiple times.

“It was and you know it”

“Well, you’re the one who made it, so I’d be surprised if it wasn’t,” It’s meant to come out as teasing and lighthearted, but Will can see Carlton tense up on the other side of the table.

It lasts only for a second, but Will swears on his life that he sees Carlton’s jaw clench, before he exhales. The movement is gone as fast as it came, but it puts Will on edge. Carlton is being weird.

Still, he carries on with the conversation, oblivious to Will’s unease, “Please, as if you’re one to talk about messy. I have had to wash paint out of your hair more times than I can count.”

Now it’s Carlton making the lighthearted comment, and Will thinks that maybe he just imagined his apprehensiveness as well. Everything is fine, it’s just the morning with Mike and the sleepless night before that that’s making him unreasonably anxious.

“That was one time!” Will laughs.

“Uh, twice, actually”

“Whatever you say”

Will gives a sheepish smile as the waiter arrives with their food, and even if he can see Carlton side-eye his cucumbers, he at least doesn’t say anything about it.

He’s still not hungry, but he likes the cucumber salad here, so he eats anyways. His bites are slow and a little tedious, and he doesn’t even realize how the conversation has gone quiet again until he reaches out to steal soy sauce from Carlton’s dish.

“Help yourself”, he says casually, but his smile is strained and all of a sudden Will’s appetite vanishes completely. Never mind imagining things, Will’s eyes were working just fine, thank you very much.

He sets his chopsticks down and reaches for the napkin again. He knows that his fiddling is obvious, and that it makes Carlton uncomfortable, but Will can’t bring himself to care, since it’s clear that he already is anyways. He feels Carlton’s eyes heavy on him, first watching his face and then flicking down to his still full bowl of cucumbers and the napkin slowly getting torn between his fingers.

In his peripheral vision, he sees Carlton’s fingers twitch as well, like he wants to reach out and grab Will’s hand to stop his fidgeting. Will hates when he does it.

But they’re in public, so obviously Carlton can’t touch him as much as he would in the comfort of their shared apartment, but Will doesn’t mind. He likes physical touch, likes being held and kept warm specifically, but sometimes there are days when touch is just overwhelming, especially when it’s restraining. The chill of autumn seeping into Will’s life

has been challenging, and although it's not November yet, Will can't help but be reminded of the freezing Upside-Down time and time again.

The Upside-Down that Carlton doesn't have a single clue about.

Will could already tell his mind was slipping, but when he looks up from the napkin in his hands, he can tell that Carlton noticed too.

Great.

His response is nothing short of a sigh, "Alright, what's going on?"

"Nothing!", Will reassures him instantly, but both of them already have their guards up, Will can tell from the way their table slightly shakes because of Carlton's hopping knee.

"Nothing? Will come on, you know you're acting off"

"Carl, I'm fine." Will mutters, hoping the casual nickname will resolve at least some of the tension that was brewing over the evening.

"Fine;" Carlton scoffs. "don't tell me what's wrong, but can you at least have the decency to put on a convincing act and let us have a nice evening?"

Will's mouth drops open. The only reason he's 'acting off' in the first place is because *Carlton* was the one huffing and puffing the entire time, to the point that Will couldn't even try to brush it aside anymore, like he does almost any other day.

"Wow." Is the only word that comes out of his mouth.

Carlton sighs *yet again*, like he wasn't the one who started the bullshit in the first place, "I'm just being honest, Will. This is the first time we've been out in ages and you—"

"Okay that's just not true!"

"It is Will, and you know it! You've been acting so weird lately, but you won't tell me what's going on"

Will debates this for a moment, because it's the only true thing Carlton has said all evening. He has been acting weird, he always acts weird around the fall time, and he thinks he always will, no matter how much time passes. It's something about the anniversary, combined with everything getting colder, that makes Will extra antsy.

He's traumatized on a good day, but the fall time turns him into a downright wreck, which is somehow equal parts embarrassing and sad. But Carlton hasn't been around long enough to know that. They started dating in spring, and Will hasn't felt the need to explain the whole fall situation.

Carlton knows, on some level, that *something* happened in Will's childhood. Will never got too much into detail about it all, so he doesn't know if Carlton just chalks it up to being

Lonnie related, (Lonnie is something that he *did* tell Carlton about, because somehow, it's the easiest to explain) or if he knows that there's something Will won't tell him about.

And Will has thought about telling him, honestly. Not the truth, of course, but a watered-down and believable version that wouldn't get him sent to the psych ward.

The beginning is okay; Will was twelve years old when he got kidnapped on his way home and got kept in a shed in the woods for a week before the police found him.

But then, he gets to the whole possession part, and the story stops making sense.

And even if he just leaves out everything that happened after his mom and Hopper rescued him, there's still holes in the story that Carlton could want answers to.

Why was Will kidnapped in the first place? What was the mystery kidnapper doing, keeping him in the shed for a week straight? Somehow, the truth doesn't seem adaptable here.

How could Will possibly explain it? The feeling of being kept in place by the vines that Vecna controlled, and then the feeling of those same Vines being pushed into Will's mouth, reaching further and further down his throat until they were all he could feel. The feeling of throwing up the slugs that the Vines put into him.

There's no possible translation for that, and whenever Will tries to find one, it reaches increasingly uncomfortable territory that Will technically knows is theoretically accurate but —

It makes Will physically ill to even think about. He can't talk about it by *comparing*, he can barely even talk about it with people that know the full truth.

You won't tell me what's going on. Will chooses the safest answer to the unspoken *why* in that sentence.

"Because you wouldn't get it." He somehow manages to say it without gagging.

And then, Carlton goes in for the kill.

"Oh, but Mike does?"

The air stocks in Will's lungs and for the second time this evening, Will can't believe his ears. Moreso, he can't believe that he felt bad about not telling Carlton the truth for a second.

"Excuse me?"

"I heard you on the phone with him this morning"

It clicks for Will then. Why Carlton has been pissed off the whole evening. Will mistook it for concern, when really it was something as uneventful as *jealousy*.

"Oh my god— Is this why you're...hyper analyzing my behavior all of a sudden?"

“It’s called concern, Will. There’s nothing malicious about it.”

Will calls bullshit, “If you’re that concerned, why didn’t you ask me about calling Mike this morning, when you heard it? You seemed fine with the fact that I was out of bed at five am. So sorry if I’m finding your act a little hard to believe”

Will hates fighting, and he hates fighting in public even more, but he hates Mike intruding on his relationship most of all. If Carlton wants to do this, then Will isn’t going to admit to shit. Not that there’s even anything to admit to.

Carlton scoffs, “An act? You’re calling me worrying for you an act?”

“You said it first”

“I can’t believe you.” He says, and he has the audacity to sound hurt.

Will can’t help but feel bad. This isn’t what he wanted, “What are we even fighting about right now?”

“The fact that you never talk to me about any of your problems but then go and blame me for not understanding you!” Carlton whisper yells, still way too loud for Will’s liking.

“When have I ever blamed you? Telling you that there are some things you just don’t get isn’t an attack on your character, it’s the truth—”

“Then why don’t you just give me a chance to try? Why don’t you tell me anything?”

Tears are building in Will’s eyes, and he doesn’t know whether they come from hurt, anger, or sheer embarrassment “I tell you things!”

“Okay,” Carlton says it like a challenge. “Then why were you out of bed at five in the morning?”

Will pauses and thinks. He doesn’t know how much truth he can unveil here without it blowing up in his face even more than it already has.

“Nightmare.” He tries, after calculating every possible response from Carlton and deeming it a safe enough choice.

“What about?”

The cold. Vines tightening around his torso. Sneaking their way into his mouth and down his throat. Feeling something everywhere, and then feeling someone everywhere, and then feeling both at the same time. Will stays quiet. He miscalculated.

His silence isn’t satisfying, judging by the way Carlton scoots back on his chair and lets out a humorless laugh, “Oh my god, see? This is exactly what I’m talking about”

Will tries his hardest to keep his bottom lip from wobbling as Carlton stands up from his chair to gather his things, “Carl, please—”

“Just drop it Will,” Carlton groans, sounding far too wrecked for Will to handle, “I can’t.... I don’t wanna be around you right now, and neither do you. If we keep fighting, we’ll just— We’ll say stuff we’ll regret, that we don’t even mean”

It's humiliating, the way Will can feel his tears spill onto his cheeks like that's where they're meant to be. Every time he cries, Will feels like that's all he's done his whole life. At some point the hurt started, and it hasn't stopped since.

It grows stronger when Carlton finally reaches into his wallet and gently places a twenty-dollar bill on the table, enough to pay for both their food, even though neither of them have finished.

“I’m staying at Quinn’s for the night,” his voice is gentler now. “We’ll- We’ll talk in the morning, okay?”

But Will doesn't care about how gentle Carlton is being. He has this special talent, of managing to never insult or purposefully hurt Will when they fight but still letting him ache in ways no one else ever has. Because Carlton isn't afraid to tell him the truth, and that's something he could never do.

“Why are you acting like this?” Will’s voice cracks, and he’s pretty sure the teenage boy doing his homework at the table next to them heard it, even if Will is being as quiet as humanly possible.

In response, Carlton lets his hand rest on Will’s shoulder, and Will has to try his absolute best to not flinch, “Because I care for you, and for some reason you won’t let me”

“I- I *will*,” Will stutters out. He can’t believe that somehow, Vecna is still ruining him from beyond the grave. “Carlton, I promise someday—”

“Yeah, someday. But not tonight. Maybe you can tell Mike about it tonight,” He mutters, and the worst part is that it sounds like an honest suggestion. Will needs to die. “Sleep tonight, okay? I love you.”

Will doesn't say anything back.

He just sits still, an entire river wild inside of him, and watches as Carlton's hand slips off his shoulder, the loss of the touch somehow feeling worse than the touch itself.

Will doesn't even ask the waiter for a container to take the food home. He simply sits in silence, waiting maybe five minutes after Carlton walked out of the restaurant, before he moves his body towards the door as well, possibly feeling more like a marionette than ever before in his life.

Will gets home and sits at the kitchen table. He's still silent, but it doesn't feel important in the slightest, since it's not like there's anyone there to notice his silence anyways.

He thinks about pouring himself a glass of wine or pulling out a cigarette, but he already feels enough like his mom as is. He doesn't need to feed into the addiction genes to top it off.

Instead, Will does something far more shameful.

He's not even sure if it'll work, except he totally is, and that makes everything worse.

Tuning the kitchen radio into the right channel is easy work. The fact that the radio bends under his will, because Mike fucking Wheeler tweaked with Hawkin's radio signals even though Will told him he wouldn't be able to listen, just in case, is a lot harder to stomach.

But it's nothing compared to the sound of Mike's animated voice in Will's ears.

You can tell it's Mike's first time moderating, and still, you can also tell that it's something he's wanted to do for a long time. Or maybe only Will can tell that. It's obvious to him, however. The signs are there in Mike's small 'uhm' sounds, or his heightened tendency to repeat himself. It's almost endearing, Will thinks, and he can't muster up the energy to hate himself for it.

Will is pretty sure the segment is almost over, but he doesn't care. Mike talks about the most boring topics imaginable, like construction work, or upcoming town hall events, or flea markets in the Hawkins High gymnasium, and yet it's possibly the most interesting thing Will has ever heard.

Mike puts on different records, most of them shitty, but Will isn't tuned in for the music.

At some point, he lays his head on the table and closes his eyes. The apartment is silent apart from the songs and Mike's stumbling commentary, and Carlton is gone. Will doesn't have to try hard to pretend he's not alone. That maybe Carlton was never even here with him in the first place. That someone else was.

Sometimes he wonders if maybe his imagination feeds him the truth every once in a while.

That night, Will falls asleep at the kitchen table, to the sound of Mike introducing the humble tunes of The Cure's *'Pictures of you'*.

Chapter 2: ARC ONE: dead poets and Will Byers' word vomit (a perfect date night)

Chapter Summary

what the title says

Chapter Notes

okay genuinely wtf was that finale i am CRYINGGGGGG as an el will mike stan, this was literally my vecna vision. Mike not saying ily to el in her last moments, carlton being fucking REAL???????? well uhm okay guess this fic is canon now!! yay!!

ignore the fact that i implied el is in hawkins in the last chapter, if u saw that, no u didn't, and if u didn't, then yeah duh bc i edited it out. now enjoy my willel byler c*rlton meal

SPOILWRS for dead poets society in this. uhm i guess. its a plot point.

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

Will is sitting at the same kitchen table four days later, only this time the sound of Jane's voice is filling his ears in place of Mike's.

Unfortunately, her talk was much less relaxing than Mike's had been.

"Dump his ass" Jane scoffs.

Will wonders what he was even expecting. This is Jane, he's talking about. The only male love interest she accepts in her friend's lives is Lucas, which, is honestly incredibly valid. Sometimes Will thinks she even judges their mom for being with Hopper.

Jane has this awful quality of forcing people to be honest with her without even needing to try, which in turn makes Will have the awful tendency of opening up to her about almost everything. Meaning that when she asked about his week, Will told her about it. And sadly, also included information on his and Carlton's argument on Friday.

"I was an asshole too, you know," Will tries, even though he knows it's of no use. Jane never liked Carlton all that much anyways.

"Not as much as he was"

Will can't deny it, "He apologized!"

"He also," Jane adds helpfully. "Ruined your cucumber salad. I know how much you love that cucumber salad"

A sigh escapes his mouth, "That's what's bothering you the most?"

"It's what I'd be most upset about," she mumbles, and Will can practically hear her shrugging.

"Well, I'm not. Anymore, at least"

It's been four days since Will fell asleep in the kitchen.

Carlton came home the next day and said that he was sorry for trying to force Will into talking, and that he knows that it just creates an even more unsafe environment for Will. Whatever that means. Carlton is friends with a lot of very pretentious psychology majors.

In any case, he's backed off now, thank the lord. And so, Will's anger did too. He didn't like that Carlton just left him alone in the restaurant, but it's nothing devastating enough to make Will consider *dumping* Carlton.

Absentmindedly, Will reaches up to fiddle with his necklace.

That was a new addition, one that came with Carlton's Saturday apology. Carlton said that he really did mean what he told Will, and that it wasn't just empty words. Carlton's way of showing this was to give Will the necklace. Well, it was less a necklace than it was a piece of string tied around will's neck, but that wasn't what mattered anyways. Sitting on the string was a lock, a miniature version of a regular one, right where Will could always reach for it.

Carlton said that it was supposed to symbolize that no matter how emotionally constipated Will kept being (those are will's own words, okay, not his), Carlton would stay by his side until he was ready. Carlton's presence was locked onto Will; there was no getting rid of him any time soon. Will thinks he likes that thought.

The cheap metal is cool against Will's fingers when he touches it, but it's not cold enough to bother him. Will enjoys the necklace. He isn't the biggest jewelry guy, but it's the thought that counts, and clearly Carlton put a lot of thought into it.

So, no. Will isn't upset anymore.

"Guess the cucumber salad will just have to wait a bit longer to be mine," Will sighs, with the hopes of putting an end to the Carlton-conversation.

Jane hums, "So are you going to stop being mad at Mike now too?"

The air around Will stops moving, as is usual when Mike's name gets mentioned. Will doesn't know who told Jane about his little phone fight with Mike, or how much she knows about what was said. Will desperately wishes to go back to the Carlton conversation.

“What?”

“Are you going to call him back at some point, or must we all keep on suffering?”

“Why— Why would I call him back?” Will stutters dumbfounded. It’s not like Mike doesn’t have a phone, matter of fact, the Wheeler household has *three*, if you include the one in Nancy’s room, whereas Will’s apartment just has the one.

“Because he says that you’ve been ignoring him for a week. He spent our entire call whining about it.”

The concept of Mike calling Jane to whine about being quote on quote ignored by Will is one that Will can’t think too long about, unless he wants to spontaneously combust.

“Well, he’s a liar!” Will deflects. “He called on Friday, was a douche to me, and now it’s *Tuesday* and he calls it a *week!*”

“I mean, you know how he gets,” Jane muses, voice heavy with held back laughter. “Especially when it comes to you”

Fuck yeah, Will knows. He knows that he and Mike used to barely fight at all, even during their worst phases like Lenora or that one summer. They only fought once both times; it was more their general dynamic that had Will sobbing himself to sleep back then. Will would have taken any and all fights over the silence and awkwardness between them that seemed to stretch on like mountains.

It’s almost the direct opposite of their relationship now. Will and Mike are in each other’s lives again, even if it’s not physically, but they fight more now.

Whether it’s a lighthearted argument about Mike calling Robin a soulless capitalist because of his work hours, or a more serious one like on Friday. They can’t seem to go a whole phone call without nagging each other on in some way. But they also can’t seem to go more than three days without each other, so Will is fine with the fighting. It’s refreshing, at least, to not be afraid of fighting with Mike anymore.

It’s also refreshing to know that more often than not, Mike is the one crawling back for forgiveness first. Call him petty, but it heals Will’s inner child to let Mike suffer at least a little bit.

“Shut up,” he huffs, after considering Jane’s comment for a bit.

Her laughter finally gets set free, “No, I’m serious—”

But then Will hears noise coming from their front door and decides that now most likely isn’t the best time to be discussing just how differently Mike acts with him, “So am I, El, shut up!”

Will ignores his sister’s muffled protests coming from the phone as he puts it down and lets it rest against his shoulder. He stands up from his seat and leans around the corner to get a clear view of the apartment entrance, where Carlton is standing.

“Hi,” Carlton mouths, gesturing to the phone.

“Just Jane,” Will mouths back, before putting the phone to his ear again. “Hey, listen Jane, I kind of have to go now, Carlton just got back and—”

“Carlton? Let me talk to him.”

“Absolutely not,” Will laughs, and he laughs even harder when he looks at Carlton standing in the hallway like a paper cut-out. For his own well-being, he turns away to look at the kitchen table instead.

“Please Will, I just wanna say hi—”

“No, you don’t, you absolute rat—” Will chuckles, only to stop mid-sentence and startle when he feels an arm slip around his waist from behind. The touch is sudden and Will tenses up, but he forces himself to relax when he feels Carlton move closer, his head right beside Will’s neck.

“Hey Jane,” Carlton says into the receive still stuck to Will’s ear.

“Hey Carl!” Jane yells loud enough for Carlton to hear. Sadly, Will is still holding the phone close enough to his head for normal conversation, so he ends up half deaf.

“Oh my god El, don’t scream at me!” Will complains, not noticing his slip up until it’s too late.

It’s quiet on Jane’s line now, but Will knows she heard it too. *El*. Something they rarely call her anymore, but still something that slips out during charged, or especially lighthearted conversations. Something that Will is sure Carlton hasn’t heard him call her before.

“El?” He asks, confirming Will’s suspicions.

Will’s heartrate picks up. It’s the smallest of lies, easily explained or excused, but it’s a detail kept from Carlton that he’ll now have to reveal, nonetheless. Will is just glad that *this* is where he slips up. A conversation about his and El’s combined body count would be harder to twist into something believable.

“Oh, it’s just a nickname. From DnD,” Will says softly, the lie rolling off his tongue disturbingly easy. He used to despise lying, but somewhere along the way it became his true nature.

“Ah, okay.” Carlton nods before casually taking the phone away from Will and into his own hands. “Well, very sorry to interrupt, but I’m gonna have to steal your brother away from you. Yeah, a tragedy, I know. Bye El!”

Will doesn’t hear Jane’s response before Carlton places the phone down and hangs up. Will’s heartbeat has settled by now and so has his unease at having Carlton looming behind him. Carlton’s hand on Will’s stomach is grounding, and it makes up for Carlton’s cold breath at the back of Will’s neck.

Will places his own hand on top of Carlton's to keep him in place while he turns around in his grasp to face him. Their eyes lock and Will lets a teasing smile settle on his lips, "So? What's important enough to steal me away from a call with my poor, sweet sister?"

"Oh, now she's sweet? Cause I'm pretty sure I just heard you call her a rat"

"She can be both"

"I'm excited to meet her," Carlton confesses, and it makes Will's heart drop to his ass.

Yeah, he can tell Carlton that his sister has a silly and nickname, but how can he tell him that not even *he* has seen her in three years? Jane was somewhere safe, somewhere she could live life as Jane and not Eleven, but that's about all the party knows regarding her location. Hell, Will thought that she was *dead* for the first two years, because she didn't think contacting them would have been safe before. Then, Will received a phone call on some unsuspecting Saturday in spring, along with the rest of his friends, and on the other line was El. Needless to say he cried.

Will doesn't know if he'll ever get to hold her again, he doesn't even know what she looks like anymore, because sending postcards and pictures would be too dangerous. Their relationship consists of Jane calling him once a week at odd hours, always from a different phone number. He always picks up, even if it destroys him to hear her from so far away. He misses her like a limb.

He'll probably have to tell Carlton that she couldn't celebrate Christmas with them because she has the flu.

"She is too," Will says, trying his hardest not to tear up at the thought. He wishes Jane got to meet Carlton, even if she doesn't like most of what she hears from him. She deserves to be able to tell him that in person.

Carlton can tell Will is upset, but he doesn't know why, which is far too close to how things were on Friday for Will's comfort. He sighs, "Well, you seem very excited"

Will swallows hard, he can't do this today, "No, Carl, I am. Okay? Trust me, *I am.*"

It seems convincing enough even though Will didn't try all that hard, but he'll count his blessings. Carlton nods, stopping to think for a while, which Will is fine with. He doesn't get why exactly Carlton had to interrupt his and Jane's only phone call of the week if he wasn't going to say anything, but Will isn't really in the mood for conversation anyways.

"You wanna do something tonight?" Carlton finally spits out.

If Will is being honest, then no, he really doesn't want to do anything tonight, "I don't know, it's— It's really cold out already"

"We can stay in." Carlton rushes to reassure him immediately. "I'll grab us take out, we'll drink some wine, keep it cozy, you know? I'm just gonna go shower first, and then I'm all yours"

Will doesn't exactly remember when he asked Carlton to be all his, but he thinks it's too late to complain about the offer now. It could be nice, all in all. Will's not in the mood to go out, especially after Friday, but he likes their casual at home dates, where they can just kind of exist within the comfort of their own four walls without worrying about things like being obvious, or being seen, or the temperature. Well, Will is probably the only one of them worrying about the temperature, but his point still stands. Not everything needs effort. Not everything always needs to be a date.

"Yeah, okay," Will nods. "Sounds nice"

The hesitance in Will's voice isn't enough to throw off Carlton, who just smiles and plants a small kiss on Will's temple, before letting go of him to walk towards the bathroom. Will is alone in the kitchen again, and he thinks that he still has some time until Carlton comes back. He likes taking long showers.

Will looks at the phone on the kitchen table and thinks of Jane's words. *Are you going to stop being mad at Mike too?* Will figures that it'd be unfair to forgive Carlton but not Mike and reaches for the phone again.

He dials the number without hesitating a single time and puts the receiver back to his ear.

One ring. Two rings. then—

"Hello?"

It's a little crazy, how the sound of a single word can let Will exhale in relief like this, "Mike."

It's even crazier that Will can hear the same exhale on Mike's line.

Will doesn't know how long he's talking on the phone with Mike, and what's worse is that he doesn't care.

"Wait, wait, wait— So Robin *still* refuses to give you time off?"

"Yes!" Mike groans, exasperated.

"For no reason?" Will questions, because that's not really the Robin he knows.

"Oh my god, for the millionth time, yes Will!"

Will highly doubts that Robin just became an evil capitalist overlord while he was gone, the answer that's more likely is that Mike somehow fucked up so badly during his first weeks of the job that Robin still needs him to iron out his past mistakes, even months later. He doesn't want to word it quite like that though.

"And you're sure you didn't like, accidentally kill her cat or something?" He jokes instead.

“No man, I’m telling you, she’s evil” Mike jokes back.

“What, I thought you two started getting along!”

“Well yes, but now I’ve discovered that it was all an act and that she’s actually just a witch”

Will chuckles at Mike’s dramatics. He’s pretty sure Robin is the least witchy person on the planet. Will thinks she feels more like a scarecrow. Hell, even Will himself is a bigger witch than Robin. At least he had magic powers, once upon a time.

“Oh right, and when was that discovery made?”

“You know what, I think I’ve always known, deep down”

“Just last week you were telling me about how cool she is”

“Uh, wrong, I was telling you she has good movie taste”

Will can’t disagree. Robin showed him Rocky Horror. He will forever be in her debt for it, “Don’t I know it”

There’s a small silence, before Mike speaks again. It’s not awkward or anything, but it’s also unlike the many comfortable silences they’ve shared with each other before. It’s almost like there’s something building up. Like Mike is mustering up the courage to say something.

“We…we actually watched something the other day. It was a good movie.” Mike eventually confesses, which seems relatively uneventful to Will.

“What’s it called?” He asks anyways, because if it’s important to Mike then it should be to him as well.

“I don’t know if you’d like it. It’s not very fantasy-like and stuff”

Will scoffs a little, “Mike, I do in fact enjoy media outside of fantasy settings”

“It’s not horror either”

“Just tell me the movie, Mike!”

“Fine!” Mike burst out. He swallows once before continuing. “It’s called uhm, it’s called ‘Dead Poets Society’. It’s about these fancy guys in the…60s? I think? And anyway, they go to this really strict boarding school, and all the teachers are total assholes, but like not the Hawkins kind, more like the rich and fancy kind, you know ‘em. But there’s this one teacher, and he’s kind of like their Mr. Clarke right, except he teaches English instead of science.”

Mike rambles on, like he’s done since they were kids. Mike finds something he likes, chews off Will ear about it, and more often than not Will will find himself interested in the same thing as well.

“And there’s—” Mike pauses for a bit, before continuing, almost like he’s nervous. “There are these two friends. I mean, it’s a whole friend group, but those two are like, more important or something. I don’t know. But Robin thought so too.”

“That’s...nice?” Will says, uncertain where Mike is going with this.

“Yeah,” He breathes. “Todd and Neil. They— they kind of remind me of us.”

Oh.

That’s where Mike was going with this.

Will’s throat dries up, and he doesn’t know what to say. It’s nothing new of Mike to find characters from Movies or book to compare to him and Will, but it is something that he hasn’t done in a while. It sounds a little pathetic to admit, but Will thinks that it leaves such an impact on him because it’s proof that Mike thinks about him when he’s not around. Which is stupid, because they’re best friends, and of course Mike thinks of him sometimes.

Still, Will’s chest grows warmer.

“I mean, that’s nice,” Is the best answer he can come up with. He sounds like an idiot.

But that doesn’t really matter, because Mike is sort of an idiot too.

“Well, it’s not that nice of a movie,” He starts again. “It’s actually really sad, you know. And like, I don’t wanna spoil you here, but I do just really quickly want to state that I only relate to maybe the first three quarters of the movie and not the sad part so—”

Before Mike can continue his rant, Will hears someone clear their throat behind him. He whips around, wild eyed, only to find an expectant Carlton staring back at him. He’s dressed in casual clothes, and his hair is almost dry again. Shit, how long had Will been on the phone?

“—And I’m not really interested in theater, but like Neil’s whole thing isn’t actually about theater either, I mean it is, but it’s not. Does that make sense? Will? Will, you there?” Mike keeps going, oblivious to the way Will’s breathing stopped.

Carlton stands in the doorway with a tired expression, as he taps an imaginary watch on his hand. Will looks at the very real watch on his own wrist and almost flinches. He didn’t notice the room got dark, but the clock showed that it was almost eight pm by now. Carlton asked him to spend the evening with each other at six.

Will left Carlton waiting for two hours.

He gulps heavily and prays Mike can’t hear, “Uh, hey, really sorry, but I think I’ll have to hang up now”

“Oh,” Mike practically deflates. “Alright, yeah, cool. Have a nice Tuesday night, Will”

“Yeah, thanks, you too” Will mumbles, purposefully avoiding Mike's name.

“Bye—” Mike tries to say, but Will hangs up before he can get past the first word of whatever he wanted to say.

The kitchen feels colder without Mike’s easy presence. In its place is Carlton’s undeterred need for honesty, and it stresses Will out. He knows he screwed up here. He knows that he kind of ruined date night, again but he’d rather kill himself than let Mike be the topic of his and Carlton’s fights again.

“Will,” Carlton sighs quietly. “I’ve been waiting for like, an hour and a half, you know that, right?”

Will’s fingers reach up to fidget with his necklace again. Somehow, the touch isn’t comforting this time. The metal feels hard enough to cut him.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbles. “I thought you were showering.”

“For two hours?”

“I didn’t know I was gone for two hours”

Carlton’s brows furrow at that, “You didn’t notice? Who on earth were you on the phone with?”

The honest answer would be Mike. The *truth* is Mike, but for some reason, Will can’t bring himself to say the name. And not for the usual reasons, it’s got nothing to do with shame or guilt this time. He doesn’t want to say Mike’s name purely because of the consequences. He knows that Carlton doesn’t necessarily like Mike, and he knows that part of the reason for that is because of how close he and Mike still are.

Carlton doesn’t even know about Will’s old feelings for Mike. He doesn’t need to. Will’s current feelings are enough.

So instead of just telling the truth, Will’s mouth moves before he can stop it, “Just with Lucas and Max”

“Oh,” Carlton’s posture visibly relaxes. It’s clear he wasn’t expecting that answer, and Will feels like someone stabbed him.

He bleeds guilt like it’s his own blood, but there’s no saving him. He knows what it means to lie about something like that. There’s no need to lie, Will knows that, so why did he? Why does he feel like talking to Mike is something inherently betraying? They’re friends, they’ve been best friends for fifteen years now, Will isn’t doing anything wrong when he talks to him, so *why lie?*

What makes it worse is that Carlton doesn’t even think of accusing him of lying.

“What did you guys talk about?”, he asks, not in an attempt to trip Will up, but out of genuine curiosity, blissfully unaware of the way the question makes Will’s heartrate pick up.

“The usual,” Will nods like he’s reassuring himself. “They talked about their Halloween plans. Max wants to hand out trail mix, because she’s bitter that she can’t go trick or treating herself anymore”

“The kids are gonna throw eggs at them”

“That’s what I said,” Will gulps, hoping it doesn’t sound like *I am making all of this up on the spot.*

He’s too deep into the lie now, and it’s a completely unnecessary one at that. Will needs to lie about the upside-down stuff, about El, about why being in Hawkins for Christmas time is this important to him, but he doesn’t need to lie about phone calls with Mike.

But the worst part is that it *works*.

“It’s okay,” Carlton surrenders, so suddenly that Will almost flinches. “You racked up our phone bill with that two-hour phone call; I made us go into water bill dept with my shower. The least we can do is just enjoy the rest of our evening and be poor together”

Will blinks. He was so sure that this would be a fight if he told Carlto the truth about calling Mike. But he didn’t tell him the truth, and they didn’t fight as a result. Which all makes sense on a purely theoretical level, but Will still doesn’t fully understand.

Will isn’t wrong for wanting to talk to Mike; it’s his right, actually. So why has he been getting punished for it, fight after fight? No matter what he and Carlton argue about, it always seems to circle back to Mike. This whole conversation just proves it. If Will told Carlton the truth about talking to Mike, their evening plans would be the last thing on his mind. But when he lies and says that it’s just Max and Lucas, all of a sudden it’s not about the principle anymore?

Will doesn’t know what to do with that information.

“So?” Carlton rips Will out of his thoughts. “What d’you wanna do tonight?”

Stop lying and talk with you about this properly, Will thinks. He hates knowing that they should actually be fighting right now, had Will told the truth. And he hates the fact that the fight would be about Mike yet again even more.

Sometimes Mike drives him insane. No matter where he goes in life, he always somehow finds his way back to him, and frankly, Will is tired of it. He hates waking up and knowing that no matter what, every day is just Mike this, Mike that, *Mike, Mike Mike Mike—*

“Do you want to watch a movie with me?” Will’s lips form the words before his brain catches up with them. It takes a second for Will to register what he’s said, but Carlton is already nodding.

“Sure, you got anything in mind?”

Screw this. Fine, let Mike wheeler win again, “Yeah, I do actually.”

Three hours, a trip to the video store down the street and two pizza cartons later, the credits to 'dead poets society' start rolling.

Will stares blankly at the screen as he feels hot tears streak his cheeks. Carlton is in no better shape than him though, so it's a bit less embarrassing. Mike was right; this was really sad.

"Jesus," Carlton snuffles next to him, arm wrapped tight around Will. "This is what you watch for fun, Byers?"

"I told you; this was recommended to me! I didn't know that Neil just— that he just fucking *dies!*" Will is full on sobbing now. Neil's death is hitting him harder than he thought it would.

Maybe it's because it was just so tragically avoidable. Will likes death no less than the average person does, but he thinks that he does have somewhat of a special relationship to it, considering how often he'd come close to it. To see someone do that to themselves just because the things they love are considered nonsense by the people around them was just that; tragic.

Carlton's hand moves in circles on Will's shoulder. The touch is warm, but it feels a little like Carlton is trying to soothe himself rather than Will. But Will doesn't blame him. It's not like Will is actively trying to comfort him either. Maybe he should.

Soon, Carlton's hand removes itself from Will's shoulder, so he can wipe his tears, before choking out, "God, is there a single gay movie that's happy?"

Will freezes right where he's sitting. He doesn't even breathe.

"Gay movie?" He asks, genuinely confused.

Carlton looks at him like he just told him interdimensional human eating dogs exists, "Yeah?"

"What about that was gay?" Will asks again, no less confused than before.

"Are you kidding? He's obviously not just talking about theater!"

"Well then what is he talking about?"

"Todd!"

Will might be stupid, but his thoughts are even more jumbled now, "What?"

"Don't tell me you didn't notice," Carlton sighs, like he thinks Will is stupid too.

Will's breathing quickens despite his attempts at staying calm. Neil, the character Mike said was like him, was gay in Carlton's eyes. The character Mike said was most like him, apart from the suicide thing. The thought was too ridiculous to even be in Will's head.

"Neil is not gay," he half-laughs.

"Neil is literally the gayest man to ever walk this earth," Carlton argues, really getting into his narrative now. "He was Puck! Straight people don't play Puck! *I* was Puck in middle school!"

This entire conversation is making Will uncomfortable. He wants to stop talking, but he also doesn't want Carlton to get the wrong impression, "Well fine, okay, then he's gay but he's not.... him and Todd aren't a thing."

"Oh, please Will, he literally told Todd 'No' when he said Neil doesn't need to take care of him!"

Will's fingers start tapping his knee. He is almost entirely sure that he and Mike have had that exact conversation before, with how often Mike asks him if he's okay. If he needs help. If he's sure.

And Will knows that Mike saw the similarities too, he mentioned them on their phone call. Will is Todd, Mike is Neil. It's almost a direct replica. But not because of any romantic undertones. Those only ever existed in Will's head, back when he was thirteen. He's grown enough to realize that was never the case now.

"Because he's a good friend!" Will ends up saying, voice too wobbly for someone talking about two fictional characters.

Carlton raises an eyebrow, "What exactly is your idea of friendship?"

If Will had to describe friendship, he'd only need one name. Mike has been there all his life; he barely even remembers living before their friendship started. Mike was his idea of friendship, his idea of love, and his idea of life in general. And here comes Carlton telling him that, from an outsider's perspective, it all looks inherently romantic.

And maybe it does. There were times when Will wondered. That year he spent living at the Wheeler's house, where he and Mike used to stay up late into the night and talk about everything and anything that came to mind. Sometimes, Will considered confessing his deepest darkest secret right there.

Sometimes, he thought Mike might tell one as well.

The stabbing guilt from earlier makes a comeback now. Will needs to stop talking before he reveals too much. What would Carlton say if he knew that that's basically how Will and Mike and Will have always acted? Would Will be able to convince him that it's just because they've known each other for so long? Would he need to lie again? Isn't he already?

"Okay, fine, they're gay, but if anything, then Todd is the one in love with Neil"

“Absolutely not, Neil was the one who approached Todd about literally everything. That’s a crush if I’ve ever seen one”

Do you wanna be friends. Five-year-old Mike’s voice haunts will. Always the one making the first step. Will was just the one following Mike, just like Todd. He needs to put a stop this conversation right now; he doesn’t care about Carlton being right or not anymore.

Will gulps, unsure of how to make Carlton shut up, “Should we not be discussing the fact that he’s literally dead some more—”

“Did you not see how Neil looked at him when he improvised his poem?”

“Fine, I did!”

“And that didn’t seem a little in love to you?”

“It’s just...it’s ambiguous”

“My grandma thinks *we’re* ambiguous”

This is what makes Will focus again. *We. They.* It doesn’t matter how much two movie characters might resemble him and Mike, and how their dynamic could be viewed. Mike, in general, doesn’t matter. At least when it comes to Carlton. At least that’s what Will tries to convince himself of.

No matter what Mike says, he and Will aren’t Neil and Todd, because they aren’t anything. It’s time that both of them get that in their heads.

Will ignores his shaking hands and desperate urge to run. He turns to face Carlton, who is already looking at him. Then, with a far too unstable voice, he says, “Well, we’re not”

He leans in. Carlton meets him halfway.

Will keeps his eyes shut when they kiss; he just feels how Carlton’s lips and tongue move against him. Sometimes, Will wonders if he’s bad at kissing, because he rarely ever takes the initiative. He leans in, yes, but Carlton is always the one doing more, the one letting his tongue slip into Will’s mouth, the one letting his hands find purchase on Will.

But Will always lets him, and maybe that’s enough. Right now, Will buries his fingers deep in Carlton's hair and doesn’t tug, even though he thinks that maybe he’d like to. Carlton makes a soft noise against him anyways, and Will prays it's going to be enough to drown out the rest of his thoughts.

It’s not. It needs to be.

Carlton holds him by the arms and pulls him up, until they’re standing in front of the couch, still kissing without stopping and something switches in Will. The hand that’s gripping Carlton’s curls clenches tighter, until Carlton makes a different sound, one bordering on the edge of desperation, and finally Will feels the distractions fade away.

Ambiguous.

Or not. Will lets Carlton push him backwards step by step, until they've made it out of the living room, past the kitchen and the stupid phone hanging there, and to the bedroom door. Will flips them around there, pressing Carlton against the wooden frame, with his fingers searching for warmth beneath Carlton's shirt.

What's your idea of friendship.

Will fumbles behind Carlton's back, turning the doorknob until they stumble backwards onto the bed. Carlton pulls away to adjust their position, but Will's hand finds a desperate grip at the back of his neck and pulls him right back in. He needs this, now, or the thoughts won't stop until the morning.

We watched something the other day.

Will does pull away now, but only so he can swing his leg over Carlton's and straddle him.

There's these two friends. They're more important than the others.

He smashes his lips back down against Carlton's and doesn't care if their teeth clash together.

They remind me of us.

Every time he hears Carlton gasp and he's not sure if it might be from lack of oxygen, he doesn't pull back and look at him, he just starts nipping at his neck instead.

Us.

The wet smacks from Will's lips grow increasingly louder; the only thing still grounding him being Carlton's hands. His knees press hard into the mattress on either side of Carlton's hips, but the thoughts don't stop coming no matter how far he lets Carlton's hands wander.

Us.

Him and Mike.

Will feels dizzy, slightly tipsy from the glass of wine he had, but not nearly enough to justify the way his two realities are mixing together. It's Mike's words in his head, but his hands are pulling at the hem of Carlton's shirt. Every time he closes his eyes, they switch places.

Mike.

Carlton's fingers ghost over Will's back, before pressing into the curve of his spine.

Mike.

Carlton takes Will's face into his hands and tilts it towards the ceiling. There's a small moment in which Will's thoughts are raging, and he can't see Carlton, but he can feel *someone* gently bite his jaw and he can't help but let said jaw fall open into a groan.

“Mike—”

It’s gone as fast as it slips out.

Will freezes. His thoughts freeze. The entire moment freezes. The only one who seems to not have gotten the memo is Carlton, who’s still happily kissing Will’s throat beneath him, before eventually pulling away as well.

They stare at each other, pupils blown wide, Will’s entire body throbbing like it’s his pulse vibrating off every inch of him. Their breaths are heavy, heavier than usual, and Will gets ready for the incoming blow. The confrontation that’s been building up during their entire relationship.

Carlton’s lips part, not to make way for Will’s tongue, but to whisper, “What did you just say?”

Will thinks that maybe all the blood in his body stopped flowing. His veins are ice, and he’s colder than the upside down has ever made him. The truth is right there within his reach, and yet he doesn’t extend his hand.

He stays quiet, looking at Carlton, and thinking. Thinking of how comfortable, how safe it is with Carlton. If Will didn’t have Carlton, he’d need to confront his *everything* with Mike. It’s an impossible task.

And he loves Carlton. He really does. He can’t lose him.

“Mine,” Will lies. “I said mine.”

Carlton smiles in response, completely oblivious to everything that just went down in Will’s head and to the way Will’s guilt-wound is bleeding once again.

“That’s sweet”, he says, smile still on his lips.

Will nods weakly. All the heat that possessed him earlier is gone now, replaced with solid interest but no desperation. When Carlton humbly switches them around, so will is the one pressed into the mattress; he lets him.

Will’s fire doesn’t come back when Carlton gets his hands back on him. He likes their position, likes the way Carlton is kissing him sweetly, still tasting like pizza and red wine. But the hunger is gone. Will is no longer a famished man. Instead, he feels like a royal, eating and eating even though he feels no need for it.

Will lets himself sink into the bed and thinks.

Mike, he thinks, and then he thinks *mine*, and then he wonders what the hell the difference is.

it was very hard to keep will a classy lady for the make out scene. he turned a bit desperate there i apologise, but thats what happens when u accidentally call ur bf by ur bffs name and are just the luckiest person ever so he doesnt notice. will byers man.....hope u guys enjoyed hihi,

also, follow on twt for more whimsy!!! @mimibaldsten

Chapter 3: Will Byers vs the threat of a November night

Chapter Summary

this chapter kinda angsty kinda horror-y kinda yerningfully kinda cutiefully

Chapter Notes

"papa me want more movie" "new chapter when :3" "Papa where is the movie" YOU PEOPLE ARE AS GREEDY AS THE CAPITALIST CANNIBAL FROM JONATHANS MOVIE. That's a joke, every time on of you threatens my life to ask for more gay fanfic i giggle blush and twirl my hair.

I cried writing this chapter lowkey so do with that info what u want. I spend the first thousand words listening to ptolemaea by ethel cain over and over and over again, and then i spent the rest of the chapter listening to phoebe bridgers, so do with that what u want too.

They #yearn in this chapter. Feel free to point out any spelling or grammar or formatting mistakes, now enjoyyyyyyyyyyy

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

It's still dark outside when Will feels a pair of arms wrap around his torso. It's a little confusing, because that's not how he and Carlton usually sleep. They don't cuddle, because Will tosses and turns a lot in his sleep, and it just ends up waking both of them up.

But Will feels the hold tight on him right now, a little too tight if he's being honest.

"Carl, what's up?" He mumbles sleepily, but there's no response.

He forces his eyes open to see if anything is going on, but nothing is there. The room is completely dark, apart from the light the window lets in. But it looks weird. Usually, Will can only see the streetlights from all the shops and bars around their apartment when he's in the bedroom. This, however, looks much more like moonlight, reflecting off of every wall, growing brighter with each of Will's confused blinks.

While the lights grow stronger, so does the grip Carlton has on Will. It almost hurts now, the way Will is completely wrapped up in his arms. He almost feels trapped.

"Carl, please let go off me," He gasps, only to be clutched even harder.

Something is wrong, Will knows that now. The lights stopped growing brighter, but they're beaming enough for Will to be able to make out every single detail of the room. It looks *filthy*.

The heater on the wall is rusting, and there's countless stains covering every inch of wallpaper. Even the window is cracked, like nobody bothered to ever fix it.

And that's when Will feels the cold.

Despite how Carlton is pulling Will into him like he's desperate to suffocate him, Will doesn't feel any body warmth coming off him. If anything, Carlton makes the cold feel ten times as biting. There's wind rushing in from the broken window, but all of that is something Will could ignore. He could ignore it if it weren't for the *fucking vines*.

He's back there.

There's one, a small one, sneaking in through the window. Then there's another, and a third one, and Will starts to desperately thrash in Carlton's arms.

He's back in the fucking upside down.

"Let me go!" Will croaks, wiggling around like a rat stuck in a cage, in an attempt to maybe at least free his arms. He's half successful. His right arm stays squished between his torso and the bed, but he manages to rip his left arm free.

He doesn't care to check on Carlton, only running on pure survival instincts now. He swings his left arm violently, bringing down his elbow into what he assumes is Carlton's side, but when he makes contact, it doesn't feel like he's hitting human meat.

Instead, there's an awful squelch, and goo stuck to his elbow when he draws his arm back from what he thought was Carlton. In his panic, he never thought to look down on his torso and check if what he thought he was feeling was actually real.

Will does look down now, and the sight is almost enough to make him throw up. There aren't any human hands stuck to him, and the vines that came in through his window aren't the only ones in the room.

Carlton isn't here; Will should have known. The thing keeping him stuck to the bed, encaged, was nothing even close to human. Vines, thicker than the ones crawling to him from the window, covered him. He couldn't tell how many there were; he could only feel them slowly draw him in even more, as if trying to swallow him whole to suffocate him.

Or maybe drown him too. They were wet enough, drenching his shirt and bed sheets with whatever they were covered in.

"Let go!" He howls again, though he knows there isn't anyone here to hear him. He's alone. No Carlton, no Mike, no Jane or Jonathan, not even his mother. He's stuck, back in Vecna's grip once again, and this time he doesn't even have his powers to help him resist. He doesn't know how he got here, but what's worse is that he doesn't remember how to get *out* again.

Just let me out, he thinks, and although he does not open his mouth, the thought still echoes in the room, like the sound of a cassette stuck in a recorder, doomed to stay in a loop for the rest of eternity.

Slowly, one of the tentacles loosens around him, not to release him but to cover his face as well. It drags over Will's shoulders, slowly making its way across his throat until it reaches his face. There, almost mockingly it slithers slowly, spreading out to get to the very corner of his mouth.

Just let me out, Will hears his own voice again, begging and on the edge of something far worse than a fear of death.

Just let me out.

Just let me out.

Just—

“Will!” someone yells, and Will sits up with a scream.

He's awake. He's awake, and he's gone from Vecna's clutches, but his cheeks and his shirt are still wet, and he doesn't know what the fuck is going on.

The room is dark again, the normal dark with warm toned streetlamps showing him the rough dimensions of it, and it fills Will with a relief so overwhelming that his scream turns into a sob.

There's something touching him again, but it's dry and warm so he lets it. Leans into it even, as his entire body shudders and shakes with the sounds he makes. Something close to a wail escapes his mouth, and he buries his face deep into whatever is holding him, whilst also clinging on for dear life.

He's safe. He escaped. Henry can't get him if he's warm and protected. Nothing can.

Will doesn't know what happened. Logistically, he knows he had a nightmare, and that it's Carlton holding him, but it felt so real that Will doesn't *know* if that's it. What if it was a vision? Vecna didn't speak to him but what if he only did that so Will would think it was just a nightmare, when really he's already on his way to Hawkins, on his way to Will's family, and Will can't even do anything about it because he's stuck in fucking San Francisco and—

“Hey, woah, Will,” Carlton panics at his side. “Can you please breathe for me?”

Will didn't realize he'd stopped. Trying to pull air into his lungs feels like a harder task than anything he's ever done, but he tries anyways. Deep breaths in, deep breaths out, just like Jonathan taught him during his first year back after the upside down.

It's times like these where Will can't believe how much time has passed. Because he may be twenty years old, sitting in his own apartment in fucking San Francisco, but he still feels like he's just a scared twelve-year-old, screaming until his lungs wouldn't fill with air anymore during sleepovers, Mike right at his side to calm him down.

Mike.

The name doesn't make him shake any less, but the more he thinks about it, the easier his lungs make way for the air he's trying to shove in.

Carlton's hand, the one that Will isn't hanging onto with all his might, rubs gentle circles into Will's back, just as Mike used to do. Will feels awful; he's had nightmares with Carlton in bed before, but none quite this bad. But he doesn't really have the capacity to feel guilty right now, not when he still isn't sure whether or not his hometown is being demolished right this second.

"Will, what's going on?" Carlton asks, almost as desperate as Will. "I— I don't *understand*."

Mike would, Will thinks. It's an ugly thought that lets another sob wreck through his whole body.

"I— I was back," He manages to weep into Carlton's hold.

"Back? Back where?" He asks Will, who is almost tempted to answer. Everything would be so much easier if he could just tell Carlton the truth about the upside down, the whole truth.

But he can't. Carlton wouldn't believe him, no matter how hard Will tried to convince him. And even if he did, how is Will supposed to be sure that it'll even change anything? Carlton might show sympathy, but he won't ever understand.

Will stays silent. He doesn't answer the question, instead he snivels as little as he possibly can and puts a stop to all his sobs. Carlton's hand stops moving on Will's back, and Will regrets waking up in the first place.

"We can talk about it tomorrow, you know." Carlton whispers into Will's hair, but his voice is cold. He's tired of this, tired of *Will* and his inexplicable terrors, and Will can tell.

Will shakes his head through the silent tears spilling out onto his cheeks. They won't talk about it tomorrow. They won't talk about it ever.

It's like Will's body is trying to tear itself apart, starting with his stomach. There's a hole in there somewhere, and it's growing, slowly swallowing Will just as the vines had tried to do.

Carefully, as if Will were a wild animal that needs to be handled with caution, Carlton removes himself from Will. He lets his free hand completely drop from Will's back and extracts his other from Will's grip.

"Fine," He mumbles. "Let's just go back to sleep then. We don't have to talk."

It's horribly unfair and deserved at the same time. Carlton is drifting away from Will, when Will needs nothing more than to be able to cling onto him, yet Will actively pushes him away at the same time.

He knows that he needs someone to lean on when things like these happen, but he also knows that Carlton can't be that person. Knows that he wouldn't be able to carry Will, to steady him

when he starts to slump, to catch him before he falls because he knows what it looks like when Will's knees are about to give out.

Will can't do anything but watch as Carlton lays back down after turning off a light Will didn't even know was on. He forces himself onto the mattress as well, right at the very edge where Carlton's arms couldn't possibly reach around him. But the distance also means that Will's hands can't reach either.

He waits and stares at the ceiling, ignoring the way tears continue to make their way down his face. He stares until he hears Carlton's breath even out, and then he slowly lets himself glide out of bed, rolling over the edge.

His legs land with a quiet thud, and Will lets himself stay on the floor for a second. His feet are planted steady on the floor, but he curls in on himself, making himself look so small that he feels fragile no matter how steady his stance may be.

His fingers dig into his elbows, and his forehead is sweating where it rests against his knees. He thinks he might spend the rest of the night hunching over the toilet.

A minute goes by, maybe more, maybe less, but Will eventually straightens up again. He doesn't spare a moment to look at Carlton's sleeping figure. Instead, he sets one foot in front of the other, as quiet as one can be, until he reaches the door.

His entire frame shudders with relief when he finally closes the door behind him and leaves Carlton alone in their bedroom.

Then the sobs start again.

He presses his hand to his mouth, willing himself to be quiet just as he had done five years ago in the back of a van. But this time there's no one to blame for Will's pain. Nobody alive at least.

Logistically, he knows very well that Vecna is dead, that his own mom cut off his head after Will had been the one to rip out one of his arms. But he also feels paranoid, and deep in his bones he's convinced that it can't just be over. His life came to a complete stop for four years, and he's just supposed to believe that he can continue now?

He can't do it. Every time he turns a corner, he's afraid he's going to see Henry look right at him. Whenever the flimsy kitchen lights flicker, he reaches for the knife drawer, because he's sure he'll need to defend himself from a Demogorgon.

And every nightmare he has, each and every single one has the possibility of being a Vecna vision, in his head. A warning.

Will craves a smoke more than he ever has in his life, probably, but he can't fathom opening a window and inviting the cold in, and he knows Carlton will have his head if he smokes inside. He hates the smell, but to Will it smells of home.

Home.

Will is stupid for even considering it, but his thoughts linger on another addiction of his for a moment.

He's not thinking clearly, but the ache in his stomach has grown so all-consuming that he can't possibly see another way to soothe his pain. He lets his hand drop from his mouth.

"Stupid," He mutters, but he's already moving towards the phone and dialing Mike's number.

Please pick up, Will thinks, nothing short of desperate.

It's embarrassing that Will is doing this to himself. He's not even sitting at the table this time, instead he's opted for crouching on the floor like a child. It's fitting, he supposes, considering the fact that he's acting like he's thirteen again.

Shivering, holding back sobs, listening to the phone ring as he calls Mike Wheeler, when he doesn't even know how late it is.

The feeling only gets worse when Mike actually picks up.

"Hello?" A sleepy voice asks.

It's enough to set free everything Will was holding back.

"Woah, hey, Will? What's going on?" Mike's voice is just as gentle as it was when they were thirteen. He knows it's Will calling him, even though Will hasn't even said anything yet. Maybe because the sound of Will's ragged breathing is familiar enough to him, or maybe because he knows Will is the only idiot out there stupid enough to call Mike this late.

"I'm sorry Mike, it's— It's so late and this is so stupid, I'm sorry, I'll hang up, I just—"

"Will, stop, don't apologize, please, just tell me what happened"

Mike is so gentle with him that it hurts. Because Mike doesn't treat him like he's broken, he was one of the only people who didn't switch up anything about their behavior after Will was taken. He's always treated Will with care, always making Will believe he was someone that deserved such attention.

The thought of the Upside-down getting to *him* of all people makes Will's throat close up.

"I just needed to know if you were okay," He chokes.

Somehow, Mike understands. Like Will calling him in the middle of the night, crying, not giving him any clues at all was enough for Mike to figure out exactly what was going on.

There's a brief pause, but eventually Mike confirms what Will was thinking, "Nightmare?"

Will nods at first, until he remembers Mike can't see him, "Yeah"

"Well, I'm okay Will." Mike moves to reassure him immediately. "I'm great, actually. And so is Holly, and my mom. And Dustin called me today; he's doing awesome too."

Will's breathing settles slowly as he listens to Mike's voice. He knows what to do to get Will to calm down, and Will trusts him to do exactly that. It's so much easier than it is with Carlton. Mike isn't even here, and still Will's heartbeat feels infinitely steadier than it had when Carlton was holding him.

Mike, despite the late hour, keeps talking with almost no hesitation, "And uhm, and mom talked to Nancy this morning, and then she mentioned Jonathan while she was chewing my ear off about Nancy's life and all, and I'm gonna be honest here, I didn't really listen, but I'm sure she would have been a bit more dramatic if something happened to either of them"

His family is fine. His friends are fine. Mike is fine.

"Okay," Will sobs again, but he isn't panicking anymore. His hands are shivering less, and air is flowing safely in his lungs. He's crying, yes, but it's out of relief.

"And you're okay too, aren't you?" Mike asks once more, just to be sure that whatever he said actually helped Will. If only he knew.

"Yeah," Will nods, *smiling*. "I guess I am"

"Exactly." Mike's tone is lighter too now; Will thinks he might have a hesitant smile on his lips as well. "You're Will, and you're in your little San Fran apartment that I *still* haven't seen yet, and I'm sure that good ol' Carlton is doing peachy too"

The mention of Carlton makes Will roll his eyes, but it's lighthearted annoyance, "Shut up"

"No, I'm serious." Mike isn't done with Will yet, apparently. Maybe he can tell that Will still isn't completely back to normal. "Just— Just take a look around you, yeah? Turn the lights on too, please, you don't have to sit in the dark like me"

Will raises a brow, "You're in the dark?"

"Are you?" Mike shoots back.

"Yeah," he mumbles, a little confused. How Mike knows that Will is still sitting in a lightless room, he has no clue.

"Well then," Mike says, and Will can tell he's smirking, "let there be light, Will the wise"

"Oh my god," Will snorts, but he gets up to turn on the lights anyways. The stupid part is that it helps. The reflected yellow glow from every tile in the room calms him. There's no light in the Upside-down, none like this at least.

"Better?" Mike asks softly.

Will hates his answer, "Yeah"

They're silent for a small moment. What else is there to talk about? Will called so he'd calm down, and he did, but he's not ready to hang up yet. He may not be sobbing anymore, but going to bed still doesn't seem like an option for him.

“I’m sorry,” he settles for the easiest and most obvious topic.

“Okay, now *you* shut up,” Mike scoffs almost offended.

“No, seriously Mike,” Will stresses. “I can’t just call you at who knows how late it even is, and expect you to pick up”

Silence. For maybe three seconds.

“I did though”

“What?” Will rasps, confused.

“I picked up,” Mike whispers lowly. “Because I know you would too”

Will sits with that fact for a bit. Obviously, he knew that, but he didn’t know that Mike knew it too. Mike Wheeler, who has steadily refused to believe the fact that people care for him and want to listen to him open up about his problems his entire life.

Will feels a little exposed, knowing that Mike is well aware of what Will would do for Mike.

But at least Mike has the decency to sound hesitant too. He gulps loud enough for Will to hear over the phone, before he starts talking again, “Do you— Do you remember that first year after we thought we lost El? I was such a fucking guilt-ridden mess, and I wouldn’t do anything and— fuck, you couldn’t even really leave me alone without me...without—”

Mike doesn’t need to say it, Will remembers. There was a time when Mike believed that the bomb he built should have taken him too. It might have been the hardest time of both of their lives.

“Anyways,” Mike stumbles to say, not any more willing to sit on that memory than Will is, “even when the others couldn’t be around me anymore because they were scared for me, when I spent every day pushing absolutely everyone away from me because I didn’t want them to be close to me when I— incase I *did something*, you still stayed...You held me up every time I broke down, you kept reassuring me even though I know you were hurting just as much as I was. You saved my life Will”

Will doesn’t know what to say. Deep in his heart, when he pushes aside all his self-hatred and insecurities, he knows very well that the bond between him and Mike is a mutual one. That it isn’t just Will being treated with all that gentleness and care; that Will can also be a safe place for Mike. It’s a little different to hear it be said out loud though.

Will pushes past his head telling him to let it remain unspoken, “You saved mine first. I was just, you know, repaying the favor or something”

It sounds ridiculous, them talking about saving each other from death like it’s the same thing as buying a can of coke for each other. Ridiculous enough even, that they both burst out into laughter.

“Well then let me repay your repaid favor!” Mike giggles, trying to be quiet so he doesn’t wake up the entire house, Will assumes.

“That is *so not* how that works.” Will shakes his head through his own muffled amusement. “Now I’m the one in your debt again!”

“Well, how about we just keep doing this then, yeah?” Mike asks, voice soft again. “Helping each other when we need it? I’ll tell you when it’s your turn to take care of me again, I promise”

“Fuck no Mike, you are horrible to take care of.” Will snorts. “I don’t ever wanna have to haul your suicidal drunk ass off a park bench ever again”

“Shut up! Just to clarify, I would have been totally fine spending the night there”

“It was January, Mike!”

“Spectacularly fine, even”

Will smiles, even though it’s not a particularly nice memory, and both of them know that. Mike had been at his worst then, only two months after losing El, one month after starting the new year without her.

He’d completely vanished from the Wheeler’s house, and Karen was breaking down, convinced Vecna had somehow come back with the goal of taking yet another one of her children. Will had known better.

The second they realized Mike was gone, Will had put on his jacket and shoes. He had no clue where Mike was, but he wouldn’t sit around and call people’s houses when he knew that Mike wouldn’t be there. If Mike had wanted to talk to someone, he would have come to Will.

He rode his Bike around town for two hours that evening, before he finally found Mike passed out on a bench in front of Hawkins Middle School, of all places, with a bottle in his hand that he’d probably paid a random adult to buy for him.

Will had been relieved, and angry at the same time, because falling asleep in the cold like this could have *killed* Mike, and Will refused to believe that exactly that would’ve happened, had Will not found him.

Mike rips him out of his thoughts, “I was prepared, you know”

“What?” Will completely forgot what they were even talking about a second ago. The memory of Mike, drunk and half frozen to death, distracted him a little.

But Mike is well, warm, and here now. He speaks again, “For you to call. I figured you would”

Will stumbles a bit at that, “What— How?”

“I mean, it’s November, Will. Almost the anniversary of...everything. I know how much it sucks for you”

Mike knows. Mike knows how much it sucks for Will, because Mike knows *him*, down to the bone. The realization— no, the *reminder* feels like a punch to the gut.

Will’s mouth forms a circle, “Oh.”

Mike inhales sharply, like he’s not done talking yet. When he speaks, he almost sounds flustered, “Yeah, so I’ve just...I don’t know, it sounds stupid, but I’ve been stealing Holly’s phone every night. Just, you know, keeping it next to my bed so I’d hear if it rang.”

The confession is too much for Will to handle.

“*Mike*” He pants.

He feels boneless, like he’d been forced to stand for hours and was finally allowed to sit back down. His hands are shaking again, not out of fear but because of something far worse. A *want*, so intense it feels tangible.

“Yeah?”

“I...” *I love you*, Will thinks.

It’s a fact so deeply ingrained into who Will is at his core that he sometimes forgets how active the feeling still is. Loving Mike is woven into the very fabric of his being, doing for longer than a decade never made the feeling grow less strong, no matter how often he tried to deny it.

I love you, Will thinks again. *I love you more than I could ever put into words. I love you so much that I couldn’t even capture the feeling in a painting, no matter how often I sketch your portrait. I love the way you care for me; I love the way you allow me to care for you too. I love you even when I know I shouldn’t, because there’s other people out there who’d deserve that kind of love from me. But I could never love them like you.*

I love feeling your warmth next to me, but I love hearing your voice through the phone even more, because it just reminds me of how much I want you by my side. I love thinking of you, even when it makes me cry, because I know that if you saw me, you’d immediately be by my side to try and soothe my pain, no matter how badly you’re bleeding yourself.

I love you so much that sometimes, I’m tempted to say it out loud.

But Will doesn’t say it. He swallows down the words with all his might and waits, until he trusts himself to open his mouth again, like he’s done time and time before.

“I miss you so much,” He whispers, voice stripped raw.

It’s not the whole truth, but it’s honest enough to shock them both. There’s heavy breathing on the other line, and for a second Will wonders if hearing the words means just as much to Mike as saying them does to Will.

“Yeah,” Mike exhales a breath Will didn’t know he was holding. “God, yes Will, I miss you too. You have no idea how much I miss you.”

“You do?” Will asks, feeling a little stupid.

“More than I could ever tell you”

Will feels drunk. He hasn’t had anything to drink since he watched Mike’s stupid movie with Carlton a week ago, but it’s the only thing that could explain the way he’s feeling right now. Like nothing he could do could ever ruin this, ruin him and Mike, no matter how reckless.

So, Will takes his small bit of sudden bravery and does something that shouldn’t require any courage at all.

It’s a silly gesture, one that Mike can’t even see, but it’s still bolder than anything he has ever done in his twenty years of living. His fingers are wrapped tight around the phone, but he drops it from his ear.

Instead, he brings up the receiver’s mouthpiece to his lips. He doesn’t speak, doesn’t even dare breathe; he simply lets his lips linger on the spot. Then, he applies the smallest bit of pressure.

The kiss is barely even there, but the sound Will’s lips make when he pulls away is loud in the quiet of the kitchen. Loud enough for Mike to hear.

Neither of them says a word, but for once in his life, Will isn’t terrified. The gesture is small enough for it not to mean anything if Mike didn’t want it to. But Mike is silent, as if he doesn’t dare say anything, afraid to shatter the moment. A moment that is *definitely* there.

There’s something akin to butterflies buzzing in Will’s stomach. He kissed Mike Wheeler. He did it through a phone, and he technically didn’t even really do it, but it’s more than Will has ever dared to do. It’s a confession, almost, if Mike wants it to be.

Mike still doesn’t say anything, but Will hears rustling on the other line. Then, there’s the sound of something smacking against Mike’s receiver.

Mike kissed him back.

Will gasps, feeling heat rush to his cheeks faster than he has ever felt anything in his life. The hole that opened up in his stomach during his nightmare has consumed him fully now, but it’s no longer the same terrifying thing that it was not even ten minutes ago. It’s still frightening, but it’s warm too, almost burning Will when he lets himself feel it.

Will still hears nothing but breathing from Mike, but he doesn’t need to. The heaviness of Mike’s breath conveys more than words ever could. He doesn’t know what just happened, but he knows that they both felt it, whatever it was.

Mike kissed his phone’s mouthpiece, because Will did the same thing after leaving his and Carlton’s bedroom to dial Mike’s number.

Carlton. Fuck Will's life.

The hole in Will's stomach transforms yet again, and it returns to the guilt leaking wound that he's been sporting ever since his relationship with Carlton started. The wound that bleeds every time he watches a movie with Carlton because Mike recommended it, or he pretends that Carlton's hair belongs to Mike, or he thinks Mike's name in the middle of sex.

Will's voice breaks when he uses it again, "Mike—"

"Will," He responds immediately, sounding vulnerable and— God forbid, downright *hungry*.

Will can't do this. It was one thing to have these kinds of conversations with Mike when he was completely sure they were entirely one-sided, but now he's unsure, and unsure is dangerous. The last time he let himself slip into that gray area, he embarrassed himself in ways he never had before. He laid himself bare before Mike, and Mike didn't even notice.

He's not ready to face that kind of danger again. He has something he's sure about, something safe, just behind his bedroom door, and while it may not cause any kind of feeling to erupt in his stomach, it also doesn't cause him pain.

"We should—" Will whines, before correcting himself. "*I* should—"

"Go to bed." Mike interrupts him. "Yeah, no, totally, it's like, two am for you, so you should definitely sleep"

Two am. That means it's five in the morning for Mike. The nausea starts up in Will's stomach again.

"I should," Will agrees.

"You should"

Still, Will doesn't hang up yet. He feels the tautness pulling at both of them. They're both strung up with no release.

"Goodnight Mike."

"Goodnight Will"

Will hesitates for a second, but gives in eventually, "Thanks for listening to me"

The silence between them is tense now; softness from earlier all gone. In its place is an unspoken truth, one that neither of them fully understands yet. The only thing they both know is that whatever it is, it has to be at least a little wrong.

"Thanks for coming to me instead of Carlton" Mike confesses and hangs up the call.

The phone slips out of Will's hand and falls to the floor. The chord is short enough that it doesn't hit the tile; instead, it bounces against the wall once, twice, before hanging still.

Will's hand is still at his ear, his mouth agape. He watches the phone dangle from its spot on the wall and doesn't know how long he stays there like that. It's a while, that's for sure.

Will has called himself out on his relationship with Carlton and Mike more times than he can count. To hear Mike do it feels like having an ice bucket turned over his head.

He knows his closeness to Mike is weird at best and unfaithful at worst. Carlton has alluded to that bothering him more than once. Will didn't know that Mike was fully aware of it too.

Slowly, Will removes himself from the kitchen. He turns off the lights, his nightmare forgotten completely. He needs to sleep and think. It's more than likely that he'll only achieve one of these goals.

He can't possibly go back to his and Carlton's room, not after he already walked out of it and definitely not after kissing their phone. After kissing their phone, calling Mike of all people.

Will has no blanket, but he settles on the living room couch, nonetheless. On the couch where he and Carlton watched Mike's stupid romantic movie together. Will buries his face into one of the pillows and groans.

This is *so wrong*.

Will doesn't fall asleep. He keeps his face in the pillows. He turns, only to stare at the ceiling. He brings his fingers to his lips, remembering how the hard plastic felt against them. He tries to memorize the way Mike's lips sounded when they were pressed against his own receiver.

He thinks of lines, being walked on, being crossed, but never being redrawn.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for making u guys go through the emotionl wiplash of horny will --> Will+the horrors

Carlton in the morning wanting to call his momma or something and wondering why the phone is all slobbered over?????? that's a joke will gave it a peck and that was that.

Conversation so emotionally intimate it felt like phone sex. okay im gonna stop with the jokes now. Whoopsies.

Will is hilarious to me bc he'll really be like wow mike i love u sm let us get married and have six little nuggets (lol) and mike will be like okay bb but then they remember carlton is like three feet away from them and they both go uhm. Akward!

MFS JUST DATE PLEASE?????????

Chapter 4: Push it down, pray, and LIE with Will Byers

Chapter Summary

this is the longest chapter yet. which is why it alos almost KILLED ME to write it.

Chapter Notes

yall. If i don't update for 48 hours i PROMISE it doesn't mean im abandoning the work. Im just. I just. Sometimes i need to sleep.

jk ive never slept before ever. But oh my goooooood will i sleep after this upload. It's 6am. I've been writing since 7pm.

but like dont get too impressed okay i have unmedicated adhd this is just how long shit takes me to do.

if the grammar here sucks blame it on my sleep okay jeeesus.

really hoping u guys will enjoy this chap. Its longer than the others, but its a bit carlton heavy (sorry buut we gotta get through it okay the development is importantt) okay enough rambling now BAIIIIIIII

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

“So? What did you want to tell me?” Carlton asks Will at the kitchen table, voice gentle as ever.

Will gulps.

He’s been quiet for the past couple of days. He’s always quiet close to the anniversary, but this time it’s not just because of the Upside-down.

It’s all a little pathetic, but somehow Will’s mind has been stuck more on his conversation with Mike than November sixth. Maybe he should thank him for the distraction, or maybe he should punch him in the face when he sees him on Christmas.

Will doesn’t do either. Instead, he acts weird around Carlton, weirder than usual even. He avoids date nights, he cuts every make out session short, and he wakes up in the middle of the night to go sleep on the couch instead of their shared bed.

Carlton thinks it’s because Will has been having more nightmares, which is true, but sadly not at all the reason for his behavior.

He kissed Mike. Mike kissed him back. Mike told him he's glad Will would pick him over Carlton any day.

Three things that more or less happened that night, when Will sat on the kitchen floor with the phone clutched tight in his hand. Three things that should not, under any circumstances, have happened.

Will knows it's wrong to act that way with Mike; he knows because he'd be more than pissed if Carlton did any of it with someone that isn't Will.

But would he, though?

Will tries to picture it, seeing Carlton kiss another man, not even through a phone, just straight lips on lips. He knows, logistically, that he should feel horrible about it. He should get mad at this imaginary fake-Carlton, and the random fake-guy, but Will doesn't feel anything.

He replays the image of fake-Carlton and fake-guy every night before going to bed for three nights straight. Every time, he adds more depth to the scenario, to see if the details will make him feel something.

Night one, he imagines him and fake-Carlton going to a bar, getting into a fight and seeing fake-Carlton make out with a stranger afterwards. Fake-Will just watches them and goes home. He doesn't intervene.

On night two, Will takes it a bit further. Him and fake-Carlton fight again, but this time it's at home, and fake-Will leaves to go on a walk to cool down. When he comes back, it's the same scenario as night one. Will still feels nothing.

There's a backstory to night three. Fake-Carlton goes home for the holidays to reconnect with his old friends, and when he comes back, he tells fake-Will that one thing led to another, and he hooked up with his first love on the trip. But fake-Will just shrugs, even tells fake-Carlton that he's happy for him.

Real-Will doesn't think that that's an appropriate reaction to have when your partner of almost a year cheats on you, even if it's just imaginary.

He gets hung up on that idea, really. He thinks about it so hard and long over the next couple of days that he doesn't even notice November sixth sneaking up on him, something that he doesn't think has ever happened before.

Now, the sixth is here, and Will has made up his mind.

He's going to break up with Carlton.

"Will? You okay?" Carlton nudges Will's shoulder, and Will hopes the impact might be enough to shake the words loose from his tongue. It isn't.

He had this whole plan; this entire speech planned out, about how he's realized that he can't just keep pushing past the things that Carlton doesn't understand, because it always ends with

him turning to other people, and that isn't fair to Carlton.

Then, he'd tell Carlton how it's not his fault, it's Will's because Will isn't ready to open up yet, how he wants to stay friends anyways. All that good stuff.

But now that it's time, Will can't bring himself to do any of that. Why did he need to pick the sixth as his breakup date of choice anyways? Making an already hard day harder for no reason at all, Will hates himself from five minutes ago, who decided to actually go through with it all.

"Just, uhm," Will starts, only to swallow his words again. "Just give me a minute, okay?"

"Hey, take all the time you need," Carlton reassures him and lets his hand rest on Will's shoulder. God, Will is going to hell.

He sighs, preparing to rip off the band aid, "Carlton it's just— I know I've been off the past couple of days"

"That's one way to describe it, yeah," Carlton chuckles nervously. Of course he noticed, it would be impossible not to.

"Okay so, there's a... reason for that," Will says, very helpfully. God, this was *so* not going how he wanted it to go.

He hasn't even gotten out of his pyjamas yet, and neither of them have finished their morning coffee. Carlton doesn't have any classes today, and Will's don't start until the afternoon, so he thought that the timing could work in theory. It doesn't.

His hands are in his lap, fidgeting with the drawstring of his sweatpants. He's terribly nervous, so much so that he's reminding himself of a time when he was sixteen and forced to confess his deepest darkest secret to a room with like a dozen people in it. Somehow, he'd take the dozen people over Carlton right now.

"And I'm assuming you wanna tell me the reason?" Carlton asks, reminding him of the situation he's currently stuck in. No way but through, right?

Rip off the band aid.

"Yeah, I do," Will breathes in one last time, before letting the truth out. "Carl, I've been thinking recently and— there's just some stuff I've been keeping from you."

More like someone, Will's brain supplies unhelpfully. He has Carlton's full attention on him, and it terrifies him. Will has no clue what will come after this.

He keeps going anyways, "Like— okay, for example, I don't really think I'm normal"

It isn't really what he means to say, but Will's cutting himself some slack. As long as he eventually gets the word out, everything will be fine.

“I mean, I am, but also, I’m not.” He’s stumbling over his words. “Not right now. I don’t have the right reactions to things, and I don’t appreciate things enough, and I— I just don’t treat you well.”

Carlton seems a little taken aback at Will admitting it, but he doesn’t interrupt to tell Will he’s wrong. His hand slowly slips on Will’s shoulder, until it lays between them on the kitchen table, almost a visual reminder of the distance between them. Will keeps talking.

“And all of that has just been so incredibly obvious these past few days, because I’ve been thinking everything over, and I feel like you really deserve to hear the truth. The truth that I — that I think I’ve been actively keeping from you ever since we started dating”

Will’s heart is racing. Carlton’s brows are furrowed, and there’s a grimace on his face that suggests he knows exactly where this is heading. It breaks Will’s heart a little, but it’s what’s best for both of them. Carlton won’t ever be someone able to comfort Will properly, and Will will probably never stop seeking that comfort in Mike. Will probably won’t ever stop *loving* Mike.

“I’ve tried to push it down time and time again,” Will sighs, almost exhausted at how long this is taking him to explain, “because really, I don’t want anything more than to make it go away, but pretending that something doesn’t exist never works out. Especially because I’ve been feeling it come between us for *months* now and— Oh screw it, I’m just gonna say it”

Will doesn’t say it. He stays silent for almost a minute, actually.

There are tears in Carlton’s eyes and Will wishes they were in his instead. He wants to release them both from this torture, of knowing exactly how this conversation is going to end but not being able to speed it up. It’s like Will’s mouth is sewn shut, with how much he wants to say the words but *can’t*.

“I...” *I am in love with someone else and we really desperately need to break up before I do something very stupid and bad when I see him again for Christmas.*

Jesus, maybe not in so many words.

Will’s head drops to his hands. This is an embarrassing confession to make. He’s not used to being the asshole, Will seriously wonders how Mike can deal with this all the time.

“I...”

The words get stuck in his throat. He thought not looking at Carlton would make it easier. It has the opposite effect. Now he can’t tell what he’s thinking in the slightest, and it’s too late to look back up. Will doesn’t think he could stomach seeing Carlton’s expression.

Will’s hands are practically shredding his sweatpants’ draw string to shreds now, his lip is being chewed on too, not to mention his knee bopping like crazy under the table. All in all, Will is somehow more nervous than when he started the conversation.

The room is too hot, which seems impossible, since it's November and all, November sixth at that, which is always the coldest day of the year for Will. Still, Will is sweating. He feels the need to run, like actually put on gym wear and shoes and go to a track or something.

He chokes one last time, "I—"

Carlton sighs, prepared for what Will wants to say, "Will come on, just say it"

I think we should break up I think we should break up I think we should break up I—

"I got kidnapped seven years ago!" Will blurts out instead.

What.

"What?"

Will slaps his hand on top of his mouth. He has no idea how he just said that. The right words were literally on the tip of his tongue. What the actual hell is wrong with him.

"Oh god. I did not mean to say that." He gulps, which probably doesn't make things better.

He can't take saying something like that back. If Will backtracks now, Carlton will almost definitely think he's lying about *literally being kidnapped*, which would for sure earn him the title of 'World's craziest ex'.

Carlton splutters, "What do you mean you didn't mean to say that?"

God, Will can't take it back. For once in his life, he let his mouth work faster than his brain and now he's backed himself into the most closed off corner in the world.

The locket necklace weighs heavy on his chest. Will's confession is too honest. It's not the truth, but it's something close to it. It almost reminds him of his conversation with Mike a couple nights ago.

Screw it. If he could tell Mike Wheeler a sort of decent half-truth, then Carlton deserves one too. It's not the conversation he planned for today, but it's the one he's having. The breakup will have to wait.

"No, I did!" Will rushes to say, "I did, I just, I did *not* mean to blurt it out like that"

Maybe explaining it will be harder than trying to pretend he never said anything at all. Carlton just stares at him dumbfounded. Will doesn't think he has ever regretted talking so much in his life.

"I am so confused right now"

Will sighs, honest, "Me too"

Carlton raises his brows again, "What?"

“Oh god, I need to shut up” Will splutters, more to himself than Carlton.

“No, no, you don’t!” Carlton is standing now, hands on his hips like an overwhelmed mom. “You gotta explain some things to me! Will, what do you mean you got kidnapped?”

Will takes one good look at Carlton and gulps. He has a sort of digestible fake half-true version of his story planned in the very back of his head. He didn’t think he’d ever use it, but Will supposes life has never worked out quite like he planned.

One big inhale. Then, “Okay, screw it, yeah. I got kidnapped today, like *this exact day* seven years ago. November sixth, 1983. That’s why I’ve been acting— *off*.”

Silence.

“I mean, anniversaries of traumatic events can be like, uh, difficult for—”

“—victims dealing with bad memories being rehashed, yeah thanks Will, all my friends are psych majors, but that’s not really the part I’m confused about here!”

Carlton is staring at him. The silence is still present enough to count as a third person in the room.

“Right...” This is awkward. Will regrets not running away when he had the urge. “Do you have... questions?”

“Only about a million.” Carlton starts pacing, hands at his temples. He stops walking, and starts again, only to stop two steps later. “Are you okay?”

“I mean,” Will mumbles, not really looking Carlton in the eye. “I got back eventually, otherwise I wouldn’t really be here”

Carlton sighs, “I meant like, mentally”

“I mean... probably?” Will hasn’t given it that much thought. He probably isn’t, if he’s being honest, but that doesn’t seem that important.

“What do you mean probably? Did you not go to therapy?”

“No, they sort of just stuck a bunch of wires to my head and told me I was fine”

“They *what*?”

Will should have written down notes before explaining this.

“Okay I am now realizing that it does seem a little crazy from an outside perspective”

“Oh Will—” Carlton shakes his head, like he’s exasperated, but then he walks past the kitchen table, right over to Will.

He stands in front of him, hesitating barely two seconds, before wrapping him in his arms so tight that Will thinks his ribs might break. Will is beyond confused.

“I’m sorry, for being this shocked.” He whispers into Will’s hair, as his hands stroke Will’s back. “I mean, I always kind of knew that there was something about your past that you weren’t telling me, but I never knew it was this serious”

If only you knew, Will thinks. Maybe he’d explode if Will told him the full truth.

Eventually, Carlton lets go of Will, but his hands stay lingering on Will’s arms, “I mean, what even happened?”

This is where things get dangerous, “Uhm, I can’t really get too much into detail, is that okay with you?”

“Yeah Will, of course, whatever you’re comfortable with”

“No like, I legally can’t.”

It’s not technically a lie. Will never signed any documents or something, but there were a few very stern warnings about the truth never getting out. Will had no desire to ever make a grand announcement to the world, but he doubts it would work even if he did. The military had ears everywhere. Will wouldn’t be surprised if there was some poor intern listening in on his and Carlton’s conversation right now.

But it’s not like Carlton knows any of that, “Wait, what?”

“Never mind, let me just—” Will takes a deep breath. This isn’t how he expected his morning to go, but he has the outline to a story in his head. He’ll be fine. “Well, I was twelve, and it was Sunday. So obviously I was hanging out with my friends, and biked home afterwards”

Carlton is watching him again, observing and aware of every little word rolling off Will’s tongue. Will swallows, hard.

This time, he doesn’t stop talking, “And it was late, and I lived near the woods back then, so really, I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Just a coincidence. Definitely not an evil wizard picking him as his first ever vessel and builder, forcing a connection between them that Will wouldn’t be able to sever for the next half a decade.

Will clears his throat. Lying about this was harder than he anticipated, “And this is the part where the government sort of forbids me from telling you stuff— but I basically got taken and kept in the woods in a shed for a week”

Carlton blinks at him, almost stunned, “A week”

“Yeah”

“And you were twelve?”

“Yeah”

“In a shed?”

Will exhales through the nose, a little nervous, “I feel like you’re just repeating everything I said.”

Carlton starts pacing again, like he’s trying to wrap his head around it all. Will figures the whiplash must be a little insane, going from thinking you’re being broken up with to your boyfriend telling you about childhood government involved kidnapping.

Carlton stops pacing again and stutters for a bit, until he lands on a question, “Who took you?”

Will cringes. He’s reaching dangerous territory, “I can’t tell you that”

“Why?”

“I can’t tell you that either”

He’s directly in front of Will again, so that Will can finally look at his face again. He hates what he sees. In Carlton's eyes, Will recognizes the same look he’s been getting from almost everyone in his life since he was twelve years old.

Pity. Will knows what’s coming now. The shock wears off, and the questions stop, and all that’s left is this huge mountain of guilt that everyone around him apparently feels every day, that he’s responsible for.

Will sees it in the way Carlton’s eyes tear up and his brows furrow. He can practically hear Carlton apologizing already.

“Will, you’re so—”

“Don’t.” Will snaps.

“What?”

Carlton looks taken aback. Will wasn’t loud, or aggressive, or anything, but he was more definitive than he usually is with Carlton. He’s always more definitive when it comes to this topic.

“Don’t call me strong or brave, or anything.” Will continues, trying to remain strong even though he can already feel his own stupid tears welling up in his eyes. “Please. I hate it so much when people do that. Don’t treat me differently, like I’m fragile or broken. It’s been seven years. I’ve heard it all, and it all just feels like a— like a slap across the face”

Will’s eyes are shut, glued together so tight he can’t make out any of his surroundings, so he feels Carlton before he sees him. Arms are wrapped around him again, even tighter than before somehow, but now they don’t feel like something pitiful.

“Hey, *hey*— I won’t, okay?” Carlton promises, leaning down so he can say it into Will’s ear instead of his hair this time, “I won’t. You’re still the same Will to me. I just want to understand you. I just wanna try, okay?”

You can’t, Will’s head immediately responds, *not like he does*.

But Will shuts down the thought. Carlton never said he understands Will. He said he wants to try, and that makes all the difference in the world.

If Carlton is willing to pour in that effort for Will, so he can be better to him, then why can’t Will? Will wanted to break up because he thinks he’ll never stop seeking comfort in Mike, but has he ever actually tried to stop?

All Will ever does is indulge, with no end in sight, even though he knows that indulging in Mike only ever ends with him in pain. He lets Mike cross lines with no consequence, and as a result he punishes himself.

Maybe this is a sign, to not let Mike influence his entire life, for once. Maybe this is the better choice. Not to give up and raise a white flag in surrender, but to work on his and Carlton’s obvious problems. If Carlton can do it, so can Will.

Will forces himself to swallow past the lump in his throat. He’ll give himself another shot.

“Yeah,” He whispers. “Let’s try.”

It’s weird, more than weird even, but having the conversation truly helps.

Will no longer feels like he has to watch his every word, it’s more like every second word now. And Carlton doesn’t have to spend his time trying to wrap his head around Will’s inexplicable behavior, because he knows the reason behind most of it now.

November 1990 is an odd time in Will’s life. For months, he prepared himself to go through it entirely on his own, without anyone able to provide him with stability or comfort, but that’s not what happens.

Carlton is right there with him. He can’t hold him up entirely; he can’t even really prop him up if Will is being entirely honest, but he’s there, and it’s almost enough. Carlton holds his hand through the worst of it, and he remembers the little things that make the big things easier for Will to handle.

Will still wakes up sweating in the middle of the night, but he doesn’t retreat to the couch anymore. Instead, Carlton just turns on the lights, and they lay together in silence for a little while, before drifting off to sleep again.

Carlton still isn't the first person Will thinks of when he wakes up, but it's not important. He doesn't call Mike either way.

Carlton tries his absolute best to accommodate Will. He asks him about things that are hard for him and doesn't ask why when Will's answers are a bit odd. When Will starts zoning out in the middle of the conversation, Carlton doesn't grill him anymore. He asks if Will is okay, and if Will says yes, he at least pretends to believe it.

He's even okay with the whole 'The government might have bugged our apartment' thing when Will tells him about it. Even if it turns him into a bit of a conspiracy theorist.

"Okay but, why won't they let you talk about it?" He asks Will once, maybe a week after their initial conversation. "Did Ronald Reagan himself abduct you?"

"I really can't tell you."

"Oh my god he did. Did Bush help?"

"Wha— Carlton!" Will laughs.

Will doesn't think he's ever laughed before when talking about his past. Carlton makes it feel easier. Stable.

As Will said before, it's really weird. But not necessarily in a bad way. Will has never talked about the entire situation with anyone that wasn't involved, apart from Bob. He thinks that maybe this is how his mom felt, back when Bob was still alive.

She had someone she loved, who supported her despite her fucked up backstory. And she could talk about it with him, but he didn't completely understand. Still, Will always liked Bob. He thinks that he could be happy with his own version of Bob.

Jonathan laughs at him when he tells him as much.

"Please don't tell me he likes Kenny Rogers too"

"God no," Will snorts into the receiver. "He's a bigger bowie fan than you"

"I mean, he has taste"

“Not really, he says that the smiths are better than the cure”

Will hears a groan from the other line, “Will, come on! Now you’ve ruined him for me!”

Jonathan’s dramatics earn him a laugh from Will’s end, “Jon!”

“Now I won’t ever approve of him”

The idea of Jonathan actually meeting and approving of Carlton makes Will’s stomach feel queasy. Still, he tries to sound fond when he responds, “Oh, shut up”

“He’s just as bad as Nancy,” Jonathan chuckles.

“And Mike,” Will adds, and regrets it the second the name leaves his mouth.

He can practically hear the eyebrow raise in Jonathan’s tone “Mike?”

Now Will feels weird. There he goes, comparing Mike to both his and Jonathan’s partner, when he knows damn well that Jonathan is fully aware of how he used to feel towards Mike.

Used to. Will almost laughs at himself, but he shakes the thought.

“You—” Will starts stumbling, “You don’t remember all our musical breakfast arguments from back when we lived at the Wheelers’?”

Jonathan takes a millisecond too long to respond, “Oh, no, totally. Yeah, they’re crazy”

It’s long enough for Will to beat himself up over. He needs to get Mike out of his system desperately.

“Yup,” He sighs, “Crazy.”

He talks about it— *Carlton*; that is— with his mom one day too, when they’re discussing Christmas arrangements.

“So, I’m assuming that we’ll be seeing Carlton too?” She asks in a cheeky voice after Will tells her about confessing his half-truth.

“Mom.” He groans, but he’s smiling into the receiver.

“Hey, it’s Karen that wants to know, not me!”

Will snorts at the thought of trying to introduce Carlton to Karen, “Mrs. Wheeler still thinks he’s my roommate, doesn’t she?”

“Actually, I don’t think she’s as oblivious as you think. But Ted doesn’t know a thing”

Will has to fight the urge to role his eyes at the mention of Ted Wheeler. He could probably make-out with Carlton in front of him, and he wouldn't notice unless the TV stopped working.

“When has Mr. Wheeler ever known anything?” Will mutters.

“Will.” There's a warning in his mom's voice, but Will knows she's secretly smiling too.

The two of them stay silent for a while, and Will can tell she's gearing up to ask an important question. It makes Will nervous.

The actual question catches Will off guard, “Are you happy?”

Will ponders this for a moment. What does happiness even mean, for someone like him? He's safe. He's loved. He's comfortable. That alone is more than he ever thought he'd have. Sure, there are certain things, certain *people* he still wants in his life, but he long ago accepted that he can't have everything.

It doesn't matter. Will Byers is content.

“Yeah,” Will whispers, “Yeah, I'm fine”

The feeling doesn't last as long as Will hoped it would.

He gets through the explanation of his awkward backstory, he gets through November sixth, he actually gets through November as a whole. He gets through the chilly first December weeks, he gets through his mom and Mrs. Wheeler calling him twice a day to see if he's still coming for Christmas, and he gets through hanging with Carlton's psychology major friends that all hate him.

But that's the issue. He doesn't enjoy these things, he doesn't look forward to them, he just *gets through*. Like they're a chore.

It's going nice with Carlton, but he still has the same issue. They don't fight anymore, but—and Will cannot believe he's saying this— Will almost misses arguing. At least it gave him something to talk and paint about. His lack or creativity lately has been concerning.

It's just that everything is sort of the same, all of the time. Will shouldn't mind it as much as he does, because when he was a child, he literally craved nothing more than normalcy, but now that he has it, it almost bores him.

At least, there's still one thing in Will's life that remains unpredictable.

The phone rings just as Carlton pulls Will onto his lap.

They're on the couch again, an abandoned episode of Star Trek that only Will had actually been interested in playing in the background. Carlton is kissing his neck whilst Will tries to make out what Captain Kirk and Spock are arguing about.

The phone pulls both of their attention away from the things they were focusing on.

"Don't," Carlton whines, but Will is already on his way off the couch.

"Sorry," He winces. "It could be Jane, and I haven't spoken to her in days"

"I feel like I'm the other woman"

"You are," Will laughs. "Pause the episode for me?"

Carlton gives him a tired nod and Will kisses the side of his head as a thank you, before sliding off the couch completely and jogging towards the kitchen.

"Make it up to me later, though?" Carlton calls after him, teasing. Will has to fight the urge to roll his eyes a little. He really just wanted to watch Star Trek.

In all honesty, Will is kind of glad the phone rang, but that's no one's business but his own.

"Keep it in your pants," Will laughs at him, "My sister can and will fight you for being gross"

"I'll gladly fight for you, my love"

Carlton says it to be cute, but Will can only snort at him, "I am so sorry to tell you this, but she'd win"

With that, he finally picks up the ringing phone and puts it to his ear, "Jane?"

A different voice answers, "Wow, this is getting to be a habit, huh?"

Mike. Will's heartbeat picks up immediately. It's not at all their first phone call since the kiss, but Will still gets a little nervous at the tone in Mike's voice.

"Mi—" He starts but then cuts himself off. It makes the guilt that he's worked so hard on shoving away appear in his stomach again, but he does it anyway. Things with him and Carlton might be fine now, still; it doesn't mean Carlton necessarily likes Mike.

"Hey," He exhales instead.

"Hi," Mike says, sounding *odd*.

Will raises a brow. There's an absurd amount of background noise coming from Mike's end, and Will can barely understand what he's saying, but it still somehow comes across as weird.

Mike sounding off is never a good sign, "Why do you sound like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like *that*."

"Oh it's— It's nothing, really," Mike says, aiming for casual but failing so spectacularly that Will has to hold back a laugh.

"Okay," He chuckles, drawing out the vowels in the word. "Why did you call? It's like midnight for you. Are you okay?"

Mike might sound hilarious, but he's also the kind of guy to try and make light of a borderline terrifying situation, so Will has the right to be a little concerned.

"Oh no, no, no, I'm doing great Will, seriously, don't worry"

"You're really bad at acting, you know that, right?"

"Absolute bullshit, never has there been a better storyteller than me"

Will agrees, in secret.

Out loud, he keeps teasing Mike, "So you admit it? You're storytelling?"

There's an almost comedic pause, which would be much funnier if Mike's line wasn't so goddamn loud.

"Uhm. No." Mike gulps.

"What- What is that noise? Where on earth are you?"

Will is sure that if he could see Mike right now, he'd see him tap his foot like crazy, something he always does when he's lying right out of his ass, "That's just uncle Eric and Cousin Joanna, you know them. They're here early, for Christmas."

Will scoffs at the obvious lie, "Well, it sounds like you're in a football stadium"

"Uh, Nana is here too?"

Will bursts out laughing now, "Okay, you are seriously confusing me more than you ever have before, and that's saying something"

"How is she?" Carlton suddenly materializes in the kitchen doorway, and Will flinches so hard he almost lets the phone slip.

His stance is relaxed; he's leaning against the doorframe, but it seems almost too casual to be real. There's a slight smile spread over his lips, but when Will looks closely, he can see the

way he's chewing on the inside of his cheek. Will tenses up.

"What?" He asks, trying to keep his voice as steady as possible, completely ignoring whatever Mike is saying on the phone.

"How's Jane?" Carlton repeats himself.

The bad part about turning from a kid who never lied once in his life, into an adult who does nothing but lie is that Will kind of really sucks at it.

"She's— no, yeah she's great, she's awesome," He rushes to say, not even thinking about the consequences.

Why on earth is he *still* lying. He could just tell Carlton he's talking to Mike instead, but Will chooses to dig his own grave deep enough that he won't be able to crawl out.

Carlton, somehow, seems to sense this, "Can I say hi?"

Fuck fuck fuck—

"No!" Will blurts out, not a thought in his head.

The pretend casualness from Carlton's stance is completely gone now. Instead, he looks almost defensive, "No?"

And as if things couldn't be worse, the universe decides to fuck with Will one more time. There's a small silence stretching out between him and Carlton, and just when Will thinks he might be able to come up with a good enough lie, God decides to strike him down.

A very distinctively Mike Wheeler like voice sounds from the receiver no longer sitting at Will's ear, "Hey Will, you good?"

It's not loud, but it's loud enough for Carlton to hear and recognize. Will sees the realization spark behind his eyes and his heart starts pounding hard enough for him to feel it in his eyebrows.

Carlton scoffs, "You've gotta be kidding me"

Will watches him shake his head, before he marches out of the kitchen. Will's knees almost give out beneath him.

"Carlton wait—"

"Will?" Mike's voice appears again and it's almost enough to make Will want to rip the goddamn phone off the wall.

"Oh my god, not now Mike!" He snaps but doesn't hang up. He just lets go off the phone and watches it dangle, not even half as long as he did the other night. He rips his gaze away and follows Carlton into the living room.

He'll apologize to Mike later; this has priority.

"Hey, hey, I'm sorry—"

Carlton whips around to face him, "Sorry? Will, what exactly are you sorry for?"

Will stands in front of him, a little dub founded. He doesn't really know how to apologize to Carlton, because he doesn't know what Carlton is mad about. Well, he does, but he isn't sure to what extent he knows.

"Uhm. For lying about being on the phone with Jane?" He guesses, and even to him it sounds awful.

Carlton stares at him for a bit, almost long enough to make Will believe that maybe his answer wasn't as stupid as it sounded, "Okay. Why did you lie?"

Never mind then.

"I don't know," Will mumbles. It's another half-truth, but Carlton doesn't seem satisfied with it this time.

"That is such bullshit," he spits, and finally, it sends Will over the edge.

"Okay, fine, yeah it is!" He throws back at Carlton. "I lied because otherwise we would have been fighting again! But it's not like that did any good, because look where we are now!"

Carlton looks at him as if Will just said something crazy, "Why would we be fighting if you just told me the truth?"

"Because we always fight when Mike gets brought up and you know it!" Will is frustrated now. He absolutely *hates* feeling angry, and he hates feeling guilty even more, but right now his emotions are some sick mix of both.

He feels like dying.

Carlton either doesn't notice this, or he doesn't care, "And you've never asked yourself and wondered why we fight when he gets brought up?"

At some point Carlton started walking and Will followed him without even realizing. They're in front of the bedroom door now, and Will is reminded of how they kissed here over a month ago, and Will accidentally said Mike.

Always fucking Mike intruding.

"No!" Will denies whatever he hears Carlton imply with his statement, even if he knows it's true to some degree, "He's my best friend, Carl, and you hate him for some reason that I just don't understand, and I hate how I feel like I have to hide my friends from you"

Will's voice cracks when he says it. He didn't even notice, but his cheeks are wet now too. He must look downright pathetic.

The way Carlton looks at him isn't making him feel any better. His mouth is dropped in what looks like an extremely humorless smile, and it makes Will feel mocked, "Wow, okay. Awesome"

Will's lip wobbles violently, not even biting down on it helps, "Please don't be like this"

It feels mortifying, begging Carlton like this, when Will doesn't even know what he's begging for. He just can't stand to be looked at like this anymore. He can't stand *anything* about his relationship anymore, if he's being honest.

"It's fine, Will. I don't want to talk right now. I'm just gonna go to bed"

Will can't believe him. He knows that putting distance is sometimes the only reasonable thing to do during an argument, but he doesn't feel like this is one of those times. Right now, Will feels like Carlton is actively taking his chance to explain himself, and he can't go to bed knowing that Carlton is seeing him in such a distinctively wrong light.

"No Carlton, please, let's just talk it out—"

"No Will!" Carlton steps even further away from Will so he can open the bedroom door. "You're not the only one who gets to decide when you don't wanna talk about shit, you know." And with that, Carlton slams the door shut in Will's face.

Will doesn't move. He stands still, barely breathing, letting the tears roll down his face freely. He doesn't dare sob.

It's a little while before he remembers the kitchen phone. He doesn't know how long he and Carlton fought for, and he's even less sure about how much time he spent in front of their door.

Still, he's sure it took a while. Long enough for Mike to hang up, anyway. But as he makes his way toward the baby blue phone still hanging above the floor, he hopes with his entire being that, somehow, Mike stayed.

His hands are shaking when he reaches for it, and it only gets worse when he puts the receiver to his ear again.

He hears breathing.

"*Mike,*" He croaks, not quite believing it.

"Will?" Mike's concerned voice immediately fills his ears.

It's enough for Will to finally break down completely.

He sinks down the wall to sit on the kitchen tiles and holds onto the phone like it's his lifeline and not the land line. He still doesn't let any sobs out, but he also gives up on being completely silent.

"Woah, Will, what happened man? Hey, Will, talk to me"

“I don’t even know”

“Was it him?”

Will thinks it’s a bit of a silly question considering Mike most likely heard Carlton and him yell at each other only one room away, “Well, yeah obviously. Both of us”

“I’ll punch him,” Mike immediately says, no hesitation in his voice.

It’s stupid, but it cheers Will up a little, “I know you will”

“No, I’m serious Will, you’re gonna have to hold me back”

He thought amuses him. Will loves Mike, he really does, but he’s also realistic enough to know it wouldn’t be a fair fight. Will could beat Mike in arm wrestling any day.

“Well,” he teases, “that’s not gonna be hard”

“Ouch Byers, you hurt my soul”

It makes Will chuckle. Mike— idiotic, oblivious Mike still makes Will laugh even when he feels like he never will again, and that fact makes all his Carlton-related pain hurt ten times as much.

His chuckle slowly turns into a sob.

How can one person be screwed over this much in terms of love?

Mike immediately notices the switch in Will, “Hey, Will, it’s gonna be fine, okay? Whatever happened, we’ll figure it out—”

“No, no you don’t get it Mike,” Will interrupts him, because Mike doesn’t even *know*, “I should have just broken up with him”

The words shock Will a little, but they seem to shock Mike even more.

“Oh.” The sound is so small, it seems like it accidentally falls off his lips.

Mike definitely isn’t the person to talk to about this, but Will can’t bring himself to care. He needs to let his thoughts out. He’s spent the past one and a half months pretending, acting like everything was fine, like he was fucking *content*.

But the truth is, Will isn’t even stuck in this goddamn relationship because it’s comfortable, or stable, or anything really. He’s in it because he’s convinced himself that he needs to be, and that’s something he hasn’t even fully admitted to himself.

But Will confesses it to Mike, voice all wet and gross, “Honestly, I’m only with him because he wants to be with me so badly, and I feel bad letting all his stupid efforts at fixing us be for nothing. But I fucking hate being with him. His friends suck, and he makes me feel like an idiot all the time, and he doesn’t get me, and he’s not—”

Will stops talking, because he knows what he'll say next if he doesn't.

Mike is quiet enough that Will almost doesn't hear him over all the background noise, "Not what?"

Will inhales and prepares for another half-truth. Except he messes up the ratio somewhere along the way and turns it into an 80/20 split sort of truth.

"He's not who I want."

The tension between them is genuine torture, and the warm feeling in Will's stomach is back. It settles there, mixing with the guilt like that's where it belongs.

Will can hear Mike's breath again, all heavy and— for once in his life— not interrupted by words, and he really thinks that if Vecna came back, the sound of it could be enough to save him.

Mike's breath changes, if only for a second, like he's about to say something that'll make Will want to rip his hair out.

But then there's another loud noise from Mike's end that doesn't sound like natural conversation flowing, and Mike starts scrambling.

"Oh shit—" Mike curses, all of a sudden, "Shit, Will. This is such bad timing, but I gotta go. Just— just go to bed, yeah? I'll talk to you in the morning. I promise I will. Like, paladin's oath, okay?"

Somehow, his sudden departure doesn't make Will panic. Will is the only one of them to lay himself bare, and there's no reciprocation this time, but Will feels deep in his gut that he still didn't say anything wrong.

It's a scary thing to be confident about, especially because it involves putting your trust in Mike Wheeler of all people.

"Okay Mike. I'll sleep." He promises calmly.

"Good"

"Also," Will adds in an attempt to make the conversation a little lighter again, "if you don't tell me what you're up to tomorrow, I will call your mom and ask her if you even have family over"

"Oh I'll tell you, alright. Warning though, it's incredibly stupid"

"You really gotta stop using your nana for your lies, Mike"

"Will, you're so correct, but if I don't leave like— right this second, it will be the biggest mistake I've ever made"

Will snorts at the rush in Mike's voice, even if he has no idea what it means, "Well then, don't let me stop you"

"But I'd let you do anything, Will, that's sort of the whole problem"

Will is pretty sure his heart stops beating for a second. And then it starts again, probably a hundred times faster than before, trying to make up for the beats lost in that one second of weakness.

"Jesus Christ—" Will exhales, like he's always known Mike would be the death of him some day, "Just go!"

"Okay," Mike says so softly that Will just knows he's smirking, "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Micheal."

"Right yes, leaving, bye Will!" He screeches, not unlike his fourteen-year-old self. Then, in a gentler tone he adds, "have a good night."

The call ends.

It was short, and not much of substance was said, but it still means absolutely everything to Will.

It's enough to get Will's tears to stop flowing. It's enough to make him move towards the couch and settle down, even though he doesn't have a blanket with him.

Just a week. In only one week, he'll be home, in Hawkins, with Mike. And tomorrow, Mike will call him.

Paladin's oath.

The craziest part is that the words are even enough to make Will fall asleep.

When Will wakes up, there's a plate with toast and scrambled eggs on the table in front of him and the couch.

His vision is still groggy, and all his senses are moving a bit slow, but he's very certain that he can smell fresh coffee too.

For a very short, very sad second, he thinks that he somehow managed to go back in time, back to when he lived at the Wheeler's, and he and Mike practically lived the same routine at all times, which included eating breakfast together.

But then he sits up and sees Carlton at the stove through the kitchen doorframe.

“Oh,” He doesn’t mean to sound disappointed, but he probably does.

Carlton turns his head slightly, just enough to be able to spot Will in his peripheral, but he doesn’t take it any further.

Will looks from him to the food on the coffee table, and back at him again. He figures he should probably thank him, but he also doesn’t know if he wants to, after last night

In the end, Will swallows down his pride, “Thanks”

He reaches for the plate and starts eating his eggs. He debates whether he should get up to grab maple syrup or not but decides against it.

The silence between them is tense and incredibly awkward, so Will is at least sort of glad when Carlton breaks it, “Do you wanna talk about last night?”

The eggs get stuck in his throat a little, but Will manages to push them down, “Yeah”

He gets off the couch and walks towards the kitchen, plate still in his hand, shaking only a little bit.

The only thing Will hates more than emotional confrontation is confrontation that feels planned. It’s almost like a setup, like he’s a rat, and Carlton is luring him into a trap not even by using cheese, but by merely saying please.

Will stays in the doorframe and stares a little. Carlton is still cooking more eggs in the pan, but he takes his fried. He made Will his breakfast first. It’s a small gesture, but Will can appreciate it. Sort of.

Carlton turns to face him then.

“Will, look—” he starts, but gets cut off by the doorbell ringing.

Will sets down his plate on the table, gesturing to Carlton that he’ll go get it. It’s a nice exchange of sorts, Will supposes. Carlton cooks them breakfast. Will gets the mail from the postman. They both hurt each other in ways that are completely and utterly avoidable.

That last part is something Will could live without.

Will walks out of the kitchen, not really bothering to make himself any more representable looking for whoever was stuck at their door.

He walks slow, but not that slow, so he’s a little annoyed when the bell rings again, “I’m coming!”

Will lets out a tired breath when he’s finally reached the door. He unlocks it, turns the knob, and opens it wide.

All air immediately gets sucked out of his lungs when he realizes who he just opened the door to.

There, right in front of him. Messy hair, big brown eyes, and a horrible fucking sweater depicting the golden gate bridge. With a suitcase in one hand, and quite possibly the most crumpled packet of Reese's Pieces ever before seen in the other.

Will doesn't believe his eyes.

"Surprise!" Mike fucking Wheeler says.

Will thinks he might die right then and there.

But he also thinks he might take Mike with him.

Chapter End Notes

yeah i ate with that cliffhanger i know.

I cannot stress enough how much byler/willcarlton are he is STABLE u are DEEP. Okay my girl lizzie wrote that song for Will. which is also why its the chapter name. As always, comments are greatly appreciated! Id yap more but honestly im deadass abt to fall asleep on my keyboard so um akward. bai

Mike staying on the phone during willcarlton fight: When the neighbours argument sounds good asf.....

I want u all to know Mike literally fell to his knees when will said he wants to break up w carlton thats why he was so quiet. Mike wheeler is about to reach levels of evil twink that have never ever been reached before

Chapter 5: poor Will Byers yearns for maple syrup

Chapter Summary

Will Carlton and Mike are fighting for the title of evilest twink. Vote ur winner in the comments.

Chapter Notes

heyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy party people.

Listening to me and micheal as i am writing this note. I am in mourning still.

I actually don't have that much 2 say today, apart from the fact that i am sososo greatful for all the love this fic is receiving!!!! But I mean, that's the case every day. I love all you greedy assholes. Imma just let the chapter speak for itself hihi. Enjoy!

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

Four years ago, Will Byers let himself sit in a Californian airport, smile on his lips and a painting in his hand. He watched and bobbed his knee for what felt like hours, patiently waiting on one Mike Wheeler to emerge from his plane and appear in front of Will in what was possibly the most idiotic outfit Will had ever seen him in.

Four years later, Mike looks just as stupid.

“Surprise!”

Will slams the door shut.

He turns around and presses his back against it, desperately trying to ground himself for a second because *holy shit mike is in front of his apartment and Carlton is in his kitchen and Will isn't really sure if he can even breathe anymore and the universe genuinely has to be fucking with him on purpose at this point and—*

“Will?” He hears Mike call him through the door, because he just shut said door in his face.

Oh god. He didn't mean to do that.

Will whips around so fast he almost stumbles and rips the door open again. Mike is still there, but before he can speak, Will takes another step towards him and lets the apartment door fall shut.

And then they're alone in the hallway. Alone, and also, as Will is quickly realizing, far too close.

Mike was close enough to the door to knock, but now Will has squeezed himself in the small space that was left, and it's very clear that the space is not at all large enough for him.

They aren't touching, but Will can see the faded freckles on Mike's cheeks from where he's standing. If he moved his hands to articulate anything he's saying, they would brush up against Mike's body. Will waits for Mike to back up, but neither of them dare move an inch.

The sudden proximity is almost enough to make Will forget about the situation. But then it hits him again full force.

Mike is standing right in front of him.

He stares at him, taking all of him in for only a second. Then—

“What the *actual fuck* are you doing here, Mike?” Will hisses.

Mike looks at him like that reaction was the absolute last thing he was expecting, “Visiting? You? I am visiting you?”

Will's mouth drops open. He genuinely cannot believe Mike right now, “A visit usually requires a heads up!”

“Well, it's a surprise visit!”

Will feels hysterical, “Oh my god”

Will keeps thinking that Mike will disappear, but no matter how hard he blinks, Mike stays standing in his hallway looking at him like a kicked puppy. As if Will is being the unreasonable one.

Mike scoffs, “Okay I was kind of hoping for a better reaction”

A better reaction to Will's friend, who he hasn't seen in months, all of a sudden standing at his doorstep with a suitcase. After Will had what was possibly the worst lover's quarrel of his life. One that was, coincidentally, about said friend.

Sure, Will should be jolly.

“A better—” Will repeats in disbelief, before giving up, “Okay, sure, like what?”

“I don't know. A hug, maybe, considering we haven't seen each other since *summer*”

“Mike, I swear, literally *any* other day I'd be jumping you out of joy, but somehow you just manage to pick the worst possible timing—”

And then the apartment door opens again.

“Will what’s—” Carlton mumbles, before cutting himself off when he sees Mike.

Will whips around again, looking at Carlton, then looking at Mike, and then looking down at himself where he’s standing between them. Oh, the irony. His art history professor would have a field day analyzing their juxtaposition.

Will feels a little smothered standing between them.

“Oh,” Mike says when he registers who just opened the door, like he wasn’t expecting Carlton, who lives in Will’s apartment, to actually live in Will’s apartment.

Will shoves at his shoulder, both to make him shut up, and to give Will more space, because he seriously feels like he’s suffocating. Mike stumbles backwards without resisting, but he stands up straight now that Carlton is in the hallway with them. Too straight.

All three of them are quiet for a moment, and it’s long enough for Will to recite every single prayer he remembers in the hopes that they’ll somehow grant him the ability to sink through the floor, even though he’s not religious.

Carlton’s the one to break the silence, “Will, who is that—”

“I’m Micheal,” Mike cuts him off, jaw clenched. Will wants to shove him down a flight of stairs.

Carlton looks at Will like he can’t believe him. It’s a little adequate, Will supposes, “That’s *Mike?*”

“Micheal, yes,” Mike repeats himself, putting extra emphasis on using his full name. There’s a venom in his voice that Will has never heard before. It’s ridiculous.

Will scoffs and turns to face him again, “Micheal?”

“What, it’s my name!”

“Right, because that’s how a normal person introduces themselves.”

“Well, it’s hardly an introduction, I’m sure he’s heard plenty about me already”

Will’s heart beats faster in his chest at the implication in that statement. He’s certain Carlton heard it too. For someone with self-esteem issues as severe as Mike’s, he sure had a huge ego.

Will doesn’t say anything back, but he doesn’t need to, since Carlton turns to him again, “Will, what is going on?”

Will shakes his head with a sigh, “I honestly have no idea.”

The entire situation is confusing to Will. Mike and Carlton are supposed to exist in two completely separate worlds. Now they’re mixing and Will doesn’t know how to handle it.

Mike is unaware of that inner turmoil, “What do you mean you have no idea, I just told you, I’m visiting!”

Carlton takes a step back and puts up his hands, “Visiting?”

Will lets out a sharp exhale through his nose. If his argument with Carlton was stressful before Mike showed up, then it feels borderline dangerous now. It’s almost comedic.

“I swear I had no clue, okay,” Will insists, although he knows Carlton probably won’t believe him

“No, he really didn’t, I meant for it to be a surprise” Mike confirms, and Will hates that he’s trying to turn them into some kind of *united front* against Carlton.

“Surprise?” Carlton asks.

Will has had enough. He can’t handle Mike and Carlton both bombarding him with their nonsense at the same time. He needs to deal with one after the other, and right now Mike has priority.

“Jesus Christ— Carlton, can you just go inside for five minutes?” Will snaps, “I just need to talk to him for five minutes, okay, I swear”

Carlton stares at him dumbfounded, and Will wonders if maybe considering Mike his main concern was a mistake.

“Are you serious right now?” He huffs.

Will takes a deep breath, “Carl, please.”

Hurt flashes across Carlton’s eyes, which Will doesn’t fully understand. He’s asking for five minutes, but Carlton’s acting like he demanded a lifetime.

“Fine, sure,” He downright spits it out. “Take your time”

When Carlton walks back into the apartment, he doesn’t slam the door, but it’s a near thing. Will shuts his eyes tight, mostly so he doesn’t flinch, because doing that in front of Mike is the absolute last thing he needs right now.

Mike, who apparently still doesn’t get the message, “Well, that went well”

Now that Carlton is gone, Will allows himself to take another step towards Mike, just so he gets his point across better, “What were you thinking, Mike?”

“Not much, apparently, judging by how pissed you are”

“I am not pissed, *Micheal*,” Will hisses. “But you can’t show up unannounced like this!”

“I should have listened to Robin...” Mike mutters under his breath.

“I— I’m sorry, *Robin*? You told Robin you were gonna visit me, but you didn’t tell, I don’t know, *me*?”

“Well, as I’ve already said, *William*, I intended for my visit to be a surprise!”

The name catches Will off guard a little.

“Don’t call me *William*.”

“Why not, you call me Micheal!”

Will almost laughs at him, “You just tried introducing yourself as Micheal!”

“What do you mean tried, I didn’t try to do anything, I just did it, I just did my introduction.” Mike sputters, and it’s obvious that even he is embarrassed by his behavior.

“I said tried because you sounded absolutely ridiculous!”

“Have you ever considered that I wanted to sound ridiculous?”

Will is so done with this, “Literally what are we even talking about right now?”

“I don’t know!” Mike yells, but there’s a sudden change in his posture. This isn’t the confident, cocky, asshole Mike that Will is used to seeing. It’s a version of him that Will knows just as well but doesn’t see as often. His arms are crossed in front of him, but Will can see the way he digs his nails into the fabric of his sweater.

Mike doesn’t look menacing or fight ready; he looks like he’s trying to make himself small. Like he’s *embarrassed*. Will’s chest tightens when he notices it.

“I’m sorry okay,” Mike mumbles, voice weak, “I didn’t think. I— I’m an idiot, I get that”

Sometimes, Will wants to scream at Mike. Wants to take him by the shoulders, shake him back and forth, and just curse him for making Will feel like this. Because Mike might be stupid, and he might have just made Will’s love life about a thousand times more complicated, but Will can’t bring himself to be upset at him for it.

Instead, his stomach lets in the stupid, embarrassing warmth again, and his chest almost caves in on itself at the sight of Mike’s kicked puppy look. He’ll curse him out another time.

“Woah Mike, no.” Will sighs, reassurance coming easy to him. “That’s not— I mean yes, you kind of are, but you’re not, okay?”

Will notices how close they are again. Mike has stepped back far enough to almost be pressed up against the peeling wallpaper of their hallway wall. Will, in the heat of the moment, stepped just a little too close. Far enough to not be touching, but still.

Eventually, Mike laughs and pulls Will out of his trance, “That... makes no sense Will”

“Oh, shut up,” Will shoves his shoulder again, but this time he looks him in the eye while he does it.

There it is. That look, that stupid *sparkle* in Mike’s eyes that Will just can’t ignore, that makes it so hard to see him in person. When he and Mike talk over the phone, Will can only hear him. He still notices the way his breath sometimes hitches, or the softness that sometimes infects his voice, but it’s easier to pretend it’s not there.

When Mike is in front of him, swallowing down everything becomes so much harder.

It feels like there’s something buried deep within his chest, something that’s been pulling and tugging at him for years, wanting nothing more than to make him crash right into Mike.

“I’m glad to see you, alright?” Will confesses, doing everything in his power so his cheeks don’t heat up, “It’s just really difficult with Carlton right now, and your presence probably won’t be helping, but I can deal with it”

Mike’s eyes don’t leave his, and instead of a frown, there’s a smile settled on Mike’s lips. Will wants to reach out and touch it.

“So you’re... not kicking me out?”

“What? No, Mike, you’re poor.” Will cackles at the idea. “I know you can’t afford a hotel here, and you wouldn’t survive sleeping on the street”

“I’m not that poor.”

“Sure,” Will grins. For a second, he lets himself be happy about the fact that Mike is right here now, in his space. But then he remembers Carlton waiting on the other side of the door, “Let me just— just let me talk to him for a moment, yeah? And then you can come in, and we’ll figure it out”

Silently, Will hopes that Mike will somehow stop him from going back into the apartment. That he’ll find a way to stay in the hallway forever.

But Mike lets him make his choice, “Okay, yeah”

Will looks at him for only a second longer, before nodding and turning his back to Mike. He takes a deep breath and opens the door to the apartment.

Carlton is back in the kitchen, right where Will left him. He’s done with making his eggs, but he’s not eating them either. He’s just leaning against one of the counters and staring off into nothing. He doesn’t even acknowledge Will with a look.

“So?”

“So?” Carlton parrots, “Will, what the actual fuck is he doing here?”

It takes Will a sharp inhale to not roll his eyes, “I told you Carl, he wanted to visit me as a surprise”

“And I’m supposed to believe that?”

Now Will does roll his eyes, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know what it means! You do nothing but lie when it comes to him”

“But I’m not lying now! Carlton, I swear, I would have told you and I would have asked if he could stay had I known”

Carlton pushes himself off the counter to take two steps towards Will, who tries his best not to step back.

“Jesus Will, you don’t need to ask, I just— I just want you to be honest with me”

“I am, okay?” Will says, and then winces at the blatant lie in his words before correcting himself, “I will be”

Carlton doesn’t look very convinced. He has his arms crossed in front of his body, not looking unsimilar to Mike. He walks towards Will again, slower this time. Will forces himself to stand still, even when he ends up directly in front of him.

“You sure?” Carlton asks.

“Yes. I’m sorry, for lying, and for Mike being an asshole”

Carlton, thank the lord, seems to accept this. He exhales once, a long steady breath, before dropping his head, so it rests against Will’s shoulder. The contact reminds Will that he’s still not entirely done talking.

“But— I need you to promise me something”

Carlton lifts his head a little, “What?”

Will takes him by the shoulders and puts enough distance between them so tht he can look Carlton in the eye.

“You have to stop— *accusing* me of things.” He tells him sternly. “Mike is my best friend, has been my best friend for fifteen years now. I barely even remember what my life was like before I met him. We’re close. And I’m not willing to compromise on that for you.”

“Will—”

“No Carl, I’m serious.” He interrupts him, “Stop this stupid jealousy bullshit, there’s no need for it.”

His next words are directed more at himself than at Carlton, but he doesn’t think it’ll hurt him to hear them too, “Me and Mike? We’re friends. *Friends*. We— We’ve never been anything more and we never will be, okay?”

Carlton seems to sit with it for a bit, but eventually he responds, “Okay”

That was easier than Will expected. “Cool. Great, uhm. Can I— Can I let him in now?”

Carlton even half-laughs at the request, “Yeah Will, he can come in.”

Will is about to leave, before he pulls back to look at Carlton one last time, “Play nice, alright? It’ll be like practice for meeting the rest on Christmas”

“I will try my best”

Carlton might try his best. Mike does not.

They’re sitting at the kitchen table, all three of them eating eggs because Carlton was kind enough to offer Mike some. It was most likely a token gesture, but Mike said yes, so Carlton had to cook him some anyways.

Now Will is on the seat next to Carlton, whilst Mike sits directly across from him and keeps trying to sneak looks that Will more often than not returns. Still, it’s a bit of an awkward silence.

But the quiet only lasts for maybe a minute. Obviously, Mike is the one to demolish it.

“You don’t have maple syrup?” He asks, mouth stuffed with eggs.

Before Will can respond, Carlton butts in, “Why shouldn’t we?”

“Well, cause, you know, Will usually eats his eggs with it”

“What?”

“We have maple syrup, Mike.” Will responds, because he can already tell exactly where this is going. “It’s in the cupboard on the right side of the fridge”

“Cool, thanks”

Will watches as Mike stands up and makes his way towards the cupboard, like he’s already familiar with the kitchen lay-out. It’s such a simple thing, but it still warms up Will’s stomach, again.

It doesn’t get better when Mike reaches into the very back of the cupboard, and his ugly sweater rides up, showing his lower back as if it were a painting being revealed.

Then Carlton’s elbow bumps into him on accident, and Will’s reminded of reality.

Will forces himself to stare at his own plate. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Mike return to his own seat and pour the syrup all over his eggs, like he did when they were kids.

Then, Mike reaches across the table without having to ask and pours some on Will's plate too.

The syrup pools at the edge of Will's plate, not touching the eggs, because while Mike likes them completely drenched, Will prefers being able to dip the eggs into the syrup individually. Mike remembered.

It's silly, but it brings a far too soft chuckle to Will's lips, "Thanks Mike"

When Will lifts his eyes, Mike is smiling back at him, "No problem"

"Since when do you eat your eggs with maple syrup?" Carlton asks out of the blue.

Will almost jumps. Mike's stupid syrup pouring stunt almost made him forget that Carlton was there with them.

"Uhm. Since always?" Will tries.

"That is so weird. I have never seen you do that"

"I have." Mike shrugs, too tense to sound casual, although that is obviously what he was aiming for.

Will kicks his shin under the table. In response, Mike gently nudges Will's foot with his own, completely missing the point of Will's kick.

"You know, I actually think the weird part is that you've never noticed, cause he does it like every day"

Will kicks him again, harder this time, "*Mike.*"

Mike replies in a too-sweet voice, "Yeah?"

Under the table, Will feels something tap his leg. He doesn't need to look to know that it's Mike, dragging his socked foot up Will's bare calf. Will almost chokes on his eggs.

"Stop it," he chokes, not really knowing if he's referring to the game of fucking footsies that Mike is trying to start, or the snide remarks he keeps throwing at Carlton.

Mike lets his foot drop either way, and Will almost mourns the loss.

Will doesn't think Carlton can see anything, but he's tense beside Will anyway. He kind of gets it.

"So, Mike," Carlton starts, and all sympathy immediately leaves Will's body, "how's Hawkins?"

Mike drops his fork and stares at Will for a few seconds before answering in the vilest tone Will has ever heard from him, "It's great."

Will can't believe he was worried about *Carlton* making things awkward.

Mike turns back to face Will again, "Lots of maple syrup over there"

"Oh my god," Will facepalms.

"Yeah, I bet" Carlton grits out through his teeth. Will doesn't know which one of them to kick out first.

The decision comes easier though, when Mike's foot brushes his leg yet *again*. Will seriously hates him for playing with Will like this. He's got Will wrapped around his finger completely, yet he's not even aware of it. He waltzes into a life that Will has perfectly curated to be devoid of him for months, and he fits himself in the gaps like they were meant to be filled by him. Will hates himself too, because maybe they were.

He doesn't move his leg away this time.

Instead, because Will might be the weakest man on the planet, he taps his foot against Mike's too. The contact is fleeting, but it sends a million bolts of lightning directly into Will's chest. Will doesn't know how he's meant to survive this for an entire week.

A few years ago, Will would have broken his head over trying to figure out what the touch meant, because it was so rare back then. Mike and Will touched constantly, practically attached to each other's hip, up until they were thirteen. Then, it all stopped.

Mike stopped holding his hand to reassure him. He stopped purposefully bumping into Will when walking. He even stopped hugging Will. Those were the times when Will thought of every touch as intentional. When he thought that every brush of the knee, every elbow bump was some sort of hidden signal from Mike that he had to decipher.

But growing up made Mike revert back to his childhood habits. He no longer avoids touching Will; matter of fact, he practically seeks it out. Fifteen-year-old Will would have a heart attack if he heard that, but twenty-year-old Will knows that sometimes, there's no secret message.

But as already established, Will is weak. So even though he doesn't pay any mind to the way his chest tightens and loosens at the way the space between them changes beneath the table, he also lets himself indulge a little.

Will's fork ghosts over his scrambled eggs at the same time his foot ghosts over Mike's ankle, and when he dips into the maple syrup, he allows himself to dip beneath the hem of Mike's pant leg too.

It makes Will's heart skip a few beats, but Carlton's presence next to him is grounding. It reminds him of what's real and what isn't. There's a little bit of that guilt tugging low in his stomach again, but he brushes it off. Whatever Mike does, it doesn't mean anything. It's not hurting anyone.

They finish breakfast in silence, and Will lets Mike drag his foot up and down Will's leg the entire time, ignoring the way Carlton sits beside him, completely unaware.

Mike is busy with unpacking (though Will doesn't exactly know what he's planning to achieve with that, since it's not like they have a guest room he can make his) whilst Will is doing dishes in the kitchen.

Carlton is lingering behind him, chewing on his bottom lip. It's clear he wants to say something, but either doesn't know what or how to say it yet.

Eventually though, he speaks up, "I'm gonna head over to Quinn's"

This catches Will off guard slightly, "What?"

Carlton sighs, looking at the ground, "Just, you know, gonna give you guys time to catch up"

"Okay?" Will says, but he doesn't entirely believe Carlton, "Is something wrong?"

Carlton looks at him now, a little disbelieving. Will puts aside the plate in his hands, because he can tell he just opened up to a longer conversation.

"Will," Carlton laughs a humorless laugh, "Mike obviously hates my fucking guts"

"What? No!" Will sputters, trying to defend Mike even though he knows it's absolutely true. "That's just— Okay, it sounds stupid, but that's just how he is. He's an asshole to almost anyone he isn't friends with"

"He sounds delightful"

Will rolls his eyes, "Believe me, I know. I'm sorry he's a dick to you"

"It's fine, I mean, the feeling is mutual"

Will almost chokes on his spit at the confession. He didn't expect Mike and Carlton to become best friends, but he thought that maybe they'd at least have the decency to act civil towards each other for the first few days.

"Sorry?"

"Look Will; I don't like him either. I'm sorry, but I don't."

"You haven't even spent an hour with him!"

"Exactly." Carlton says like Will just proved his point. "And it was already enough for me to want to slap him"

“That’s just his face,” Will shakes his head.

Carlton blinks at him, “His face?”

“He has— He has a very slappable face”

“No, I’m pretty sure it’s his personality”

Will huffs. He didn’t like having to defend Carlton from Mike, but he likes it even less the other way around, “Carl.”

Carlton puts both of his hands on Will’s shoulders, “Look, all I’m saying is that I don’t like the fact that I’ll be forced to live with him for another week”

Will feels like he’s going crazy. Did he or did he not make sure that Carlton was alright before even letting Mike in? That would have been the time to voice any complaints, not once the damage is already done.

Before Will can respond, Carlton is already talking again, “But— I’ll work on it, okay? I’ll talk with Quinn, and then I’ll give him another shot”

Will snorts, “Yeah right”

He can count the number of times that Carlton talking to his wannabe psychologist friends actually helped their relationship on one hand. Matter of fact, he doesn’t even need one hand, because the total sum is zero.

“I’m serious Will.” Carlton tries to reassure him.

What does it matter anyway. Will knows that having Mike in the apartment will lead to bajillion different fights anyways, so if *Quinn* has any more harmful advice for their relationship, Will might as well let her talk to Carlton about it.

“Okay.” He gives up. “Okay, sure, that’s great Carlton.”

Carlton squeezes his shoulder, before leaning down and planting a small kiss on Will’s forehead, “I love you, okay? See you later,”

“Bye,” Will sighs.

He watches as Carlton moves out of the room and faintly hears him grunting out a goodbye to Mike, who pops his head into the kitchen only a second later, when Will hears the front door fall shut.

“Why is he leaving?”

It’s odd, seeing Mike in his kitchen when he usually only hears his voice here. But it’s even more odd to listen to Mike pretend like he doesn’t know exactly why Carlton is acting off.

“Why? Are you serious Mike.” Will deadpans.

Mike isn't phased in the slightest. It's the opposite, actually, because he hears the annoyance in Will's voice and *smirks*. He walks towards Will with no shame, like he didn't just almost fistfight his boyfriend over maple syrup.

When he's close enough to touch, Mike hops up onto the counter next to Will, like it's his own home, "Hey, at least I haven't punched him yet"

"Thank you?"

"You're welcome"

"You're impossible," Will laughs at him.

It's scary how easily Will falls back into old habits. Mike says or does something stupid, Will scolds him for maybe a second, and then he gives up the act and laughs at him. Maybe adulthood should have gotten rid of that part of both of them, but Will feels it ten times stronger instead.

And Will is sure Mike does too. He can't find any other possible explanation for his behavior towards Carlton. Growing up should have gotten rid of Mike's overprotectiveness and jealousy, just as it should have gotten rid of Will's delusions and dreaming, but it hadn't done that for either of them.

"What exactly was the plan when you showed up here?" Will asks, genuinely curious.

He rests his hand next to Mike's on the counter and allows himself to lean in a little, invading Mike's space. If they're going to be childish, they might as well both do it.

Mike groans, almost embarrassed, "Are you seriously gonna make me explain again? I get it now, the surprise wasn't—"

"Not with me, with Carlton." Will barely manages not to flick Mike's head. Instead, he teases, "Are you just going to poke at him for the rest of the week or—"

"I didn't think he'd be here."

"What? Mike, he *lives* here"

Mike swallows, sounding a lot more nervous than Will would expect him to, "I know he does, but then, you know... the call last night"

Oh.

That's why he sounds nervous. Will was joking around, teasing Mike even, but Mike had been dead serious this whole time. Mike was being an asshole to Carlton because, above all, he wasn't expecting him.

Mike thought Will and Carlton broke up already.

"Mike."

Mike keeps talking, trying to explain his thought process, “The way you talked about him”

“Mike.”

Mike slips off the countertop so that he’s standing in front of Will, and Will doesn’t know if this position is worse than the one before, because Will’s hand is still on the counter and he’s completely cornering Mike in, but Mike just keeps rambling and doesn’t even notice.

“I thought that maybe— maybe there were *developments*.” He says the word like it physically pains him.

Will straightens up at that, his hand at his side again instead of on the counter, “Developments? What developments?”

Mike crosses his arms, defensive again, “Don’t ask me that, you’re the one who wanted to break up with him”

They aren’t fighting, but Mike’s remark sounds so much like an accusation that it makes Will feel like they are.

Will wants to break up with Carlton. It’s one thing to have the thought on his own, it’s another to hear Mike throw it back at him out loud. It almost changes the meaning, because it makes it feel more real.

But that’s not what Mike said. Mike used the past tense. He said that Will *wanted* to break up with Carlton. Not that he still wants to.

It’s not the truth. Will’s opinion didn’t magically change overnight, despite his talk with Carlton. It still doesn’t feel right to be with him. But Will also can’t seem to find the time to tell *him* that.

“When.” He gulps.

“What?”

“When— When were those *developments* supposed to happen?”

Mike’s eyes linger on him for a while, like he wasn’t expecting the question. When he answers, he sounds a little breathless, “I don’t know”

“Me neither, Mike.” Will responds truthfully, raw. “But I called you *yesterday* and now it’s not even noon. There wasn’t time for any— developing.”

The space between them fills with an all too familiar tension again. Both of them can tell that they are slipping into dangerous territory. Mike is asking things of him, and Will is always all too willing to give them to him. But during those rare times when Mike asks for the truth, it gets confusing.

And this time, Mike is right there where Will can see him. There aren’t 2000 miles of safe distance between them, there’s barely two feet. Neither of them can retreat.

Will hates it. It means he can see Mike's Adam's apple bobbing when he speaks again, "Oh. So, you—"

Another pause. Will looks down for a second and sees the way Mike's fingers digging into himself like he's holding on for dear life, which is ridiculous. It's just Will, he's talking to. It's just Will, and they're just talking about Will's boyfriend and if Will tries really hard, there's nothing weird about it.

"Are you going to break up with him?" Mike then asks and makes it decidedly weird.

"That's not what I said."

"But it's what you want," Mike insists.

It knocks the breath right out of Will, to hear Mike say it so matter-of-factly. The truth always hurts more when it comes from someone else.

"How would you know?" Will snaps. He doesn't mean to come across as angry, but he can't help it, "I can't even talk about him with you, because you basically start barking at the mention of his name!"

Mike lets his arms drop and grabs Will by the elbow to keep him close. Will wasn't even aware that he was starting to move backwards.

He looks Will into his eyes, almost searching for something Will doesn't know about, and licks his lips like he's hesitating to say something. Like he's holding back.

"Cause he's not who you want."

It takes Will everything he has not to back away. Mike's grip is firm on his elbow, not strong enough to hurt yet, but somehow Will wishes he'd hold on tighter anyways.

Instead, Mike tugs on his elbow, sending Will falling forwards. With his free arm, he manages to catch onto the kitchen counter Mike was sitting on earlier. His hand is gripping the very edge of it, right next to Mike's hip.

They are so fucking close.

Mike's fingers are still wrapped round Will's elbow, and Will doesn't bother trying to straighten up. He's directly in front of Mike, leaning into him completely, mere inches away, and he doesn't straighten up.

His nails hurt where they dig into the countertop. When he looks up at Mike, he can physically see the energy changing.

Will is out of breath even though he hasn't done anything but stand around this entire morning.

He whispers, so quiet that he's sure Mike can only hear him because of their proximity, "You don't know what you're talking about. You don't even know him, Mike"

Mike's gaze falters for a second, dropping from Will's eyes, dipping lower—

“I know he makes you cry”

“And you don't?”

He doesn't mean for it to slip out, but it does.

Immediately, there's a change in Mike. His brows change into something that can only be described as the expression of someone who feels guilty beyond words. He releases Will's elbow. He stumbles sideways a little.

Will does straighten up now. He's ruined the moment.

He always does this. Compres Carlton with Mike in his head, then says it out loud and confuses everyone involved. He can't believe he let himself crowd Mike against the counter like that. He can't believe he did it, and then *said that*.

“I— I'm gonna go work on, uhm, a painting in my room for a bit.” Will swallows quickly, his breath not completely returned yet.

He says it, but he doesn't move. Instead, he waits for Mike to move first, to say something.

Mike nods, lips parted and eyebrows furrowed and all, “Yeah, alright.”

“Cool.”

Mike's breath stutters for a second, “Cool”

Mike moves first. He keeps looking at Will as he walks away though, and it makes Will feel weird. The warmth in his stomach is back.

Just before Mike touches the Kitchen doorknob, he stops. He turns, dropping his gaze from Will, and fixing it to the phone on the wall instead. He waits, hesitating yet again. Will couldn't figure out what he's thinking if he tried.

But Mike eventually makes up his mind. He huffs, like he's trying to pull himself together, and strides towards the phone like a man on a mission. He picks it up and turns around to stare at Will again.

The guilt has left his face. In its place is pure softness, with a hint of fear mixed into it if Will really focuses. Will has absolutely no idea what Mike is doing.

Mike doesn't dial a number, and for a second Will thinks that maybe he just forgot to, because he's lifting the phone up to his face, but then he stops mid-way.

Mike swallows so hard that Will can hear it from the other side of the room. Then, he lifts the phone's receiver to his mouth and places a *fucking kiss against it*.

Will stares at him. He's pretty sure his mouth is hanging open. He can't bring himself to care. The warmth that's been steadily spreading in his stomach since the second he first saw Mike at his doorstep is now flooding his entire body.

His elbow, his calf, every part of him that Mike has ever touched before feels like it's on fire. And Mike has the audacity to *smile*.

Then, he drops the phone and walks back towards the kitchen door. He closes the door behind him, leaving Will completely alone in the quiet of a room that has Mike painted all over it, even though he's only been here for barely an hour.

Will brings his fingers to his lips, just as he had done during that night. They feel impossibly warm. Will wonders if it's possible to feel things through a phone receiver.

Mike knows. Mike has to know.

Will doesn't dare move. He can't leave the kitchen. He stumbles towards the kitchen table and pulls out a chair so he can sit down and, preferably, think.

Does he know?

It's the only thought Will is capable of forming for a while.

He's not sure if he'll survive until Christmas.

Chapter End Notes

I want you guys to know that after Mike left the kitchen this nonchalantly, he literally ran to lock himself in the bathroom and say WHY THE FUCK DID I DO THAT WHY THE FUCK DID I DO THAT WHY THE FUCK DID I— over and over again.

I've made them yearn too hard for each other and now every single interaction between them has me feeling like an intruding pervert. Like ok my bad guys keep doing whatever y'all are doing i'll look away. the concept of a fade to black, but for like, hand brushing.

i swear i'll stop making them argue at some point okay. The next chapter is fluffy i SWEAR i just like seeing them in pain kinda.

Also uh.....i have a confession to make.....CLASSES HAVE STARTED FOR ME AGAIN.

Which is why- and I am very sorry to say this- uploads will be a bit less crazy frequent from now on. But dont worry folks, im talking like, only twice a week instead of every 48 hours, NOT once a month.

This ship is not being abandoned. Anywys, hope u guys have great night, as always, i love ur comments and I'll love u even more over on twitter if u wanna be oomfies!!!

buh bai

Chapter 6: The target employees hate Will Byers (and the other one.)

Chapter Summary

This is the equivalent of a dog being shown the flowers before getting put down. But like. Enjoy the 8k worth of byler fluff i gues!!11

Chapter Notes

so hi im finally done with this. Halelujah.
also, can we just really quickly appreciate the grwoth on this fic ??????? HELLO???
OVER 2400 KUDOS???? Insane. Love yall.

Okay now, ik none of you re going to complin about this, but i just really quickly wanna clarify that this is NAWT a filler chapter or a "here damn" kinda thing after putting u guys through like 30k of hurt/only a little comfort. EVERYTHING in this fic serves a narrative purpose bc im a little film nerd like that. Yes there is a chekhovs gun yes you should be scared. Terrified even.

But no seriously, i always put a lot of symbolysm and thought into my fics, so if u notice something, it's probably on purpose. Feel free to point it out.

Anywho, it's 4am and i'm going to the european parlament tmr, so imm leave it at tht. ENjoy!!!!!!

(also, real quick, idgaf that the legal drinking age in america is 21. This fic is literall historically and geographically accurate in almost every aspect, but i dont gaf about this one. Sorry not sorry you can all suck my german fat one.)

and yes, i chnged the chapter count again, shut up. This was originally supposed to be a 5+1 fic and Will was gonna hook up with Richie Tozier. I can do what I want.

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

Five hours, about a dozen pages, and three used up charcoal sticks later, Will is nowhere near having his head cleared.

He doesn't remember the last time he sketched for this long without taking a break, but he desperately needed the distraction today. Not that it served as much of a distraction.

When he had finally gotten the courage to leave the kitchen, he went straight into his bedroom and locked himself in there. Then, he grabbed his sketchbook and his cheapest charcoals and just started moving his hand across the pages.

At first, he sketched items scattered across the room. Then, he made the fatal mistake of wanting to sketch items he remembered strewn across their entire apartment. It's how he came to draw the phone.

And once Will drew his phone, Mike followed easily.

He didn't even really notice, but when he started drawing a pair of hands wrapped round the telephone, he noticed that the hands looked familiar. They weren't Will's, short and stubby. Instead, they were bony and almost concerningly spindly. Longer than Will's in any case.

They weren't entirely Mike, because he didn't have any references, but they were close enough that it terrified Will. What did it mean, if he could sketch Mike Wheeler's hands almost perfectly from memory only?

It scared Will enough to keep drawing. A pair of eyes here, a lower lip there, and then everything put together on a new page. On the next page, the same thing, but with an added body. On another page, Will sketches *only* his body. No head attached.

His fingers smudge around on the white paper, but when they ruin lines, Will simply redraws them. He keeps the pictures neat and unblurred; he tries to, at least.

He tries so hard, in fact, that he ends up covered in charcoal dust.

He only notices when he goes to brush his hair out of his eyes and instead smears a bunch of tiny dust particles right into them.

"Shit," He curses under his breath.

He looks out the window only to see that the sun has gone down already. Will has lost track of time completely. He's in his room, his and *Carlton's* room, completely surrounded by drawings of Mike. Even his arms have Mike on them, in form of dark charcoal streaks.

It's almost symbolic. Almost enough to make his fingers twitch for his crayons again, to paint the scene.

Will physically slaps his hand when he feels the urge, "Stop!"

He probably looks a little like a crazy person, sitting in the middle of his bedroom, all dirtied and talking to himself. If Mike is going to be the reason he ends up in Pennhurst, Will is never going to recover from the humiliation.

Mike, who is symbolically right here in the room with him, but physically in Will's living room. Or kitchen. Actually, Will doesn't know where Mike is.

Maybe it was a dick move on his part, to lock himself away for hours after Mike flew all this way, but it's not like Mike is entirely innocent himself.

He kissed the phone.

Will physically shakes his head, trying to get rid of the thought. He hears his stomach growl and realizes that he skipped lunch, which is maybe a sign to get up, leave the room and— Well, and face Mike.

He doesn't want to. He stands up anyways.

Walking towards the door is the easy part, turning the doorknob takes some internal convincing.

Eventually, Will opens his bedroom door and steps foot into the small hallway space separating his bedroom from the kitchen. He doesn't hear or see Mike yet, so he goes investigating. At first glance, the living room is entirely devoid of him as well, but it's quiet enough that Will can hear the noise.

Snoring.

Slowly, Will walks towards it, only to find Mike sprawled out all over his couch like a goddamn cat that's lived with him for a decade. Not an adult man that's barely been here for six hours.

Will almost scoffs, because this is an incredibly Mike thing to do, but somewhere along the way the humor gets stuck in his throat.

Mike looks like a painting.

Will wants to slap himself for being urged to run right back into his room to pull out his oil paints, but he can't move. As pathetic as it is, the way Mike's hair falls across his face has him in trance.

He takes a few seconds to start breathing again and prays that his choked first inhale isn't enough to wake Mike up. It'd be an awkward encounter, no doubt, waking up to see your best friend standing above you, staring down like a creep. The only person able to get away with that is Jonathan and his stupid camera.

The thought gives Will an idea. It's a stupid, indulgent, selfish one, but so are all of the ideas he's had today, and it's mostly been going alright so far.

He can't believe he's doing this, but then again, he's had that thought about a thousand times in the past six hours. Somehow, Will manages to rip his gaze away and lets his feet carry him towards the coffee table in front of the couch.

He doesn't worry about being quiet. Mike sleeps like a stone while Will is the lightest sleeper on the planet. It's what made sleepovers between them so practical, because Will could toss and turn as much as he wanted during his dreams, and Mike couldn't care less.

Carlton wakes up every time Will accidentally nudges him in his sleep.

He shakes the thought and focuses on the task at hand. Their coffee table has two drawers, and he pulls both open before digging right in to find what he's looking for.

It takes a moment, but eventually he pulls out a shitty polaroid camera from under a bundle of jumbled cables.

Jonathan sent it to him a couple of months back, when he'd been experimenting with different photography styles, before deciding that Polaroid was never gonna work for him. He said he couldn't even stand to share an apartment with the camera, which Will initially thought was dramatic, but then his illustration professor forced him to work with ink, and he understood Jonathan.

Jonathan left him the camera, maybe in the hopes of being able to push Will into exploring different art mediums (the two of them are incredibly pretentious, when Will thinks about it), but Will hasn't looked at it twice since he first stored it in the drawer.

Well, six hours can change a man. He prays that it still has some film left. For once, the universe seems to grant Will his wish.

He grins, wickedly. Mike would have his head for this if he knew.

Will reverts back to where he was standing earlier, looking down at the landscape that was Mike Wheeler on his couch. His smile falters a little when the heat in his stomach pops back up, because it changes the mood of the moment. For something that's supposed to be silly and annoying, this sure feels intimate to Will.

Still, he ignores it. He continues hovering above Mike, lifting the camera to his eye to get a glimpse of him through it. He doesn't know how, but somehow the lense manages to make Mike look even more— like himself.

He's beautiful, of course, but in a sort of careless boyish way that makes him seem charming despite his awkwardness. His arms rest above his head, his face is turned to the side, and his hair is tousled. One of his knees is propped up, but his other leg dangles off the couch like dead weight.

Will exhales, presses down on the shutter just like Jonathan taught him, and takes the picture.

There's a small flash, and the polaroid immediately falls out. Will bends down to pick it up and doesn't shake it, despite how much he wants to, because he actually listens to Jonathan's rants.

Will stares at the photo as it develops. It's tiny, definitely not detailed enough for him to be able to use it as a reference, but he wants to keep it for himself anyways.

Once it's fully done, Will gently caresses it with his thumb. He thinks it might be his favorite picture of Mike. He traces the outline of his body and wants nothing more than to keep the picture on him at all times, in a stupid place like his wallet or something.

The hunger in his gut flares again, stronger this time, but Will isn't sure it's about the food anymore. Still, he forces himself to back away from the couch and into the kitchen. He lets the picture slip into his jeans' pocket.

The kitchen looks the same as it did six hours ago. Will pointedly looks away from the counter Mike was sitting on earlier and makes his way towards the fridge.

When he opens it, it's practically empty. Which is just amazing.

They were running low on groceries anyways, because they always are, since he and Carlton can't seem to put together shopping a list to save their lives, but now that Mike is here, it's almost absurd.

There are two eggs, a can of tomato sauce, and a pack of cheese left. Maybe there's a packet of spaghetti and some toast in the pantry, but it's not enough to survive the week either way.

Will sighs and looks at the clock hanging on the wall next to him. It's not that late yet, and much too early for dinner anyways. Carlton isn't back yet, so he supposes he can go and walk to the shops.

He just doesn't want Mike alone in the apartment when he wakes up. Or, God forbid, have Carlton come back while Will is gone, so they're forced to spend time with each other waiting on him.

He could use the extra pair of hands anyways.

Will strides back out of the kitchen and into the living room again. He gets to the couch and pulls out a pillow from beneath Mike's head to wake him up. It doesn't work. Mike grumbles for a second but eventually shuts back up.

"Mike." Will hisses, but this time he doesn't get any reaction.

Will groans. Waking Mike up is such a task.

Will looks down at his hands for a second, where he's still holding the pillow, and decides it's better than nothing.

"Sorry," He mumbles for a second, before throwing the pillow at Mike's face as hard as he can.

It gets the job done. Mike flails, still half-asleep, and the movement causes him to topple off the couch. Will would feel bad if it didn't look so ridiculous. Screw his Polaroid, he wishes he had a video recorder so he could tape this.

Mike lays flat on the floor for a good five seconds before he finally opens his eyes, "Will?"

"Wake up sleepyhead," Will chuckles at Mike's confused expression. He almost looks betrayed.

"What are you doing?"

Will walks closer to where Mike is laying and extends a hand, “We’re going grocery shopping. Come on, get up.”

Mike grimaces but eventually takes Will’s hand and allows himself to be pulled up. Their hands linger on each other for a second too long, but Will pretends like he doesn’t notice it. His stomach has been acting up enough today already; it deserves a break.

Mike looks at the dark apartment for a second, before turning back towards Will, “How late is it?”

They’re eye to eye now, just like they’d been in the kitchen. Will has to force himself to keep up the eye contact, because if he let his gaze slip, it’d end up on Mike’s mouth, and he can’t handle that.

Mike kissed the telephone.

Will swallows hard, “Almost six.”

Mike’s eyebrows shoot up a little, “Oh shit!”

Will raises his own brow, “Shit?”

“I slept for like six hours straight”

“Wha— Mike, how?”

Mike shrugs, “Jetlag”

Will is glad that Mike wasn’t sitting round waiting on him while Will had his creative break down in the bedroom, but he also can’t help but roll his eyes.

“You don’t get jetlag from a three-hour time difference.”

“Maybe you don’t, but I have a very delicate sleep schedule.”

“You have a non-existent sleep schedule.”

“Shut up,” Mike mumbles as he rubs a fist across his eyes, and Will almost has to look away. Mike is a grown man, Will feels embarrassed of himself for basically thinking of him as something akin to *cute*. He cringes at the word.

Will shakes himself out of it, he has a job to do, “Wake up Mike, I need your help with this”

That seems to get Mike’s attention, for some reason, “My help?”

“Well, yeah, Carlton’s gone and packing up all the bags alone takes ages—”

“I’ll help.” Mike interrupts him. He’s straightened up, with better posture than Will has probably ever seen on him before.

“What?” Will asks, not confused because he accepted Will’s request (Will would have forced him to come if he said no), but because he seems to be so eager about it.

“I can carry so many bags Will, you don’t even know,” Mike praises himself. “More than Carlton, anyways.”

Will bursts out laughing.

“Will!”

The image of Mike trying to prove he’s stronger than Carlton is an objectively hilarious thought, because he’d fail so miserably. It’s not that Carlton is particularly strong; it’s just that Mike is incomprehensively unfit.

“Stop laughing Will, you are ruining my self-esteem!” Mike pouts, but Will can see a smile trying to sneak its way onto his face too.

“I’m sorry, really, it’s just—” Will can’t even finish the sentence before he erupts into giggles again.

“It’s just what?” Mike blurts.

“Nothing, nothing—” Will waves him off. “Just go put on your shoes Mike, I’ll go grab my wallet”

Will starts walking away from him, but he can still hear Mike spluttering under his breath.

“You’re such an asshole,” Mike yells after him once Will is back in the bedroom.

“Yeah, but I’m still nicer than you,” Will shouts back, silently praying that Mike won’t follow him, because the floor is still covered by various parts of his body and face put onto paper. Will is such a creep.

He bends down and starts picking up the drawings one by one. Even if Mike won’t come into the bedroom, Carlton will, and Will isn’t sure if he wants him to see all that.

He stacks all the loose pages on top of each other and sticks them into his sketchbook. Carlton doesn’t ever look in there unless Will is showing him something. He’s an artist himself, he gets how private sketchbooks are. He also probably doesn’t think Will has anything to hide, but oh well.

Will sets the sketchbook onto his desk with one hand and grabs his wallet with the other. He’s got enough money in there for a proper grocery trip.

Will rushes out of his bedroom to find Mike standing ready at the apartment door.

“Let’s go,” he says, and Mike nods.

It's a good time to go shopping. The afternoon rush is over, and all the people shopping for their night-out haven't come out yet, so it's relatively empty.

The store is a small one, just down the road from Will's apartment, right next to the Asian restaurant, so Will and Mike can walk there no issue. It's chilly, but the breeze is more comfortable than frightening. Still, Mike asks him if he's cold multiple times on the way over.

"Did you make a list?" Mike asks once he and Will have their shopping cart ready and start browsing the aisles.

He's the one pushing the cart while Mike wanders around aimlessly next to him. Will wonders when the last time Mike was in a supermarket that wasn't Melvald's was

"No." Will confesses.

"Then how am I supposed to know what we're looking for?"

"I'll improv it!"

"Didn't know you were a theater major."

Will slaps Mike on the shoulder, "Shut up!"

Mike smiles at him and reaches out towards the cart. He leans into Will's space completely, basically forcing Will's head into the space between Mike's shoulder and neck. Their hands brush when Mike grabs onto the cart's handle.

Will's heart and breath stutter, "What are you doing?"

Mike bats away Will's hands from where he's still holding onto the shopping cart, "If you're the one looking for stuff, I should be pushing the cart. Logic."

Will lets go like he's been burned, ignoring the way Mike probably felt his breath on his neck only seconds ago. He desperately needed to learn the concept of personal space.

Will swallows, "Yeah, sure, makes sense."

Talking casually with Mike like this is weird after what happened in the kitchen. It's like it always is with them. There's an interaction where lines seem to blur, but they don't acknowledge it afterwards. Mike always acts like everything is normal, and it makes Will feel like he's imagined the thing, every single time.

They keep moving, now in switched positions, but Will doesn't throw anything into the cart, too busy with his thoughts. It feels weird to go grocery shopping with Mike, specifically

because it's something they've never done before. Will has been shopping with Mike and the party, or Mike, Holly and Mrs. Wheeler, but it's never been just them before.

"Do you wanna starve to death?" Mike asks suddenly.

"What?"

"You're not putting anything in."

"Well, I don't know what to get!" Will admits.

Mike sighs, "You should have written a list."

Will scoffs. Leave it to Mike, a boy who has lived with his two parents since he was born, to lecture him on grocery shopping, "How would you know how to shop properly?"

"I don't," Mike says and then sends him a look, "But my mom does, and she writes a list every time."

"Damn, you're right. I can't insult Karen's superb grocery buying skills"

Mike laughs, "Okay, now *you* shut up."

Will stops in his tracks. He sees cans of kidney beans on one of the shelves and strides towards them. He takes two cans and gently dumps them into the cart, before looking up and seeing Mike scrunch his nose.

Will sighs, "Oh come on, Mike. You still hate beans?"

Mike stares at him like he just said something insane, "Do beans still feel like powdered velvet assaulting my tongue with its texture?"

Will gasps dramatically, "Wha— the texture is the best part!"

"You are so gross about food. I still can't believe you like Jello."

"Everyone likes Jello."

"It's *jiggly*."

Will laughs openly now, "That's the whole point!"

"No, the point is the taste, which is also awful."

"The taste is allowed to be awful, you eat it for the texture!"

Mike practically gags at that, "There is nobody on planet earth that eats food because of the texture apart from you! And even if there was, I can guarantee you they wouldn't eat Jello or kidney beans to satisfy their corrupt, perverse cravings."

Will is laughing even harder now. The two of them have always been a little weird about food, but in such opposite ways that they still can't seem to ever agree when it comes to the topic.

“Perverse?” Will repeats after he can bring himself to stop laughing, “Oh my god, fine Mike, we're getting green beans for you”

Mike smiles at him innocently, like that was the whole point of the conversation, “Thank you.”

They keep walking through the aisles like that; Will putting stuff into the cart, listening to Mike complain, and then promising to get a replacement for Mike. It's a lot louder than Will's usual grocery trips, and it takes almost double the time, but it's more fun too. Will is sure the old ladies restocking shelves hate them, but he can't bring himself to care.

“What is something you get every time you go shopping?” Mike asks when Will is struggling to come up with more essentials again.

Will thinks for a second before answering, “Honestly? Wine.”

“Okay, then let's go get your wine.” Mike claps his hands, and starts pushing the cart again, even though he probably has no idea where the wine is.

It makes Will smile, to see Mike so enthusiastic about getting Will something he wants, even if it's just his stupid wine. It's also a little hilarious, because Mike is very confident, but also totally going in the wrong direction.

“Wrong way, Mike,” Will chuckles.

Mike stops, dramatically swings the cart around, and wheels it towards Will again, “Aye-aye, Captain!”

Will snorts and watches Mike get closer but eventually panics a little when Mike doesn't slow down. He looks at him in question and sees a maniacal glint to his eyes.

“Mike,” Will warns, “Do not—”

It's too late. Mike jumps in the air mid-run and lands on the metal bars that the carts wheels are attached to, using the cart like a scooter. He doesn't stop, instead sliding towards Will at high speed, giving him no time to move out of the way.

Will throws his hands up to protect himself just as Mike lets the cart slam into him, almost hard enough to let him topple over, but not hard enough to cause any harm. Still, Will gapes at Mike.

Mike stares back, smiling like an idiot, “Oops.”

Will exhales through his nose, “Oh, I am so going to sneak beans into your eggs tomorrow.”

“You wouldn't dare.”

Will smirks and walks closer to Mike, before laying his hands onto the shopping cart's basket to lean into Mike's space, "Watch me, Wheeler."

Their faces are close again, as close as they'd been in the kitchen, but it's a different feeling this time. What was heavy and fragile earlier is now featherlight, teasing and downright *fun*. Will enjoys the change. He's not used to Mike's proximity being anything other than terrifying.

Mike seems to like it too, judging by the smile on his lips. He nods his head towards Will, "Get in."

Will moves away from Mike again, "What?"

"Get into the cart."

Will stares at Mike in slight disbelief, "You cannot be serious."

"Why not?" Mike asks, like wanting Will to climb into their already half full shopping cart is a reasonable request to make.

"We are in a public establishment Mike, those poor employees—"

"Don't get paid enough to care about whatever we are doing, yes, correct Will."

Will closes his eyes and shakes his head. He doesn't know how he's made it this long with Mike Wheeler at his side when his entire existence seems to consist only of forcing Will into the most embarrassing situations possible.

"Mike..." Will sighs, having mentally already given up.

"Captain Byers, lead our ship to find booty and grub, will ya?" Mike murmurs, giving his best pirate impression, which sounds ridiculous at best.

"Oh, so we're pirates now? Let's stick to roleplaying the Middle Ages, your slang is horrible."

"I'll have you know that it's historically accurate," Mike smirks and looks at him expectantly.

What the hell, sure.

Will puts aside his self-preservation skills and sense of shame, as he so often does when Mike is around, and puts one of his feet on the metal bars, preparing to climb into the basket.

He tries jumping once, twice, and then lands in the basket with his third jump. There's a loud clatter, and for a second Will is scared the cart might topple over, but Mike holds it steady.

Will tips his head back to look at Mike, "Hi."

An upside-down Mike looks back at him, "Hey!"

Mike looks silly, looking down at Will like a dork, but Will probably doesn't look much better, buried between cans of beans and yogurt cups. They are having way too much fun for two people who are supposed to be completing a chore.

Mike clears his throat and puts his pirate voice back on, "O Captain, my Captain! Where to next?"

Will laughs again, a full belly kind of laugh, "I already told you, wine section is this way! And do *not* quote Dead Poets Society at me."

Mike's smile drops for a second, replaced with something more tender, "You watched Dead Poets Society?"

"Of course I did, you told me to." Will says, like that should explain it immediately. Because it does, at least to Will. He'd watch every movie on earth if Mike wanted him to.

"Oh," Mike breathes, like that's a realization he's also having, "Did you like it?"

Will's neck is starting to strain from looking up at Mike, so he shifts in the cart until he can face Mike directly, "Well, the guy that you said was just like you *died*, so I wasn't too fond of that."

"Hey, I said first three quarters only!"

"I still had to go through the emotional turmoil of watching the theater equivalent of Mike Wheeler commit suicide!" Will clarifies, because Mike is acting like Will should've just stopped the tape after the first one and a half hours of the movie. Maybe he should have.

"Well in my opinion, that's not how the movie ended."

Will scoffs at him, "You can't just decide how a movie ends."

Mike shakes his head, "I can, and I did. It worked when I tried it with El, who's to say it won't work now?"

Will almost chokes on his own spit at how out of pocket the comparison seems, "That is just — That is by far the worst comparison I have ever heard from you"

"See, you're in disbelief now, but my alternative script is ready and Jonathan's desperate for a job. That epilogue will be out by the end of 1991."

"Do not abuse my brother for your deluded—" Will starts, but then pauses mid-sentence, registering what Mike said, "Wait a minute, you wrote an epilogue script?"

Mike's eyes widen, like he just realized he said something he didn't mean to, "Uh, no."

"Mike! That's so cool," Will gushes at him.

Mike's cheeks grow ever so slightly red, an amazing sight in Will's opinion, "It's not good, really, I only did it for fun."

“But I love everything you write.”

Mike somehow goes even redder, “You’re just saying that.”

“No, I mean it.” Will says earnestly. “You’re allowed to love *my* art, can’t I love yours?”

“I’d hardly call it art. Plus, there’s like, a significant quality gap there.”

Will hates that Mike thinks of himself that way. It’s gotten better in the past few yers, but Mike holds this fundamental belief that, for some reason, nothing he produces can ever truly be of value. Like *he* can't ever truly be of value. It makes Will sick.

“Mike, you still go crazy for doodles I made when I was like six, I don’t think quality matters that much to you.”

“Believe it or not, the quality gap is still there when you compare it to your art from back then.” Mike laughs lightly, before turning more serious again. “I mean, Robin liked my script, but I feel like she was more into the overall idea rather than my writing so—”

“Woah, Robin got to see it, but I don’t?” Will asks, almost offended for a second.

He loves Robin, and he loves that her and Mike are friends now even more, but that doesn’t mean he can’t be a little jealous. Mike is his best friend above anything else; Will wants to see the thing he creates, even if they’re sloppy.

But the offense immediately leaves his body when he looks Mike in the eye again. He looks small, vulnerable, and it reminds Will of himself. It’s the same look he probably had every time he showed Mike a sketch that he drew of him, every time he painted the parties DnD characters together for Mike.

He probably looked like that when Will gave Mike his painting in the back of a van too.

Mike stays silent for a little bit longer. When he talks, the hesitance is palpable in his voice, “It’s scarier with you.”

Oh.

Will doesn’t know what to do with that confession, but also simultaneously knows exactly what it means. Will shifts again, and rests one of his hands next to Mike’s on the shopping cart’s handle. They don’t touch. They aren’t exactly far away from each other either though.

“I love everything you do, Mike.” He tries saying. His voice is soft enough that it couldn’t be heard if there were any more people in the store. But there aren’t, so Mike hears him loud and clear.

“I know,” He whispers. “That’s what makes it scary.”

Will feels something twitch against his hand. He looks at the cart’s handlebar and sees that it’s Mike’s pinky. It’s a barely there touch, but it burns like a bomb set loose inside Will’s

chest. Mike's pinky taps against the back of Will's hand, almost like a question, and when Will doesn't move, he starts stroking it.

The touch is so light it could be accidental, if it weren't for how often Mike repeats it. He lets his finger linger over and over again, and every time it leaves a bit of warmth after retreating. The heat adds up quickly, until it grows so strong that Will feels like his hand will burn. When Mike's pinky starts moving in a circle, it gets too much for Will to handle.

He flinches backwards and clears his throat, only to quickly find something to busy his hands with, so his recoil doesn't seem as suspicious as it probably does. He settles on trying to fix his hair, which just makes him look stupid, really.

Mike is staring at him. His lips are parted, and his cheeks are just as red as they were when Will first asked about his script, even though Will is sure that they went back to their normal color at some point.

It's awkward again. Different than in the kitchen, but still weird. Will doesn't know how much longer he can handle the push and pull of all this. It's only Mike's first day in California. They're just going grocery shopping. It's only Mike's pinky.

It shouldn't feel like this.

Mike's pinky shouldn't make Will feel more than Carlton's entire body does.

Will needs to fill the silence, needs to find a way to stop Mike from looking at him. He breathes in and lets the words flow free with his exhale, "You'll still show me your script one day, right?"

Mike's eyes slip from his face, now looking anywhere but at Will. It stings, slightly, but it's what Will wanted, so it feels silly to complain.

Mike clears his throat and coughs a little, as if he choked on his own spit. He stumbles over his words when he speaks, "Yeah. Yeah, one day soon."

Will looks at him and feels like he can see way too much.

"Cool." He murmurs.

"Cool." Mike replies, easy smile back on his lips, even if it's a bit less steady than before.

The awkwardness is mostly gone now, but Will still feels the need to change the conversation topic. Also, they do still have to finish grocery shopping.

"So, are we gonna get my wine or what?" Will teases.

Mike slips back into routine easily by offering Will a smirk, "I think you mean booze."

Will throws his head back as he laughs, "Oh my god, walk the plank, Mike."

Mike laughs with him and starts pushing the cart. He doesn't give Will any warning, so Will topples over in the cart as he keeps on cracking up.

Will yelps as Mike keeps pushing, not giving him any time to adjust his position. Eventually, Will is able to get back to how he was sitting earlier, and holds onto the cart with all his might as Mike starts running.

"Micheal!" He shouts, caring more about his safety than the employees' judging stares.

"Where to, my Captain!" Mike is back in his pirate voice, yelling just as loud as Will, even though he doesn't have the excuse of pure terror flowing through his veins.

Will throws his head back to stare at Mike again. There's a twinkle in his eyes, one that Will used to see every day when they were kids. Nowadays, it's rare. The world has caused both of them so much hurt, has stolen so much from them, including their childhood. Will refuses to let it steal the twinkle from their eyes too.

Even if it means embarrassing himself a little. Embarrassing themselves used to be fun, back when they were young and couldn't be paid to give a damn. Who says that they need to start caring now?

Will lets go of the fear and lets his hands slip from the shopping cart. Instead, he uses them to point Mike in the right direction, waving to their right like a maniac.

"Right over there, mate!" He laughs at himself, but Mike's smile brightens an impossible amount.

Will laughs as they swerve around the corner, and he keeps laughing when employees send them dirty looks. He feels like he's twelve years old again, and not afraid of the cold yet. He feels like a boy with no worries apart from maybe liking his best friend a little too much. He feels like a boy that no longer has any worries at all.

But most importantly, Will feels happy. Not content, not fine.

Will is fucking *happy*.

When Mike has rolled them towards the wine section, they almost crash into the shelf, but Will doesn't panic. He's laughing too hard to pretend he cares about anything else, and Mike is laughing right alongside him, louder than Will thinks he's heard him be in years.

Mike practically folds in half as he holds his stomach tight and collapses right on top of Will. His head is stuck in the crook of Will's neck, vibrating with laughter, and Will holds the side of his head for a second as he continues giggling.

They're close, of course. Closer than they're supposed to be. But for once, they can't bring themselves to care.

They do, eventually, stop giggling. They buy the wine, with the rest of their groceries, and bag everything. It takes them a while, but they get it done in the end.

Will hasn't looked at his watch yet, but the darkness lurking outside the supermarket tells him that they spent an unnecessary amount of time in there. The cool evening air does the same thing, when they eventually walk out onto the street again.

"Oh shit," Will curses when he feels the cold hit his face.

Mike, who is the one carrying their bags, for some reason, turns to him immediately, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, it's just cold."

Mike blinks at him for only a second, before he basically throws the bags toward Will with an expectant look on his face.

Will takes them of course, but the gesture confuses him, nonetheless.

"Mike, what are you—"

Then Mike basically rips off his jacket, and it starts making sense.

Will sighs, "Mike—"

"Take it," Mike basically pants. "Please."

"Mike, we're home in like five minutes anyways," Will says, ignoring the way his stomach does a little flip at the thought of saying home and including Mike in that too. He's a little insane.

No more insane than Mike though.

"Exactly," Mike agrees. "Five minutes. Which means I won't die from hypothermia if you take my jacket, so put it on."

"You know that means I won't die either, right?"

"Well yeah, but you'll be uncomfortable, and I won't so, logic."

Will giggles again, "You really have a thing for logic, don't you?"

"One could call me a smart cookie," Mike quips with his eyebrows raised.

It's stupid enough that it makes Will snatch the jacket out of Mike's hands, which ends up making Mike look insanely satisfied with himself. Will can't help the fact that his face heats up. At least he'll be able to blame it on the cold if his nose turns rosy.

“Oh god, you’re ridiculous,” He shakes his head, but he’s already handed off the bags to Mike again, and he’s shrugging on the jacket over his own. It fits, because Mike is taller than him and tends to wear his clothes a little baggier anyway.

It smells like him.

Mike huffs a little as he balances the bags again, “Ridiculous enough to make you laugh.”

Will smiles shyly, “Well, that’s easy.”

Mike looks at him for a long second.

“No, it’s not.” He says lowly, looking into Will’s eyes.

Will doesn’t really get what Mike means by that, but it doesn’t matter, he supposes. They keep walking, Will wrapped in Mike’s jacket, until they get to the apartment.

An hour later, they’re sitting at the kitchen table, done with cooking *and* dinner.

Mike had carried and put away all their groceries, so Will took cooking duty upon himself.

He’s not a master chef, but he still likes to think that he managed pretty well. He made rice for both of them, to pair with chili for him and Carlton, and plain salted green beans for Mike. It’s a little complicated to make Mike an extra dish, but he doesn’t care. He’s not going to let Mike live off plain rice while he’s here.

Carlton's portion stands untouched on the counter. He’s still not home, even though it’s eight in the evening. Will hates it, but part of him is happy about it. He likes coexisting with Mike. It reminds him of when he lived at his house. It also reminds him of multiple stupid fantasies he had when he was thirteen.

“Would you rather,” Mike asks, sitting on the counter again, while Will washes their plates, “Never be able to smell anything ever again, or smell everything twice as strong?”

Will stops in the middle of drying off one of their plates, “How do you even come up with that?”

Mike swallows for a second, “Do you want to know the truth?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s cause of the chili.”

Will starts snickering, “You can’t be serious!”

“I— I’m sorry, but you asked! What was I supposed to do, lie?”

“It’s fine, Mike” Will reassures him as he moves towards Carlton’s untouched bowl. “I don’t think he’ll be home soon enough for it to still be warm anyways.”

He opens a cupboard and pulls out a plate to cover Carlton’s bowl with, then sits the entire thing into the fridge.

“You didn’t answer.” Mike says once Will shut the door.

“Hm? Oh!” Will remembers Mike’s question.

He thinks back to the way Mike’s jacket smelled on him, so simple, yet so distinctively *Mike*.

“Definitely smell everything twice as strong.”

Mike shivers theatrically at the thought, “God, I would rather literally chop my nose off.”

Will smiles, “I figured”

“Everything already smells strong, why on earth would I want to make my life harder on purpose?”

“Isn’t that the story of your life?” Will snorts.

“Okay, ha-ha—” Mike starts, only to be interrupted by the sound of the front door opening.

Will’s heart drops as he hears footsteps approaching, even though there’s no reason for it. The pain in his chest only hits harder when Carlton pops his head into the kitchen.

“Hey.” He says. His tone is neutral, and he’s not smiling, but he doesn’t look mad either. He just looks tired.

“Hi.” Will responds, forcing a smile that came easy to him barely ten seconds ago.

“Hey dude!” Mike quirks from the countertop, either not aware or caring about the tension that just filled the room. Will has to hold himself back from slapping him on the knee.

“Uhm, I made dinner,” Will offers instead, trying to take a little edge off the moment. “Your portion is in the fridge, if you want it.”

“Sorry, I already ate. Thanks, though.”

Will blinks at him silently, “Right, yeah, of course. You can just have it for lunch tomorrow or something.”

“Yeah.” Carlton agrees with him. He seems off. Everything about him is off, and Will doesn’t know why. He thought talking to Quinn would make Carlton better before it made him worse, but apparently Will can’t even get the good part first this time.

They are silent again, and Will feels Mike grow unsteady next to him too. He prays that Mike just keeps his mouth shut this time.

“I’m feeling kind of tired.” Carlton says.

Will frowns, “Already? But it’s only—”

“I know, Will.” Carlton cuts him off, which is more than weird.

Will doesn’t get it. He thought they ended this morning on a positive note, he doesn’t understand why Carlton seems so pissed off at him now. Sue him for thinking that the eight hours Carlton spent away from him might’ve grounded him a little.

“Right, well.” Trying to keep up the smile best as he can. “Good night? Hope you had a nice day.”

Carlton’s brow furrows. Will has the feeling he said the wrong thing, “You’re not— You’re not gonna come with me?”

That’s not what Will was expecting. He barely ever sleeps before midnight, Carlton knows that.

“Oh. Uhm.” He stammers a little. He’s not tired yet, but he also knows that not going with Carlton would make whatever’s going on ten times worse.

“It’s fine, you don’t have to.” Carlton sighs when Will hesitates too long. “I’m gonna go to bed either way. Do what you want.”

“Alright.” Will mumbles, not understanding Carlton better in the slightest.

Carlton flashes him a quick strained smile that doesn’t feel honest at all, “Hope you had fun too.”

“We did.” Mike suddenly speaks up, almost scaring Will to death.

He completely forgot Mike was even there with them.

“We just went grocery shopping.” Will rushes to explain, not wanting Carlton to have any more reason to start a fight.

They all stare at each other for a second. Well, Mike and Carlton switch between looking at each other and looking at Will, but Will can only focus on Carlton.

He looks like a stranger.

Even during their various fights and disagreements, Carlton has never looked *angry*. But this time, he does. He mostly looks numb, but there’s the slightest hint of anger there too, and it *scares* Will.

The fact that Carlton is making him even a little afraid is making Will sick to his stomach.

But Carlton seems oblivious to that. He grits his teeth a little, still with the same smile on his lips, “Cool. Yeah, sounds awesome.”

Then he starts walking towards Will and his gaze softens a little. Will relaxes, but only until he feels a hand on his neck, pulling him in.

And then Carlton’s lips are on his.

Will doesn’t kiss him back, doesn’t move at all because he’s too focused on trying not to flinch away. It’s the most uncomfortable he’s ever been, kissing Carlton while he’s acting like that, in front of Mike of all people.

The kiss only lasts maybe two seconds, but when Carlton pulls away, Will feels like he’s been underwater with no oxygen for months.

“I’ll see you in our room, yeah?” Carlton asks, jaw tighter than before.

“The fuck.” Mike whispers under his breath when Carlton turns around. Will silently begs Carlton to remain oblivious to Mike’s words.

His begging works. Carlton leaves the kitchen without another word, leaving Will to wonder what the hell just went down. Carlton felt him tense up, that’s why he seemed even worse after the kiss. This is something they will fight about, either today or tomorrow. Will feels like crying.

Will inhales deeply and presses his palms to his eyes, until he feels someone gently lay a hand on his shoulder.

“Will?”

Right, Mike.

Will sniffs quickly and prays that Mike didn’t notice how close he was to letting tears fall, “Well, I’m gonna head to bed too. It’s getting late.”

It’s futile praying, of course Mike noticed.

Mike’s hand slides from Will’s shoulder down to his biceps, a gentle touch that somehow hurts more than if he slapped Will. Will ignores the sting with all his might.

“You don’t have to go with him, you know that right?” Mike whispers, low enough for no one but Will to hear, even if there was someone else in the room with them.

“Of course I do.” Will says, even though he’s not completely sure. He forces himself to look at Mike and is only able to hope that his content expression looks convincing enough. “Hope you sleep well, Mike.”

There’s worry etched into Mike’s face, along with something else. Looking at it is Will’s equivalent of literal physical torture.

He forces another quick smile, before turning around and walking after Carlton, letting Mike's hand slip off his arm.

"Will." Mike bursts out.

Will turns around again. Mike's hand is outstretched, reaching for him but not touching him. He could grab Will by the elbow and reel him right back, tuck him into his chest and force him to stay there; Will would let him.

But Mike stays frozen.

Will's lips twitch one last time, "Goodnight, Mike."

Mike doesn't say anything else. Just watches as Will leaves.

Will leans his head against the bedroom door when he closes it behind him, trying to ground himself one last time before walking into the lion's den, which is ironically the place where he's going to sleep tonight.

Carlton's already there, on the bed. Like he was waiting for Will to come, because he knew he would.

"You didn't even kiss me back." Carlton scoffs.

Will's head drops from the door. He wasn't expecting Carlton to be this direct with him. In all honesty, he wasn't expecting Carlton to say anything at all. He thought he'd save that for the awkward talk in the morning.

"Sorry?" Will rasps

"You heard me."

"Carl, what the hell." Will moves away from the door to stand in front of Carlton and shakes his head. "I was caught off guard! You never kiss me in front of Quinn, or literally any of our other friends!"

"Is that why you stood still like a fucking stone?"

"Yes! That, and the fact that you are acting like a completely different person right now!"

"Yeah," Carlton laughs at him. "I'm sure those were the only reasons."

Will flinches. He balls his hands into fists, trying to force back his tears, but it's too late. His cheeks are wet again, and he sits down on the bed in defeat.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to imply,” Will whispers. “But it is not true.”

Will means it. The reason he didn’t kiss Carlton back isn’t because Mike was right next to him, but because Carlton wasn’t *himself*. Will knows Carlton, and he knows that, despite his gentleness, Carlton can get a little mean sometimes, but that wasn’t that.

Carlton was angry at Will, for reasons that Will doesn’t even know about.

Carlton looks at him but only rolls his eyes. He lets himself fall backwards onto the mattress and turns away from Will, “Just let me sleep, Will.”

“Wha— You’re the one who started this conversation!” Will croaks, truly frustrated now.

He doesn’t get a response. Instead, Carlton moves to turn off the light, leaving them in complete darkness.

“Carlton,” Will tries, “Carlton, come on.”

There’s no answer, Carlton is ignoring him, on purpose, which is also something he’s never done before. It almost hurts worse than it would have if Carlton had screamed at him. He hasn’t received purposeful silent treatment since he was a kid.

“Carl,” Will snivels. The room stays silent.

Will hates this more than he’s ever hated anything before, he thinks. He can’t even sleep on the couch, because that’s where Mike is, and Will would rather spend a thousand nights with Carlton ignoring him than let Mike see him in this state.

Will chokes down a sob and moves one of his shaking hands towards the blanket. He lifts the corner enough for him to crawl beneath it. Once he’s covered, he curls up into a ball, as far away from Carlton as possible. He’s sharing the bed with someone, but he’s never felt so alone in his life.

Will doesn’t sleep. Carlton doesn’t either, for the first thirty minutes maybe, but eventually Will hears his breath even out. Will allows himself to cry once he’s sure Carlton is asleep.

He doesn’t dare make any noise. He turns into his pillow and lets the tears fall freely, muffling any noises he could possibly make with the fabric.

It’s such a stark fucking contrast. How he went from grocery shopping with Mike, feeling on top of the world, to whatever this is.

He didn’t even care with Mike. He could’ve done whatever he wanted, and one glance at Mike’s stupid smile would have reassured him. He thinks of Mike’s outstretched hand, of Mike telling him that he doesn’t have to go with Carlton.

Oh how he wishes that were true.

It felt so normal, so *good* with Mike. Will doesn’t get why it can’t be like that with Carlton too.

He doesn't get why Carlton can't just be Mike.

Chapter End Notes

gulp sorry im really allergic to not writing angst.

As a little recommendation, if ur enjoying the vibes of thi fic, i HEAVILY recommend that u watch the normal people tv show. The book is amazing too, but the show captures such a specific essence i always find myself accidentally recreating it in all my art. Mike and Will are very connel and Marianne coded. Carlton is jamie. Think of this chapter as episode 8.

anyways, i feel like we are really going to see a bit of a switch in Carlton's behaviour now tht mike is here, without giving too much away. Get ready tho u guys. I feel like making myself cry.

Anyways. Mike reminds will of the best parts of his childhood while Carlton reminds Will of the worst #LOL

peace out <3333333

EDIT: I wanna remind everyone that no matter how long i take to update, this fic is NOT being abandoned. I lowkey just realised that the shit i plnnd for chapter 7 is like a borderline insane amount and I'm not sure how to write it without it taking until sunday and being 10k words long. It might be 10k words i can't even lie. Ugh. Someone play editor for me. Anyways, i'm taking my time with this one, but trust its for a good reason.

Chapter 7: Will Byers is an unreliable narrator

Chapter Summary

The calm before the storm.

Chapter Notes

hey party peeps. I wanna apologise for taking a while to update, but also.....i dont. Joking. I am trying my best, hope u guys know tht.

This chapter is a very calm one, and i actually mean that this time!!!! Originally, this was supposed to have a lot more content in it, but it just got soooo long tht chapter 7 is now chapter 7 and 8. Whoopsie. So if this feels like a nothingburger just know that its because things are about to go downnnnnnn.

Anywho, hope u enjoy this!!!

OH ALSO. I hve made an official this loving feeling(it wears us out) spotify playlist. Feel free to drop song recs that remind u of this fic!!!
<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4r0tdBtlKMu2XwVTxnXRLj?si=mJl3TGMRTh6Lo711Ieukpg>

now actually enjoy

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

When Will wakes up, Carlton is gone, and Will doesn't know if the feeling in his stomach is dread or relief.

It's a bit of both, he thinks.

He's relieved, because he can wake up without the first thing he sees being Carlton. He doesn't want to face him, especially not after last night, and especially not after he refused to talk to Will.

But the dread is present in his stomach too, because if Carlton isn't here now, it means Will is going to have to face him later, unprepared.

He could just be in the next room, over in the bathroom or the kitchen, but Will doubts that. The bed feels cold when he lets his fingers ghost over where Carlton is supposed to be laying,

and Will doubts Carlton would stick round in a space he shares with Mike for longer than he has to.

The window's not open, but it might as well be. It's freezing cold in the bedroom and Will finds himself longing for the warm comfort of the living room. For more than one reason, if he's honest.

As he untangles himself from the sheets, Will thinks back to the night before. How angry Carlton was, but even worse, how different he was from Mike.

He stops thinking about it almost immediately after he starts. It's too early to feel this sick to his stomach.

Will yawns and stretches he gets up. The sun is out already, so it must be later than the usual time Will gets up at, but he doesn't feel relaxed in the slightest. He doesn't know how long he spent last night debating whether he should just take his blanket to go sleep on the kitchen floor but judging by his tired state he guesses it must've been hours.

He still stayed in bed though, no matter how much it felt like a self-made prison. He didn't want Carlton to wake up without him.

Clearly, Carlton doesn't worry about that.

Will sighs. It's no use getting upset at him now, when he isn't even around. Honestly, it's not like it'd make any difference if he were. Carlton wouldn't care either way.

Will looks down at himself, deciding that boxers and a shirt would have to be representable enough for Mike to see him. He's too lazy to put on real clothes, he hasn't even had coffee yet. He feels like shit.

Opening his bedroom door is a task. He yearned for the living room's warmth barely a minute ago, but now that he's faced with actually having to leave the safety of his bedroom without Carlton in it, he hesitates a little.

Then, he decides that he's a grown man and that it's ridiculous to be scared of his own apartment.

When Will twists the doorknob, he thinks he's dreaming for a second, because he can smell *coffee*, and Carlton has never made coffee a day in his life. Then he remembers that Mike lives here too now.

"Mike?" He calls, not sure if he'll get a response.

But surely enough, the door to the kitchen swings open and Mike pops his head out to look at Will.

The pain that comes with seeing Mike is different from the pain that comes with talking to Carlton. It's something familiar, but it's also something he hasn't felt this intensely in a long time. Loving Mike is supposed to be a dull persistent ache, but now that he's actually here

with Will, able to see him and to *touch* him at any given time, it feels like being stabbed after willingly walking into a knife.

“Oh,” Mike exhales after a moment. “Will.”

Mike looks at him weirdly. Not his normal kind of weird, where he just stares at Will with sparkly eyes until even Will starts to get a bit freaked out by it. This time, Mike is looking at him like he thinks Will could fall apart at any given moment.

Will wonders a little if Mike could be right.

Before Will can even start that train of thought, however, Mike is already moving towards him at an alarming speed. Will can barely register what’s even happening before he feels Mike tug at his sleeve and pull him in.

He wants to ask Mike what he thinks he’s doing, but then he hits Mike’s chest with a thud and his mouth slams shut immediately. Mike’s arms wrap around Will’s shoulders, and he presses Will against himself hard enough that Will is sure Mike can hear his heart hammering.

They’re hugging.

But it’s not like one of their normal hugs. Normally, Mike bends down so he can be at Will’s level, squeezes him tightly, and then lets go as quickly as possible.

But now, Mike is standing straight, tucking Will’s head beneath his own, even if it means that Mike is probably standing on his tippy toes for it. His squeeze is still tight, but it’s also steady, like Mike doesn’t plan on letting go for a long time. And Will is just standing there, motionless like a complete idiot.

His cheeks are so hot he can’t believe he felt cold barely ten seconds ago. It only gets worse when Mike’s hand slides from his shoulder into Will’s hair. Mike is standing normally again, which means he can’t rest his head on top of Will’s anymore, but instead of just letting go he nestles himself into the crook of Will’s neck instead.

Will genuinely thinks he might die.

He tries his best to wrap his hands around Mike’s torso too, but the feeling of Mike’s fingers gently scraping against his scalp almost has him whimpering. And Mike is right there, his ear practically pressed against the corner of Will’s mouth, *so. Fucking. Close.*

And apparently, Will is the greediest man alive, because it still doesn’t feel like enough. He brings his arms around Mike’s waist and allows himself to let his fingers dig into the skin covered by the thin layer of Mike’s shirt.

His nails are probably hurting Mike at least a little, but Will has to grip something in order to keep his composure.

It’s not just the feeling of Mike’s hands in his hair, it’s more so the fact that Mike is *here*, right here with him, and that he’s not letting go. This isn’t Mike hugging him casually; this is

Mike holding him, telling him that things will end up being okay without even having to use words. This is something they've never been able to do over the phone before.

If Will's stomach felt warm these past few months, it's exploding now. His entire body is being flooded with a bubbling kind of heat that he hasn't experienced in maybe half a decade, and all he can do to not fall apart is hold on as tight as he can.

Will can handle a hug. He can't handle whatever this is.

He's exactly where he wished he was last night. Reeled in by Mike and tucked into his chest, kept safe. Mike is over twelve hours late, but he's there now. Somehow, Will thinks it's better now than if he had done it yesterday.

He can almost feel tears pricking in his eyes again, and there's a lump in his throat, but Will says the name anyway, "Mike."

Mike still doesn't let go, "I'm sorry."

"You didn't do anything, Mike."

"I can still be sorry."

Will hesitates to open his mouth again, because he doesn't have a direct response to what Mike said, and a topic change will make them move away from each other, which will no doubt make them enter their weird, awkward in-between space again.

But he also thinks that the longer they stay like this, the harder it will be to let go, so he forces himself to speak, "Did you— Did you make coffee?"

As expected, Mike basically flinches away from him. Being gone from Mike's hold is painful, and the loss of Mike's fingers from his hair is even worse, but Will can manage. He doesn't know if Mike can do the same though, judging by how he looks three seconds away from dying.

His breath is heavier than it should be, because Will is pretty sure he wasn't in the kitchen running a marathon. His cheeks are also flushed, most likely from embarrassment, but Will likes to pretend otherwise.

Despite the fact that he's a wreck, Will has to hold back a smirk. He likes it when Mike does little things that let him believe that he too has an impact on him, the same way Mike does on Will.

"Oh, yeah, totally, it's in the kitchen!" Mike stammers, stepping back to put some distance between them.

"Cool." Will grins lightly, trying to push down the fact that he's feeling just as awkward as Mike.

Mike's lips part at the familiar word, and the corners of his mouth tug up into a small smile as well. He doesn't say it back, but his expression says enough to Will. It's one of the rare times

where Will is at least sort of certain about what Mike is thinking.

“Come on,” He eventually says instead, “I’ll get you some.”

Will rolls his eyes, “Mike, you really don’t have to—”

But Mike is already on his way back into the kitchen, “I said—” He turns to face Will again, a playfully stern look on his face, “I’ll get you some.”

Half an hour and two cups of coffee later, Will and Mike are sitting on the couch in the living room that Mike slept on last night. His sheets and pillow are still on there, but they’re sitting on top of the blanket, so it doesn’t bother them.

A Star Trek rerun is playing in the background, and it’s the same episode as a couple days ago, but Will isn’t paying attention this time either. He’s focused on talking to Mike, who’s been bombarding him with hypotheticals since they sat down.

“—but would you rather have telepathy or clairvoyance?” Mike asks him like it’s the most important question he’s ever asked before.

Will thinks about it for a minute before answering, “Didn’t I kind of have telepathy?”

“Huh?”

“Well, you know, with—” Will stops for a second before saying the name out loud. “With Vecna. That was kind of like a weird, freaky, telepathic connection.”

It’s odd how easy it is to bring up, just because it fits the topic of conversation, not because he was forced to open up. Telling Carlton anything about Vecna, even when it’s shrouded in a thousand half-truths, feels like walking on glass shards. When he brings him up with Mike, it feels like skipping over the shards.

Mike’s eyes widen at what Will says, but not because he’s shocked Will said the name. He looks a little bit more like a kid that just got reminded of Santa leaving Christmas presents under the tree.

“Wait, holy shit, you’re so right!” Mike beams at him excitedly.

Will regrets bringing it up. Not because he’s uncomfortable, surprisingly, but because he forgot just how intense Mike still gets over his powers, even though Will hasn’t felt or done anything supernatural since they defeated Vecna over three years ago.

Will swallows and tries to distract Mike, even though he knows it futile, “I’d still rather have clairvoyance though.”

“Well yeah, okay,” Mike shrugs. “But you actually *had* the other!”

“And it sucked! Also, that wasn’t real telepathy.”

Mike scoffs at him, almost offended, “Bull.”

“It wasn’t!”

Mike considers it for a second. Will can basically see two sides of him fighting each other; the biased one that seems to think praising Will should be a full-time job against the side that’s been reading comics for a decade and can recognize what actual telepathy looks like.

The nerd seems to win the argument, judging by the way Mike huffs like he’s annoyed at himself.

“It was still crazy cool though.” He mumbles, confirming Will’s suspicions.

Will has to bite back a smile and curses himself for it, “Well, that’s just what you think...”

Mike chuckles when he sees Will smiling. It’s a timid little thing, like they’re both almost a little shy in the moment, but it’s not awkward. Will likes having conversations like these with Mike. Meaningless and casual, talking without having to worry about how each word could possibly be interpreted.

It’s not quiet between them for long, it never is when Mike has the urge to talk, because Will always indulges him.

“What’s so cool about clairvoyance anyway?” Mike asks.

There’s not really a simple answer to that question. Will is fine living life like it’s meant to be lived, getting surprised and disappointed at every corner, but sometimes he wishes he could just get small *hints* about where his life is heading.

He wouldn’t have to spend his time deciphering anymore. He could be certain about something for the first time in his life. It’s a scary thought, but he finds himself yearning for the certainty, nonetheless.

“I don’t know.” Will admits. “I don’t think I could handle knowing exactly what others are thinking all the time, you know, but knowing the future would still sort of make people more...predictable.”

He sneaks a look Mike’s way when he says it. God would Will pay thousands just to know where Mike’s future is heading. Where *their* future is leading, if Will is completely honest. Not because he still believes in his fifteen-year-old self’s dreams, but because he thinks the absolute certainty would be a nice and needed slap to the face.

Mike doesn’t clock his look or realize Will is talking about him though. His expression changed; there’s something heavier set behind his brows. A look so stern he wouldn’t use it when talking about Will.

“Do you mean,” Mike starts, struggling to complete the sentence, “People like Carlton?”

Oh. That is not what Will meant at all.

He drops his gaze from Mike, but he thinks about it for a little while. Knowing and being able to predict Carlton would have been a useful skill to have this past year. He’d be able to coexist next to him without that constant dread and fear of a fight tugging at his stomach. He could just schedule their arguments instead.

His moods wouldn’t catch him off guard like they did yesterday.

“Yeah,” Will sighs and nods. “Him too, I guess”

The blanket they’re sitting on shifts a little, and when Will looks at Mike, he can see that it’s because Mike changed his own position to sit closer to Will. He has one leg still dangling off the couch, but the other is still tucked away beneath him. He’s close enough to touch.

“Do you wanna...talk about it?” Mike speaks carefully, like he’s afraid Will is going to jump and run off like a startled deer if he doesn’t approach the bomb that is Carlton’s name with caution.

It’s a little warranted, because Will does feel the urge to hide in the back of his mind, “What’s there to talk about, Mike?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Will can see Mike fidgeting with the blanket’s edges. He looks as tense as Will feels. When Will dares to sneak a glance at his face, Mike is chewing on his bottom lip.

Eventually, he puffs a quick exhale and speaks up, “I heard you guys argue yesterday.”

Immediately, Will’s head whips up to stare Mike directly into the eye. A million thoughts race through his head, all replaying his and Carlton’s fight, trying to search for any too obvious implications that would make Mike realize who they were really fighting about, had he heard them.

“How— How much did you hear?” Will gulps.

“Nothing!” Mike rushes to reassure him immediately, and Will’s heartbeat goes back to normal again. Sort of, at least, because Mike still isn’t done. “But...I—”

There’s another pause, and another swallow from Mike, still careful.

“I just heard him get loud.”

Will reels back at that. Blinks.

What?

“He wasn’t loud.” Will chuckles a little awkwardly.

“Will.” Mike huffs, like *he’s* the confused one. “He was.”

Admittedly, Will stares at Mike, a little baffled at what Mike considers yelling. Carlton and Will were *talking*, like normal. Will was just quiet yesterday, that’s why Mike didn’t hear him and only heard Carlton instead. It has nothing to do with Carlton and everything with Will.

“I heard him when I was at the airport too.” Mike adds, ignoring Will’s perplexed stare. “When you left to go talk to him but didn’t hang up. I didn’t hear you, but he was so *loud*.”

“Oh.” The sound falls from Will’s mouth.

Will can’t believe that Mike heard their fight from that evening too. They had been in a completely different room, and Mike was only listening over a shitty payphone from the airport of all places, where background noise must have no doubt made it hard to make out anything, let alone Carlton’s voice.

Logistically, Carlton must have been at least a little too loud. But Will doesn’t recall ever thinking that.

“I don’t—” He gulps, because he doesn’t want to say anything wrong. He’s in dangerous territory again. “I didn’t notice that.”

Mike raises a brow, “You didn’t notice that?”

“I don’t know. It sounded like always.”

“*Like always?*” Mike repeats, sounding almost horrified.

Will’s stomach tightens, because he’s getting this so horribly wrong. He’s making it sound like Carlton always yells, but that’s not true. Will was just distracted yesterday, too focused on what Carlton was saying to focus on how he said it. Carlton doesn’t yell. Will isn’t deaf; he’d know that.

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Will mumbles, far too aware of Mike’s eyes on him.

But Mike doesn’t move his eyes. In fact, he lets them bore into Will even harder, “Then how did you mean it?”

“I just didn’t notice him get loud,” Will starts defending— himself or Carlton, he doesn’t know. “It’s fine.”

It hurts to see that Mike doesn’t look any less horrified than before. There’s just some bewilderment thrown in there too now. He looks like he doesn’t believe Will.

“It’s not fine,” He whispers and shakes his head. “Will, he yelled at you. More than once. That’s fucked up!”

Will doesn’t think it would be that fucked up even if it were true. People yell at each other all the time, he’s sure that he’s gotten loud with Mike more times than he can count. It’s normal.

But Carlton didn't yell. Will doesn't care what Mike thinks he heard, he's wrong, or just has overly sensitive ears. Carlton doesn't yell, one of the main reasons Will fell for him in the first place was because of how gentle he was.

"That's not true." Will denies vehemently. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"But I do!" Mike responds, without missing a beat. "You keep telling me I don't, but I do! And you don't like it, but it's the truth, Will. You told me."

If Mike stopped talking and left the room silent for a minute, Will is sure he could hear Will swallow past the lump in his throat. He mentally prepares himself for what he knows is bound to follow.

"You hate being with him." Mike drops the bomb without hesitating. "His friends suck, he makes you feel stupid and he doesn't get you."

An exact copy of what Will truthfully told him two days ago. Mike is throwing it right back in his face, forcing him to confront the actual truth for once. Will hates it, still, he hates the fact that he knows what Mike will say next even more.

Even though his breath shudders when he says it, Mike manages to pull the words out of his throat, "And he's *not who you want.*"

It's the second time Mike says it to him out loud, and Will wonders how long he'll have to keep listening to it. Both times felt like Will was nearing organ failure, and he doesn't know if he can keep putting that strain on his body.

He doesn't let it wreck him as much as the first time, though. Despite the way his heart is racing, Will at least tries to keep his composure and listen to what Mike is actually saying.

Will is used to constant little implications from Mike regarding Carlton, but this couldn't be called an implication if Will closed both his eyes. This is a demand, no— a *plea*. Mike is basically asking Will to break up with Carlton. Matter of fact, he's treating it like a debate topic, with a thesis statement, arguments and examples. Like he took fucking notes.

But it's not as simple as Mike makes it out to be. On paper, Will doesn't want to keep being with Carlton and should therefore break up with him. But he never said that out loud. When he called Mike that night, he told him that he *should have* broken up with him.

Past tense. A past opportunity, one he missed.

They aren't looking at each other, but Will can still feel Mike's eyes linger on him like that's where they've been this entire time. They probably were.

Slowly, Will begins shaking his head, "I can't break up with him."

Mike doesn't get it, "But you want to."

"But I can't."

“Why not?”

“Because!” Will suddenly explodes. He isn’t yelling at Mike, he barely does that anymore, but he’s still audibly frustrated and lets himself be. “He’s meeting my *mom*, Mike. He’s coming home with me for fucking Christmas, and I’ve already told everyone he’s gonna come and if I pull back now, it’ll just prove that I’m incapable of acting like a normal adult.”

It comes out rushed, and he jumbles up some words along the way, but the confession still stands. He’s never said it out loud before, but every word feels like a weight lifted off Will’s chest.

For some reason, he can’t seem to stop talking, “And not to mention *him*. He’s already bought a ticket and moved his own family plans, all for me, and then I leave him alone on Christmas? What dickhead breaks up with someone on the jolliest day of the year?”

Sometime during his rant, Will stood up and started pacing. Mike looks at him a little in disbelief at all this new information, but Will needs to get his point across, so he doesn’t care.

He barely pauses to breathe before continuing, “And God, we *live together*, Mike. I can’t just kick him out, because we pay our rent together, and then we’ll have to be broken up and still live together and that’ll be so awkward you don’t even know.”

He stands still, inhales one last time before dropping the big one.

“And when he moves out, it’ll be even worse, because then I’ll be *alone*.”

That last blurt has Will panting once he gets it out.

There’s nothing left to be said. Will hasn’t told anyone any of this before, but that’s just what Mike does to him, he supposes. Egg him on until he confesses to absolutely everything and comes out as the stupidest human on planet earth.

Mike stares at him like a deer caught in headlights, as if they both don’t know damn well that this was at least partially his goal. It’s rare to catch Will lying, but it’s even rarer to catch him telling the truth, yet Mike has this talent of somehow managing both.

Still, it’s a talent that Mike possesses without even knowing that he does. Which sort of explains his expression. He might try to get Will to be honest with him, but that doesn’t mean that he actually expects it to work.

The longer Will stares down at where Mike is sitting on the couch, the longer the silence goes on, the more he can see the shock on his face shift into something almost sad. Not quite pity, but not unlike it either.

Eventually, Mike’s pouty lips begin to move again, “But you’re not happy.”

It hits Will as hard as it does because Mike is right.

Content. But there are worse feelings out there than content.

“Who’s to say it’ll be better without him?” Will mumbles, looking at the floor so he doesn’t have to watch Mike’s face twist into pity even further.

It doesn’t do much. Mike’s voice is just as bad.

“It’s worth a try.” Mike whispers, barely loud enough for Will to hear, almost sounding a little childish with how innocently he says it.

“Mike—”

But Will is interrupted by the sound of keys fumbling with the apartment door lock.

Carlton’s back. From wherever he even was in the first place.

Will inhales sharply and instinctively takes a step back from Mike, even though they are apart further than they’ve ever been for the past two days. He looks at Mike now, who’s looking right back at him, wearing a matching expression. Will assumes that neither of them look particularly eager to talk to Carlton.

But Will has the moral obligation, so he excuses himself.

“That’s him.” he gestures to the door in a hushed tone, “I’m gonna—”

Mike coughs a very obvious fake cough and leans back on the couch, trying too hard to look casual. The fact that Will can practically see his eye twitching from where he’s standing also doesn’t help with making the nonchalant attitude more convincing.

“Yeah, sure, okay.” Mike mutters as he scratches his nose, a nervous habit he’s had since they were kids that Will’s never pointed out before. He feels tempted to do so now but instead settles on leaving the conversation with Mike altogether.

He needs to focus on Carlton now, draining as it may be.

So, Will just sends a curt nod Mike’s way, before walking round the couch, out of the living room, and to the front door, just in time to watch Carlton enter the apartment.

Will ignores the way his stomach clenches at the sight of him. The talk with Mike didn’t help to prepare him for this in the slightest, in fact, Will is certain it only made things worse.

Carlton is right in front of him, yet he feels a thousand miles away at the same time. Will doesn’t know what to do with that.

He takes a deep breath in and bites the bullet, “Hi.”

“Hey.” Carlton replies. His face is blank. Will couldn’t decipher what he’s feeling if he tried, and he really is trying.

The silence that stretches is more awkward than terrifying. Maybe the dread in Will’s stomach was unwarranted, or maybe it was just misplaced. The conversation doesn’t scare him anymore, instead, it’s somehow already draining him.

“We should—” Will starts, wanting to get it over with. “Can we talk?”

“About what?” Carlton asks.

Will blinks at him for a second.

About what. He must have misheard Carlton.

Either Will is going crazy or Carlton hit his head *hard* on the way here. Both are likely, but currently Will is more inclined to believe the second option, since he has Mike as an eyewitness willing to back him up.

“What?”

Carlton’s face stays blank as he takes off his jacket, completely casual, acting like last night didn’t even happen. He can’t be serious. This has to be some weird performance of his; Will is sure of it.

Carlton adds text to his play, “I actually wanted to talk to you about something as well, do you mind?”

“Uh. No, but—”

“Great, let’s talk in the kitchen.” Carlton cuts him off.

Will remains still as Carlton begins walking towards the kitchen door. He knows damn well that he didn’t hallucinate last night, because he has evidence of what happened. Even when he puts Mike aside, Will can take the bags under his eyes, the absence of Carlton in the morning, and the obvious strain in the conversation as absolute proof.

And yet Carlton is pretending like nothing ever happened at all.

He’s never shied away from addressing their problems head on before, so Will can’t fathom why he’d have that response. Sure, there have been times when Carl ended their arguments because he simply walked away from them, but he’s never pretended that they never existed in the first place before.

That’s not what Carlton does. Still, it’s exactly what is happening right now.

Will can’t stand seeing it.

“Carl, wait—” He tries, but what is he supposed to say?

Carl whips around to look back at him, “Yeah?”

The words are right on Will’s tongue, but he can’t get them out. He wants to ask Carlton about last night, but what if he isn’t pretending after all? How is Will supposed to be sure that Carlton is just pretending? What if, all this time, Will has been the one taking things seriously, letting them hurt him, when in reality no one but him thought they were a big deal.

It wouldn't be the first time it happened. Will doesn't think that it could possibly be the case this time, but the doubt is still there in the back of his head, and it prevents him from speaking up about it.

"...Nothing." Will says instead.

Carlton gives a quick nod before squeezing himself into the kitchen. Will follows, despite the way his body is basically begging him to leave.

"I wanna do dinner tomorrow," Carlton announces once the door falls shut.

So, they aren't going to talk about it. Right.

Will hesitates, "Like, you and me?"

"Yeah, but I wanna invite our friends too. Hang out one last time before Christmas."

Our friends. Carlton keeps insisting on calling them that, but it's just not true. Will can count the number of times he's talked to any of them without Carlton in the room on one hand. He has his own friends. He doesn't need Carlton's to be his too.

The thought distracts him from what Carlton is actually saying.

"Wait," Will sputters once he's caught up with Carlton's actual request. "Invite?"

"Yeah."

Will mentally stumbles backwards. They've hosted dinners before, but never this spontaneously. It almost seems like Carlton is trying to prove a point, going above and beyond to show Will that things are fine, that they aren't fighting, and that he's overreacting.

Will also isn't sure how much he wants to hang out with Carlton's friends if Mike is visiting.

"Wha— But what about Mike?" Will asks.

Carlton just shrugs, "He can join too."

The expression on Will's face must look stupid, but he doesn't stop himself from gawking at Carlton's suggestion.

There are very little things out there that make him as uncomfortable as the prospect of this dinner.

"Can I just— repeat what you said?" Will needs the reassurance that he isn't going crazy this time and actually heard Carlton correctly.

"Go ahead."

"You want to have dinner."

"Yes."

“With me and Quinn.”

“And Poppy and Alex, yeah.” Carlton adds. Poppy is in the same course as Quinn, but Alex is in Will’s art history class, which means they at least share the pain of having to sit through mind numbing lectures together.

Still, Will isn’t sure what to think of that ensemble.

“And you want *Mike* to join?” He asks again, needing to be completely sure.

Carlton closes his eyes but doesn’t sigh at him, “Yes, Will.”

“Here?”

“*Jesus*, yes!” Carlton bursts out. “What’s so weird about that?”

“Nothing!” Will lies. “Just— *Why*?”

It makes Carlton quiet for a second. He looks like he’s thinking, but it seems more like he’s thinking of an excuse rather than an honest explanation. Will isn’t sure how he knows this, but he does. Maybe because he’s spent the better part of the past year differentiating between the two.

Carlton seems to settle on a half-true half-lie eventually, “Well, it’s just hanging out with friends. That’s what we normally do, isn’t it?”

There he goes, talking about *normal*, just like Will thought he would.

“Yeah, but—” Will tries to say but can’t, because Carlton cuts him right off.

“Hey, I need to go work on something, okay?”

It’s clear that he’s trying to cut the conversation short, probably because he doesn’t want Will to bring up last night. Will doesn’t want to talk about it either. Not anymore at least. Still, he’d appreciate being able to finish a conversation in a natural way, thank you very much.

Will huffs, “Alright.”

“Cool.” Carlton hums and looks at Will for a moment. “Love you.”

Those are his last words before he moves out of the kitchen, going to do who knows what. He doesn’t wait for Will to say it back. Will isn’t really sure how long he would’ve needed to wait if he’d stayed. He doesn’t know if he could’ve said it back at all.

Somehow, talking to Carlton didn’t resolve any of the dread that’s been settling in Will’s stomach the entire morning. If anything, it’s tugging at him even harder now.

Dinner. With Carlton, his friends and *Mike*.

It's nothing if not a planned disaster. Mike and Carlton can barely look at each other for more than five minutes without starting to basically foam at the mouth, and Will can't be near them for even five seconds without losing his mind. Carlton's friends thrown into the mix guarantee actual living hell.

And Carlton considers this *normalcy*. Will would laugh if he weren't about to become a victim of said attempt at normalcy.

The only thing Will can really do is hope that their kitchen spontaneously explodes, so they can't cook for anyone and need to cancel the dinner. Death will come and get them anyways, if Mike is forced to sit at the same table as Carlton for longer than a ten minute breakfast.

They are all so hilariously screwed. It's hilarious to consider that Carlton is doing this on his own free will.

Will thinks back to what Mike told him for a second. That Carlton gets loud with him. That Will doesn't even notice. Mike called it fucked up. Will wonders what he'd say if he told him about Carlton's complete dismissal just now. Will wouldn't blame him if he said I told you so.

Will's life is badly written joke, and the unfunny punchline is somehow always Mike.

Chapter End Notes

dinner. what could possibly go wrong. hashtag lol.

We got a little meta in this chap lol. Conformitygate except it's not Vecna manipulating the audience, it's Will being so dismissive of his own feelings that he doesn't even properly narrate what's happening in HIS story. Lol. Things are gonna get uglyyyyyyy ^^


NOW you people. We have hit 3000 kudos??????? This is insane literally last chapter i was thanking u all for 2000. Loving all the support and as a thank you, here are some funfacts about this fic that i thought would be fun to know:

- Carlton is blonde. I know this goes directly against canon and i have never mentioned this before for the exact reason, but i need to put it out there, im sorry. maybe he saw a pic of mike for the first time and didn't like how similar they looked so he bleached his hair or smth idc but that boy is a BLONDE
- Richie tozier was originally gonna have a cameo. He was still a tagged character when i first posted this, actually. So i wanna apologise to all the people still waiting on his ppearance.
- This was originally supposed to be a 5+1 fic. I kno crazy right.
- This one is kinda a spoiler but idc: There will be a little Mike pov part at some point. Gasp.
- I started writing this fic bc i was mad at WILL(!!!?\$/&&!!!!) after watching vol2 bc he called mike his tammy and i was personally offended, so i needed him to explore the

horrifying world of twinkie men before remembering where home is at.

- This fic is titled "Let Will Byers whore out" in my word drafts.
- Coming up with the chapter titles is my fav part of writing
- I can't think of any more sorry queens

Hoping u guys were somewhat satisfied with this chapter i mean u got byler embrace so thats progress. Buh bye!!!!!!!!!!!!

EDIT: y'all update is coming tomorrow my bad  it'll be long okay promise

Chapter 8: A Will Byers humiliation ritual (courtesy of Quinn)

Chapter Summary

all I'm saying is, don't be too hard on Quinn. Actually no, be hard on her, she deserves everything, but also keep in mind that she is a lesbian so everything she says is automatically a thousand times more funny.

Chapter Notes

y'all..... i fucking split the chapter into two AGAIN. Chapter 7, 8 and now NINE were originally supposed to be one chapter. Wht was i thinking bruh.

Im so sick rn pray for me. I have to play the female lead in a musical tomorrow fuckkkkk (rare author lore drop)

anywho this chapter is one of my favs. It's so funny to me. If u don't think it's funny then um. I'll. I'll be fine. I guess. Uhm.

ALSO @ the two people that thought Carlton was cheating on Will with Quinn of all people. guys. GUYS. That's a gay man and a lesbian and their 33 year long marriage will change ur perception of love.

okay stfuing now go enjoy the chapter

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

Will drops his forehead against the hallway wall. His sweater is too hot, and his fingers are practically twitching for a cigarette, but he can't leave the apartment. Not with three strangers still sitting in his kitchen, making small talk that he doesn't care about.

He inhales, exhales, but it doesn't do much to get rid of the beads of sweat collecting at his neck. It's all far too much. They haven't even been here for half an hour yet.

He hates that their dinner table is in the kitchen, because that's his safe space, and now it's being invaded. Cooking with people around him is awful. At least he had the foresight to prepare a casserole before anyone came, so he only needed to stick it in the oven, but even that was unnecessarily stressful. They should have just pushed the table into the living room and eaten dinner there.

For a second, Will debates how obvious the smell would be if he spent a quick minute smoking out of the window, but he doubts he'd have the time for it. He's already wasted the better part of his self-timed five-minute people break sighing against the hallways striped wallpaper.

"Will?" A voice forcibly cuts his pause short.

Will flinches away from the wall and stares at where Mike suddenly materialized in front of him.

He doesn't look much better than Will. There's been a permanent scowl on his face ever since Quinn first started rambling about all her opinions regarding placebo effects. Will would probably find it funny if he weren't this exhausted.

But the scowl is gone now that Mike is looking at Will, "You okay?"

Will shakes himself a little before answering, trying to get his body used to movement again, "Yeah."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, Mike."

"Okay," Mike says, not sounding convinced in the slightest. "The casserole is done, so you should probably come back and eat."

At least it's Mike that's coming to fetch him. Will doesn't think he'd survive if one of Carlton's friends—*especially* Quinn—went to get him. With Mike though, he just sighs and complies. His five minutes were almost up anyways. Maybe this way, he can allow himself another break once he's done with eating.

Will forces a smile and nods, before walking towards the kitchen door again.

But Mike interrupts him before he can reach it. His hand darts out and settles on Will's shoulder, practically holding him back from walking without using any pressure at all.

Mike leans down slightly, not enough for his lips to be at Will's ear, but close enough that only Will could hear him should someone else enter the room, "You don't have to come back in, you know that, right? I can tell them you feel sick or something."

Mike's thumb digs into the flesh beneath Will's sweater, a light yet comforting sting. He wishes Mike could keep his hand right there throughout dinner, pressing harder every time Carlton tells a joke that isn't funny, or one of his friends tries psychoanalyzing Will's behavior.

Mike is offering him an out, but Will can't take it.

"I'm not gonna force you to sit in there on your own." He mumbles back at Mike.

“Oh please, that’s nothing.” Mike snorts. “Clearly, you’ve never been forced to sit between Nancy and Uncle Eric during the Christmas dinner, and it shows.”

Despite how overwhelmed Will is feeling, Mike makes him laugh.

“Wait, since when is Eric a bad guy?” Will asks as he chuckles. “I remember him sneaking us extra desert once when we were like nine.”

“Well yeah, he likes desert, but he also likes feeling up the women at his office job, so…”

“Oh God.” Will’s eyebrows fly up.

The giggle Mike lets out is almost infectious, “Yeah”

Mike’s thumb stops digging then, and instead starts moving in soft circles, a touch so light that Will can barely feel it through his sweater. He has to fight the urge to move Mike’s hand to his neck instead.

Before he can do anything stupid though, the kitchen door opens again, and Mike’s hand falls from Will’s shoulder at the sight of Carlton’s head popping out behind the doorframe.

“Will!” He calls. “You coming or not?”

The look Carlton sends him is a little odd, but Will elects to ignore it for now. If Carlton has a problem, he’ll tell Will. If he doesn’t, then it’s not something Will has to worry about.

“Just a sec!” He answers.

Carlton disappears behind the door again, and Will turns to face Mike.

“Be nice.” Will warns him. Just because Mike has been mostly silent so far doesn’t mean he’ll stay this way. They’re only twenty minutes into the evening, and Will has a feeling that it’ll drag on.

“I always am.” Mike defends himself. Like either of them actually believes that.

Somehow, Will manages to keep himself from rubbing at his temples and simply pulls at Mike’s sleeve, gesturing him to follow Will into the kitchen. Mike listens.

Conversation is flowing when Will sits back down at the table, right between Mike and Carlton like he’s stuck in a goddamn comedy. At least they’ve moved on from talking about Freud, though Will is sure that Quinn will find a way to bring him up again.

Will doesn’t really like Carlton’s friends. They’re not bad people, exactly, but Quinn seems to actively despise him, and Poppy, who’s in the same class as Quinn, has only met Will maybe twice before.

The only one that Will is sort of friendly with is Alex, who he and Carlton share art history with. It’s not like they talk a lot there, mostly because Will is too busy with trying not to fall asleep as their professor talks about Dutch baroque for the hundredth time.

Still, Will knows he's nice, at least. The same can't be said for Quinn. Poppy is a totally blind draw. All in all, Will's cards aren't exactly looking good.

Will stays seated when Carlton gets up to serve everyone their portion of the casserole. The only thing that Will touches on the table is the wine bottle, which is almost halfway empty already, most likely because of Quinn.

He sends a quick look Mike's way, silently asking if he wants some, and pours the wine into his own glass when Mike declines. If he can't take a smoke break to survive dinner, he can at least allow himself to be a little tipsy.

"Thanks Carl," Quinn says when Carlton hands her back her plate. Her cheeks are red and her voice is lighter than usual, so Will thinks it was safe to assume that she was the one to drain half the bottle already.

"You're welcome," He responds. When he gets to Mike's plate, neither of them say anything. Will doesn't know if he should be annoyed or glad about it. Maybe them staying completely silent is better than the nonsense they will undoubtedly spew if they enter a conversation with each other.

Will reaches for his wine glass and takes a long sip.

Beside him, Mike and Carlton start eating, and it's not long before the others join them.

"Oh, this is great, Will!" Poppy gushes after taking a bite. Maybe he can count on her to not be a complete villain.

"Thanks," Will smiles. Then, he adds, "Mike helped make it, it's his mom's recipe."

Will tries to watch Carlton's face out of the corner of his eye, but he can't notice any change at the mention of Mike's name. Quinn, however, seems to perk up enough for both of them. Will reaches for his glass again.

She leans onto the table, getting closer to Mike when she addresses him, "Right, Mike. How uhm— How are you liking San Fran so far? It's different from where you're from, right?"

Will hears Mike practically choke on his food next to him, but it's not hard enough to require assistance, so Will ignores it. Maybe Mike choking to death would be beneficiary, seeing as how it would keep him from responding to questions and getting them both in trouble.

"Uh, yeah, I guess." Mike eventually replies, obviously startled by being talked to by someone other than Will. "I mean, I haven't really been anywhere yet so—"

"He likes it." Will cuts in before Mike can finish his sentence. He doesn't need anybody knowing that Mike has practically only been here to hang out with Will. He didn't even leave their apartment yesterday. Mike's experience of San Francisco so far has been Will's couch and the supermarket down the road.

Will's interruption doesn't go unnoticed though. Alex chuckles across from him, "Will, come on, let the man speak for himself."

If only Alex knew that letting Mike Wheeler talk for himself is basically the equivalent of letting a toddler loose during a concert.

Mike seems tense beside Will. For all his loudness and audacity, he still sucks at talking to people he doesn't know. Mike is extroverted for the party, and that's it.

He mumbles while looking down at his plate, "It's like Will said, I like it."

It's an awful answer, but everyone seems to let it slide anyways. Alex is too nice to press Mike any further, and Poppy is most likely too focused on eating to demand anything else from him. Carlton probably just doesn't care for what he has to say.

But of course, Will can't have nice things. Because he has the devil reincarnate sitting at his table, in the form of Carlton's horrible drunk best friend.

Quinn eyes Mike from her seat across him, "What *do* you like about California?"

"What?" Mike huffs.

It's almost like Quinn was able to sense Will's entire prior inner monologue and knows that Mike hasn't seen shit of California. She probably does. Not because she can read minds, but because Carlton is a gossip and a snitch when it comes to her. She probably knows more about Will's relationship than Will himself does.

Will narrows his eyes at her. Usually, he avoids conflict like nothing else, but his wine glass is also already the second one of the evening, and it's not like he's the one that's starting anything. Still, Will doesn't go further than that.

When Mike still doesn't have an answer ready after ten seconds, Quinn repeats herself, "What do you like about being here?"

"Uh..." Mike sends Will a look, practically begging him for help. Or permission to talk on his own. Will doesn't know, but he answers in Mike's place either way.

"It's bigger than where we're from." He says casually, hoping to be vague enough to shut everyone up, "More than one restaurant in town."

Mike nods his head eagerly, visibly relieved that he didn't have to answer, "Yeah, that."

Quinn doesn't seem done, "You went to restaurants?"

"You only have one restaurant in town?" Poppy asks at the same time as Quinn, and Will is thankful for the interruption.

"It was a joke..." He mumbles and shoots a quick smile Poppy's way, before sticking his fork right back into his casserole potatoes.

"Hardly." Mike snorts, probably thinking of how after Benny's Burgers closed, the only real restaurants were Enzo's and the place that served fries next to the community pool. Maybe Melvad's too, if you were generous and counted the milkshake counter as a diner.

Hawkins really is a shithole. Will has to bite back a smile.

“Jesus!” Alex wheezes. “How is poor city boy Carl gonna survive his holiday?”

The mention of Carlton in Hawkins for Christmas makes the smile leave his lips easily again. Mike scrunches up his face next to Will too, though that could also just be his regular ‘I hate strangers’ face.

“I don’t think he’ll die from eating my mom’s cooking for a couple days...” Mike mumbles around his food filled mouth. Will isn’t really sure if he’s trying to keep up with the small talk, or wanting to antagonize Carlton, but he’s doing a bad enough job at both that he somehow ends up in-between the two options, and that’s good enough for Will.

“Well, if it tastes anything like this casserole, then I think Carlton’s gonna be a very lucky guy for Christmas.” Poppy praises the food once again. Will is almost completely sure that she’s just saying it to dissolve some of the awkwardness that Mike brings to the conversation. Potatoes and green beans thrown into one dish cannot be *that* good.

Mike shrugs, “Sure.”

They barely get three seconds of quiet peace before it’s disrupted again. Only this time, it’s not Quinn that drops the tension bomb.

Carlton looks at Mike and scoffs, “Yeah, I don’t think the food is gonna be the problem.”

The room goes quiet.

Will drops his fork. Whirls around to stare at Carlton and ask him *what the fuck was that?* with his eyes. It’s the only thing Carlton has said since they started eating and Will shudders at the implications in his statement.

Carlton is staring directly at Mike, which means he has to lean forward slightly and look past Will, and that gives Will an unobstructed view of his face. It’s still as blank as Carlton can possibly keep it, but Will sees the way he chews on his inner cheek.

Even the slightest twitches of Carlton’s jaw cause Will to grip his glass and fork tighter. He’s barely eaten anything yet, and the newly added tension isn’t exactly making it easier. He ends up dropping his cutlery on his plate, abandoning it.

Then, he turns to look at Mike, who’s already looking back. There’s a question in his eyes that Will can’t answer, but he sends him a quick warning that could be interpreted as a threat as well. Mike doesn’t seem to care about it.

He leans forward in his seat too, but doesn’t move his eyes, so his gaze naturally slips from Will to Carlton.

“Oh, really?” He asks, so provocative it almost seems satirical. “Then what will be? Please, enlighten me.”

Based on Carlton's stiff frame beside Will, he didn't actually expect Mike to respond to his dig, which just goes to show how unprepared he was for inviting Mike to this dinner.

Carlton clears his throat and scoots around on his seat next to Will, "Guess we'll find out."

Will's fingers have found purchase on the back of his hand by now, and he digs his nails in deeper with every word exchanged between Mike and Carlton. The touch keeps him from storming out of the room and taking them both with him.

"Will we?" Mike asks Carlton, voice getting sharper by the syllable.

"We will."

"Cause, you know, you talked like you already knew what the problem is so—"

Will finally has enough.

"Mike." He cuts in louder than needed. Mike shuts up, but everyone else looks at him. Quinn fucking *whistles*.

Heat rises to his face. Will honestly has no idea why he couldn't have just told Carlton no when he had asked him about the dinner. Now he's stuck here, in between two people who are so different from each other, and yet still somehow share the title of being the biggest presence in Will's life. And as if it weren't stressful enough, Will has a whole audience there with him to witness it.

Will exhales and closes his eyes. If he can't see everyone watching him, then maybe they just aren't. It works with everyone, apart from Mike. Will can always feel Mike watching him.

"Sorry," He whispers, not apologizing to Carlton, but to Will. Will isn't sure if he'd want Mike to do anything else. Sure, he's not a fan of Mike arguing with his boyfriend at the dinner table, but it's not like Mike did anything wrong. It's Carlton Will is mad at, if he's honest.

"It's fine," Will mutters, sounding almost purposefully exasperated. But then he bumps his knee into Mike's beneath the table, a silent promise that Will isn't actually mad at him. He knows that this isn't exactly easy for Mike either.

Will sees Mike's face twitch into something almost resembling a smile when he looks at him out of his peripheral vision.

He can't look at Mike for too long though, because something brushes his hand and reminds him of the reality of the situation, and the fact that he and Mike aren't alone in the room with each other. When Will looks down to see what caused the touch, he sees Carlton's hand looming over his, forcibly sneaking its fingers through the gaps between Will's.

It's probably because he's a little tipsy already, but Will is overwhelmed with the desire to pull his hand away once it lays there fully entangled with Carlton's.

He doesn't.

Instead, Will grabs his glass again, only to find it empty already. He should probably slow down a little, but every word Carlton and Mike exchanged still grates on his nerves like nothing else. He grabs the bottle once more and pours a new glass, until there's only droplets left.

Conversation around him starts again, but Will isn't listening to it. It's mostly Alex, Poppy and Quinn talking, but he can sense Carlton or Mike throw in a word every now and then too. Unlike them, Will stays silent, abandoning his plate in favor of sipping his wine with the hand that isn't captured by Carlton's.

"So, how'd your finals go?" Alex asks Quinn and Poppy. The earlier tension has faded from the conversation, but Will is still on edge.

Poppy is the first to answer, "Actually, I was kind of surprised by how easy all the questions were—"

"It went fucking horrible!" Quinn interrupts her loudly mid-sentence.

Will looks up from his wine for the first time in minutes, puzzled. He didn't know that Quinn struggled with exams; Carlton always talked about her like she was the next Carl Jung.

"Seriously Alex, low blow," Quinn scoffs. "You know how bad I suck at psych, seriously. I feel bad for the poor bastard that'll have me as his therapist one day."

Will chokes on his wine.

For months, Carlton has been going to Quinn for advice on their relationship. For months, he's been preaching Quinn's methods and pointers like they came from God himself.

And now Will is finding out that the girl who played counsellor for them all this time can't even pass her first-year psychology exam.

It's hilarious enough to make him giggle.

"Will." Carlton hisses when he hears, but Will can't bring himself to care.

"I'm sorry, I— No, I really am, I promise I don't wanna laugh, it's just— It's just *so fucking funny*."

"That I'm failing?" Quinn gasps with a high-pitched voice, dramatically making her offense known to the rest of the table.

"No, no, I swear it's not that, it's just—"

"I think he just already feels bad for the poor bastard that has you as his therapist." Mike smirks and bumps his knee into Will's.

Will's head whips around to stare at Mike, and a knowing smile meets his gaze.

Mike knows exactly why Will is giggling, even if he never told him directly. His open teasing should annoy Will, but he's tipsy, and Mike looks at him silly, so it doesn't.

Instead, Will laughs twice as hard. He buries his face in his free hand and does his best to tame his giggles, but it's no good. Especially when he sees Mike's smirk through his fingers every time he opens his eyes.

"I feel like there's a joke I'm missing." Alex half-laughs when Will still doesn't quiet down after half a minute. He's almost certain he's the drunkest person at the table, even though he and Quinn had the same amount to drink.

"Oh no," He rushes to reassure Alex. "Don't worry, that's just Mike being—"

He's cut off not by someone speaking, but by pressure growing stronger around his wrist.

The words get stuck in Will's throat when he feels Carlton's fingers tighten around the joint. The hand that Carlton was intertwined with only seconds ago now lays limp in his clenched grasp.

Will looks at Carlton, laughter vanished from his mouth. Carlton doesn't look back. Instead, he stares at his plate, pinching the bridge of his nose with his free fingers. He's irritated, and his tightening clasp on Will is meant to be a silent warning.

Stop humiliating me. Will hears it as clearly as he would have, had Carlton said it out loud.

With Will going silent, the rest of the table seems to do so as well. It's incredibly embarrassing, sitting with so many people and knowing that every single one of them knows that Carlton is mad at Will. That they are mad at each other, actually.

That thought is a spontaneous one, but it stands true. Will can't believe Carl. First, he starts a fight with Mike over absolutely nothing, and then he keeps on poking when Will is doing nothing but giggle a little? No, Will is pissed now too.

He shakes the hand that's being held by Carlton, until Carlton gets the hint and lets go of him. Will reaches for his glass of wine and downs it all in one go. It does nothing to get rid of the sickness in Will's stomach.

Even though Carlton's fingers are no longer touching his skin, he can still feel them lingering. Will briefly considers wrapping his own hand around his wrist to replace the touch, but the idea seems ridiculous, so he just shuts up and sits still.

If Carlton doesn't want him laughing, then he's going to have to be okay with Will not talking at all. He leans back in his chair, empty wine glass in hand, and doesn't bother trying to fit himself back into the conversation once it starts up again.

He only goes back to paying attention when Quinn addresses Mike directly, *again*.

"Hey, Mike?"

The voice in combination with the name almost makes Will flinch, but he catches himself last second. The same can't be said for Mike, who drops a potato into his lap when he hears Quinn.

He sighs, "Yeah?"

Quinn is leaning closer again, watching as Mike tries to avoid eye contact as he fishes the potato out of his lap and pops it back on his fork.

Her torso is almost laying across the table when she asks, "You're staying on the couch, right?"

Will blinks. It's not the question he expected, and judging by Mike's matching stare, it isn't what he prepared himself for either, "Yeah?"

"But like—" Quinn hiccups, and Will starts to think he might not be the drunkest person at the table after all, "you know that that's *Carl's couch*, right? And he really, really loves that couch a lot."

Will looks to his right, at Carlton. He's never expressed a particular fondness towards their couch, but it also doesn't shock Will that he only seems so care about it once Mike is involved.

It could also be that Quinn is just pulling the couch thing right out of her ass, because she's made it her evening goal to antagonize Mike, and she doesn't mind getting a bit nonsensical to achieve it.

Poor couch. It doesn't deserve to be dragged into these antics. And neither does Mike, really, Will thinks when he looks at him stammer something.

"I mean, yeah, I guess I'm stealing his and Will's couch for a couple days, but like, I'm repaying the favor for Christmas."

Quinn blinks, thoroughly unimpressed, "That's not how I meant that."

"Wait, they're staying at your place?" Alex interrupts Quinn, which Will is insanely thankful for. He isn't really in the mood to talk about their couch like Mike sleeping on it is a personal insult to Carlton.

Poppy joins Alex in changing the topic, "Carl, I thought you guys were staying with Will's mom?"

That was the plan, initially, but then Will's mom had called him out of the blue to tell him that El and Will's old room in the cabin would be *occupied* for Christmas, and that the Wheeler's basement would be a much better fit, since Jonathan is staying with Nancy too anyway.

In reality, Will is almost entirely sure that his mom is just trying to save him and Carlton from Hopper's three inch rule. Will wouldn't really mind, but the Wheeler's basement has been his home for longer than the cabin has, so it's all the same to him.

Carlton hadn't really enjoyed hearing the news. He sighs when Poppy and Alex bring it up again, "Yeah, well, I thought so too, but apparently she has other guests, so..."

"Murray." Will blabbers the name, almost expecting Carlton's friends to magically understand what he's saying.

"Who's Murray?" Poppy asks.

Oh, you know, Will thinks, just a guy that helped expose the laboratory responsible for all my childhood monster related trauma. He also uncovered a secret Russian invasion with my mom. And then he and my mom broke into a Russian prison to free my captured stepdad, so you know.

"Family friend." Will manages to simplify it.

"A conspiracy theorist." Mike corrects.

Will turns to face Mike, sternest look he can possibly muster on his face, "He's not a conspiracy theorist."

"You know, you're right. They're not theories if they're true."

All of a sudden, Quinn slams both of her palms flat on the table. She hasn't taken a bite since she first started talking about the couch, and even her wine glass seems unoccupied.

She scoffs dramatically, before addressing the entire table, "Uh, I feel like we're drifting off topic!"

Alex, who's sitting next to her, drops his head in his hands and mutters under his breath, "I feel like maybe we should drift off topic..."

"Absolutely not!"

Even Carlton seems to want Quinn quiet. He's tense beside Will as he hisses her name, "Quinnie..."

"Nope Carl, not now, gotta finish my talk with Mike."

Mike seems to have forgotten about her unfinished talk with him already. He doesn't drop his food this time, thank god, but he doesn't seem any less startled either.

"...Okay?" He asks, face scrunched up in what Will knows is annoyance. Mike genuinely sucks at hiding what his face is doing. Sometimes, Will uses his expressions as inspiration for cartoons he has to draw, but Mike doesn't need to know that.

Still, his illustration assignments most likely aren't the most important thing right now. Quinn is staring at Mike like he's a task on her to-do list, and she is determined to tick the box next to his name. The deeper her breaths get, the shorter Mike's become.

“Micheal.” She lets the name roll off her tongue slowly, taking her time with it, like she’s about to explain how trains work to a four-year-old. “It’s not about the couch.”

“But we were just talking about sleeping arrangements?” Alex asks her, sounding just as confused as Will feels and Mike looks.

“Wrong!” Quinn explains, slamming her hand down again for emphasis. “You guys were talking about that. Me personally, I wanted to dig a bit deeper.”

Mike turns to face Will and deadpans, “I have no idea what she’s talking about.”

This seems to come across as a personal insult to Quinn. She puffs up her rosy cheeks, red from the alcohol, and huffs, “Fine then. Let me show you.”

Will thinks that by ‘show’, she means misquoting yet another poor philosopher that is about to get his name slandered by her and then acting like she’s the most enlightening presence to ever grace the earth. He gets proven wrong, however, when Quinn actually gets up from her chair.

Everyone looks at her, and she seems to consider something for a moment, before shrugging and reaching towards Carlton’s dinner plate that he’s still eating from.

She has to lean across the table completely to snatch it out from underneath his fork, just as he goes to pick up another potato.

“Quinn!” He yelps, but she just shushes him loudly.

Will watches in slight horror as she holds up Carlton’s plate, almost like she’s contemplating whatever her plan is. Will regrets getting drunk now. If Quinn is going to be stupid, he should be sober enough to deal with it appropriately, and he could have known that she’d definitely pull stupid shit today.

His stomach tightens, in both anticipation and terror. There’s also some curiosity settled there, but that’s drunk Will speaking. The small part of him that’s still able to form coherent thoughts takes over and tells him that Quinn’s bullshit with Mike is nothing to be excited for.

He stares at Quinn and tilts his head just as she reaches across the table again.

Then, she dumps the rest of Carlton’s potatoes on Mike’s plate.

Mike scoots back on his chair immediately, “What the hell!”

She doesn’t try to be clean with it. The potatoes have to fall a small distance to reach Mike’s plate, and the impact makes some of them bounce back a little, rolling off the plate and onto the table.

Quinn’s dump isn’t very accurate in general. About half of the casserole completely misses Mike’s plate, getting onto the table instead, and sliding off into Mike’s lap before he has the opportunity to scurry away with his chair.

Will's jaw drops to the floor, probably right next to some of the potatoes. Poppy and Alex share a similar expression, but Carlton stays tight lipped even as Mike jumps up from his chair.

Will hurries to reach for napkins laying on the table, almost knocking over multiple glasses in the process, "Oh my god Mike, I am *so* sorry—"

Quinn juts out her finger at Mike just as Will stands up, "You just stole Carl's potatoes."

The blatant lie is enough to get Will to stop moving, just so he can whirl around to stare at her with his eyes open because—

What the *genuine fuck*?

"What the hell?" Mike voices what Will is thinking, though he's far more vocal about it. He's practically screeching. Meanwhile, Will can still only stare at Quinn absolutely slaw jacked.

Quinn doesn't seem to care about Will, or anyone else in the room, in the slightest. Her gaze remains steady on Mike, and she repeats herself with the patience of someone who didn't just throw food at someone else, "You stole Carlton's potatoes."

"No, I fucking didn't!" Mike yells at her, gesturing wildly with his hands, "You're crazy! That was literally all you!"

"What is even happening right now?" Poppy whispers. Will would respond really, but he can't even begin to pick up his jaw from the floor. He manages a weak shake of the head, if you could even call it that, far too entranced in what is happening to move his eyes away from Quinn.

"I'm being metaphorical!" She shrieks.

Will has sat through a lot of hours of English class. He is very sure that his teachers' metaphors never involved casserole. He is not at all sure what Quinn is even trying to say.

It is then that he somehow manages to rip his gaze away from her, but only to turn towards Carlton instead.

Unlike Poppy, Alex and *Mike*, Carlton doesn't look shocked. Instead, he's almost as red as Quinn, even though he doesn't have the alcohol as an excuse for it. He's not looking at Quinn, or Mike, or even Will. He's staring straight down at where his plate was only moments ago, and he looks three seconds away from running out of the apartment.

He's never regretted drinking so much in his life. He's too fucking tipsy to figure out what the hell is going on.

But when Mike responds to Quinn, Will remembers that there are more important things going on than Carlton's facial expressions, "Your metaphors make no goddamn sense!"

"It's not about logistics Mike!" Quinn stresses, which makes sense because there is clearly nothing logical going on in her head, "The end result is that they're on your plate now, even

though Carl had them first.”

“Yeah, on my plate and on *me!*”

Quinn leans onto the table, and Will is unsure whether it's to steady herself, or to make her next words more impactful. She inhales sharply through her nose and lets out a long breath through her mouth. When she speaks, she makes sure to add a pause after every word.

“Carl. Had them. First.”

Carlton's gaze finally snaps up from the table and fixes onto her, “Quinn, seriously, stop.”

And then it clicks.

The realization comes so suddenly, so cold and harsh, that it sobers Will up within seconds.

Quinn's stupid nonsensical blabbering about potatoes and couches was never about food and furniture. It was about *Will*.

It all makes sense, all of a sudden. Quinn poking at Mike with her words throughout the entire evening, Carlton staying silent, Carlton being *embarrassed*. All that talk about what *belongs* to Carlton, and all the things that were *on his plate first*.

Quinn is talking about Mike stealing *Will*. Right here, in Will's kitchen, at Will's table, in front of absolutely everyone.

And Carlton just stayed silent through it all.

Will's voice shakes when he dares to use it. With anger, or humiliation, he isn't sure. He just knows that he sounds *exactly* how he feels, “Are you serious right now?”

He says it through gritted teeth, directly at Carlton, so nobody can make the mistake of thinking his anger is directed at Quinn. A part of it is, but that part is so miniscule in comparison to Carlton.

Will *hates* feeling angry, but right now, he's furious.

“*Carl.*” He repeats himself when Carlton stays silent like a goddamn coward.

It doesn't get him an answer either, but at least Carlton acknowledges him this time. His face scrunches together, and he squeezes his eyes shut, like he can't handle seeing Will upset. It takes everything Will has in him not to start laughing.

Then, he looks at Mike, and for a terrible second, he feels stripped completely raw. More than that, he feels *terrified*.

If he could tell what Quinn was insinuating, then what does Mike know? Does he know what Carlton thinks he wants from Mike? Does he know it's *true*?

When Mike's expression finally reaches him, Will prepares himself for disgust, confusion, or betrayal. But as he registers Mike's gaze on him, slow motion style, he realizes that his face shows none of these emotions. Instead, he looks almost thankful.

The slow motion stops then, and Mike reaches out towards Will to grab the napkins still sitting in his hands.

"Thanks." He mumbles and begins wiping potato clumps off himself.

Will stands there like an idiot. The anger vanished just as suddenly as it came, and he only needed one look at Mike to do it. One look to make him afraid again, and then one dumb second of eye-contact exchanged between them to reassure him that there's no reason to be scared.

Will falls back onto his chair with a punched-out exhale. Silently, he thanks God for making Mike this oblivious.

And then he curses him for making Mike *this* unable to shut up.

He's barely been wiping for two seconds before he just has to open that mouth of his again, "You know, technically I bought *and* cooked the potatoes, before Carl ever even touched them, so—"

"Oh my god!" Quinn explodes, "You're like a six-year-old!"

"You're the one shoveling other people's food on me!"

"Yes, exactly, *other people's food*, which doesn't belong to you. I'm just saying, it's a metaphor—"

"I have no idea what you're trying to convey, but that sounds less like a metaphor and more like an *analogy*, actually—"

Will is back to being angry.

"Just stay away from other peoples shit!" Quinn shouts.

It makes the message clear as glass. To Will, at least.

He's got no clue what Alex and Poppy know, but he knows. And he also knows that Quinn couldn't know this much if she didn't have Carlton feeding her every single one of his observations, suspicions and borderline delusions for *months*.

Carlton invited her to dinner, and then invited Mike as well, knowing *damn well* she'd make some kind of scene. Will doesn't care that Carlton didn't know it would be this specifically. He cares about the fact that Carlton didn't care about the possibility of humiliating Will, and then didn't intervene when it became reality. He can be as embarrassed as he wants to. It won't give Will back his dignity.

He has had *enough*.

Will pushes himself up from his chair and storms out of the kitchen.

“Woah, Will, wait!” Carlton yells after him. Awesome, so *now* he can speak up.

“Will?” Mike asks as well when Will moves past him.

Will can't respond. If he did, he'd just pull Mike out of the kitchen with him, and that'll lead them down a path neither of them can afford to be caught on. If Carlton sees them alone together now, he'll get ideas in his head that are *so wrong*, Will doesn't think he could form a coherent thought ever again.

He doesn't stop when Mike calls his name, no matter how unnatural it feels. He just keeps walking, until he reaches the door, slams it shut, and ends up in the living room.

He has maybe two seconds of peace and quiet to himself before Carlton bursts out behind him. Of the two people most likely to follow him out, he's the more disappointing option.

“Will, hey, Will—” He hisses his name, hand reaching out to grab Will's arm, but Will steps back to put distance between them. It's not enough.

“What was that, Carl?” Will lets the words cross the distance for him. He needs them to sound like he's right in Carlton's face, without actually having to physically be there. He doesn't know why, but he can't be near Carlton right now.

“Please, Quinn's just drunk, Will, ignore her.” Carlton pleads.

“I can't ignore her when she's in my kitchen!”

Carlton doesn't have anything to say about that. Will won't settle for his silence.

“What was she talking about, Carl?” He pushes him, more strain in his voice this time.

“Will—”

“What have you been saying to her, to make her act like that?” He won't let Carlton get away with steady denial this time. He deserves better than that, goddammit.

“She's drunk, Will! This is just how she gets!” Carlton takes the easy way out. Again.

This won't work. Not if Will does it while he's like *this*. So full of emotion that he feels like he'll pull apart at the seams, slowly and painfully, laid bare right for Carlton and the strangers in his kitchen to watch.

Will takes what is possibly the deepest breath he's ever taken in his life. He closes his eyes. Looking at Carlton will make calming down even more impossible than it already is.

“Listen to me, Carl.” Will steadies his voice as much as is physically possible for him, “I'm going to go out and smoke.”

Carlton doesn't make it easy, “Will, we have *guests*—”

“And when I come back, those guests will be *gone*. Okay?”

There’s a determination settled in his voice that Carlton doesn’t know. He’s never heard Will be bossy, because Will doesn’t like having to be, but he’s let himself be pushed around long enough. He loathes talking more than anything else, but it’s what they need to do.

Carlton doesn’t exactly seem on board with that idea, “What? Will—”

“Carlton.” Will interrupts him. “*Please*.”

Carlton doesn’t say anything else. His pursed lips show that he understands though. He’ll make them leave the apartment; Will is sure of it. Carlton doesn’t want to do it, because what he really wants is to take Will back into the kitchen and pretend like everything is fine, but he knows that he won’t get that today.

There’s an agreement in his silence, and Will uses it to turn around and slip away.

He’s able to take maybe seven steps before Carlton’s voice stops him in his tracks.

“But Mike can stay?”

Fire blooms in Will’s chest. Not the kind that usually follows after Mike’s name is mentioned. The anger from before is back. It makes Will grit his teeth and claw his own nails into his palms, trying to regain the smallest bit of control over himself.

He fails. He doesn’t even register he’s talking until he hears his own voice wobble, “If you say a single word to Mike, I can promise you that you are going to have to find another place to stay for Christmas.”

Carlton stares at him, stunned into stone.

Will said so much, far too much, and either Carlton is stupid, and surprised he’s picking Mike over him, or he’s surprised that Will is actually admitting to it. Will thinks it’s the second option. He doesn’t blame Carlton; He’s surprised himself.

“Jesus.” Carlton scoffs. “Wow. Okay, Will.”

A shared look between them, devoid of all affection. If Will were an outsider watching them, he doesn’t think he could believe that they’re supposed to be in love.

“Have fun destroying your lungs.” Carlton mumbles. There’s no emotion in his voice, not even acceptance.

“We’re not done talking, alright?” Will insist. “We’re going to talk when I’m back.”

For almost a minute, Will is certain that Carlton won’t respond to him. For almost a minute, he watches Carlton’s lower lip shake, watches his fists clench at his sides, watches tears of anger pool in his eyes.

Then, and it’s barely even a whisper, he gives in, “Yeah, sure.”

That's all Will needs. Confirmation that he can hold Carlton to, even if it's not legally binding. It counts as an obligation, one that Carlton will have to fulfill if he cares about Will half as much as he pretends he does.

Confirmation means that Will no longer needs anything from this conversation. It means that he's free to go. He does exactly that.

He turns around to leave Carlton behind, successfully ignoring the guilt leaking out of him for maybe the first time in his life. He only stops at their coat rack for barely a second to grab his typical smoking jacket and the spare pack that lays in one of its pockets. He doesn't even stay still to put it on. Instead, he shrugs it on with great struggle as he keeps walking, opening the apartment door, and leaving everything else behind him.

The hallway air feels like an entirely different world. He doesn't get how empty floor and supermarkets can feel more like home than his own four walls.

But if Will is being honest, he knows exactly why they do.

Chapter End Notes

okay, to defend carlton for a sec, i promise u guys his ass did not ask quin to pull this bullshit. Quinn doesn't need an instigator, she does that shit for fun.

Rest in peace Quinn nolasname, you would have LOVED i love LA.

I know im gonna read 247474 hate comments wishing death on her but she's special to me. The plot twist that crlton's "psych major friend" is genuinely just fucking failing and thats why carlton just keeps on fumbling might've been the best thing i've ever written.

I genuinely reached flow state a i was writing this like ive been locked in for the past five hours no pause. Don't kill me for any typos ok i use a computer from 2016 and wrote a quarter of this backstage during a professional musical production. You never know what the girl playing the farmers daughter is doing behind the scenes.

next chapter somehow even more tense than this one. But i promise it's cute too. And they do go back to yearning, they were just kinda busy today.

QUINNCARLTON ARE EVIL MADWISE. I love quinn. What if i make el date her huh. What then. My messy queen. Mike would kill himself.

also, real quick, if i see any of u bitch and moan about will byers smoker hc's on twitter bc "lonnie did that so he'd never" HIS MOMMA DID THAT TOO. It's in his genes i'm sorry. But he's classy with it okay. Only every couple days. Only when he's stressed. Only every day.

bye bye i gotta get up in three hours.

Chapter 9: Lies are Will Byers' truth

Chapter Summary

y'all i kno i promised hurt/comfort in this chpter but like lowkey it got too long and i had to split it again and u will never guess what part of the hurt/comfort got pushed to the next chapter.....#LOL

Chapter Notes

it's five am yall i have school in two hours wtf am i doing.

okay so before we go into this, i just wanna put a quick content warning out there and say that people who have ever been in emotionally abusive dynamics might be a little uncomfortable with this chapter, because especially will's inner monologue gets a little uncomfortable at times. It's nothing too crazy, but im just saying like uhm take care of urselves guys

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

Willingly staying outside on his own this long during winter is something Will isn't used to doing and likely hasn't ever done before. But even on his third cigarette, Will wasn't any closer to calming down yet, so he lit up his fourth one. And now he's standing with his head rolled back against the brick wall of their apartment building, debating whether the chill outside or inside the apartment is a less painful torture.

Not that the apartment is cold at all, in terms of temperature. But that's not what Will is talking about.

He sucks in a deep breath, letting the smoke curl inside his lungs, and waits longer than he normally would before releasing it again. He burnt through his first three like he was trying to finish a race in first place, so he's taking his time with this one now. It'll be his last for the night.

Will knows that once he's smoked it down to the filter, he'll have no choice but to go upstairs again. The entire point of his little retreat wasn't so that he could escape the conflict as a whole. He just needed a break and an opportunity to clear his mind. He's had that now. It's time to walk back into the lion's den.

The cigarette resting between Will's fingers is significantly shorter than it was when he first started smoking it, but it's still not enough to snub it out. He's poor, alright; he'll use up

everything he paid for.

He takes one last drag, really letting it last. Then, he presses the glowing tip of it into the brick wall, right next to where his head is resting.

Since he's not an asshole, he doesn't throw the cigarette butt onto the ground. Instead, he bends down to pick up the other three leftover butts and closes his fist around them.

Will pushes himself off the brick wall and starts reluctantly walking back towards the entrance to the building. Once he's there, he throws the contents of his hand into the trash can right next to the door and enters the building.

When Will opens the door to their apartment, after a long five minutes of just standing in front of it, the first thing he hears is the shower running in the bathroom.

He steps further inside, exploring the living room and not finding Mike anywhere, which means that it's most likely him using the shower. Which means that Carlton is waiting on him in their bedroom.

Will sighs, but he doesn't let his apprehensiveness stop him. He meant what he told Carlton before stepping out. They need to talk, desperately. Or, more accurately, Will needs to cuss him out and then do some serious damage control. Or, the most honest answer, Will needs to lie out of his ass again and actually do a convincing enough job that Carlton will finally leave him alone about certain things. Certain *people*, actually.

Will needs to fix things, and he needs to fix them *tonight*. They're flying to Hawkins in only two days, and tomorrow Carlton will be gone visiting his own family (without Will, since they seem to be a lot less supportive than the Hawkins group, which is an insane concept to Will), so tonight is really the last chance Will has. Unless he *wants* to make Christmas even more awkward than it will already be.

As Will makes his feet carry him across the living room and into the hallway leading to the bedroom, he briefly revisits his conversation with Mike from yesterday.

He's not who you want.

But you're not happy.

Seriously, Will should cuss Mike out too, because once Will lets the words invade his head, he can't seem to make them leave. He isn't happy, not right now, but he also can't remember when he last was.

Actually, he can, and that's the problem. He just can't remember the last time he was happy *with Carlton*.

There's a little voice in the back of Will's head, one that he's been blocking out for half a year now at the very least. One that just keeps on asking him *why*?

He stands in front of the bedroom door, hand on the doorknob, and the voice asks again. *Why is he bothering to do this?*

Why is Will so insistent on trying to fix— no, *pretending* to fix a relationship that he gains next to nothing from? Why does he let Carlton come back to him, time and time again, even though he dreads his return more than anything?

Yes, there's the logistical aspects of it, like Christmas or rent, but apart from that, what's keeping him in this relationship?

Distraction is the most obvious answer. Guilt is the second one. Loneliness could be the third one, if Will didn't already feel alone in every room Carlton joins him in. It's more likely that the third answer is tied directly to the second one. He has to repent for his guilt somehow, and the only logical answer to *that* would be to stay with Carlton, in order to keep him from the pain of finding out where said guilt truly comes from.

It's a punishment, really.

That thought snaps Will out of it. He shakes his head quickly, and the words are gone as fast as they came. Being with Carlton isn't *punishment*. Will has suffered enough in his life to know what punishment feels like, and Carlton isn't that. He's just not perfect. Will can't judge him for that. If Will left him for being imperfect, then how could he expect anyone to stay with *him*, the perfect example of imperfection?

Will's grip on the doorknob turns more certain the further his thoughts start to stray. He's being silly. He might be pissed, and he might need to lie a little to fix all this, but he owes this talk both to himself and Carlton.

Will takes a deep breath and turns the knob in his hands.

The bedroom is dark when he walks inside, but Carlton is there as expected, curled up on his side of the bed with his eyes closed even though it's barely past nine.

"Carl?" He calls his name, just to see if he'll get a response.

Will doesn't hear Carlton *say* anything back, but there's a ruffle of sheets that can be heard in the quiet of the room that indicates he's listening.

Will huffs, "Carlton, come on, get up. I know you're not sleeping."

The shadow blob on the bed that Will is very sure is Carlton starts to move, until it's sitting up and the bedside lamp suddenly turns on.

"Hey." Carlton exhales without looking at Will.

He sits on the very edge of the bed, feet planted on the ground as his fingers twist into the bedsheets. Will watches him for a second before responding.

“Hey,” He breathes eventually. “Are you ready to talk with me?”

“...Yeah.”

In the warm light of the lamp, Will can see Carlton nod, but he can't see him lift his head up to look at Will. That's because he doesn't. Carlton keeps on staring at the ground, like meeting Will's eye could kill him.

Will huffs and walks closer to him, arms folded over his chest, trying to seem as confident as possible, so that maybe some of his performed boldness would rub off on his real strength.

“What the hell was that earlier Carl?”

There's no response at first. Just the same old silence that has Will second-guessing just how successful his attempt at an actual conversation will really be. There's no sound in the bedroom. Will can only hear the faint rush of water from the bathroom if he really focuses on it, which is a relief. Mike already occupies too much of the background noise in Will's head.

Will forces his legs to move again, bringing him even closer to the bed until he's right in front of Carlton, staring down at him as stern as possible, even though he knows Carlton could see his lip wobble if he dared look up.

Eventually, he has enough.

“Carlton.” He repeats, when Carlton is still silent after a good ten seconds.

The word is enough to get Carlton's attention. It's even enough to make Will worthy of his gaze again, apparently, because Carlton tilts his head back to stare at Will like a kicked puppy. It's a pitiful sight, really, but Will can't feel bad for him right now if he wants to keep this conversation going.

The look in Carlton's eyes only grows sadder, until it seems almost regretful, and Carlton suddenly gets up from his seat on the bed's edge.

Will almost stumbles as he watches him, because this isn't the Carlton he witnessed barely an hour ago. The bite in everything he does is gone. Instead, he almost resembles a dog with its tin tucked between its legs. In one swift motion, Carlton lets go of the sheets in his hands, stands up to take a couple steps towards Will, and spreads his arms like he wants to *hug* Will.

He speaks too, though it's a no less confusing notion, “I'm sorry baby—”

Now Will does stumble backwards.

It's less a sense of fear or surprise that makes him move; it's more the absolute bewilderment he feels at what Carlton is trying to do.

He *told* Will that they'd talk about this, and now he's apologizing and calling him *baby*, which he's *never* done before. He's running away again, just like he did yesterday, just like he's been doing almost every day these past few weeks.

Something will cause tension between them, and Carlton will just send Will a smile and pretend like he doesn't know Will can see how tight it is. And if they do end up fighting, he'll come crawling back, apologising, without ever fixing or addressing the actual root of the issue, just like he's doing right now. And Will lets it slide every single time, because every minute he spends fighting with Carlton feels like actual knives carving drawings into him.

But not today. Today, every minute spent with Carlton feels like a blade, one which'll only stop moving if Will forces it to, through confrontation.

"No!" Will bursts out as he steps back. "Don't do that!"

Carlton freezes on the spot, hands still spread. The regret in his eyes begins crumbling, giving way to something that almost resembles annoyance if Will ignores the context of the situation.

"Do what?"

"Deflect! I *asked* you something."

The mask over Carlton's eyes collapses completely as he lets his arms drop to his side again. It only took a minute, but the Carlton he talked to before leaving the apartment is back, with his clenched fists and pursed lips.

All regret in his eyes is fully gone now. They're blank, and Will can watch as Carlton rolls them. "It's hilarious to hear *you* complain about deflecting."

"We're not talking about me right now, I'm trying to talk about you and Quinn—"

"No, you're right," Carlton interrupts Will, sounding almost sarcastic about it. Like he's decided to treat this conversation as a joke now that he realized Will actually wants to talk seriously. "We're not talking about you right now. But we're also not talking about Quinn."

Carlton's jaw clenches in a way Will doesn't think he's ever seen him do before. There's a different kind of tension between them, different from every fight they've ever brushed off, different from every little comment they've ever left unaddressed. There's something almost unrestrained in the way Carlton is looking at him right now, like he's finally letting himself breach the topic he's wanted to breach since the start of their relationship.

"We're going to talk about *Mike*."

Will's eyes widen at the mention of his name.

"What? No!" He stammers as he realizes that he's losing control of the conversation. "I told you, I came in here to talk about what happened—"

"And what happened only happened because of Mike, didn't it?"

"Mike had nothing to do with that!"

"Mike had everything to do with that!" Carlton suddenly explodes.

He's practically heaving with the effort that saying the words cost him. When Will focuses on his stance, he can see Carlton practically *tremble*. Will instinctively takes another step backwards, small enough to go unnoticed by Carlton, thank God.

Carlton keeps on talking through gritted teeth, "Yes, he didn't start the fight, and yes, Quinn was being an asshole, but we both know that Mike has been an issue for much longer than today!"

"Because you keep making him into an issue."

"No!" Carlton denies heatedly, "That's all you, Will!"

This is completely uncharted territory for Will. He's never seen Carlton like this. He's starting to think that maybe Mike could have been right about Will not noticing things in Carlton's behavior. But maybe this was just Will's punishment for insisting on talking this out instead of just accepting Carlton's apology. He shouldn't have pushed.

Carlton continues deviating from the conversation Will was pushing for in the first place, "Fine, okay, I'm a jealous asshole too sometimes, and yes, I don't trust you as much as I should, and maybe I just need to be more open towards Mike, but can you fucking blame me?"

Will blinks in confusion, "What?"

"He's fucking everywhere, Will!" Carlton drops without missing a beat, using his hands to gesture and emphasize his point. "Everywhere you go, everywhere you talk, everywhere you *breathe* Mike follows you like he's your *shadow* or something!"

The words feel like someone slapped Will with them.

It's bad enough that Will feels like Mike is an everlasting ghost, haunting his every step with feelings of nostalgia and grief, even though Mike is alive and well.

But he can't possibly admit to that, so he— and he genuinely hates to say this— *deflects*.

"He's only been here for like three days Carlton, and we haven't seen each other in months, of course he's gonna be close—"

"Oh, I'm not talking physically!" Carlton interrupts him with a laugh that almost sounds a little cruel. "That's a whole other joke you're playing on me!"

There's an entire separate statement hidden in Carlton's humorless dismissal. Like it's not enough of Carlton to tell him all the ways in which Mike mentally stays attached to him, he just has to point out the actual touching too.

If Mike heard Carlton talk about those touches like they meant something, he'd think that they mean something to Will too. And they do, Will just doesn't delude himself into thinking they mean the same to Mike anymore. Carlton is making it sound like they do, and he's talking about it way too loud for Will's liking.

“Can you please be quiet?” Will whispers instead of defending himself. Damage control.

“I’m not loud, Will.”

But Carlton does quiet down when he says the words, which sort of disproves his statement anyways. But the intensity in which he stares at Will speaks louder than words ever could anyways.

“And I’m not talking about physical closeness,” He repeats himself, voice steady. “I’m talking about the fact that every single little thing you do seems to be *tainted* by him.”

Will’s throat closes up a little when he hears Carlton say it out loud, because he’s had this exact thought process about a hundred times already. Carlton isn’t done talking yet though.

“I come home? You’re on the phone with him. We go out? You’re upset because he said something stupid that you won’t even tell me about. We’re watching something? Oh, it’s something that Mike recommended. We want to go home for Christmas to *your* family? Obviously, we’re staying with fucking Mike!”

He gets louder during the last sentence, but he stays where he’s standing, so Will can somehow manage to not step back further. He crosses his arms in front of him and digs his nails into his own biceps in an attempt to force himself to stay put and keep this conversation going.

He can’t let it show that Carlton’s words punch into him like boxing gloves, because every single one of them is a thought he himself has had before. To know that, apparently, Will is not as mysterious and unreadable as he thought is humbling at best and frightening at worst. Right now, feeling Carlton’s anger directed straight at him, Will is leaning towards frightened.

When he looks Carlton in the face though, he doesn’t look that angry anymore. In the place where a heating fire roared almost ten seconds ago, there’s now a sadness so deep that even looking at it makes Will feel it too. He can watch Carlton’s lips tremble, and this time it’s not with the effort of holding back.

“He is literally in everything you do, and it’s making me sick.” Carlton’s voice could be classified as a whisper by now. “You even wake up shaking in the middle of the night and you call me by his name.”

That catches Will off-guard.

“I do *not* do that.”

“Will,” He stresses, speaking to Will as if he were senile. “You do.”

Carlton’s shoulders drop, and he takes a step backwards. When he takes another, the back of his knees hit the bed’s edge, and he lets himself sink back down on it. His hands sit in his lap, twisting around themselves instead of into the bedsheets.

He hesitates and swallows before speaking, “Do you know how hard it is to love someone, when half of their existence consists of someone else?”

Yes, Will thinks, thinking back to that one summer, where everything changed between him and Mike, because Mike had grown enamored with El, completely forgetting Will in the process. He also thinks of the first few months after El’s disappearance, where Mike had completely lost himself in her once again, though that time it hadn’t sparked an ounce of jealousy in Will. Only compassion, and near lethal amounts of shared grief over the girl Will called his sister.

But Will obviously can’t bring any of that up. It’s bad enough that he’s thinking of Mike while Carlton is telling him about how much space Mike’s presence already takes up in Will’s life.

Even with Carlton shaking right in front of him, Will can’t help but let his thoughts wander to Mike. He’d like to pretend that it’s just because he lives with them now, but there’s no point in pretending, not if the only person he’s lying to is himself. Mike has been living in his head since the day they met, not that he’s ever even thought of paying rent to compensate Will for the constant turmoil and state of misery his presence brings.

Will isn’t sure if he’d be allowed to demand it anyways. His own presence seems to bring plenty of turmoil and misery with it too, judging by the way Carlton’s frame is still shuddering with what Will assumes are unshed tears.

God, he’s going to end up in hell.

Will chews up his own cheek as he watches Carlton sniff and contemplate. He opens his mouth to say something once, then closes it without making a sound. The second time he opens it, a choked down sob escapes him instead of words. Carlton only manages to speak on his third try.

“Do you know how hard it is to love someone, when all they do is love someone else so much more, right in front of you?”

The eye-contact between them turns into white noise in Will’s ears.

There it is. The truth that’s been building up since spring. Since the very first time Carlton even looked at him, since they first went out for coffee together, since Will first let Carlton push him into the mattress, since Carlton suggested moving in with each other.

This is where it ends. This is where it *should* end.

And yet.

“I’m not in love with Mike.”

The words are out before Will can stop them.

The obvious, painful, almost absurd *lie* leaves Will’s lips before his brain can even catch up and recognize that Will is speaking.

Carlton raises his eyebrows in disbelief, and Will can't say he blames him.

At first, even Will is surprised by the blatant dishonesty, but when he thinks about it for longer than a second, it becomes clear that it's the only answer he could ever give.

Will thinks that he could be fed literal gallons of Russian truth serum, and he still wouldn't ever be able to admit it, least of all to Carlton. He doesn't think he's ever said it aloud before, actually.

Sure, there are certain people in his life that *know* about Mike, but not because he told them. Robin knows, because she has eyes, and Jonathan knows because he knows Will better than anyone, and well, also has eyes.

Mike knows, Will thinks bitterly. He has to. Mike is stupid, but even he can figure out what direct eye contact during the topic of unrequited love could mean. Not to mention the conversation on the radio tower. Mike knows Will loved him; he just pretends it never happened.

So, screw Mike and screw the truth. If Mike can't even muster up the courage to admit that Will loves him more than he should, then he doesn't deserve to be the thing that ends this entire conflict. Will can't end things with Carlton, not yet. And even if he did, it can't be because of Mike.

It just can't. Will owes himself and his dignity that much. He can't let Mike make this big of an impact, no matter what. Even if it means lying again.

"I don't love Mike," Will grit through his teeth, even if it almost hurts to say the words. "Not like that."

Will listens to the silence laying thick across the room for a second. When he focuses, he can still hear the shower, which at least gives him the certainty that Mike won't overhear anything he says.

The newfound assurance lets Will take in another thick breath, "I love Mike, I really do. But I love him the same way I love Dustin, or Lucas and Max."

Being burnt alive through the connection of an interdimensional hivemind hurt less than the guilt currently settling in Will's stomach does. Lying about loving Mike by concealing the severity of it with half-truths is nothing new to Will, but does repeated torture truly hurt less over time? Will feels like it's the other way around.

In the van, Will felt guilt like a thousand tiny cuts, all connected to wring out as much pain out of Will as physically possible. Now though, the guilt hits him right in the chest and splits him down the middle in one messy, violent gash.

Carlton stares up at Will, eyes all big and wet, making the wound ache a thousand times harder, "No, no Will it's *different* with Mike—"

“You’re right, it is different,” Will keeps going, ignoring the way he feels like he might pass out, “But it’s not because I’m *in love* with him.”

Deep breath in, deep breath out, like proper airflow will somehow save him from the questionable morality of this entire conversation. It won’t, but it still beats suffocating. Probably.

“Mike...Well, *me* and Mike aren’t like *most* friends, I think.” Will stumbles over his words, and then rushes to say, “But that’s because we’ve never been!”

It’s very evident that Will doesn’t have the preparation needed for a conversation like this. He hopes that his fumbling and stumbling will at least make the lie a little more believable, because of realism and all that. So far, Carlton seems attentive, so he guesses that he’s doing something right.

Will clears his throat, “It’s just— for as long as I can remember, it’s always been Mike at my side. Like seriously, he’s always been there. And I don’t really know if that’s reassuring to you at all, but I think it might explain it all a little better? Why I’m so— why I’m *tainted*, or whatever you said.”

Carlton’s eyes look a little less glassy, and Will takes it as a win, even if it only makes the shame in his gut burn hotter. He’s not lying, but he is pointedly leaving out everything that actually matters, dumbing his and Mike’s relationship down so much that it’s barely even recognizable as the same thing anymore. If a boat slowly has all its parts replaced over time, is it still the same boat? Carlton will have to believe it is. Will adds even more half-truths, exchanges more parts.

“For example, when I— when I went missing, Mike helped find me. And not in the ‘oh, my best friend could be dead right now, so I’ll spend all my time hanging up missing posters for him’ kind of way, I mean like actually. He spent the entire week looking for me, and somehow, he was smart enough for that to actually mean something. They were able to rescue me because of things *he* found out about.”

Something like understanding flickers behind Carlton’s eyes, “Oh.”

“Yeah.” Will nods to himself. He doesn’t dare imagine a world where Mike hadn’t insisted on Will being alive despite all the evidence that spoke against it. “And once I was back, he was the one that stayed with me every time I got flashbacks, or whatever.”

Was. Like Mike isn’t still the one Will runs to every time his dreams take a turn for the worse. The one he runs to always, actually.

“And it’s not just the traumatic stuff.” Will adds after contemplating for a little while. “We’ve always helped each other, Carl. I have more memories of Mike than of my own father. He’s just— He’s always been there. He’s maybe the one thing in my life that I’ve always been able to count on. He’s the first friend I’ve ever made.”

For once, Will is telling the full truth. He might be hopelessly, devastatingly in love with Mike, but above everything, he’s Mike’s best friend. There’s not a single person in the world

that is more weaved into Will's story than Mike is. Carlton was right when he talked about Will being tainted, because he is. He's more than that even; he is completely and utterly drenched, a product of every single interaction he's ever had with Mike.

It's what makes being in love with Mike so unbelievably painful. They've been intertwined for their entire life, and Will is starting to think that is how it'll stay until they die. Mike and Will, attached at the goddamn hip, and somehow, it's still not enough for greedy Will Byers.

And the worst part about everything is that Will knows it's the same for Mike. Their connection is mutual. They are equals in every single aspect but one.

It's more than stupid, but talking about them like this makes Will's eyes a little wet. When he swallows, it takes more effort than it should.

"So, yeah, I guess, uhm." Will coughs to get the lump out of his throat. "I guess it's always been me and Mike."

Then, he realizes how awfully lovesick and romantic and straight up *horrifying* that sounds, and quickly adds, "Being *best friends*."

It's the final nail in their conversation's coffin. Will is pretty sure he either just fixed something or made everything a thousand times worse. He might be sweating.

Carlton doesn't really do anything that indicates how successful Will's monologue truly was. They look at each other for a long while, and Will can't even begin to read his mind. There's nothing on his face that tells Will Carlton's opinion on anything he just said.

Eventually though, Carlton sucks in his lips, like he's thinking of what to say. Then, "So, it's just the bond?"

Will blinks. He's so far in his own head that he no longer has any clue what point in the conversation Carlton is referring to, "What?"

Carlton stands up with a sigh and starts pacing as he explains, "The whole— Well, I don't wanna say obsession but..." He gestures vaguely with his hands, searching for a better way to word it, before giving up. "It's not— It's not *him*, it's the bond you have with him. Like a trauma bond."

Will winces, "That's not what that word means."

Carlton probably learnt it from Quinn, who most likely forgot the actual meaning and figured that the two words smooshed together could just be taken literally. Will fights the urge to roll his eyes, despite everything. The therapists from the institution that literally experimented on children were somehow more knowledgeable than Quinn.

Carlton seems focused on other matters, "Yeah, okay, fine, but—"

When he stops talking, he also stops walking. He stays in front of Will's desk, placing one of his hands next to Will's tower of sketchbooks, so he can let the table take some of his weight.

His other hand runs through his hair a few times, until it's all tousled, and he starts talking again.

“There's no... infatuation?”

Infatuation. What a silly word. And what a silly question, really.

When Will thinks of the word, he thinks of Mike using it once during one of their phone calls. Mike was talking about a book he was reading, because it was non-fiction for a change, and he'd wanted Will to congratulate him on how grown up he was being.

The book was nothing more than a collection of letters from the author to his lover Milena, but Mike had called it *the rawest portrayal of infatuation* he'd ever seen outside of Superman and Louis Lane.

“Wow, I've never heard you use big words like that, Mike.” Will had teased him when Mike told him about it.

“Oh, shut up!” Mike laughed. “You're just jealous, because Kafka can write shit for like, his muses and stuff, and your professors just force you to paint poverty five times a day, or something.”

Mike had been trying to tease him back, but he was wrong. Will did and still does work on shit for his muses and stuff, he just can't show those sketches to Mike. Because Mike is in every single one of them.

And well, Mike was right. What is a muse, if not the most open display of infatuation there ever could be?

“No.” Will lies again. “No Carlton, I swear there isn't.”

Despite the way Will's heart is racing—beating so loud that Carlton could probably hear it echoing if he focused, right alongside the sound of Mike's showering—Carlton somehow believes him.

“Okay.” He exhales softly.

Even Will sounds surprised when he parrots him, “Okay?”

“I believe you.”

Carlton's facial expression finally unveils, revealing nothing but relief. Will can barely believe it. Months of arguing and petty snide comments, and all it took to get the topic of Mike off the table was a singular unplanned monologue that Will managed to pull off even though he's still at least a little tipsy.

Of course, Will feels like he's dying, but the important thing is that he can be quiet about it now. That he can turn his inevitable guilt driven death into something that feels a little more like bleeding out in the snow, instead of exploding into a thousand pieces.

And Carlton seems guilty too. About Quinn, or about being an asshole to Mike, or just about the situation as a whole. Maybe about all of it.

The important thing here is that he genuinely seems sorry. Like he's finally come to the very important realization that, no matter how Will feels, he won't let Mike be a deciding factor in their relationship anymore. And Carlton seems relieved about that. He even smiles at Will before talking. It's a fiddle, flashing thing.

Carlton's lets out a long breath, "I'm sorry—"

But then he moves the hand resting on Will's desk and knocks over his sketchbook tower.

The one on the very top of the stack falls open onto the floor, and a dozen charcoal pages from only two days go spill out across the entire room.

Every single one of them has a part of Mike on it.

Silence.

Neither Carlton nor Will speak. They just stare at the embarrassing amount of paper between them; each sheet drenched in the *rawest portrayal of infatuation* there ever was.

Each smear of the charcoal looks and feels intentional, even from where Will is standing. It was drawn with the aid of nothing other than devotion, even someone who has never painted a day in their life could see that.

But Carlton does paint. He creates, more than Will even, and if the feelings pushed onto the paper read as clear as words to Will, then there is not a doubt in Will's mind that Carlton understands the message as well.

Absolutely none of what Will just said matters anymore. Not when there is literal picture evidence of his lies covering the space between him and Carlton, like a bridge that could never be crossed.

Will's entire body shudders when it catches up to what his eyes are seeing. He feels cold all over, colder than even the Upside-down makes him feel. Like someone stripped him of all his clothes and then shoved him outside, straight into a snowstorm.

It is a bit like that, Will supposes. The thought of his naked body makes him feel no less exposed than his sketches of Mike being revealed, and Carlton serves as the snowstorm.

The sketchbook lays at Carlton's socked feet, like a ticking bomb. But there's no ticking to be heard between them. The only sound is that of their breath, heavy with shock, disbelief and—for maybe the first time; *truth*.

Will doesn't think he's ever fucked up so bad in his life. He inhales shakily, and almost pleads, "Carlton—"

He can't finish what he's trying to say, because Carlton bends down to pick up Will's sketchbook.

Then.

Will hears it before he sees it. The loud noise of something *smacking* against one of the bedroom walls, and then the sound of Will's own gasp. Instinctively, Will's eyes fly shut, so tight it hurts, and he stumbles backwards— away. Far away from where the noise just exploded against the drywall, his legs trying to get him as far as they can.

He pries his eyes open again just as fast when he hits the wall behind him, and even though it already happened, the image replays in his mind as he sees Carlton hurl the sketchbook at one of the bedroom walls.

Will stays frozen. Or maybe he's trembling. He doesn't really know what his body is doing; he's too focused on Carlton's.

Carlton, who seems to be shaking as well. But it's not out of shock. It looks like restraint on him.

Carlton's hands are balled into fists, but because Will's eyes immediately zero in on them, he can tell that they don't form the typical kind.

Carlton's thumbs are tucked in, and he's using every single one of his fingernails to dig into where they meet his skin. Like he's using his own fists to fight himself, rather than anyone else.

But seeing that doesn't calm Will. He knows Carlton would never hurt him, but still. Seeing him throw that book was so different from anything Will has ever seen him do that Will doesn't know if he can trust his judgment anymore.

He doesn't know if he can trust *Carlton*.

“Carl—” He croaks, heart beating in his chest impossibly fast.

Carlton's hands curl open again when he hears Will, and he brings them up to his face so he can bury himself in them. He's shaking too, and he looks so small like this, but Will *feels* even smaller. He presses his back against the wall behind him, like he's trying to break through. He can't be in the same room as Carlton anymore, not right now.

“Will.” Carlton whispers through the gaps between his fingers. “I'm—”

Will knows it's supposed to be an apology, but the words seemingly get stuck in Carlton's throat, and Will is thankful for it. He can't listen to Carlton apologizing right now, even hearing his breathing is too much for Will. He needs to get out of here as quickly as possible, and an apology would demand his stay.

Will doesn't think he can stay much longer.

“No.” Will shakes his head when it looks like Carlton is going to try talking again. “Just— just don't. *Please.*”

Will's breathing isn't steady in the slightest, but the steps he takes towards the door are. He doesn't wait to hear Carlton's response. For once, he's focusing on himself instead of Carlton. Every second spent in their bedroom suffocates him a little more, and Will can't drown in here.

The doorknob twists in his hand, and he's vaguely aware of Carlton saying something behind him, but once he rips the door open and the air of the living room hits his face, Will couldn't care less about everything else.

He forces the door shut behind him, knowing Carlton won't try to follow him, and lets his head fall back against the wooden surface.

Fuck Will's life, seriously.

He can't even begin to comprehend what just happened. He went in there to call Carlton out, but instead he somehow slipped into a conversation about Mike. Then, he poured out every lie he could think of, basically gutting himself to keep Carlton from being hurt by the truth, and then it slipped out anyway.

And then Carlton threw the sketchbook. And Will left the room. And now he's standing here, still shaking and completely alone.

"Will?"

Maybe not completely alone. Shit.

"Mike!" Will jumps at the sudden appearance of Mike, only a few feet away from him. The sketchbook threw him off guard, and he lost focus on all the noise in the apartment, so he must've missed Mike's shower stopping.

Mike is right there, close enough to touch if Will only took a few steps. He's in a loose shirt and shorts, and his hair is still dripping with water. Actually, when Will takes a closer look, his clothes look wet too, like he tugged them on without properly drying himself off first.

Usually, the sight of Mike is enough to get Will to calm down at least a little, but right now it just makes him feel sick.

"Will, what happened?" Mike's voice is soft, but still loud enough to be heard through the door. Will can't deal with that right now.

When Mike's hand reaches out and he takes a step towards him, Will instinctively flinches back. Mike's hand stays frozen in the air, mere inches from Will's shoulder, and its presence is stark between them.

Mike's eyebrows twist up in what should be shock or confusion, but instead Will can only see the concern etched into his features. Had Mike been offended, it would have hurt less. Will could push him away all he wants; he'd still just keep on asking *why*.

Mike stays hovering until Will swallows and responds, "Nothing, Mike."

How could he possibly tell Mike anything about what just happened, when it would mean revealing the truth to Mike as well. Will doesn't have the capacity for any more lies tonight, but he definitely can't reveal any more groundbreaking truths either.

Even just seeing Mike and his outstretched hand, willing to provide Will comfort without even knowing what happened— It's enough to make Will's eyes watery again.

Slowly, Mike drops his hand, but he keeps looking right at Will with this *look* in his eyes that might be worse than anything Will has ever seen in his life.

“Will, you're shaking.”

Mike whispers the words. Will isn't sure if he does it because he's afraid of scaring Will away, or because he's realized that Carlton is still behind the very thin bedroom door.

Will thinks of denying Mike's statement, but then he makes the mistake of looking down to avoid eye contact with Mike and sees the way his hands are twitching at his sides.

Deep inhale, even deeper exhale.

Will closes his eyes and lightly bites the inside of his cheek to calm his nerves a little before speaking. If he opens his mouth, the only thing that'll come out will be croaking, and he isn't ready to cry in front of Mike right now.

“It's fine, Mike.” Will pushes his reassurance through his still closed mouth.

Both of them know Will doesn't mean it, and Mike's questioning head tilt confirms it.

Secretly, Will wishes he hadn't stepped back from Mike's comforting hand. Even more so, he wishes that Mike would just ignore his implied rejection of physical contact and completely engulf him, but he knows that Mike won't. Mike listens to him and the things he wants, he just doesn't know that Will has never been honest about what he wants a day in his life.

Because what Will really wants right now is to fall into Mike and let himself be held, no matter how embarrassing it would be to be seen like that. As a matter of fact, to be seen is exactly what Will wants.

He wants to spill his guts out and actually be honest about it this time. He wants to stop this constant dance of half-truths and veiled confessions and uncertainty, because his legs are getting tired, and he is too. He wants to tell Mike everything he said to Carlton, and everything he kept to himself too.

But he can't have any of that, so instead, he forces a smile onto his wobbling lips.

“I'm just cold.”

At least it's not a lie. Will has felt a chill rooted deep in his chest since the conversation with Carlton first began.

Mike's mouth drops open a little, making way for words, but none come. He just keeps on staring at Will, eyebrows scrunched together in frustration, but Will can tell that it's directed at Mike himself, not Will. Somehow.

The longer Mike stands in front of him, the harder it is to hold back his tears. He's so used to telling Mike about things he struggles with, that Mike's mere presence opens him up more than anyone else ever could.

He needs an excuse to get away from him, before either of them can say anything that'll unravel Will completely, and his eyes frantically search for anything he'd be able to use as his pretense.

Of course, his eyes land on Mike himself, and the way little droplets of water still cling to the skin on his throat.

Will clears his throat with a cough that sounds way wetter than it should, "I'm just gonna go take a shower."

Mike's face is unchanging, "Are you sure—"

"Yeah Mike."

Will's voice cracks in the middle of saying Mike's name, and it's a sign that it's more than time to get going.

He sends another quick smile Mike's way before pushing himself off the door and practically tearing himself away from Mike's orbit.

It's hard, especially because Mike follows him for a few steps, but he stops eventually. It leaves Will stumbling, trying to find his way towards the bathroom door like he's a blind visitor in his own apartment.

He forces the smile on his lips to keep shape as he twists the doorknob and lets himself in.

Only once he's closed and locked the door safely behind him does he let it fall. But he keeps his mouth and eyes shut tight, not yet ready to fall apart completely.

He trips over his own feet on his way to the sink and clumsily places his hands on it to steady him. When Will looks up, the window is completely fogged from Mike's time spent in the shower, and it's maybe the only grace the universe is willing to give him. Looking at himself seems like an impossible task.

Once Will feels like he can stand without his knees crumbling beneath him, he lets go of the sink and starts undressing himself. The bathroom air feels cold on his bare skin, but the shower isn't far.

He steps in, teeth *still* busy with the inside of his cheek, pointedly not making any noise in case Mike is listening for it.

He pushes himself against the freezing tiles when he turns the shower on, so the freezing water doesn't hit him before it heats up. Will's arms are slung around himself, protecting his torso from the cold as best as he can, but every few seconds a drop of what is basically ice hits him anyway.

It's loud. Loud enough to tune out the way Will finally lets a sob break out of his throat when another spray of water hits his face. Another one follows, and while he's still trying to keep to a reasonable volume, he's not restraining himself anymore.

He turns the water as hot as possible, but it's lukewarm at best. Suddenly, he hates Mike for being here. Invading his home, using up his hot water and ruining *everything* Will has built without him, and he doesn't even have to try to do it.

When the water temperature isn't straight up torture anymore, Will steps under the steady stream and lets the entire evening be washed away. The cool water runs down his body and face until he can't tell if the wetness on his cheeks comes from his eyes or the shower anymore.

With a painfully twisted expression, he shakes his head, even though nobody is there to see him to it.

"Screw you, Mike." He whispers into the roar of water.

Tears keep flowing, and the occasional sob wrecks his body, but they eventually stop. Will cries until he feels wrung out and then keeps on standing still beneath the showerhead. His body gets used to the cold, as it has done many times before, and he doesn't know how long he stays.

Will blocks out Carlton from his thoughts, because that's too much to even begin to think about.

Instead, just like always, he thinks of Mike, and how badly he just wants him gone. From their apartment, from Will's mind, from it all. If Will could, he'd shove Mike out in an instant.

But at the same time, he knows all too well that it would only take him a second until he'd drag him back in again. It's all an act, really, pretending that it would be easier with Mike away from him, because he knows it wouldn't. He's spent the past year away from Mike, and all it's done is make things harder for Will, because separating them feels inherently unnatural to *both* of them.

It's pathetic, but Mike's name will always be an oxymoron to Will, because even though he wants Mike to leave, he will always *need* him to stay.

god. This felt really heavy to write, and i truly hope it's not as heavy reading it! This is very much the breaking point in Carlton nd Will's relationship. Its not a break up, but it IS the end of how they've treated their relationship so far, and you guys will see more about tht next chapter. I promise ext chapter is comforting, i feel very bad for ending this one like....that.

Gee i couldnt even give poor will a hot shower i lowkey evil. BUt listen. It'll all be worth it. I swear. Eventually, it WILL be worth it.

also wow will is such an ass. Obviously carlton is a thousand times worse and NOTHING will could do would warnt this tretment, but Will is so focused on keeping his feelings for Mike ccovered that he's willing to say almost anything, and that is a little shitty i can't lie.

But like. People are murderers, i feel like a little problematic relationship when ur 20 isn't the worst thing u can do.

ANYWHO notes are done im too depressed to be of much whimsy rn. Spotify is hitting me with that mistki ethel cain PURPL RAINNNNNNNNNNNN combo rn and im mourning byler so i took it out on will and now im sad for us both. Have a goodnight guys. I will try, too >^<

Chapter 10: Will Byers has got to be dehydrated by now

Chapter Summary

YALL THIS IS TEN THOUSAND WORDS THIS IS WHY IT TOOK ME SO LONG TO POST!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

honest to god i cant believe i wrote that much wtf. Theyre gay idk what to say

Chapter Notes

im not gonna lie 10k are crazy even for me

im just gonna say enjoy ur meal, i know you're starved after i left you high and dry for like a week. Whoopsies. Once again saying that if u want live updates on like my writig process for this fic, u should follow my twt @mimibaldsten !!

I swear next chapter will be out faster. I just sort of. Lost myself in this one. ALSO

we hit five thousand kudos. That's more people than the village i live in has for citizens.

Now, eat, children. For this chap i listened to Casual by chappel roan, Bags by clairo, Sex by The 1975 and the entire Life is strange soundtrack on repeat, so I guess that's the vibe for this chapter. Hihi u guys will love this one i think

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

The hallway is dark when Will finally steps out of the humid bathroom. His skin feels a little raw with how hard he scrubbed at it when he dried himself off, and the fabric of his already worn clothes feels like sandpaper on him.

He'd get fresh clothes, but those are stuck in Will's bedroom, right alongside Carlton. It's the same with his pillow and blanket. In all honesty, he's not exactly sure where or how he's going to sleep tonight. He figures he'll try to sneak up on a hopefully asleep Mike and steal one of the couch pillows, and then he'll make himself comfortable on the cold kitchen tiles.

Comfortable. He almost laughs.

Will doesn't think he could be *comfortable* to save his life, not right now. There's a special kind of restlessness stuck inside his chest, one he usually only feels when facing Upside-Down related nightmares. It makes paranoia bubble up in his stomach, stripping away any comfort he could ever feel. Not even twenty mattresses and twenty featherbeds could get rid

of the sting in his gut. He's like *The Princess and the Pea*, if the pea were an apparently unloved boyfriend who's recently found interest in throwing things.

So, no, Will won't exactly ready be able to sleep, but he's still tired. Exhausted even, just not physically. But going to bed— if you can even call it that— means crossing paths with Mike, so he stands silently in front of the bathroom's closed door for a little while.

Keyword, *little* while.

“Will?” Mike suddenly appears in front of him.

Will practically jumps, “Oh Jesus! God Mike, you scared me.”

Although *scare* probably isn't the word Will should use. Seeing Mike isn't frightening, it's a blow to the chest, because it feels like his mere presence is enough to cause Will to fall apart. Because he knows that, if he did, Mike would be there to catch him, and that thought almost ruins Will every time.

Will's jumpiness is less Mike's fault than it is Carlton's. Will still feels like something is buzzing beneath his skin, and Mike's appearance just made that sensation a thousand times stronger.

“Sorry?” Mike apologizes sheepishly.

Will quickly wipes at his eyes, getting rid of any lingering wetness, even though he's sure they're already dry by now. He doesn't want to risk it. Still, he sees a little clearer when he's done.

Standing there in the dark of the living room, wearing pajama pants and an oversized *The Empire Strikes Back* shirt, Mike looks foreign and familiar to Will at the same time, somehow. Will hasn't seen him like this in a long time. When Will visits Hawkins during holidays, he normally stays in the cabin with his parents, so he doesn't really see Mike without his daytime clothes.

It's a little odd. They're older now, and Will hasn't had a sleepover with Mike in almost two years. Because he's an adult and all that. Funny, how he used to think that would never stop him and Mike.

He has to stop being melancholic. Today was bad enough; he doesn't really need to rub salt into the wound. But just Mike's presence might already be enough to do that.

Will shakes himself a little and clears his throat, “I, uh, thought you were asleep already.”

It's notably awkward between them, and Will isn't sure which one of them is making it worse. Will is stammering, but Mike avoids eye contact and chooses to look at the floor.

“I mean, no, it's barely even ten.”

“Right.” Will gives a tight-lipped nod. “Well, good night then—”

Will manages to squeeze his way past Mike in a quick two-second maneuver, slipping around him like he practiced it, then taking long strides towards the kitchen in the hopes of escaping before—

Mike's hand shoots out to grab Will's wrist.

He holds it for a second, only long enough to get Will to stop walking, before letting go like it burned him.

The sudden touch should startle Will, considering the way his heart has been beating like it's running a marathon ever since Carlton touched the sketchbook, but nothing happens when Mike's fingers close around Will's wrist.

If anything, it even grounds Will. The single second that Mike's hand spends touching Will's is enough to flood Will's entire body with warmth. Even when Mike draws back after successfully spinning Will back towards him, the heat doesn't leave Will's face.

Will swallows hard as their eyes meet in the dark.

It's hard to see Mike's face like this, or it should be, but Mike's eyebrows are scrunched together so dramatically that Will can still see them even with the moon as his only source of light.

"Woah, woah," Mike fumbles. "What do you mean 'good night'?"

Will raises an eyebrow, "Have a good night's sleep?"

"Where are you going?"

"Uhm. The kitchen."

"The *kitchen*?"

It might not be the most conventional place to sleep, but it's the only option Will has right now. Mike is occupying the couch, and Will would rather sleep in the dairy aisle of the supermarket down the street than share a bed with Carlton tonight. He says as much to Mike.

"Well Mike, I'm sure you already guessed that I'm not gonna sleep in the bedroom tonight, so—"

"No, no!" Mike rushes to explain, like he's terrified of the possibility. "God no, Will, that's not what I meant, it's just—"

Mike stops himself from saying more by biting his lip. When Will's eyes dip a little, he can see Mike fiddling with the hem of his shirt.

"What?"

Mike shakes his head, "Never mind."

It feels wrong to leave already, but it's for the best. If Will stays any longer, the tension between them could go from awkward to something unnamable again, as it does almost every time they're alone. Will doesn't know if he can stand that tonight. And he really does need to sleep.

When they've silently stared at each other for a bit, Will sends Mike a quick, forced smile.

"Night, Mike."

He doesn't even manage to fully turn around before Mike stops him again, "You're gonna sleep in *that*?"

Mike is pointing at Will, or, more specifically, at his jeans and Button-Up shirt. They're the same clothes he's been wearing since before the dinner even started, and Will wants nothing more than to literally set them on fire and slip into something more comfortable. But he has no other clothes laying around, and it's too cold to sleep in his underwear, so he'll just have to suffer.

Will sighs, "Can you guess where my clothes are?"

"No, I know that, it's just— wait a second."

Mike holds his palm out, signaling Will to stay put, and Will listens. He walks towards the couch quickly and pulls out his suitcase from the space beneath it. When he opens it, he digs through it for a few seconds before grabbing multiple articles of clothing and skipping back towards Will.

He holds out his arm expectantly, "Here."

"Uhm." Will stares at the clothes for a second. "Thank you?"

"To sleep in."

Will has to keep himself from rolling his eyes, because what else would he use Mike's clothes for. But at the same time, he feels the unease that's been clawing at him since he left the bedroom slowly get replaced with something else.

Where Carlton had him feeling like winter itself snuck beneath Will's skin, even the simplest gestures from Mike feel like someone lit up a fireplace in Will's stomach, and then also got about a thousand candles for good measure.

It feels good to feel warm, but it feels awful knowing where that heat stems from.

Usually, Will is greedy and selfish and lets himself sit in front of Mike's fireplace for a little while before forcing himself to move on, but today the warmth burns him, like it's hell's flames licking up to get him instead of the regular cozy fire.

It's the familiar guilt, mixing with the even more familiar buzz, and it makes Will hesitant to accept Mike's clothes, no matter how badly he wants to get rid of his own. Because the ones

he's wearing are a physical reminder of everything that happened today, while Mike's are simply a reminder of *Mike*, and that brings more comfort to Will than it should.

He tries to say no, at least.

“Mike, you really don't—”

“Dude.” Mike immediately cuts him off. “You straight up *lived* in my clothes for like two years straight, I'll be fine. They're fresh, I promise.”

Yeah, back when I didn't have a boyfriend that I should at least pretend to be loyal to, Will thinks, but doesn't say, because he's weak.

Instead, he smiles, “Thanks, Mike.”

Weak.

Will takes the clothes— a pair of plaid pajama pants and a sweater that looks like it could belong to someone's grandfather— from Mike's outstretched arm and stands still for a second, unsure of what to do.

He should just go back into the bathroom or, even better, head straight into the kitchen so he can change and immediately go to bed. But the kitchen is cold, and the bathroom is colder, and stupid Mike Wheeler is the only thing that keeps his body temperature from dropping to subzero, so he can't leave the living room yet. Actually, he can leave with no problem, he just doesn't *want* to.

“I'm just gonna—” Will says and gestures vaguely with the clothes in his hand.

Somehow Mike understands him, “Oh, yeah, no, of course!”

Mike quickly turns around, giving Will privacy, and Will starts undressing himself, moving as quickly as humanly possible.

He's far more emotionally stable than he was ten minutes ago, but peeling off his jeans and unbuttoning his shirt makes him feel almost as frail as the shower did. The apartment air feels colder when it hits his bare skin. Removing his worn clothes gets rid of the layer of hurt that's been building on him this entire evening, but it also exposes him.

He tugs on Mike's pajama pants, still in a hurry, but slows down when it's Mike's sweater in his hands.

His fingers dig into the material, holding onto it as if it were a safety railing on a cliff, but Will's thumb has a mind of its own. It ghosts over the fabrics, almost caressing it, and Will stares at it with his lips parted.

God, he's going to hell.

If a *sweater* still makes his cheeks heat up like this, then Will is seriously beyond saving. He guides his arms through the knit sleeves, taking his time, before pulling the whole sweater

over his head.

Immediately, both the scent and warmth overwhelm him.

The sweater is big on Will, and it's thicker than anything Will owns, but it's mostly the way it feels like Mike is all around him in a tight embrace that makes any lingering chill flee from Will's body.

It's probably the most comforting thing he's ever felt.

Will absolutely *hates* it.

All the strength he's tried to desperately build up since leaving the shower vanishes from his body, and he suddenly wants nothing more than to just crumble. The desperate desire to be held up burns in his chest like a forest fire, and it takes him everything he has not to burst into tears straight away.

He succeeds, but only barely. His shoulders start shaking with the effort of holding back, and breathing becomes a little harder to do.

Will's face twists as he reaches a hand out towards the wall to steady himself. He has to keep himself together. He needs to use the last small bit of self-control he still has left, and he needs to use it on pushing down every emotion he's felt this evening, because he needs to get both Carlton and Mike off his mind, which is a little hard to do since Mike is *right there* but also if he doesn't do it he knows he's going to start full on sobbing and he would honestly rather shoot himself than—

“Will!” A hand finds purchase on Will's shoulder.

Will's breath is a stuttering mess, and he's pretty sure he's shuddering even though he's not cold anymore, but now Mike is at his side and—

A small sob finally breaks through Will's mouth.

His eyes fly shut in defeat, and he lets the tears that have been building in them fall. They sting almost painfully on his cheek, in the same way Mike's hand on his shoulder stings.

“Woah, hey, what's wro—” Mike starts but cuts himself off, because they both know exactly what's wrong.

Stupid *Carlton* is what's wrong, but this whole exchange is wrong too. It's a process they've both repeated about a thousand times at this point, and the routine is all too familiar by now.

Will gets hurt, and it's at least partially Mike's fault, but somehow Mike is still the one to show up and provide him with comfort. And Will always lets himself take it.

He isn't full on sobbing like he was in the shower, but even Will's quiet weeping is more than Mike should see. Still, Mike doesn't draw back. His hand stays firmly placed on Will's shoulder, and he even takes his free hand to place it on the other side.

“Will, talk to me, *please*.”

Another tear rolls down from Will’s eye as he shakes his head. He can’t talk to Mike *about* Mike. He can’t talk to Mike at all right now, if he’s honest.

He’s mad at him, even though Mike didn’t really do anything, but Will’s mind is too frazzled to care about the logistics of it all. He doesn’t know why he’s feeling anything he just knows that he feels. And right now, Will is more than frustrated with Mike, and the way Mike keeps slotting himself into Will’s life like he belongs there.

Through his tears, Will weakly grabs at one of Mike’s wrists, trying to get it off of his shoulder, but the movement makes him stumble. He doesn’t know when he got this lightheaded, but Mike needs to catch him when he tries taking a step away from him.

“Will!”

Mike’s hands wander from Will’s shoulders to his biceps and hold on tightly, securing Will without hurting him.

“Hey, I’ve got you,” Mike whispers. “I’ve got you.”

The gentleness of it all feels like a slap across the face to Will. He shakes his head again, “Stop.”

Mike raises an eyebrow, “Stop what?”

“This!” Will explodes, keeping his voice down. “You— You’re always just— *there*. For me. No matter what I do, and no matter how horrible I’m being and— and I *hate it*.”

Will hiccups his way through his quiet outburst. It’s the most truthful thing he’s confessed to in months, and he’s sure he’ll regret it once he’s calm again, but right now it’s his emotions taking the lead. There isn’t really anything Will can do about that.

In the very back of his head, Will feels a little bad that it’s Mike who has to deal with it. He looks more than confused about the whole situation. He’s also still holding onto Will.

“You...hate that I’m there?”

Will truly wishes it were that simple. If only Will was mad about Mike babying him or something like that. What he’s mad about is the fact that Mike is the only one who’s truly able to comfort Will, and that the opportunity to show that arises time and time again. Mike is almost always there to help Will, so Will can’t even pretend that he doesn’t want Mike’s help. He could *never* hate the fact that Mike is there.

“No, I don’t, that’s the problem, Mike!”

His voice is wet when he says it. Will feels like a soggy sponge. Mike *looks* like a soggy sponge, with the way he’s still scrunching his face together like he hasn’t got a clue in the world.

“Okay, I’m really confused right now—”

“You’re such an *asshole*, Mike.” Will huffs, sounding more gloomy than annoyed.

Finally, he manages to slide out of Mike’s grasp. He drags himself over to the couch, ignoring the fact that Mike’s pillow and blanket are occupying it, and lets himself fall down on it.

Mike follows.

In his lap, Will fiddles with his hands, and his lower lip wobbles as he speaks, “You’re rude to Carlton, and you never ever swallow your pride, even when it’s the smartest thing to do, and it’s almost like you seek out conflict and fights and everything.”

Mike blinks at him for a second, like that’s the last thing he expected to hear from Will. Will almost never gets pissed off, but the line between devastated and angry is blurry, and Mike is the one watching Will try and walk it.

Still, Mike is easy to irritate.

“That’s so unfair, Will.” Mike’s face twists, but his voice stays quiet, not even beginning to waver. “I have been *trying*, like, *so hard* to not be a dick, because you don’t want that and—”

“Yeah, exactly!”

The words hang between them for a few seconds, before Mike catches up and his face goes back to being blank.

“...What?”

“You—” Will fumbles, unsure of how to explain it without sounding pathetic. “You’re a dick, but you’re not a dick to *me* and that’s— that’s just *mean!*”

He’s not sure that he’s getting the message across correctly. He’s too wound up and shaky to explain his whole thought process behind the oxymoron Mike, but he’s also too wrung out to lie again. Somehow, though, Mike understands. Sort of.

“Are you...saying that I’m an asshole because I’m *not* an asshole?”

Will sniffs as he nods, “Yes.”

“I’m not gonna lie, I’m really confused.”

“So am I!” Will sobs weakly.

Confusion might be the most accurate word for him right now. He knows he’s overwhelmed, because he feels like his entire life just fell apart an hour ago, and now Mike is also here, and worlds that shouldn’t mix are mixing. Or maybe, they’ve just always been one and the same, which would be worse.

Mike stares at him for a long time, and each second of his eyes on Will feels like torture. It feels like he’s trying to read Will, to search for an answer to the thousands of questions no

doubt rolling through his head. Eventually, he seems to find it, and his gaze changes from calculating to understanding, turning softer and more painful at the same time.

“Will?” He swallows hard. “I’m gonna say something, and you can totally like, blow me off here if I’m wrong but...”

Will grows more uneasy the longer he looks at Mike, but the tears in his eyes remain frozen with anticipation. He watches as Mike struggles, not with finding the words, but with saying them out loud. Eventually though, he manages to open his mouth again.

“I don’t think you hate that I’m here for you. I actually think you sort of need it.”

The words arrive with a bang in Will’s chest. It hits so hard he almost falls backwards, struggling to hold himself upright as he lets his mind register what Mike just said. It’s no new information, Will knows that Mike is right, he just didn’t know Mike was aware of it too.

Almost a decade of hiding his feelings for Mike, and still he hasn’t had enough practice to know how to stop slipping up. He can try as hard as he wants to, but the truth just keeps leaking through the tiniest of cracks in his well-built walls.

Will’s breath stutters when he inhales, “You shouldn’t know what I need.”

Mike’s gaze on him is earnest; a torture Will has had to withstand more times than he can count. When Mike speaks, his tone is even worse.

“But I do.”

The gentle softness of Mike’s voice is a starker contrast than anything Will has ever talked about in art class. Mike’s voice flows like silk in Will’s mind, while Carlton’s stays still, like an ever-present block of wood forming painful roots within Will.

All of a sudden, Will hates himself for ever pushing this away. He keeps on projecting all the hurt inside him onto Mike, because blaming Carlton feels wrong, but it’s the truth.

All Mike has done to Will these past few months is to support him and treat him gentler than almost anyone else ever has. Just because that hurts Will the worst, doesn’t mean Mike does it to be cruel. In fact, it means the opposite.

The realization hits him even harder than Mike’s words did. All this time, he’s been forcing himself to forgive and forget and ignore *everything* Carlton does, even if it meant lying to himself and everyone around him. But seeing Mike be this soft with him, when Carlton is the exact opposite, is a little like putting glasses on for the first time.

He’s so tired of denying everything and punishing himself for it. He’s tired of not letting himself take the hand that’s extended to him and instead holding onto the one that slaps him away. Right now, he wants nothing more than to just let himself be held up by Mike, and Mike is *offering*, without Will ever having to ask. But Will thinks he might do so anyway.

“Mike,” He rasps, eyes stinging. “Can I—”

He doesn't quite manage to form the words, but Mike hears them anyway.

"Jesus, Will. Of course."

Then, Mike takes Will by the arm and pulls him into his chest.

Will's face collides with Mike's collarbone, and his hands immediately fly to Mike's arms. He holds on like he'll fall if he lets go, fists scrunched into Mike's shirt so tightly that he's sure his nails are scratching Mike's skin, but Mike doesn't pull away.

Instead, he does what Will considers to be on the opposite end of the 'hold on, pull away' spectrum. Will feels the hand that was on his arm only a few seconds ago slide to the back of his head almost immediately, where it buries itself inside Will's hair. It feels so good that Will wants to cry, and when he remembers that that's what he's already doing, he lets himself release another sob against Mike.

It sounds muffled from where Will's mouth is pressed against the fabric covering Mike's collarbone, and it makes Will realize that he's not nearly as close to Mike as he wants to be. Usually, a thought like that would make him pull away and ask himself what the hell he's even doing, but it doesn't do that now.

Instead, Will lifts his hips from where they rest against the soles of his feet, so he's up on his knees and can use the extra height to bury his face in the crook of Mike's neck instead of his chest. He's leaning towards Mike to the point where he's halfway to laying down, but it doesn't matter, since Mike's hand is already sliding down from Will's hair to guide him into a more maintainable position.

At first, Will mourns the loss of Mike's fingers on his scalp, but Mike quickly replaces them with his left hand. His other one glides down until it meets the bend of Will's knee, where it fits itself into the crook and pulls.

Will lets Mike position him, lets himself fall into Mike in all the ways Mike will let him—which are far too many—until he's practically in Mike's lap.

He keeps holding on, burying his face even deeper and letting tears flow as Mike whispers incomprehensible strings of reassurances into Will's hair. It hurts, but it's probably the best pain Will has ever felt, because it doesn't cause the tears; it just allows them to come.

They stay just like that for a long while.

Will wonders if this is the longest they've ever held each other for, but he isn't sure. Back when Jane left them, there were nights where Will was up for hours, watching and holding Mike in his arms until he slipped off to sleep. But Mike was never fully there those nights, too far away and lost in his own despair—and alcohol, sometimes—to truly notice what's going on around him.

But Will is well aware. He's conscious of Mike's hand rubbing circles into his lower back, of the way his fingers twirl around strands of Will's hair. Will is especially conscious of the way he feels his heartbeat slow down the longer he stays in Mike's arms, and of the way he stops

sobbing. His eyes are still wet, but he's no longer in active emotional agony. He doesn't even feel the restlessness clawing at his chest anymore.

Will relaxes his hold on Mike a little, because he's coming to realize that he is genuinely *digging* into Mike's skin, and lets one of his hands slip from Mike's biceps to his upper back.

It signals a change in Will's mood to Mike, who slightly slackens his hold on Will in response.

Mike whispers again, and this time, Will can hear him, "You don't have to cry, Will."

Will doesn't move away from Mike just yet, which is odd. It's either touching or talking with them, never both at the same time. But Will somehow finds the strength to respond in him.

"Screw you, I'll cry if I want to."

"You can," Will feels Mike nod. "At least you're a pretty crier."

Jesus. Whatever that means. Will ignores the heat creeping onto his cheeks.

"That's not— *shut up.*"

Mike giggles a little, and Will musters a weak, wet chuckle too.

It sounds bleak in comparison to Mike, and it makes him notice just how *tired* he is. It's still early, but all the crying has wrung him out. He detests the idea of letting go of Mike in exchange for the cold kitchen floor, but he can't fall asleep like this.

"Mike," He mumbles, still pressed into Mike's neck. When he moves his lips, they brush against Mike's skin.

"Yeah?"

"I'm tired."

"Okay. You can lay down."

"*Mike.*" Will repeats.

"What?"

Will, despite the way it feels like losing a limb, pulls himself off Mike's torso a little, just enough so he can look at him. It makes him realize just how close they are. One of his hands is resting in the space between Mike's shoulder and neck, whilst the other one holds onto his elbow.

Will swallows, "I can't sleep here."

"Why not? I don't mind taking the floor."

"I'm not gonna make my guest sleep on the *floor*, Mike."

“Please,” Mike scoffs. “I am not a guest. A guest is like, your aunt. I’m just a guy.”

Just a guy. Will wishes. If Mike were just a guy, then touching him wouldn’t make Will feel like he has to call the fire department for his insides.

He shakes his head, both to deny Mike and to get his thoughts back in order, “I’m still not letting you sleep on the floor.”

Mike shrugs, “Fine, then we’ll share.”

Will almost chokes on his spit. Absolutely not.

He can manage being this close to Mike during extreme emotional distress. He definitely can’t sleep next to him. He’d take the kitchen floor over that any day. Even touching Mike now that neither of them are actively crying feels like too much. Will’s legs are sprawled across Mike’s lap, for fucks sake.

He doesn’t get up, but he does let his hands drop from Mike’s arms before clearing his throat, “Absolutely not.”

Something indecipherable flashes in Mike’s eyes, “Why?”

Will sputters, “Because it’s not even half a foot wide!”

“So?”

“I—”

It’s all far too much for Will far too quickly. Really, it’s emotional whiplash, going from what was essentially a breakdown to feeling this flustered. He’s definitely going to hell, but at least he’s pretty sure he’ll meet Mike there. Offering to share the couch that isn’t even big enough for Mike himself, like Will doesn’t have a boyfriend sleeping one room away from them.

Jesus Christ, *Carlton*. You’d think that Will couldn’t forget about him, what with the way he’s been crying because of him for like an hour, but somehow, he managed to do it.

The lock necklace Carlton gave him all those weeks ago lies heavy on his chest; the same chest that was pressed against Mike only a few seconds ago. Will thinks of Carlton’s promise to him, of the way he swore to remain locked onto Will no matter how difficult things got. It’s almost ironic how little Will cares about those words now.

He cried his eyes out to Mike and didn’t care about them, or Carlton. But now that the tears are gone from his eyes, that usual concern is starting to come right back. Will’s freshly stitched up guilt wound starts leaking again.

Maybe the cold kitchen tile will do him some good and clear his mind, no matter how sucky it might be.

Will fakes a cough and inches back from Mike, who doesn’t help him in the slightest. He stays planted right where he’s sitting, not even thinking about helping Will detangle his legs

from Mike's lap.

“Uhm.”

Another fake cough. Mike looks up from his lap and at him now, not unlike a goldfish. Will exhales sharply, determined to just get it over with.

“Goodnight, Mike. Thank you for—”

Will falters. Thanks for *what*, exactly?

The hugging? The holding? The ‘being the one to pull Will in’? It’s too much to say, so Will just says nothing and sends Mike a smile instead.

“Thanks.” He repeats and gets off the couch. Mike doesn’t respond.

He grabs one of the pillows as he stands up, not the one Mike sleeps on though, and starts walking towards the kitchen.

He half expects Mike to interrupt him one more time, though he’s not sure what for, but nothing comes. He makes his way to the kitchen door without any more hurdles and opens it.

The air inside is different. Clearer and less tainted than the living room’s air, but still familiar. Will likes the kitchen. Just not to sleep in.

Will lets his pillow drop to the ground and listens for the sound of the door falling shut behind him, but it doesn’t come. Instead, he hears the thud of something else falling on the floor.

He spins around, and there stands Mike, blocking the doorway.

Will blinks, “What are you—”

“If you’re not gonna take the couch, then I won’t either. Scoot.”

Mike’s blanket and pillow lie at his feet, and he kicks them, so they slide over to where Will’s stolen couch pillow sits. Will is about to protest when Mike cuts him off.

“Dude, don’t. Seriously. Either I’m taking the floor too, or you’re gonna have to drag me out by my hair.”

Sleeping on the kitchen floor *next to Mike* defeats the entire point of sleeping in the kitchen in the first place. The space is large enough so that they wouldn’t have to touch at all, but Mike’s presence being all over Will is maybe just as bad as his hands doing it. Will tries to refuse again, to no avail.

“Mike, that’s—”

“Stupid? Petty? Stubborn? Yeah, I know. Some of my best attributes.”

Mike bends down to adjust his pillow to how he wants it, and then just sinks down to the floor completely, patting the space next to him for Will to take.

“Come on,” He whispers, “It’ll be like a sleepover.”

Will chews on his bottom lip, “We are grown men.”

“Pfft, barely. We’re not even legally allowed to drink yet.”

Somehow, Will cracks a smile, “Right, and we’re known for following that rule.”

Mike smiles back, “Exactly!”

Will knows that the only right answer to the riddle in front of him would be to take Mike’s scrawny ankles in his hands, physically drag him back into the living room and pray he got the message.

But the evening is already so fucked up. What’s one more slip-up, really? Mike being next to him helps with the storm of emotions inside him. He might start crying again if he’s alone, and he doesn’t think he’s hydrated enough for that.

Robin would hit him if she saw him right now. God, that Christmas debrief about Mike’s time at Will’s is gonna *suck*.

Before he can change his mind, Will lets himself sink to his knees, right next to Mike. He doesn’t need to do much maneuvering until he’s laying down, flat on his back against the hard tiles, with only a cheap pillow supporting his head. His back will kill him tomorrow.

“Hi,” Mike whispers beside him.

Will turns his head to face Mike first, and then the rest of his body follows. He’s lying on his side, just like Mike, looking at him, “Hi.”

“Still tired?”

“Exhausted.”

Mike hums, “Me too.”

Will squints at him, “Liar.”

Despite Mike’s sweater, Will still feels cold without a blanket. He wraps his arms around himself, trying to generate at least one extra layer of warmth, which Mike seems to notice. His eyes dip to Will’s middle, covered by his arms, and reaches for the blanket behind him.

He almost looks a bit hesitant, propped up on his elbow so he’s looking down at Will a little, “We can share my blanket.”

Great, the flush is right back on Will’s cheeks. He can handle sleeping next to Mike at the distance they’re at, he can even handle a few more inches, but he can’t handle the closeness

that comes with blanket sharing.

He hugs himself tighter, willing himself to heat up as quickly as possible, so Mike shuts up, “Mike, I can’t—”

Mike leans down by a bit, so he’s closer to Will. In the dark of the kitchen, it’s hard to really make out anything, but Will doesn’t need to see Mike to *feel* him staring. It sends icy shivers down his spine, which probably doesn’t help with the whole ‘warming himself up’ thing. Mike’s gaze stays steady when he talks.

“Do you want it to yourself?”

The words almost sound taunting, because both of them know that that’s *obviously* not why Will is denying.

Heat somehow rises to Will’s cheeks, “What? No!”

“Do you want neither of us to have it?”

“...No.”

“Great!” Mike finally moves, plopping back onto the floor with an exhale. “Then we’ll share.”

Will sighs, admitting defeat. It’s the same logic Mike applied to the kitchen-couch situation, and it worked again. Curse Mike for knowing his buttons this well.

“Is this going to be your new thing?” Will chuckles softly as Mike detangles the blanket with the help of his feet.

“Yup. Told you, I’m stubborn now.”

Will shakes his head as he smiles, “You physically cannot be more stubborn than me, sorry.”

“Sure, but I can be an even match for you.”

Mike finally seems to be done with untangling, and kicks the blanket up in the air, so it drapes over them evenly. Surprisingly, it works. The blanket lands on top of them sideways, but Will thinks that that was Mike’s plan anyways. This way, it’s long enough for them both, even if it leaves Mike bare feet vulnerable at the bottom.

He hates to say it, but Will does feel warmer with the blanket.

Reluctantly, he mumbles, “Thanks.” Then, “The only real equal opponent I’ve ever had was El, when she lived with us. Sorry.”

“Damn it, you’re right. I can’t compete with her.”

Will snorts into the dark of the night but doesn’t respond otherwise.

It's quiet between them for a while. They're both on their sides, so they're looking right at each other, at least until Will's eyes start slipping shut. The floor isn't exactly comfortable, but it's better than Will imagined it would be, and the tiredness that has settled in his bones makes it easier to ignore.

He's almost bordering the edges of sleep when he hears Mike's soft voice again.

"Will?"

"Yeah?" Will mumbles into his pillow.

A small pause, before Mike speaks again, "I'm sorry, but my toes are really cold."

"So put on socks." Will mumbles again.

"I don't wanna get up."

Will opens one eye to look at Mike in question, "I'm not gonna get them for you."

"That's not what I—" Mike starts but then cuts himself off.

Will can barely see Mike, but it looks a little like he's trying to gnaw off his lower lip.

"I meant like—" Mike starts again. "Can we just turn the blanket so it's not sideways?"

This time, Will rips open both his eyes.

They set the blanket on top of them like this, so they'd both have more space to work with. Turning it back to normal means being closer. And seriously, Will must be drunk with sleep, because it somehow doesn't seem like a bad idea to him. In fact, he almost *wants* it, which is a horrifying thought.

Being held by Mike has apparently damaged his head beyond repair. Everything about getting closer to Mike seems like the most stupid thing he could do, but it's like his body craves it.

He can still practically feel Mike's hand on his back and head, like an imprint or a scar. A smudge of charcoal, even.

So instead of denying, Will closes his eyes again and says, "Sure."

There's no immediate movement. Will just feels Mike's eyes linger on him for a second, before he mutters an uncertain sounding, "Sure."

Then, the blanket starts slipping off Will, taking all the warmth along with it, which is a state of misery Will never thought he'd reach. But it returns just as quickly; only this time it barely covers Will's side.

He groans into his pillow lightly and watches as Mike reacts to it, since he's now given up on closing his eyes.

Mike just raises an eyebrow, “What?”

“Your blanket is slipping off me.”

“Oh.”

Will truly doesn't know what he expected, but whatever it was, it did not prepare him for Mike actually *scooting closer*.

The movement causes Mike's knee to knock into Will's, which makes them both yank back their legs like they're two magnetic north poles, repelling each other at all costs.

Will's breath catches, and he can hear Mike skip a breath too. He can *hear* this, because Mike is close enough for Will to hear his breathing. He almost wishes he'd be close enough to feel it too, but he hasn't gone completely insane yet.

Will isn't even trying to keep his eyes closed anymore. Exhaustion wrecks his entire body, but he has never been further away from sleeping. Not when Mike's knee is less than three inches away from his, and definitely not when he's close enough to see the moonlight reflecting in Mike's eyes, and not when he wants even *more*.

He tells himself that it's just a wish that doesn't mean anything, but the truth is that Will wouldn't turn away if Mike reached out and decided to hold him again. He should feel guilty for letting it happen in the first place, but he doesn't find the energy to do so anymore. Maybe it's due to the exhaustion, or maybe it's because of what happened tonight, but Will doesn't really care about Carlton right now.

“Is this better?” Mike whispers, staring right at Will, unblinking.

Will's stomach is a mess of flushing, heated pangs. He feels sick, but he still manages to respond, “Yes.”

It's like he's digging his own grave and enjoying it.

No matter how hard Will tries, he can't force his eyes to stay steady on Mike's. After only a few seconds, they dip lower, finding interest in the long curve of Mike's mouth instead. His lips are shiny, glistening with the slightest coat of spit, and Will has to bite down on his tongue to keep himself from licking his own lips to match Mike's. The quick sting makes him realize what he's doing, and his gaze snaps back up.

When he looks back up, Mike is looking at his lips too.

Will tries to swallow, but his throat is closed up completely.

It's moments like these that make Will feel like he's going absolutely insane. Mike kisses the phone, he holds Will, and he stares at his lips with a glint in his eyes that can only be described as hunger.

But at the same time, he knows that Mike *can't* mean anything by it, because Will has been indirectly rejected by him a thousand times over, through little unspoken gestures or plain

ignorance.

Will thinks that maybe this is their problem. They talk more with each other than they do with anyone else. Mike talks about Mike, or Will, and Will talks about Will, or Mike, but neither of them ever talk about Will *and* Mike. About the *thing* between them. Will thinks that he'd rather die than be the first one to ever utter a word of it.

Throughout the entirety of Will's inner monologue, Mike's gaze doesn't snap back up once. Will almost feels trapped under it.

"Mike." He rasps, strained.

This seems to catch his attention enough to get his eyes to meet Will's, "Yeah?"

Will promptly forgets what he wanted to say in the first place, because Mike just sounds so *weird*. Will looks him up and down as thoroughly as he can from his position and notices the stiff way Mike is holding his arms to his chest, folded in like a T-rex.

"What are you doing with your hands?"

"I don't know where to put them." Mike blurts out.

"Oh." Will swallows. "Where— Where do you usually put them?"

Mike's eyes drop from Will's face to the space between them, covered by the blanket. He takes one of the hands tucked against his chest and uses his pointer finger to tap the spot between them.

"Around here, I guess. But you're here, and I don't wanna like, bother you."

"It's okay." Will breathes.

But Mike still doesn't move. He fumbles with his Star Wars shirt's collar, almost like he's nervous.

Silently, Will curses himself for everything he's done this evening and what he's about to do. Still, he reaches out his own hand in Mike's direction.

His fingers brush against Mike's wrist, and even though that was his goal, Will still has to try his hardest, so he doesn't pull back. The touch sends a thousand jolts of electricity down Will's arm, all of them leading straight to his heart. If Will dies of a heart attack tonight, he won't be surprised.

Slowly, he takes Mike's wrist into his hand. He doesn't wrap his fingers around it like Mike did to him earlier; he just sort of holds it, thumb pressing into the soft flesh of Mike's palm. Once his grip is at least a little secure, he pulls back, taking Mike with him and guiding his hand to the space between them, beneath the blanket, until his palm is pressed flat against the kitchen floor.

When Will lets go of him, Mike's hand stays put.

The space between them isn't exactly big, so the tips of Mike's fingers graze Will's stomach. They don't meet skin, because Mike's sweater is long enough on Will to cover his entire torso, but they still press against Will in a way that feels almost intentional. It makes Will dizzy.

It stays like that between them for a few seconds until one of Mike's fingers twitches against Will. At first, Will thinks it's an accident, but then it happens again. And then a third time. Mike's spasms grow longer and more frequent, until he's practically rubbing circles into Will's side.

It's like he's testing waters, waiting for Will to pull away.

He doesn't.

Will lets Mike's circles grow and doesn't move an inch when Mike starts pressing harder, more intentional. He doesn't know what's happening, but he knows that he'd rather die than stop.

Mike isn't looking at his face anymore, opting to stare at where his hand is moving beneath the blanket instead. Will's stomach tingles, and the sensation spreads over his back until it reaches his neck.

Will is all too familiar with feeling tingling in his neck, but this is nothing like sensing the Mind Flayer. This is a feeling Will wants to drown in, even if he doesn't understand what the hell is happening.

Will is frozen where he's lying, unable to move until he forces himself to. He reaches out his hand towards Mike's again, but this time, he lets it rest on Mike's forearm without pulling him anywhere.

Then, he starts copying Mike's movements. Circle after circle. It's a tender thing, a motion so small but somehow still capable of making Will feel so much.

Mike's breath catches, and Will isn't sure if it's because of the touch, or because he wants to say something.

No words come from his mouth, but his eyes flick back up to meet Will's, wide and almost concerned.

Their eyes stay connected for a while, hands still moving in circles on each other, the movement not faltering even when Mike finally manages to produce words again.

"Will?"

"Yeah?" Will rasps.

"Can I ask you something?"

Will hesitates for a second, before predictably giving in, "Sure."

Mike hesitates too, a little longer than Will. But he also gets over himself eventually.

“What happened tonight?”

The question hangs heavy between them. Will’s finger stutters on Mike’s arm but eventually finds its way back to the rhythm that Mike is still producing on Will’s stomach.

It was so easy, pretending that nothing happened with Carlton tonight. Mike’s comfort and touches are like an eraser to Will’s mind, removing all the hurt and replacing it with tenderness and stolen glances instead. But Will can’t keep pretending nothing happened, like Mike is just comforting him for the fun of it. It isn’t fair to either of them.

“You don’t have to tell me.” Mike says when Will is silent for too long.

Will shakes his head lightly, “No, I want to.”

He takes a deep breath and slides his hand up Mike’s arm a little, until it meets the crook of his elbow. He stops moving in circles, simply placing his hand there, holding on like it could offer him support.

“It’s just— *I* messed up.”

Mike immediately shakes his head, “I don’t believe that.”

“You should.”

“But I don’t.”

Will sighs. Mike can be so stubborn sometimes. But it’s not like he can tell him how exactly he messed up, so Will is just going to have to deal with Mike not believing him.

Mike asks him like he can read his mind, “What did you do?”

A beat passes between them, and Will tries to think of the best explanation he can muster.

“I lied.”

Mike blinks at that, “Oh.”

“Yeah.” Will repeats, “Oh.”

It’s such a flimsy oversimplification of what happened that Will almost feels like he’s lying. And he’s more than tired of lying today. He can’t just leave it at that.

“It— It was a *big* one too.” He keeps going, no longer looking at Mike. “We were fighting, and he looked so miserable and I just wanted to fix it so bad, so I *lied*. And it worked, like he was okay again, but then he—”

Then he uncovered my weird stalker sketchbook that I have of you, Mike. Isn’t that sweet. Obviously, Will can’t say that.

“Well, he realized. That I wasn’t telling him the truth.” He settles on instead.

Mike takes his time with taking in Will’s words like he’s contemplating something or just trying to register the new information. His fingers slowed against Will’s stomach, so that they’re just resting against Will’s side now.

They still twitch and flex against him every few seconds, but it feels unintentional this time, like it’s just a byproduct of the storm no doubt flying through Mike’s head.

“Will?” Mike finally says. “I, uhm. I heard something. When you guys were fighting. Like a bang.”

Oh. *That*.

Figures that Mike of all people would hear that part of the conversation. Maybe Will should just count his blessings and be glad that Mike didn’t hear Will’s monologue about their purely platonic friendship, or Carlton’s relationship insecurity regarding Mike.

Still, this opens a window to a new branch of conversations that Will doesn’t want to explore. It also proves to Mike that he was *right*, during all of his and Will’s fights about Carlton.

“Oh.” Will lets out.

Immediately, Mike says the thing Will was afraid he’d say.

“Will,” He sucks in his lips. “Did he—”

“Jesus, Mike, no!” Will cuts in to deny the unspoken accusation.

Did Carlton hurt Will.

He can almost hear the words in Mike’s voice, and they make him sick to his stomach. That’s a direction Will isn’t willing to let this conversation go in. He shakes his head again, more vehemently this time.

“He—” Will starts at a normal volume, before lowering his voice back down to a whisper. “He just got angry. He threw something. A book. At the wall, not— not at *me* or anything.”

Mike’s hand goes completely still against him, and his eyes widen. Somehow, Will thinks he messed up. Mike isn’t supposed to react like this.

“Will.” He hisses. “Will what the actual *fuck*.”

Will’s heart starts beating a little quicker. Mike is getting the wrong impression again, “It’s not that big a deal, okay?”

“It is!” Mike suddenly props himself up on his elbow “That’s the definition of a big deal!”

Will huffs, “Well, it’s not like it wasn’t deserved.”

Wrong thing to say. Again.

Mike narrows his eyes. Being propped up on his elbow makes him tower over Will slightly, and Will feels trapped beneath his gaze. Like everything he's ever felt is showing on his face, and Mike can see it.

“What's that supposed to mean?” Mike says lowly.

There's no going back now. Will gulps, but starts explaining anyways.

“I mean. I screwed up, Mike. I did something shitty and saw the consequences. I wasn't being a good...person. Or partner, or anything, really. I deserved it—”

“Don't say that.” Mike cuts him off. He's still whispering, but he almost sounds mad. Still, Will somehow knows that his anger isn't directed at him. “That is the least true thing I have ever heard in my life, Will. Please don't say things like that.”

Guilt spreads in Will's stomach, “Sorry.”

“No, you don't need to apologize.” Mike immediately reassures him, then sighs, “I just— I *need* you to understand that that's not true. That you don't deserve any of that shit.”

Will's eyebrows scrunch together as he looks up at Mike, “Okay?”

“I'm serious Will. You're one of the most incredible people I have ever known in my entire life, and even if you *were* a bad person or whatever, which you literally couldn't be farther away from, then it *still* wouldn't mean that you deserve that mouth breather's *bullshit*.”

The anger is clear in Mike's voice, but it's also evident that it's directed at *Carlton* and not Will. Never Will.

Mike's hand isn't pressing against Will's stomach anymore. Instead, it holds onto Will's sweater, the material all bunched up between Mike's fingers, like he needs to hold onto something to calm down.

“I don't give a shit if he's angry or sad or something, that still doesn't mean he can just let it out without a care in the world. Even if you're the one who made him angry.”

Will's breath is unsteady. He's pretty sure there are tears building in his eyes again. Not because what Mike is saying is hurtful, but because it's *true*. Deep down, when he stops pretending, he knows very well that the way Carlton treats him shouldn't be okay. Still, it's always easier to say something objectively, than actually admit it applies to you.

Will still can't bring himself to look at Mike, but he feels Mike's eyes on him. He hears his voice, too.

“I don't care about what you did, Will. You don't deserve anything.”

Will puffs a wet breath, eyes definitely full of tears by now.

“Then why do these things keep happening to me?”

The question slips without Will wanting it to, but he doesn't regret asking it. He hates feeling and acting like a victim, but life keeps throwing these obstacles at him that make it impossible not to. For once in his life, he'd like something simple. Something *good*.

Mike releases his grip on Will's sweater, “I don't know.”

When Will looks up at him, there's a shine to his eyes that Will isn't familiar with. He rarely ever sees Mike cry, and while he isn't crying right now, he still looks more vulnerable than usual. Like it's breaking him to admit that he doesn't know how to fix Will.

Will chews on the inside of his cheek, “Sometimes, I think I'm tainted.”

Tainted. It's the same word Carlton used earlier, and it's been stuck in Will's head ever since. He shifts where he's lying, turning so he's on his back instead of his side. Mike's hand stays where it was, which means that his arm is now draped across Will's stomach.

“I feel like my time in the upside down somehow left a mark on me and cursed me with fifty years of bad luck, or something. I don't know how to explain it otherwise.”

A tear slips down Will's cheek, and he quickly wipes it away with his free hand. Back to stupid square one, crying again.

He's far more quiet about it this time. His tears are silent, and he doesn't let himself look at Mike, too scared of seeing the pity and concern in his eyes again.

“Will.” Mike whispers eventually, forcing Will to look at him anyways.

When Will turns his head, Mike looks like a wet, sad puppy. He almost seems pained, like all this is somehow inflicting physical damage on him. All because Will is crying.

He inhales sharply, preparing himself to ask a question Will already knows the answer to, “Can I—”

“*Please.*”

The second Mike gets confirmation from Will, he pulls him in by the waist and tucks his head underneath his chin. Will is pressed against Mike's chest again, but this time they're laying down, so they can tangle their legs as well.

Mike drapes one of his over Will's, pressing Will against him even more, like he's afraid someone will come to snatch him away unless every inch of their bodies is connected.

His hand goes back to Will's hair almost immediately, burying itself and crossing every imaginable line between them. Again.

Will isn't in the middle of a breakdown right now. He is very aware of the situation, and of how he and Mike are essentially *cuddling*, and of how his heart is beating faster than it ever

has in his life. He's also extremely aware of Mike's heart beating, since he's close enough to basically be considered part of Mike's sternum.

He feels as though he should be panicking, or pushing Mike away, or literally *anything* else. But he's calm, and Mike's body wrapped around him grounds him even further.

Will lets Mike cling to him, and lets himself cling onto Mike in return.

Mike's voice sounds muffled, and Will is pretty sure it's because Mike's mouth is pressed into Will's hair, "You don't have to live like that, Will."

A wave of terror washes over Will as he realizes that Mike is *right*.

The universe keeps throwing him stupid challenges that threaten his life or wellbeing like it's the funniest thing in the whole world, but it's never the universe that gets Will out of these situations.

It's always Will.

When he was stuck in the Upside-Down, it was Will who let his mom know that he was alive. When he was possessed, he was the one to tell them to close the gate via morse-code. And when it came to the final battle against Vecna, *he* helped kill him.

And yes, his issues these days are far simpler than interdimensional monsters that want to see him dead, but who's to say the same concept can't be applied?

"I'm gonna do it." The words slip out without Will forcing himself to say them.

Mike's hold on Will tightens, like he already knows what Will is talking about. Still, he asks, "Do what?"

"After Christmas." Will declares. "When we're back in San Francisco, I'm doing it. I'll break up with him."

Mike inhales sharply, before exploding into a coughing fit like he just choked on his spit. Will tries to crane up his head up to look at him, but he's trapped under Mike's hacking chin.

"Hey Mike, you okay?"

Instead of answering, Mike pulls away just enough so that he can look at Will. The hand that was just in Will's hair slips to his cheek, and his other one does the same, until he's holding Will's head in his hands.

"You will?" Mike sputters, completely ignoring Will's question.

"Uhm, yeah?" Will says, still not sure if Mike is going to choke to death. He also isn't sure if *he* will choke to death, because Mike's face is very close and the way he's cradling Will's face could be interpreted in a certain way.

Mike releases a heavy breath, "Holy shit."

Will scoffs at Mike's surprise, "Don't act like that wasn't your goal."

"No, it was, I'm just surprised it worked."

One would think that Will should be a little gloomier, considering that he just basically broke up with Carlton in his head, but he truly can't bring himself to care that much. The decision feels more like a weight lifted off his chest than something worth mourning.

But maybe that's just the fatigue clouding his mind. He has no clue how late it is, but he's been wanting to sleep ever since he and Mike were sitting on the couch.

But the position he's currently in probably isn't the smartest one to fall asleep in.

Will stops smiling at Mike and clears his throat, "Go to bed, Mike."

Mike just raises his brows, "But I am in bed."

"Your own bed." Will playfully rolls his eyes, before turning more serious again. "If he— If Carlton wakes up tomorrow and sees this, it'll just be trouble for both of us."

Mike's hands slip from Will's face, but he still doesn't look concerned, or move away.

"Isn't he visiting his family tomorrow?"

Will sighs, "He'll still wake up here."

"Fine, I'll go. But I'm staying 'till you're asleep."

Will feels a pang in his heart. This might be the most confusing situation he's ever been in.

Him and Mike are crossing more lines than Will can count tonight, and he doesn't know where that leaves them. Of course, there's the voice in the back of Will's head yelling at him, telling him that Mike doesn't earn anything by anything he does, but these past few days have made it go quieter than it has ever been before.

And honestly, the silence is terrifying. Because even though all the noise is annoying, it at least keeps Will at a safe distance. Ignoring it is like jumping out of an airplane without knowing if you have a parachute.

In theory, Mike likes girls. In practice, he's cradling Will's face and rubbing circles into Will's stomach and kissing Will through the telephone.

And Will might be terrified, but he's survived scarier things. So, for once, he skips the usual step of denying Mike and gives in.

"Okay."

Mike's eyes widen for a second, but he still parrots Will "Okay."

Will drops his head and scoots down a little so he can fit himself under Mike chin again. He's sure that Mike can feel his breath against his throat, but he still lets him lay there.

“Goodnight, Mike.”

“Night Will.”

Mike scoots down another inch, so that it's his nose against the top of Will's head instead of his chin. An unfortunate byproduct of that movement is that it lets Will see Mike again, his eyes specifically.

Will's eyes are half closed already, so he's sure that Mike can't see him watching him, but Will can see *Mike* look at *him*.

And God, does Mike look *wrecked*.

It might be the worst thing Will has ever seen, because he recognizes the exact feeling Mike's eyes are mirroring.

It's *fear*.

But then, the change of emotion is gone just as fast as it came, and Mike's face goes back to being blank.

Still, Will saw it.

He doesn't think he'll ever be able to erase it from his mind. Even when Mike squeezes him tighter and Will tries willing himself to sleep, he still sees Mike's face behind his closed eyes. He thinks of his metaphorical airplane again, and his stomach starts turning.

If he weren't this wrung out, he'd spend the rest of the night awake, overanalyzing the curve of Mike's eyebrows and mouth, trying to figure out how he'd interpret their meaning if Mike were a painting that Will needed to discuss.

As it is though, Mike's face will only be able to haunt him in his dreams. No matter how hard he tries to hold onto his consciousness, it still fades away from him eventually.

And yet, he's still awake enough to feel Mike slip away from him when he eventually leaves, under the impression that Will is fast asleep.

The last thought Will has before actually drifting off is that his parachute might be broken.

Chapter End Notes

Mike wheeler once he's back on his couch with no blanket since he obviously left it to Will: I fear I might have homoerotiscismed too close to the sun.

Chapter 11: There's a handprint on Will Byers (I wonder who it's from)

Chapter Summary

Dress by Taylor swift made an appearance for this one again. real ones know what that means lol.

Chapter Notes

"Next chapter is the last chapter of the arc" ME WHEN I FUCKING LIEEEEE BRUH I had to split this chapter into two again im really sorry. It's just that next chapter is REALLY important and i just didn't wanna rush it at ALL. anywho. I got a little bit carried away in the middle of the chapter lol. This was so much fun to write ugh. Everybody give me ALL ur thoughts.

ALSO!!!!!! I CANT BELIVE I FORGOT TO MENTION THIS AST CHAPTER BUT: beautiful beautiful zunaki on tumblr made fanart for chap three of this fic!!!! Everyone go like it rn. It's a wholeass comic too.

<https://www.tumblr.com/zunaki/807373323755520000/based-on-this-loving-feeling-it-wears-us-out?source=share>

anywho. enjoy this guys. This might be one of my fav chapters so far so shshhdhddhjd

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

Will wakes up to a hand drifting across his forehead, sweeping his bangs out of the way so the hand can gently swipe its thumb over Will's skin.

The touch is tender, and Will slightly turns his head into his pillow, so that he can muffle a playful groan into it. His eyes are shut tight, unwilling to expose themselves to the cruel light of the morning just yet.

He's about to tell Mike to let him go back to sleep, when he hears a different voice say his name instead.

“Will.”

Will rips his eyes open and comes face to face with Carlton.

He's on his knees next to Will, leaning down his head to talk to Will. His hair is styled, gelled into a side-part that looks far too conservative for Carlton's usual attire. His eyes have bags under them though, so the hair doesn't do anything for him regarding professionalism.

"Carl." Will responds, a little startled, and sits up so he can be on the same level as Carlton. "What are you doing?"

"I'm leaving in five minutes." Carlton says.

Will can't tell if the feeling in his stomach is unease at seeing Carlton's face, or relief, because he'll be gone in just a sec anyways.

In all honesty, between last evening and last night, he completely forgot about Carlton visiting his own relatives today. It's a horrible thing to forget about, because Will knows exactly how much stress this event has caused Carlton over the months, because of his family's more unaccepting nature, but Will just can't bring himself to care.

"Oh. Right." Will breathes.

Carlton is still sitting in front of him on the kitchen floor, apparently uncaring about getting his dress pants dirty or wrinkled. He's chewing on the inside of his own cheek, debating his next words.

"I just— wanted to say see you later, you know."

Will raises an eyebrow. It's an awfully casual approach at conversation considering all that happened last night. A day ago, Will would have ignored it, but today he can't help but question it.

"That's it?" He quips.

The response from Carlton is immediate. He closes his eyes with a groan and even pinches his brow, which Will honestly thinks is a little dramatic.

"Will, can we not? I know we need to talk about everything but—"

He gestures with his hands for a bit, like he's trying to convey everything he wants to say without talking. When Will doesn't make an effort to understand him, he drops them again and starts speaking instead.

"I'm about to have the most stressful day of the year, and tomorrow we're going to be with your family, and I just don't think that talking about *that* will do us any good right now."

That.

Like last night was some mystical, vague event, and not something that actually happened to both of them. Like Will can't still feel his heartrate spiking at the sight of Carlton as proof for it.

Will swallows past the lump already forming in his throat, "What do you mean?"

Another sigh from Carlton, “Can we just take a break?”

Will blinks at him. He’s not sure what the word *break* entails in Carlton’s head.

“From fighting, I mean.” Carlton clarifies. “Can we just be civil for the next few days, and then we talk it out once we’re back home? *Alone?*”

The emphasis on the *alone* part isn’t lost on Will. This whole week, Carlton’s been very vocal about his distaste for Mike’s presence, but it’s still annoying to hear time and time again. Though, after last night, it should probably make Will feel guilty instead.

He thinks about Carlton’s proposal. On one hand, he isn’t sure if he has the stomach for further confrontation, but on the other hand, he knows that not talking about it would be worse for them than any possible argument.

Then again, what relationship is he even trying to save from further damage?

A week ago, hell, even yesterday he would have demanded they talk about what happened, but now? Will isn’t sure if anything he does in the next few days will even matter at all. He’ll break up with Carlton no matter what; he might as well make it easy on himself.

“Yeah, sure.” He nods his head, trying to seem as compliant as possible. “Whatever you say.”

“Great, thanks.” Carlton breathes, relieved. Then, after a short silence. “I love you, Will.”

Will feels the hairs on his neck stand up in response to the words. Somehow, they stand even straighter when he sees Carlton lean in, aiming to plant a kiss on Will’s lips.

In all honesty, Will never truly enjoyed kissing Carlton, but he didn’t hate it either. Right now though, he thinks he’d rather die than feel Carlton on his mouth.

He doesn’t pull away, because that would be too obvious, but he angles his head in a way that makes Carlton’s lips hit his cheek instead of his mouth. Then, when Carlton pulls back, looking slightly confused, he flashes a gentle smile at him.

“Good luck.” Will whispers as sweet as he can, hoping that it might make up for his lack of *other* words.

Judging by Carlton’s face, it doesn’t. But Carlton doesn’t complain using his voice, so Will is happy to pretend like everything is fine between them. That’s what Carlton wanted in the first place anyways.

Carlton stands up from the floor, wiping the dust off his knees as he’s standing above Will, looking down on him. He nods his head quickly and almost courteously.

“Yeah, Thanks.” Carlton says and adverts his gaze. He barely throws a glance Will’s way until he’s standing in the doorframe to the kitchen, where he casts one last look, “Bye.”

Will doesn’t say anything back. Instead, he watches Carlton leave and lets himself softly fall back on his— on *Mike’s* pillow.

He closes his eyes and inhales. It's pathetic, but he can still distinctly smell Mike from the pillow and the bedsheets, like he's still on the kitchen floor with him. Carlton's smell is nowhere to be found.

The combination of those two facts is enough to put him right back to sleep.

When he wakes back up, it's to the smell of eggs.

Will twists in his sheets for a minute, shielding his eyes from the sun that's now shining through the windows brighter than earlier. Eventually, he gives up and turns towards where the smell is coming from.

When his eyes open, Mike sits at the kitchen table next to him.

"Hi." He says through a forkful of scrambled eggs.

Groggily, Will sits up to look at Mike. He rubs a fist across his eyes and sweeps his bangs to the side, so he looks at least a little presentable. He's still wearing Mike's sweater, and Mike is right in front of him again after whatever the hell happened last night.

Will got into a fight with Carlton, Will cried his eyes out, Will bumped into Mike, Will cried his eyes out some more, this time on Mike's shoulder though. Then Mike had wound himself around Will and held him until he fell asleep.

And then he looked at Will like *that*. And now he's sitting in Will's kitchen, eating eggs like nothing even happened.

No big deal at all.

Will swallows like he's trying to digest a boulder, "Hi."

Mike doesn't seem to have any problems with swallowing, seeing as he's still practically shoveling eggs into his mouth, "I made breakfast."

That much is evident. Will untangles himself from his— and Mike's— bedsheets, and walks to the kitchen table. There's a plate ready for him already. Maple syrup stands right in front of it.

"And you didn't think that maybe I should be awake for it?"

Mike just shrugs, "You looked content with being asleep."

"I was." Will sighs as he sits down. "What time is it?"

“Like eleven-ish?”

Mike and he are sitting next to each other instead of across from each other, an odd habit they’ve adopted over the years. They’re probably too close too, but after last night Will isn’t sure if he still has the capacity to care about a few extra inches of space. Not when he knows what it feels like to have Mike Wheeler’s leg draped over you as you’re tucked under his chin.

“Oh wow.” Will shakes his head and takes a bite of his eggs. They’re cold, but the sweetness of the syrup makes them enjoyable anyways. “I was knocked out.”

For some reason, that stops the movement of Mike’s fork for a second.

“Slept through the night without a nightmare?” He asks.

“Yeah,” Will responds. Then, curious, “Why?”

Mike bites down on the inside of his cheek. He can’t hide his smile no matter how hard he tries to though, so Will is more than tempted to throw a piece of egg into his curls. He doesn’t do it, but it’s a near thing. Especially when Mike opens his mouth again.

“No reason.”

God, does he sound cocky. But Will ignores that and hides a smile of his own.

He keeps digging through his eggs, cleaning his plate bite by bite, whilst pointedly ignoring the memories of last night that his head keeps sending him flashes of.

The warmth of Mike’s arms around Will’s torso still burns on his skin so strongly, that Will thinks it could count as phantom pain.

But that’s just the physical toll that yesterday is taking on him. If we’re talking mental issues, then last night slapped him across the face so hard he’s regressing back to a sixteen-year-old.

Because once again, there’s a really stupid miniscule part of him that thinks he might not be insane. That all of Mike’s touching and talking and visiting and being there for him might actually mean something. He usually squashes those thoughts every time one pops up, but today it’s harder than usual.

“Hey, it’s my last day in Cali today, isn’t it?” Mike suddenly speaks up, and rips Will out of his thoughts so hard that he almost chokes on his maple syrup.

After coughing once or twice, Will responds. “I mean, yeah.”

“So, we should do something.”

“You want to go sightseeing?”

“Fuck no.” Mike winces, like he’s offended Will would even joke about that. “I just wanna leave the house!”

“It’s an apartment, not a house.”

“Point still stands.”

Will sits his fork back down on the table. “Well, where do you wanna go?”

“I don’t know. Anywhere, anytime. I am open to everything. Like a kite in the wind, willing to go wherever it blows me.”

“Well, I think the wind is blowing me towards the suitcase I still haven’t packed.” Will teases, but there’s a bit of truth to it. He desperately needs to pack.

“Oh, come on!” Mike groans. “If I don’t get to live the real San Fran lifestyle, then what did I even go to Cali for?”

Will hesitates before answering. There’s a little voice at the back of his head screaming yelling and begging him to be quiet and not put himself through this on purpose, but he ignores it. The leftover warmth from yesterday is enough to make Will’s lips move on their own.

“Me?” Will asks, but his voice is dripping with a certain playfulness, like he’s daring Mike to say yes.

In a quiet exchange, Will watches as Mike’s eyes widen slightly and the corner of his mouth twitches. It’s over after only a second, and Mike huffs a silent laugh before responding.

“Well duh, but I’d go anywhere for you.” He speaks in the same tone Will used. “I want something California specific.”

I’d go anywhere for you.

Will’s heart almost hammers right out of his chest. What a mortifying way to die that would be. Will imagines his gravestone; Death to a lethal heart rate disease induced by Michael Wheeler’s stupid cocky voice.

But Will doesn’t die, because he isn’t *that* dramatic. He just struggles to breathe for a few seconds, like the totally normal casual guy he is.

Eventually, he manages to fumble his way to forming a response, “If you want to, we can go into town after I’m done packing.”

“See? That’s what I wanna hear.” Mike slams his palms on the table in celebration. “Eat up Will, I’ve got big plans.”

Will is immediately filled with dread. “Do you now?”

The question makes Mike squint at Will, and he almost looks a little mischievous. “Oh, definitely.”

Will pointedly eats his eggs as slow as he can. Plans with Mike have literally never meant anything but trouble.

For someone so adamant about rushing Will to eat his eggs as fast as possible, Mike sure likes distracting Will during packing.

They've been at it for almost two hours now, and Will is somehow still not done. After breakfast, he immediately got to work, but Mike joined him in the bedroom after maybe five minutes of productive packing, and it's been downhill ever since, because it's not like Mike is helping him in the slightest.

“He is literally the most *boring* avenger.”

Mike is sprawled across the bed in Will's bedroom, dangling a Captain America comic over his head and twisting his face like he's physically repulsed by it, while Will sits on the floor and folds his clothes. He's already picked out everything he needs to take with him, he just needs to actually put it into the suitcase now.

Will shakes his head at Mike's dramatics, “That is not true.”

If Will is being totally honest, Steve Rogers is a little boring. And a propaganda tool. But when Will was twelve, he felt like the weakest boy on earth, and then he remembered the story of another weak boy, who turned strong one day. It's stupid, but Will has had a soft spot for Captain America comics ever since.

“Oh yeah? Who's worse?”

Will stops folding for a second, and bites back a smirk before answering. “Iron man.”

In a heartbeat, Mike's sitting up on the bed and staring at Will like he just told him he killed his non-existent family dog.

“You did *not* just say that.”

“Sorry, I like it when my superheroes are *against* fascism.”

“How is Tony Stark a fascist?”

Will sends Mike a look.

“He's a billionaire Mike, I don't know what to tell you.”

Mike scrunches his face, like he forgot about that part, “Okay, fair, but he actively uses that money to help people!”

The 'Tales of Suspense' comic Mike was holding apparently doesn't interest him anymore. He throws it on the floor next to Will and slides down the bed, making his way towards the stack of single issues next to Will's nightstand again.

"So does Steve Rogers, and he doesn't need to exploit people to do it." Will points out, watching Mike flip through more comics.

He shakes his head, "Steve Rogers has been fighting the same nazi skull since the forties, he's boring."

Will can't help but roll his eyes, "Well, he's a good guy, and that's what—"

"Holy shit!" Mike butts in when he finds an issue that piques his interest. "Since when do you read Punisher?"

It's very unfortunate timing, regarding Will's whole talk about morals. "Uhm."

"You want to talk to me about good guys while being a Punisher fan?"

"Just because he's morally ambiguous doesn't mean his heart isn't in the right place!"

Mike shakes his head, disappointed. "Everything Punisher does, Daredevil does better."

Will almost facepalms.

"Ugh Mike, do not talk to me about Matt Murdock."

"He is the coolest non-mutant Marvel character there is!"

It's kind of funny, how so much has changed between them over the years, but they still act the same. Will can barely remember ever not spending his time bickering about comics with Mike.

A little fondly, Will denies what Mike is saying. "The best thing to come out of Daredevil is Elektra Natchios."

If you looked at Mike's face, you'd think Will just said he enjoys eating chocolate chips with beans.

"How on earth is it possible that you only ever like the characters nobody cares about?"

Will's eyeroll is on purpose this time, "Well, I'm sorry that we can't all be X-men fans like you and Dustin."

"The popular shit is popular for a reason. Also, I distinctly remember you stealing our x-men comics like, every time you came over."

"Yeah, Mike, when I was *twelve*."

Mike raises his brows, “Oh, and now you’re grown and mature enough to appreciate real art?”

“Yes!” Will ignores Mike’s mocking. “The Elektra Assassin run is genuinely one of the best comics to have ever been released, Mike. Not only is the plot freaking great and super impactful, but the art is like actually *mind blowing*.”

“I hate to tell you this, Will, but nobody has ever heard of that run.”

“Bull! My entire illustration class loves it and—”

Mike literally snorts at Will, “Oh, it’s an *illustrator* comic. That makes sense.”

Will recognizes Mike’s teasing and picks up one of his discarded half-folded shirts to throw it at Mike, who yelps when it hits him. Very brave of Mike to call him pretentious, like he doesn’t spend his time writing fake-scripts for movies about dead poets.

That thought gives Will an idea.

“Okay, you know what? Screw you. We’re reading it.”

If Mike can chew Will’s ear off about tragic thespians and force him through the emotional torture that is Neil Perry’s life, then Will can make Mike read a few comics with him.

“What, now?” Mike asks, bewildered.

“Yes Mike.”

“But—”

“It’s a mini-series, totally doable in like an hour.” Will responds without having to hear Mike’s question. He already knew what he’d ask anyways.

An hour is a very, *very* generous and unrealistic timespan for reading an eight-issue run. Mike seems to know this too, because he squints his eyes at Will knowingly, “That’s a lie, isn’t it.”

“Yes.” Will snorts. “Go get the comics, they’re on the top shelf in the living room.”

“Did you give them their own special place?”

“Of course I did, who do you think I am!”

There’s a smile forming on Mike’s lips as he gets up from the floor, “Fine.”

He jogs out of the bedroom, and Will is starting to think that he’ll just have to survive Hawkins with only half a suitcase.

Will doesn't know how long he and Mike have been laying on the bed, pressed against each other, reading the comic in dramatic whispers.

It started out with them reading the first issue simply sitting next to each other, not touching at all. But then, once they were done, Mike grabbed the second one, without Will even telling him to, and leaned back against the headboard. Will followed, and from that point on, they just kept on inching closer to each other, immersed in the pages completely.

Now, they have their feet propped up and knees pushed together, so they can rest the comic against their joint thighs. Mike is on Will's left, and he holds the comic to their legs as Will flips the pages. They started reading out each panel to each other after issue number two, switching the narrator after every turn of the page.

Or at least that's how it was when they were still reading. They've been done for about five minutes now, just staring at the last panel without talking. Mike is the one to break the silence.

"Okay. You convinced me. Elektra is like— *totally* the bomb."

Will turns to Mike with a half-scoff laugh, "Are you serious? Eight issues of the most in depth trauma exploration ever seen in a marvel comic and your reaction is that she's *totally the bomb*?"

"She can be traumatized and a fucking badass! Not my fault that they made her look cool when she's supposed to be tragic."

"Elektra is not supposed to be *tragic*." Will rolls his eyes and turns to face Mike. Their faces are close, but Will should be used to that at this point. Still, his cheeks heat up unwillingly.

"See? I'm interpreting her correctly, she would want me to call her the bomb."

Mike also twists so he's lying on his side. It's a similar position to yesterday, except this time it's only their knees that touch. But that doesn't mean Will wants to grab Mike by the shoulders, shake him, and ask him what the hell he's doing any less.

His and Carlton's bed probably isn't the best place to do that though. For a second, Will wonders if it's weird that Mike is laying on Carlton's side of the bed with Will right next to him, but he discards that thought as fast as it came. It's only weird if Will makes it weird, and Will is absolutely hell-bent on not making things weirder between them than they already are.

This is nice. This is casual. This is totally normal, even if it's a little more intimate than anything Will ever does with any of his other friends. They're lying on their sides, looking at each other, legs flush against each other, and it's *normal*.

He focuses back to the conversation at hand and ignores the flutters in his stomach that appear when Mike presses his knees harder into Will's. Accidentally, of course. Will thinks.

"So, you liked it?" Will says, and Mike is close enough that Will can whisper it.

“Are you kidding?” Mike asks and knocks his knee into Will’s again, definitely on purpose this time. “That was amazing, I can finally subscribe to the belief that she’s too cool for Daredevil.”

“You didn’t think so before?”

Mike snorts, “Fuck no, Matt Murdock is the most attractive character Marvel has ever created.”

Will chokes on his spit a little.

Sure, they just spent hours looking at who is arguably the most universally considered sexy character in the history of comics, but Mike is thinking of famously male Matt Murdock.

Attractive. Not ‘coolest character design’, not ‘most badass’, no, *attractive.* As in, Mike would potentially be attracted to him if he were real.

Mike, a guy. Attracted to Daredevil; a guy.

But that doesn’t have to mean anything. Plenty of guys talk about finding other guys attractive. Seriously, Will has heard Lucas talk about men he considers to be hot more often than he’s heard Max talk about them. Still, it’s a little bit of a distracting thing to hear from Mike, all things considered.

Especially because Mike is right in front of Will, face closer than it should be. They spent the past few hours staring into pictures together, but now they’re looking at each other again, just like last night. The only difference is that this time, Will can see Mike.

And God, does Mike have a staring problem.

Every few seconds, his gaze dips, right to Will’s lips.

The first time, Will can brush it off as an accident. The second time, it’s a coincidence. But when his eyes drop to Will’s lips for the third time and stay there for a good ten seconds, it becomes really hard for Will to pretend like it doesn’t mean anything.

Mike’s knees are still pressing into Will’s, and Will finds himself pressing back. It’s such a small exchange, but Will sees the way Mike’s lips part, and it’s genuinely addicting. He craves more.

He can’t press any harder without it being uncomfortable for both of them, bone meeting bone and all that, so he settles for something else. It’s more of a Mike thing to do, but Will moves one of his feet just enough to brush Mike’s bare ankle.

They’re lying in complete silence, so the rustling of fabric is loud. Same thing with Mike’s breathing. Will hears it growing heavier when he brushes Mike’s ankle again, and he doesn’t know what to do with that information.

He doesn’t know what to do with any of this, actually.

With Mike, who likes girls, but also apparently likes touching Will tenderly and being touched *by* Will.

It's the truth but putting it into words— even when it's just in Will's head— sends shivers down his spine. The heat that usually spreads in his chest moved to his stomach at some point, and now it doesn't feel like a cozy fire at all anymore. It's a roaring volcano threatening to burn Will, and it only grows stronger every time Will touches Mike. But he doesn't care. He's willing to melt for Mike.

He doesn't know where it comes from, but the overwhelming urge to just *feel* Mike spreads through him like wildfire. He has to ball his hands into fists so he doesn't reach out, and at first, he's worried that Mike can see his terrible lack of self-control, but that worry fades quickly.

Mike's eyes are still tied to Will's mouth, with an intensity so strong that it almost freaks Will out. Scratch the almost; it *definitely* freaks Will out.

But it also sets something loose in him.

He uncurls his fists, and because either Will or Mike unconsciously inched closer at some point, the tips of his fingers brush against Mike's stomach.

It's kind of funny, because this is exactly how they were lying last night, just the opposite way.

Except Will doesn't rub circles into Mike now. He doesn't know what possesses his hand, but he lets his fingers trail upwards, travelling over Mike's torso in featherlight touches, barely even meeting the fabric of Mike's sweater at all.

His fingers jump from Mike's stomach to his waist, and then to his shoulder, where they rest for a bit. His touch is firmer there, but still not a hundred percent confident. Will has no idea what he's doing and why he's doing it, but being able to see Mike's full face in a situation like this is a rush he's never felt before.

A situation like this. How would you explain this? Will letting his fingers drift over Mike without a care in the world while they're lying in his and Carlton's bed.

Last night crossed lines, sure, but right now Will feels like he is downright *erasing* lines. The dark of the night and the tears in his eyes made it hard to see yesterday for what it really was, but he's never been more clear minded than he is right now.

And still, he lets his fingers slide to the nape of Mike's neck and watches as Mike swallows a gasp.

His pupils are blown wide, like he can't really believe what Will is doing right now, which is hypocritical, because Will's just doing what Mike has been doing this entire week.

One of Will's fingers slides a little higher and curls itself around one of Mike's hair strands. He's gentle with it, but a voice at the very back of his head tells him to *pull*, and he barely

manages to resist it.

Turns out, he doesn't need to pull to get a reaction from Mike. He curls the strand around his finger, and one of Mike's hands immediately flies up to grab Will's wrist.

It's less of a grip than it is a hold, but it still sends jolts of electricity down Will's arm and to his stomach, where they mix with the heat already settled there.

Even though literally everything in Will is screaming to break the eye contact with Mike, he doesn't. He feels naked and exposed under Mike's gaze, but he almost likes it. He's more afraid of laying himself bare than anything else in the world, but the fact that he's staring right back at Mike and *seeing* him makes it seem like a mutual exchange, even if he doesn't know what exactly is being exchanged.

Without looking away for even a second, Mike releases Will's wrist and instead places his hand on the back of Will's neck, so they're mirroring each other. Then, he lets his fingers trail down Will's body, basically repeating Will's process, but backwards.

Will doesn't know what's going on, but it's not like he can ask Mike. At first, it's just because he knows it would ruin whatever moment they might be having right now, but then the air genuinely leaves his lungs when Mike's fingers reach his stomach.

They fiddle with the hem of his shirt for a moment, rubbing circles just like yesterday, but then Mike's eyebrows scrunch together, and all of a sudden, his fingers are dipping *beneath* Will's shirt, grazing the bare skin of his stomach.

Will can't hold back the gasp slipping out of his mouth.

He tries desperately to clamp his lips back together, but then Mike huffs a genuine fucking *laugh*.

Like seeing Will like this brings him nothing but pure joy.

Will thinks he might be a madman. They might both be.

There are a thousand voices yelling at Will, tearing at him, trying to get him to stop and just *think*. He doesn't even know what he's doing, but he's still willing to do it, and that's the most fucked up part.

This is wrong, more than wrong even, because he might no longer want Carlton, but Carlton is still under the impression that he does, and they're in *his bed*, and Mike's fingers keep trailing up his stomach.

They're rubbing familiar circles again, but feeling the circles through fabric is completely incomparable to feeling them on bare skin.

Each rotation sent a new set of shivers through Will's body, and he has to bite down on the inside of his cheeks to keep himself from squirming.

He has no idea how things got out of hand this fast, but they've reached a point where not even Will can convince himself that this is normal. He doesn't know what they were talking about before anymore, but literally no topic on earth could warrant this reaction.

Mike's fingers stop circling eventually and spread out until Mike's entire palm is pressed against Will's stomach instead. It stays there, unmoving, just putting the slightest pressure, like Mike is testing something.

Then, it slowly slides up Will's torso, over his belly button, until it reaches the space just below his chest.

The heat gathered in Will's abdomen is almost unbearable now, and he can't help but wonder if Mike feels the same. If touching Will like that, on the bed Will's boyfriend sleeps in, gets him hot and heavy too.

When Will stares at the way Mike's mouth hangs open and listens to him practically *panting*, he thinks he has an answer.

Mike's hand keeps on pressing against him, and there's the same look in his eyes as last night.

He looks scared, but there's something almost feral to it this time.

The tension between them is thick enough to cut with a knife, but Will isn't sure if either of them are brave enough to pull one out. Will would rather die than talk, or move, or do anything at all except stay still.

And Mike doesn't move either. His mouth stays open, and his eyes don't get any less wide. His breath puffs hot against Will's face. Will doesn't expect Mike to talk.

"I'm so fucking hungry."

And then Mike rips him out of his thoughts.

The voice he uses makes Will's stomach drop.

Because Mike is still staring at him, and he sounded almost breathless, and Will genuinely doesn't know what he means when he says he's hungry, and he kind of wants to find out.

"What?" Will's throat feels like an actual desert when he asks. It's so dry that his voice cracks a little, which is more than embarrassing, but what's even worse is that the sound seems to break Mike out of whatever trance he was just in.

His eyes snap back up to meet Will's, and he looks like a deer caught in headlights.

He snatches his hand out from underneath Will's shirt like he'll be burned if he doesn't and scoots away faster than Will has ever seen him move.

"Food!" He practically yells. "Like, hungry for food. Eating. I'm really hungry for that. Are you hungry?"

“Huh?” Will breathes, more confused than he’s ever been in his life. He blinks at Mike for a solid five seconds, trying to figure out what the hell is going on. He comes up with nothing.

Mike is no longer looking at him. In fact, Will is almost certain that he’s actively avoiding his gaze.

Unblinking, Will rolls over to stare at the ceiling. His stomach is still curling itself around the heat residing there, but his head is suddenly wiped clear of any warm butterfly feeling.

He *does* feel hungry. Starving even.

“Yeah, sure.” He nods slowly, still out of it. “What time is it?”

Mike rolls over on the bed to look at the clock on Carlton’s nightstand. “Oh shit, it’s seven already!”

“What?”

“Dude, how long were we reading?” Mike laughs, like nothing just happened.

Will wants to take him by the shoulders and ask him what the hell just happened.

He wants to demand an answer from Mike and make him write an actual hundred-page long essay about what the hand against his stomach, along with all the other shit he’s been pulling over the past fucking *decade* means.

But if Will asked that, it would automatically mean giving an answer himself.

And Will can’t answer.

He *can’t*.

So, he doesn’t say anything, not about what just happened. He thinks about it, of course, but his mouth stays shut tight. He doesn’t even turn to look at Mike.

Screw it. If Mike can be normal about this, so can Will.

“I didn’t think it would take that long.” He croaks. Great. Not an embarrassing sound at all.

“Mhh,” Mike hums. “You know, maybe we wouldn’t have taken this long if you didn’t stop to explain the composition or whatever every two panels.”

Now, Will *does* look at Mike. He doesn’t look back.

“Shut up!” Will groans and pushes Mike’s shoulder, trying to be playful and— god forbid— casual.

Mike pushes him back, and Will uses the momentum to roll himself off the bed. His feet land on the floor with a soft thud, and he stretches his back the second he’s standing.

Acting normal is fine. He can do that. His back pops twice, and he winces at the sound. He sounds like an eighty-year-old grandpa.

Mike hears him, raises his eyebrows almost like he's impressed, and stands up himself, "Two can play that game, Byers."

Will watches as Mike takes his head into his hands, like a super normal best friend, and tilts it until his neck cracks even louder than Will's back did, which makes Will cringe.

"Ugh, gross."

"I win?" Mike asks expectantly.

"It's not a competition!" Will argues but gets interrupted by a loud growl of his stomach.

Jesus, Will is never skipping his lunch ever again. Mike laughs at him for a few seconds, but then his own stomach makes itself known, and Will huffs a weak chuckle.

Second after second, the tension fades. Will doesn't know how it's possible, but it does. He can still feel the imprint of Mike's hand under his chest, and his shirt is ruffled from riding up his stomach, but the mood between them settles somehow.

Like they're just Mike and Will now. Strictly platonic childhood best friends of one and a half decades Mike and Will. Not Mike and Will who apparently touch each other under their shirts now and stare at each other's lips like they get paid to do it, even though one of them is in a relationship and the other isn't into guys.

Okay, maybe they aren't strictly platonic best friends Mike and Will right now. But Will is going to get them back to that at some point.

"Hey," Mike asks, and Will almost flinches. "Can we make dinner?"

"Yeah." Will manages to say, even though he's breathless and his thoughts are racing at a hundred miles an hour.

If he tries cooking right now, he'll probably burn down the apartment, but he really is starving, not to mention that he needs to get at least one chore done today.

His suitcase still isn't fully packed but that's fine, he supposes. He walks over to it and dumps the little heap of already picked out clothes and dumps it into the case. He'll organize it once he's in Hawkins. Right now, he needs to eat. And distract himself.

He and Mike walk out of the bedroom together, and Will shuts the door behind them. Maybe, if he closes it tight enough, he can leave whatever happened in there too.

Once they've made their way into the kitchen and to the fridge, Will is met with a very disappointing sight.

The refrigerator is basically empty. Just like it was when Mike first arrived in the apartment.

“Oh, you can’t be serious.” Will sighs.

Mike leans into Will’s space, so he can look inside the fridge over Will’s shoulder. It makes the hairs on Will’s neck stand up. Mike seriously doesn’t understand the concept of personal space today, for some reason.

“Well, that sucks.” He declares wisely.

“Oh really?” Will deadpans, trying not to show the way he shivers when Mike’s breath puffs against his ear.

As Will investigates leftover cheese packages and bags of carrots, trying to figure out what he could possibly make for dinner with them, Mike pushes himself away from the fridge.

“Hey,” he says suddenly, like he just got an idea. “Do you wanna go out?”

The wording makes Will freeze for a second.

“To eat!” Mike immediately adds, like he saw Will’s reaction. “Like, go out to eat food, in a restaurant, if you want to. Because, you know, it wouldn’t make sense to get new groceries since we’re leaving tomorrow anyways and—”

Mike rambles on for a bit and fumbles with his hands, almost like he’s nervous, until Will interrupts him.

“Mike! You know, that sounds great, but like— I’m poor.”

Mike tilts his head, confused, “What?”

“Do I have to explain the concept of being a 20-year-old college student to you?”

“Well, no, but—”

“I already went out to eat last week, and the dinner with Carlton’s friends was also more expensive than regular dinner, so I just kinda need to watch my finances right now.”

The look on Mike’s face doesn’t turn any less confused at Will’s explanation. Maybe Will *does* need to explain the concept of not being part of the upper middle class to him.

“But you don’t need to pay.” Mike says then, and it’s Will’s turn to be confused.

“What?”

“I’ll pay for you Will, I don’t mind.”

The awful warmth in Will’s stomach is there again. The casualness in Mike’s voice when he says it, like it’s obvious that he’d be the one to pay for it, is almost enough to light Will on fire.

“Mike, you really don’t—” Will tries but immediately gets cut off.

“Shut up, I’m practically rich, I can pay for both of our meals okay, I won’t die.”

Mike Wheeler— part time radio host for a small-town radio run by the cheapest girl in Hawkins— being considered ‘rich’ is almost enough to make Will burst out laughing.

“Mike, Robin pays you, and she’s broke too, I know damn well that you aren’t rich.”

“I live at home, don’t need rent or grocery money, and have a full-time job. I am a millionaire compared to other 20-year-olds.” Mike points out.

It feels weird, Mike offering to pay for both of them. Not because it’s something new— Mike probably used to spend half of his allowance on Will— but because the setting is different. Paying for Will’s ice-cream when Will forgot his wallet is one thing, taking him to a real restaurant and paying for him *just-because* is another.

Especially after what just happened. But Will is trying very hard to ignore that, so never mind actually.

The embers in Will’s chest glow a little stronger, and he might be stupidly selfish and self-destructive for doing it, but he lets them.

“Fine,” Will relents, surprising even himself. “But we’re picking a cheap place!”

“Of course!” Mike immediately agrees and nods eagerly. “I wouldn’t want anything else. Can we do Asian?”

Will thinks of the restaurant he and Carlton always go to. It might be a little fucked up to take Mike there now that Carl is gone, but it’s the only cheap Asian place Will knows in their vicinity.

“There’s an Uyghur place here that I like.”

“I have never tried that in my life but sure, sounds great!” Mike nods again, before letting his smile turn a little more mischievous. “Exploring the great city of San Francisco at last.”

Will scrunches his nose, “I hate to tell you this, but it’s just down the street.”

“Is it the same direction as the grocery store?”

“No.”

“Great, so I’m exploring a whole street! Enough for me.” Mike exclaims, sounding far too enthusiastic about mediocre restaurant food.

“You’re such a dork.” Will laughs, because if he doesn’t, he’ll start asking himself what the actual fuck is going on again, and that’s not a road he wants to go down. “Come on then, put your shoes on, I’m starving.”

“Fuck yes.” Mike celebrates and rushes out of the kitchen to go and grab his shoes and jacket.

Will waits until he's gone to put his head into his hands. He's going to a restaurant with Mike, and Mike will pay for him and most likely touch him the entire time, because that's all he's been doing this whole day, and Will is most likely going to explode, right inside of his favorite restaurant, and they'll ban his ghost from it for making a mess, and then his ghost will have to genuinely kill Mike. Unless alive Will kills him first, who knows.

Will huffs a heavy exhale and grabs the keys sitting on one of the counters. Being alone in the kitchen makes the memories of last night all the more heavy on his mind, and when his glance falls to the floor, he almost doubles over.

But it's fine. Absolutely everything is *normal*, and dinner will be fine.

Will thinks that maybe he should just call the funeral home in advance.

Chapter End Notes

Rip will byers, biggest blue balls survivor of 1990.

Listen, i promise u guys Mike isn't being DL here. Will is just as bad if you really look at what he does!!! "Oh mhh i wanna know what Mike is thinking but like if i ask then he'll know i care about what he thinks so i just won't say anything" BABY THAT IS MIKE'S EXACT THOUGHT PROCESS TOO!!!!!!!

They would rather die than talk about their honest feelings for each other, Will because he is terrified of rejection, and Mike because he is terrified of vulnerability. So they just. Don't talk. And instead have awkward sexually charged encounters. Yay? Definitely did not take inspiration from my own life for this. Lol. Kms they're both so me coded.

Anywho, the sexual tension is killing me. It has been 77k worth of build up, when tf do i get to write the pay off. I like slowburn guys but my god is it torture sometimes. Anywho, everyone stream Ständer by SXTN (idgaf about none of u knwoing german, ur gonna stream that fucking song rn. It means boner. It's fitting for the chapter.)

Also sorry for randomly turning autistic about Marvel comics. that was entirely self indulgent, but it's very in character so none of you can beat my ass for it. Hah. The concept of daredevil making byler fuck. Wow. matt would be proud i just know it.

anywho, if all you could just yell a quick shout out to my straight best friend of almost a decade. Couldn't have written that homoerotic tension without our nighttime make outs. Appreciate you bro !!

Anywho. Situationships aside, hope u guys enjoyed this chapter. See u for the next one!!!

Chapter 12: Will Byers makes some very bad decisions

Chapter Summary

This chapter canonizes Willoughby Tucker a Carlton's cousin. It's a crossover fic. Mb yall.

Chapter Notes

ITS OUT!!!!!!!!!!!! 12K WORDS OF INSANITY YAYYYYYY

now. before we start, i do have to have a serious talk with u all.

I do not appreciate all of you being rude about updates! Not to me, and definitely not to other authors. Yes, this chapter took longer to update than the others. But guess what? I have a life! Yes yes i know its very crazy. Also, can i just tell you guys how spoiled u are???? Most ao3 authors update with 3-5k long chapters, you guys almost always get more than 7k!!!! So please don't come into my comment going "When's the update when's the pdate" You guys will be getting that notif when i do update, not anytime before that. For extra info, follow my twt! Easy as that. Instead of demanding stuff, we could try smth more like "Oh wow cool chapter, VERY starved and excited for the next one."

And this isn't just the case for me! Be nice to all authors, im watching you!

anywho, enjoy this now lol. This one is insane. end of arc one, so we're marking the halfway point of the plot!!!!!!

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

Dinner is literally everything *but* fine.

For some reason, twenty-four hours have managed to turn Will into his sixteen-year-old self again, and he has no idea how to stop it. It's like someone flipped a switch in him.

He honest to God finds himself yearning for the depressed, broken mess he was yesterday. At least then he was still somewhat rational. But apparently, deciding to break up with Carlton in his head is the same as his brain deciding that he's never even existed in the first place.

Every stupid joke Mike makes lets Will's lingering guilty conscience fade away more and more, until he's wondering why he's even supposed to feel bad about all this in the first

place.

He's hyper-analyzing things again, counting the amount of times Mike's eyes fall on his lips, and the tone in every single one of Mike's words. He feels almost animalistic, like he's watching his prey from far away and preparing to attack.

Except, he is absolutely *not* an animal, and there will be *no* attack, or anything of the sort. Will needs to get a grip more than he has ever needed anything in his life.

That's a lie, probably. Because he also desperately needs to find out if Mike is still hungry, despite the egg noodles and cucumber salad on their plates.

The restaurant is a little fuller than it usually is, probably because of the holidays and mandatory family dinners and all that. Will and Mike are seated at a little table in the corner of the restaurant, and Mike is sitting next to him instead of opposite him, which is bad enough on a normal day, but actual mental torture right now.

Will chews slowly on his cucumbers, stealing glances at Mike every few bites. They're talking about something, although Will isn't sure if either of them are actually listening to what they're saying.

Obviously, Will is distracted, but he's paying enough attention to notice that Mike isn't completely present either. They're sitting next to each other, yes, but Mike's elbows stay firmly trapped at his sides, and their knees don't brush even once. The air between them isn't awkward or anything, but it's *different*.

It's kind of like Schrodinger's Cat. Things are weird and—Will can't believe he's saying this—almost *sexually charged* between them, but also, they simultaneously aren't. At least until Will pokes the dead cat or something. He didn't really listen when Quinn explained the concept to him in a bar once.

Anyways, Will wants to poke the cat.

Mike is in the middle of spitting out fun facts about soy sauce when Will interrupts him.

“Did you know this is the restaurant me and Carl always go to?”

Will honestly surprises himself when he says it. Sure, he meant to poke dead-not dead-cat Mike Wheeler, but he didn't mean to do it this directly.

“Oh yeah?” Mike replies casually, but Will knows him well enough to know that it's a put-on voice.

Screw it. Will knew he was playing with fire when he agreed to dinner in the first place. He won't back down now just because his mouth worked faster than his head for the first time in his life.

“Mhm.” Will hums affirmation, trying his best not to sound strained, probably failing miserably though.

When Will sneaks a glance at Mike, Mike glances back for the first time tonight. Will expects him to look away once he sees him, but their eyes stay locked for almost ten seconds, each second making Will feel like beads of sweat are running down his neck and back.

Mike doesn't break the eye-contact when he speaks.

"Then I'm his replacement for the night?"

The chopsticks Will was holding just a second ago clatter as they fall from his hand onto the table.

"Sorry?" Will chokes.

Mike apparently doesn't realize that what he just said is an objectively insane thing to say, "Well, he's gone, so I'm jumping in. Like an understudy."

Out of all the crazy things Mike Wheeler has said in life, this might be the craziest.

Will genuinely wishes he could look inside Mike's brain even just for a few minutes, to find out what on *earth* could possibly possess him to think like *that*. Pronouncing himself Carlton's replacement so easily, like they somehow exist in the same category. And they do, but only in Will's head, not in Mike's. At least that's what Will has thought for the past ten years.

Will picks his chopsticks back up from the table and grips them like his life depends on it. He doesn't think he can stomach another bite of cucumber salad right now, but he can at least pretend not to be as affected by Mike's insinuation as he actually is.

Will clears his throat before trying to form a response, "Mike that's—"

"Wait no, that's fun actually." Mike cuts him off before he can even try to say something nonsensical. "I could play a great Carlton."

Jesus, he's *serious* about it too.

"Nobody is asking you to do that!" Will squirms.

"No, but now I wanna try that." Mike chuckles, eyes lighting up like he just had an epiphany. "Theatrical roleplay, Will. It's like dnd, just more casual."

Absolutely *nothing* Mike Wheeler has ever done in his entire life was *casual*.

Will was completely right, he should have called the funeral home an hour ago, because clearly Mike is trying his absolute hardest to kill him.

He doesn't know *what* possessed Mike, but this is a bit far even for him. If Will thought Mike was beginning to cross the lines between them before, then this counts as him using them like a jump rope.

Sure, let Mike pretend to be his boyfriend. Absolutely nothing weird about that. It's like dnd, just more casual!

"I am never letting you watch Dead Poets Society again." Will drops his head into his hands and shakes it.

Mike doesn't seem to care about Will's frustration. Will feels him shift in his seat next to him, before he feels Mike's palm against his forehead, pushing Will's head backwards out of his hands in one swift movement.

It's such a laid-back motion, as if they didn't spend the entirety of dinner pointedly avoiding all physical contact with each other. But Mike pushes, and Will lets himself be pushed. He lets Mike's hand linger in his hairline for a second and doesn't even think about asking what any of this is supposed to mean.

"Will, come on." Mike groans, like he's the frustrated one. "I could do a great Carlton impression. Tonight is my acting debut. I, Mike Wheeler as Carlton... What's his name?"

Will mentally sighs.

"It's Tucker." He relents.

"Tucker? What is he, a farmer?"

"He's from San Francisco!" Will barely resists the urge to roll his eyes.

"Could be a San Francisco farmer."

Will shakes his head again, "That's not a thing."

Mike shakes his head too, much more animated than Will. He is surprisingly passionate about this. It's a little worrisome, how he's slowly going from non-theater Neil Perry to full on Neil Perry. Will swears to God that he'll beat Mike up if he dies for theater.

"That is definitely a thing!" Mike sputters, like an idiot. "You know what, I'm using that for my characterization. My interpretation of great Carlton Tucker is the lone farmer's boy, all abandoned in the big city, yearning for his horse—"

"Mike!" Will cuts him off, and Mike actually does stop talking.

Honestly, Will doesn't know what exactly he wants to say, he just knows that he wants *Mike* to not say *anything*. Everything coming out of Mike's mouth right now makes no sense, and Will isn't going to break his head over trying to figure it out.

Will sighs, "I don't want to interrupt your impromptu...theater debut, but— what are you even doing?"

"I wanna show you my amazing Carlton Tucker impression!" Mike says, like it's totally obvious. Will's face scrunches, which Mike apparently sees, because he adds, "Don't. I'll be super entertaining, I promise."

It's not like theatrics are something new with Mike. He's always been very dramatic, in an almost purposefully comedic way, and he thrives when acting out dialogue for their campaigns. Will just doesn't get why that same drama is making an appearance *now*, in this context.

Will asks him as much, "Why?"

"It's— look," Mike breathes, eyes no longer fixed on Will. "We read comics today, right? And yesterday, we practically had a sleepover. And now, we're eating junk food."

Will raises a brow. Junk food wouldn't leave a hole in his wallet. This is grown adult cuisine. "I would hardly call this junk."

"Fine, high-quality junk food then." Mike waves him off. "The point is— We're doing all the things we did when we were kids. You know what's missing though?"

For a second, Will thinks. They did a lot of things back when they were kids, but one does stick out.

"Dnd?"

"Exactly!" Mike smiles, glad Will understood what he was getting at. "And it's not like I can whip together a random campaign on the go. But you know what the most important thing about dnd is?"

"...Roleplay?"

"Bingo!"

It's a nice explanation in theory, but it makes no sense in practice.

Surely, pretending to be your best friend's boyfriend—while said boyfriend is away, and you and the best friend are eating in a restaurant that usually only the boyfriend goes to— isn't the most common way to relive childhood whimsy.

"You...want to pretend to be my...*partner*," Will whispers, because they're very much in a public space, and Will isn't exactly fond of announcing his identity to the whole room.

"Because of...dungeons and dragons?"

"Right on."

"You are so weird, Mike." Will huffs in slight disbelief. Only slight though, because it's not like Mike *hasn't* been doing things bordering on insanity this past week. Will is almost glad that they're all flying back to Hawkins tomorrow. Maybe being around their friends and family will somehow make Mike go back to normal.

But who is Will kidding. This *is* Mike's normal, Will just can't seem to adjust to it no matter how often he comes face to face with it.

“Come on.” Mike playfully pushes Will’s shoulder. “It’ll be good for my radio hosting skills!”

Will scoffs “How?”

Mike seems to think about it for not much longer than a second, before seemingly realizing that that argument was bullshit.

“It’ll be fun too,” He throws in instead.

It’s ridiculous enough to make Will snort, “Oh really?”

“Yup.” Mike nods, popping the P.

It’s such a stupid idea, letting Mike do his stupid Carlton parody. At best, Will is going to be forced through an agonizing evening of Mike relentlessly bullying Carlton, and at worst, he’ll

Actually, he doesn’t know what the worst-case scenario would be. Mike has never been predictable when it comes to his interactions with Will. One day, he’ll act like he did today, and then the next he’ll pretend like nothing ever even happened. It leaves Will feeling crazy, like he’s somehow imagining absolutely everything.

Today though, there’s a dangerous edge of curiosity to the weariness Will usually wears around Mike when he starts acting like this. If he’s being completely honest, that edge has been there this entire week.

It’s almost like an itch. The doctor (Will’s brain) tells you to ignore it, because it’ll only get worse if you scratch it. But eventually, you give in and do, and all of a sudden you can’t seem to stop, until the itch turns into an open wound.

Will has been scratching all week. He thinks it’s time to see if it’ll bleed.

“Fine then.” He says, before he can think any better of it. “Do your worst.”

And Mike just lights up like a kid that just discovered Christmas.

Then, however, he starts moving out of his seat, which confuses Will a little.

“Wait, what are you doing?”

“Well, Mr. Tucker doesn’t sit next to you during dinner, does he?”

“Sometimes he does,” Will lies. Mike just snorts at him and settles on the seat opposite Will.

It’s a little odd to look at Mike like this, since they almost always sit next to each other. It’s an odd change, but Will doesn’t mind it much. He likes being close to Mike, but he likes just looking at him too.

Mike isn't looking back at him though. He adjusts his posture, squirming around for a little until he settles on sitting like someone put a pole in place of his spine. Will doesn't think he's ever seen him sit so straight.

When he starts fixing his hair, Will decides that it's enough ridiculousness.

"Mike—"

"Shh, it's Carlton now." Mike cuts him off, very serious all of a sudden. Will should have known Mike would get intense about this if Will allowed it.

But what's done is done. Will dug himself this grave, and now he can't do anything but slump back in his chair and sigh.

"The noodles taste good."

It's not an outrageous thing to say at all, but the *voice* Mike puts on when he says it makes Will burst out laughing immediately.

He's added a vocal fry to his voice and is talking in a higher pitch than usual. All in all, Mike sounds like the classic Californian LA valley girl.

It sounds horrible, and it doesn't even make any sense, because Carlton grew up in San Francisco, not Los Angeles, and also absolutely does *not* sound like that, but hearing it out of Mike's mouth is somehow the best thing he's heard all year.

When Will is done throwing his head back with laughter, he wipes at his eyes and more quietly giggles, "They do."

Mike doesn't seem to be doing any better with laughter than Will is, but at least he looks like he's trying to keep himself together.

It takes Mike a couple of attempts to form the words. He gets there eventually though, "You know how they'd be even better though?"

"Please enlighten me, *Carl*." Will teases, still chuckling.

"If they were on that asshole Mike Wheeler's lap."

The callback to last night's dinner with Carlton and his friends makes Will's jaw drop a little, "Oh my god!"

"It's the truth." Mike sighs, almost sounding wistful. "That stupid, borderline amphibian yet still terribly good-looking, asshole of a best friend who still lives with his mom—"

"Carlton doesn't hate you that much!" Will cuts him off before Mike gets too deep into the rant about *himself*. The voice is also still making Will's stomach hurt with laughter.

"Oh, I'm sorry Will, I truly don't want to spend our evening talking about that *bastard*, but unfortunately he's the only thing on my mind!"

“You’re impossible.”

“Shh Will, you’re so pretty when you just close your mouth.”

The laughter *immediately* dies in Will’s throat.

Nothing is funny anymore all of a sudden, not when Will’s stomach feels like it just did twenty cartwheels in a row.

Pretty. Will doesn’t know if he’s ever been called that. Certainly not by Mike.

“Uhm. For the record, *I* would never say that.” Mike rushes to add.

The cartwheels disappear immediately. Mike is *joking*, and Will is acting like a fool. The embarrassment is immediate and so strong it almost feels painful.

“Yeah, no, of course.” Will quickly agrees, so Mike doesn’t notice he misunderstood him.

But then—

“I think you’re very pretty when you talk.”

And boom, the embarrassment is gone again. Never mind will interpreting things wrong. He just occasionally forgets how insane Mike is. Of course, Mike would never call him pretty while quiet, but not because he doesn’t think he’s pretty. Just because he prefers to hear Will rambling. The implications are insane.

“Oh.” Is the only sound Will manages to produce.

Mike takes one good look at him and *smirks*.

“Let’s keep eating.” He nods at him.

Discreetly, so nobody around them notices, Mike sneaks one of his feet towards Will, until he can hook it around Will’s ankle. Will’s heart skips a beat, but what else is new.

He hates himself for allowing Mike to indulge in stupid games, but he guesses he’ll just have to deal with the consequences. Maybe Mike will give up soon.

An hour later, when they’re making their way into the apartment, Mike is still at it.

“Oh Will, my love, finally we’re back in our grandiose apartment!” Mike practically booms when Will opens the door.

“When has Carlton *ever* said grandiose?” Will laughs.

Mike stops in his tracks, like he's thinking about it, then breaks character for a second, "I don't know. But it's an annoying word, so he probably secretly loves it."

Will laughs again and closes the door behind them, before flicking on the hallway light. The rest of the lights are still out, which means Carlton isn't home, and Will is glad for it. It feels right in the moment. Will alone with Mike, while Mike makes fun of Will's not-quite-ex partner. This is what being best friends should be like. As a matter of fact, this is what Will's *life* should look like.

For once, the apartment feels warm, despite the freezing winter just outside the walls. Will can hang up his jacket and smile at Mike, and the warmth just grows stronger. He likes it here without Carlton. He thinks he could get used to that.

Just when Will thinks Mike might be done with his antics, he opens his mouth in a fake-gasp, "Oh god! My even greater love! The couch!"

Mike's tone is distinctly mocking. Will doesn't think he's ever heard him be *this* sarcastic in his life, and that's saying something. It also makes him snort again as he watches Mike jog into the open living room, towards the couch.

Dramatically, Mike flings himself onto the couch, arms and legs flying in every possible direction.

"Finally, I have you to myself, no more evil Mike Wheeler lurking in your cushions." Mike deadpans.

"Okay, he does not think you're *evil*," Will chuckles, even though that's definitely a lie. Will wouldn't be surprised if he caught Carlton throwing darts at Mike in his free time.

"He?" Mike acts confused, back in character again. "Baby, *I'm* right here."

Even though Mike is just joking around, Will can't help but feel his stomach squirm at the name.

Baby. Carlton doesn't even call him that. Even though they've been crossing every line tonight, a single word is still enough to make Will's cheeks heat up like nothing else. He's pathetic.

At some point, he followed Mike into the living room, without even manually deciding it; just always naturally gravitating towards him. Now he's standing in front of the couch, looking down on Mike with a smile on his lips.

"Oh yeah?" Will raises a brow. "Scoot over then, it's impolite to leave your date standing."

It's not like Will *wants* to play into this. It just happens automatically. And also, he totally lied. He's probably never wanted to do anything more than indulge Mike right now.

Mike doesn't respond right away, almost like he has to take a second to process Will actually feeding into his stupid jokes and teasing nicknames. Or maybe that's just what Will wants to think. Will doesn't really know what he wants anymore.

Will can't stand the silence from Mike, so he quickly turns around to grab the radio sitting on the coffee table in front of the couch, so he at least has something he can fiddle with. If Mike can't bring himself to fill the silence, then Will is going to do it instead.

But Mike replies eventually.

He clears his throat and scoots to make place for Will, "Fine, take your seat, sweet cheeks."

Will lets himself plop onto the couch with another laugh, "Sweet cheeks? That is such a horrible name, Mike."

Mike is sitting with his legs planted firmly on the floor, facing the coffee table where Will stood just seconds ago. Now, he's on Mike's left, facing him with his knees drawn up to his chest and the radio in his hands.

The couch is large enough for both of them to sit comfortably without touching each other, but Will's toes dig into Mike's thigh, and Mike isn't moving away. Instead, he moves his own hands away from his lap to his side, so they're lying next to him on the couch, fingertips grazing Will's ankles.

Such a casual touch; one that lights Will on fire but doesn't even make Mike falter in the slightest. He just shrugs and keeps going with the conversation, "That's how we say it in Alabama."

"You're getting your character wrong, *Michael*." Will tries ignoring it too. "His *cousin* is from Alabama, he was born and raised a city boy."

"Ugh, gross. I hate city people." Mike groans. "They don't know the horror of the only cinema in town closing for the summer."

"God! The summer of '87," Will chuckles, reminiscing as he continues switching radio channels, unsatisfied with everything that's playing. "Literally the worst thing to happen to Hawkins."

"Oh totally, can't think of anything more terrifying to ever hit that town." Mike jokes.

The laughter that escapes Will's mouth overlaps with the beginning notes of a new song once Will turns the radio's knob one more time.

It takes him a few seconds, but eventually Will recognizes the intro to 'Pictures of You' by The Cure.

"Oh my god," Will smiles, and leans against one of the cushions with his eyes closed. "I love that song."

"Yeah, I know, doll."

Will's entire body goes stiff, suddenly.

Mike's been terrorizing him with horrible pet names this entire evening, but for some reason *this* is the one that actually has an impact on him.

The hand against his ankle doesn't feel all that soft anymore. It feels like a lighter pressed against him, one that Will is willingly letting Mike light. Its flames spread from Will's foot to his entire body, and soon they're infecting the air between them too.

It's like they're back in Will's bedroom again, or tangled on the kitchen floor, or grocery shopping with too much touching and too many looks traded between them. The tension that's almost as familiar as Mike himself is back, just because of one simple word.

And Will can see that Mike noticed the shift too. The grin stuck on his face only a few seconds ago dims slightly, and Will can practically feel his eyes widening. Then, he can *actually* feel the way Mike's fingers wrap themselves around his ankle.

The touch is still light at first, like Mike is just letting his hands wander again, but then soft caress turns into a grip and Will feels his ankle get *tugged on*, slowly drawing his leg away from his chest.

Mike keeps gently pulling at Will's ankle, not breaking eye contact, until Will's leg is fully stretched out and laying across Mike's lap.

That's new, Will thinks helpfully.

He's pretty sure that his heart is beating fast and hard enough for Mike to feel it in Will's ankle, even though he's pretty sure that that's impossible.

At least he also has the privilege of hearing Mike's breath, because it's somehow heavy enough to drown out the song playing on the radio.

Will's mouth is cotton, but his legs are gummy, which means running away from this isn't an option. Somehow, Will finds that for once in his life, he actually *wants* to stay put. He wants to find out what will happen if he gets rid of all the excuses he's made for both Mike and himself over the past fifteen years, and just *keeps going*.

Which is, of course, how he ends up talking.

"Did— Did you know that...Carlton doesn't even call me any...names?"

"What?" Mike exhales, almost surprised, and Will is pretty sure that he didn't understand a single word. He doesn't let that stop him though.

"Yeah. So, your, uhm— *creative talent* is being wasted."

It's like Will is trying to push a boulder without ever even having thrown a rock. All the *want* inside of him stands as tall as a mountain, and trying to actually indulge in it for once seems like an impossible task. He's stumbling over his words, and he's so incredibly unsure of what to say, but somehow Mike's breath stays heavy. Like *he's* wanting too.

"Really?" He asks, and it's comforting to hear his voice be just as unsteady as Will's.

“Totally.”

Mike stares at him some more, before quickly shaking his head, like he’s trying to snap himself out of—*whatever*, and clearing his throat, “Well, uhm, do you have any other notes for me professor?”

Will huffs a shy laugh, “What did I just say about nicknames?”

“Oh my god, okay.” Mike laughs, but it doesn’t do anything to dissolve the tension. “Any other notes, *William*?”

“Mhm, you know,” Will hums, pretending to be as confident as he can possibly muster, when in reality he has no fucking idea what he’s doing. “I actually think the entire portrayal is unrealistic.”

Mike flinches in offense, “What?”

“Yeah,” Will snorts. “The real Carlton would have already started an argument by now.”

The grip Mike still has on Will’s ankle grows a little tighter at that. It doesn’t hurt, it’s just playful revenge for Will’s teasing, but Mike’s hand is holding him in a place that is so rarely touched that Will finds himself craving more, like a crazy person.

“Okay, so maybe my Carlton is a little bit slower-paced.” Mike starts defending himself. “But I can totally argue. What does he fight about with you? Whether like— Monet or Picasso is better.”

“They’re both boring.” Will drawls and slowly lets his other leg slip in the direction of Mike’s lap. He doesn’t drape it across Mike; he just pushes until his toes start digging into the side of Mike’s thigh.

He holds his breath as he watches Mike slightly choke on air before continuing to talk in the wobbliest tone Will has ever heard, “Well, maybe Carlton doesn’t think so. Or maybe he doesn’t like seeing you eat maple syrup. Oh, or he found your phone bill after a call with El.”

The topic has Will feeling uneasy again. If Mike knew what Carlton and Will really fought about during almost all of their fights, he’d stop whatever *this* is immediately. Will doesn’t want to stop.

“Yeah, no totally, that’s what we fight about.”

Mike hums, oblivious to the beads of sweat undoubtedly building on Will’s forehead. But then his eyes dip, and at first Will thinks that Mike could be looking at his lips again, until he realizes they’ve fallen to his neck instead.

Not averting his eyes, Mike asks, “And then he apologizes with stuff like this?”

With a start, Will remembers the lock necklace still tied around his neck. The one Carlton gave to him months ago, before Mike came to visit, before things got worse. He remembers

Carlton's whole monologue, about how locked onto Will he'd be, no matter how badly Will fucks up. The whole thing sounds funny to him now.

In all honesty, he never really liked the necklace. He was just too nice to say anything about it, and he hated the thought of taking it off when Carlton could see. On his good days, Will could appreciate Carlton's intentions with it, and even liked seeing it on himself, but on his bad days it felt like a noose tied around his neck.

Now though, he wants it off more than ever. Maybe the air in the room is thick enough to crush the cheap metal.

"Yeah," Will confirms Mike's question. "You know, he actually gave that to me after the last time we ate at the restaurant."

Mike's hand twitches around his ankle again, and Will digs his foot further into Mike's thigh in response.

"Did he?" Mike asks, then opens and closes his mouth maybe three times before continuing. "Well then I should probably do the same."

Something inside Will makes him nod. He doesn't even register he's already made the decision until his head moves on its own.

Will doesn't exactly know what he expected Mike to do, but when Mike's hand slips loose from Will's ankle, he startles a little. When Mike actually stands up from the couch, Will is really confused.

Will has no clue what Mike is about to do, but he already regrets giving him permission. Sort of, at least. The part of his brain that can still be considered functioning regrets it, and that is a very small part.

Will has to tilt his head upwards so he can keep looking at Mike, who isn't really doing anything. At first, Will thought that maybe Mike got up because he wanted to go get something or just walk away from the situation entirely, which would honestly be a smart thing to do. But Mike is just standing still, looking at Will, eyes flashing like he's trying to make a decision.

Suddenly, there's a hand on Will's shoulder, and Mike leans in.

For a split second, everything inside Will panics. The heat pooled in his stomach and chest bubbles up so quickly that it spreads to his throat and burns everything residing there, melting his vocal cords in the process.

Will can't think, can't speak, can't even breath.

But, of course, Mike isn't leaning in to *kiss* Will. It just takes Will's body a second to realize that.

Still, Mike is close. Close enough even that he has to put one of his hands on Will's shoulder, so he doesn't topple over from leaning too far. But just as his hand makes contact with Will's

covered skin, he stops moving too.

Will doesn't trust himself to speak. He does it anyways, "What are you doing?"

When the words land, Will can actually *see* Mike's Adams apple bobbing. He can watch Mike lick his lips before swallowing a breath, and he can look at Mike parting them before taking another.

He can't see Mike's eyes on him though, because Mike is looking *everywhere* but Will's eyes.

"I need to—" Mike stutters, unable to finish the sentence. "I mean, I need to take it off if I wanna put it back on, right?"

Will cannot believe that a necklace off all things will end up being the death of him.

Mike's hand on Will's shoulder burns hotter; the flames licking at Will's abdomen even faster.

"Can I—" Mike stumbles his way into asking for permission; Will doesn't know for what.

"Yes." He says anyways.

The word finally makes Mike's eyes snap up to meet Will's.

And God, Mike *does* look really fucking hungry.

The hand on Will's shoulder slides to his neck, taking entirely too much time to do so. Mike fiddles with the string around Will's neck but doesn't put any effort into actually untying it just yet. He'd probably need both hands for that.

Obviously, Mike is dangerously close, but this time it's not just a risky position because Will threatens to explode every time he's in Mike's vicinity. Mike is swaying again, no longer supporting himself with the hand on Will's shoulder.

Mike seems to have a somewhat similar thought process, because he reaches for Will's other shoulder again with his free hand.

All ten of Mike's fingers are pressed into Will's torso. Still, if he wants to actually undo the necklace, he'll have to let go of Will's shoulder to do it.

"You're gonna fall," Will rasps. His and Mike's eyes are still locked—faces close enough that Will can see each of Mike's eyelashes—so Will recognizes the spark of realization in Mike's gaze.

For only a second, Mike's eyes drop from Will's and dip to the couch.

"Can I—"

The same unfinished words.

The same desperate answer, “*Yes.*”

Mike wastes no time after Will speaks. He starts lowering himself until he’s practically crouching, and then he lifts one of his legs.

He lets it hover in the air for barely a second before placing his knee onto the couch, right between *Will’s* knees.

Will feels the couch dipping beneath him, and he feels like it might as well just turn into an all-swallowing hole taking Will down with him, because that’s what it’s like to have Mike Wheeler in a position like this.

Automatically, before Will can stop himself, his hands find hold on Mike’s upper arms. Mike is holding onto Will’s neck, and Will is holding onto Mike, and Will really doesn’t know what on earth they did to wind up here.

Mike shifts almost all of his weight onto his knee, letting Will sink further into the couch. In response, Will’s fingers dig into Mike a little harder. He’s holding on for life, and he can see the way Mike’s breath reacts to it.

The same song is still playing in the background, but Mike isn’t looking at his face anymore. He’s completely focused on the necklace now, using both hands to fiddle with the knot tying it to Will’s neck.

He’s incredibly clumsy with it, and the fact that he can’t actually *see* the knot probably isn’t helping either. It’s a little embarrassing, actually. Or at least it would be, if it were anyone other than Will witnessing this. As it is, Will thinks the way Mike’s eyebrows are scrunching together is almost adorable.

But eventually, even Will has enough. He’s spent this entire evening betraying every promise he’s ever made to himself because he’s been playing with how far Mike can be pushed; He can go a little further.

Will lets one of the hands holding Mike’s biceps go slack, so he can move it around. Just like Mike, he lets it slide from Mike’s shoulder to his neck, partly because he is incredibly unsure about all this, but also partially because he wants Mike to *feel it*.

Once he’s settled on Mike’s neck, he gently pulls his arm towards himself, guiding Mike even closer. He doesn’t stop until he has to tilt his head, so their faces don’t collide. Instead, he lets Mike hit his shoulder, and feels his nose dig into the side of his throat.

The punched-out breath that escapes Mike is almost dizzying enough to make Will let out a sigh of his own, but he clamps his mouth shut. His fingers are still resting on Mike’s neck, and he doesn’t move them. He needs to know what’ll happen if he doesn’t.

The new position helps. Mike’s hands are working more efficiently now, and he has the knot untied in a matter of seconds.

“It’s off,” Mike rasps, and Will faintly hears something clatter to the floor.

The necklace is off. They can sit back down now. They can stop touching.

Neither of them move.

“That’s great.” Will whispers back, but his voice is rough and barely recognizable.

Mike moves on the couch, and Will can’t see exactly what he’s doing, but his face stays where it is. Will can feel Mike’s breath on his bare skin. If he moved only an inch, his lips would be touching Will.

It takes Will a little while to realize that the movement was Mike bringing his second leg onto the couch as well, on the outside of one of Will’s knees. Mike is practically straddling Will’s leg. Scratch that; Mike *is* straddling his leg. Will isn’t sure if he can breathe anymore.

How he’s ever going to pretend this is normal he doesn’t know yet. Mike makes it infinitely harder when he digs his fingers deeper in and turns his head further into the crook of Will’s neck, so that his lips are *actually* touching skin now.

“What else would Carlton do?” Mike whispers against Will.

And God, does that sound like a *proposition*.

Will doesn’t know if he should pass out, die, and explode, or puh Mike off him and yell at him to just *stop* with the role play for a second. Not even their dnd campaigns have ever gotten close to this intense before, so Mike isn’t fooling anyone by pretending to stay in character.

Will feels too fragile to keep playing games. He’s had one going on for the past fifteen years already, thank you very much.

Mike isn’t looking at him, but not being able to see his face makes it easier to turn the question around.

“What else would *you* do?”

A pause. A quick inhale from Mike, no exhale. Silence.

Then—

“Anything you let me.”

Well Jesus. If those aren’t the words he’s been waiting to hear his whole life.

He doesn’t really believe them, but right now the emotion they invoke within him is stronger than all the doubt his brain can muster. Will thinks his chest might as well be fireworks, exploding while he’s still standing too close to them, the noise making his ears ring for hours.

For the first time in a very long time, maybe even for the first time since they’ve defeated Vecna, Will feels a desperate urge to be brave.

“Mike.” He breathes. “I’d let you do everything.”

Mike releases one last shuddering exhale against the side of Will’s throat, before pulling away by only a few inches. Will can look at his face again, and he can make out every single detail of it.

Maybe he’s even closer than he was before taking the necklace off. Will has no clue. He just knows that he could probably brush his lips against Mike’s if he leaned forward a few inches. His hand is still on Mike’s neck. He could probably pull him in, if he wanted. Mike would probably let him.

He’s pretty sure that all the blood has left his face and wandered downwards several minutes ago already, but Will can *feel* that that’s the case for Mike as well. Mike pressed against his thigh is absolute tangible proof that Will isn’t making any of this up, and he doesn’t know how to handle that truth.

Not to mention that this time, they have the words for what they’re doing, and they’ve said them out loud. They can’t do both at the same time. It’s either their mouths or their hands that are being honest, never their bodies as a whole.

This is the most terrifying thing Will has ever felt. He feels like someone slowly stripped him of his clothing, peeling off layer after layer, but not stopping once they got rid of all the fabric. Will feels like that someone kept going, somehow removing layers of his flesh, making him smaller and more vulnerable and lighter until he’s light enough to float away like a balloon.

The only thing grounding him and keeping him on this earth is Mike, sitting on top of Will’s thigh with soft music playing in the background, *leaning in*.

And then, the sound of a key opening the apartment door is ripping him loose again.

All the heat leaves Will’s body in a matter of seconds. One moment him and Mike are almost breathing into each other’s mouths, and the next Mike is jumping away from him like they’re both on fire. And they are, just not literally.

Doesn’t mean they’re in any less danger.

Will’s head whips around just as the front door opens, filled with nothing short of panic. He feels like a deer that just spotted a hunter in the forest. He feels like a rat that just got caught in a trap. Most of all, he feels like he just did something absolutely *terrible*.

He just almost kissed Mike.

He didn’t imagine that.

He just almost kissed Mike on his and Carlton’s couch.

“I’m home!” A voice booms from the hallway.

And now Carlton is home.

Will whips his head back to Mike, who is now sitting at the opposite end on the couch, as far away from Will as he could possibly get in three seconds. It would almost hurt to see, if Will didn't have a *huge* different problem right now.

He can hear Carlton take off his jacket in the hallway, barely ten feet away from him and Mike. Mike is already far away again, ready to pretend that everything is normal, but Will feels frozen.

The moment is already shattered, but Will thinks that if he even dares to breath, he'll break it completely. He was so close to getting the answers he's wanted for more than half his life. Now, he's not sure if he'll ever get them.

And yet, Carlton is home. Carlton is ten feet away from them. Carlton just announced his presence and is waiting for an answer.

And Will responds.

“Welcome back!”

Will's voice cracks as he yells, and he can't bring himself to stop staring at Mike. Mike, who isn't looking back at him.

Suddenly though, Carlton appears from around the corner, and Will is forced to rip his gaze away. He quickly draws his knees back up to his chest, like that can erase any of the things he's done or said in the past hour.

Mike pretended to be Carlton to be funny, then Will almost kissed him because he just had to take it too far, and now the actual Carlton is standing in front of him.

“Hey,” Carlton nods and takes a step towards Will, so he can press a quick kiss into his hair. Will almost flinches away from it. He can't even look Carlton in the eye right now. “How was your day?”

You would genuinely lose your shit if I told you, Will thinks, but quickly shakes the thought.

“Uhm,” He struggles for a second, before managing to summon all of his strength and focus. “Yeah, no, uh— It was great. We just went out to get dinner.”

Carlton raises a brow, and for a second Will thinks his life is over, “You *got* dinner?”

Jesus, of course he's just concerned about money. Will needs to get a grip.

“Yeah, but I mean— Mike paid.”

Carlton raises his brows again, and Will has to mentally convince himself that it's not an accusation. But Carlton just turns to face Mike instead, “Oh, great. Thanks man.”

Mike practically flinches when Carlton addresses him. Will would facepalm if he weren't almost as bad. Still, Mike is another level of obvious, and that makes the panic in Will's gut flare even hotter.

When Mike responds, his voice is squeaky, “Yeah, sure dude.”

“Okay.” Carlton, responds, drawing out the O, before turning back around to face Will. “Hey, you wanna go to our room? I’m unfortunately obliged to tell you about all the Tucker family bullshit, and like—no offense—but I don’t think you want to hear that, Mike.”

Will is about to find a way to awkwardly deny, when Mike opens his mouth instead, “Yeah, sure, I don’t care, go ahead.”

Will’s head whips around *again* so he can look at Mike. He has never been thrown under the bus this hard before. Will is practically buzzing out of his own skin, and now Mike is forcing him to spend time in a room with Carlton, alone.

Will huffs a breath. Mike Wheeler’s fucking *audacity*, everyone.

“Great,” Carlton smiles, strained. He really does hate Mike. “You coming?”

That last part is of course directed at Will, but he barely hears it. He gets up, but he doesn’t respond.

He follows Carlton to their bedroom, but he casts a glance over his shoulder, at Mike. He’s not looking back. His hands are in his hair, like he’s asking himself what the fuck just happened.

And yeah.

What the fuck just happened.

The good thing about Carlton wanting to talk to Will right now is that Will doesn’t have to respond. He can just sit on the bed, stay quiet, and listen. Carlton, apparently, can talk about his family and various cousins for a very long time. He’s been at it for almost an hour, talking and ranting while getting ready for bed.

“...And it’s like— I *know* your son is an alcoholic and that sucks, but his girlfriend literally just died. You can’t cut him any slack for at least a couple of months? He doesn’t even live at home anymore! And when I brought *that* up, he started fucking berating me about how him running away was traumatic and shit. What bullshit. I hate that that military piece of shit is my uncle.”

Will hasn’t been listening. His thoughts are someplace else, and he can’t bring himself to focus, no matter how attentive he usually is to the topic of Carlton’s cousin from Alabama and his missing girlfriend.

“That sounds...horrible.” He manages.

“It was. Glad I’m home now.”

This Carlton is different from the one he’s seen these past few days. He’s more like the Carlton Will has known for the past nine months, the one he was at least somewhat happy being with.

It’s horrible. Will wishes Carlton would yell again, would pick fights over the tiniest things, just so Will could at least sort of justify what happened in the living room. How Mike’s breath felt against his lips. How his thigh felt between Mike’s.

But no, this Carlton still calls their apartment home. This Carlton thinks that he and Will can fix things once the holidays are over.

This Carlton looks almost nervous before asking Will a perfectly mundane question. “Are you...gonna sleep in here tonight?”

Will has every excuse to say no. They still haven’t talked about last evening, and Will doubts they ever will. But if Will takes the kitchen floor again, he’ll have to be near Mike. He doesn’t know if he can handle that

“What? Uh, no, yeah, totally.” Will says, before he can change his mind. “For sure.”

“Okay...” Carlton looks visibly relieved at his answer. It makes the guilt hurt Will’s stomach so much harder.

For a minute, Carlton studies him like he’s a puzzle. And each second that passes is filled with a constant stream of *he knows he knows he knows*— in Will’s head.

Finally, Carlton breaks the silence, “Are you—”

It’s a very unsatisfying question to hear, because it’s not even complete. Carlton could be asking Will anything right now.

Are you cheating on me? Are you willing to cheat on me? Are you absolutely still in love with your best friend, which is something we have all known for months, and is there a chance of something actually happening? Are you absolutely terrified to look said best friend into the eyes again? Are you being eaten alive by guilt? Are you okay?

The last question is the one Carlton most likely wanted to ask. It’s also the simplest one, and still Will doesn’t know the answer.

He doesn’t need to though, because all Carlton says is, “Never mind.”

The dismissal doesn’t make the lump in Will’s throat disappear, and it does even less to the reopened gash of leaking guilt from his chest.

Carlton is done changing, and his suitcase is packed for the airport tomorrow. He’s ready to sleep, and he lifts the covers on his side of the bed, scooting in beside Will, laying in the same spot Mike did a few hours earlier.

“Night Will.” Carlton whispers and turns off the lamp.

Will lays down too, as far away from Carlton as he possibly can be, and crawls under his own covers. He prays that Carlton’s sheets don’t still smell like Mike.

“Night.” He swallows.

Then, he doesn’t even try closing his eyes. He just stares up at the ceiling and listens to Carlton’s breathing, praying that fate will somehow put him to sleep.

Three hours later, Will is still awake.

It’s no surprise, because Will is notorious for being a bad sleeper, and the condition he’s in right now isn’t exactly healthy, but it’s still annoying, nonetheless.

The ghost of Mike’s breath on his lips lingers like a nasty scar. He’s been chewing on his bottom lip for the past hour, trying to get rid of the sensation to no avail. The only thing happening is Will’s mouth going dry from the constant licking and gnawing.

He’s horribly thirsty. He needs to get up and grab water eventually, but the warm comfort of his blanket traps him in bed like a prison.

Still, every prison can be broken out of.

Will sighs the quietest sigh of his life, then forces himself to untangle his legs from the sheets. The cold bedroom air hits his bare skin immediately, but he knows that he’ll feel better with water. Maybe he’ll even sleep. They’re driving to the airport at six in the morning, and Will is pretty sure it’s almost two already.

He quietly tiptoes his way to the door and opens it as quietly as he possibly can. For once, the universe seems to be on his side, because the door doesn’t creak.

The hallway to the kitchen is dark, but Will knows it well enough to not need any light. He slips into the kitchen easily and only needs to turn on the small light above the stove to grab a glass,

He fills it with tap water and downs it in one go. It’s not enough. Again, Will lets the water flow from the tap until his glass is filled to the brim. This time, he takes a slow slip, then sets the glass back down on the counter. He leans onto the counter, letting it take some of his weight, and sighs a deep sigh now that he’s alone.

“Hey Will.”

Will flinches so hard he almost hits his head on the cabinet he just got his glass from. He whips around fast enough to give himself whiplash, but the sight welcoming him is just as dizzying.

Mike, in his Star Wars shirt and plaid boxers. Dressed the exact same way he was when he was ten. That doesn't make him sneaking up on Will in the middle of the night any less terrifying though.

"Oh my god Mike!" Will whisper shouts, holding his hand to his racing heart. "You scared me."

Mike's eyes widen a little, like that's a surprising thing to hear. "Sorry...I uh, wanted...water."

Mike is lying. He doesn't feel thirsty, *ever*. Will is almost entirely sure that Mike has consumed more 7up than water in his lifetime.

"Yeah, me too." Will whispers back and points a finger to his own glass, to show that at least *he* isn't lying.

"Wow, that's a crazy coincidence, isn't it?" Mike mumbles, scratching the back of his head. Definitely lying.

Still, Will indulges him, "Yeah, totally."

It's horrifically awkward between them. Seriously, the silence they're sitting in right now is scarier than any of the trances Vecna has ever put Will through. But somehow Will still doesn't know if maybe he prefers the silence over whatever could replace.

Still, he knows that they'll need to talk about it. Ignoring—whatever *that* was—isn't an option anymore.

Apparently though, Will doesn't have to be the one to bring it up. For once.

"Uhm. Will?"

Mike's voice is unsteady in the dark of the kitchen, just like Will's was last night. There hasn't been any indication of what exactly Mike wants to talk about, but Will knows anyway.

"Yes Mike?"

"I need to ask you something."

There it is.

"Yeah," Will sighs. "I think so too."

"It's stupid." Mike warns, like Will doesn't know *exactly* how stupid their entire situation is. It's the only thing he's thought about this entire week. It's the only thing he will think about for the foreseeable future. It is *very* stupid.

“Most of your question usually are.”

Will tells the joke to make things a little easier on himself, but Mike actually laughs.

“You can be such a dickhead.” He shakes his head.

“Nobody would ever believe you if you told them.”

“Yeah, because they don’t know you like I do.”

And there it is.

One of the thousands of too-deep truths that plague every single one of their conversations, now more than ever. Will can’t pretend successfully with Mike, because every so often, he’ll say things like that and still expects you to be normal about it.

“Mike.” Will swallow heavily, just wanting to get it over with. “Ask.”

“Oh, right. Uhm.”

For some reason, Mike starts walking towards Will. Or not, because he turns around right away, but then he twists to face Will again. With a start, Will realizes he’s *spacing*.

Mike is *nervous*.

“This is the worst question I’ve ever asked you, I think.” He confesses, a little breathless.

Will doesn’t know what he could say that could possibly make this any easier on Mike, so he stays silent. He nods though, so Mike at least knows he’s listening.

“But— earlier, when we were alone— not in the restaurant!” Mike keeps walking, and Will already knows that he’ll be a rambling mess by the end of this. “On the— or like, by the couch. Like, when we were taking and then the—you know.”

Mike badly mimics himself taking off Will’s necklace. It’s a hilarious display, but Will can’t focus on anything but Mike’s words. He doesn’t know what he’ll hear, and he’s both scared and impatient to find out. It’s like with carlton earlier, only this time, Mike’s question could change absolutely *everything*.

“Did you—” Mike starts but cuts himself off.

“Is there a *chance* that you—”

Everything in Will is wound up tight, begging and praying for release. If Mike spits out a question, then maybe Will can spit out an answer, and maybe they can stop whatever they are doing right now. The constant push and pull, the uncertainty, the *fear*.

Most of all, the warm feelings. Will just needs Mike to tell him that they went too far with blurring the lines this time, that they should have never felt each other like that, and that they

need to go back to *normal friendship*, even if he doesn't know what that would look like between him and Mike.

But it needs to be Mike that says it, Will can't do it. Partially because he doesn't truly want any of these things to stop, but also because talking about them to Mike would mean admitting to him that they exist, and Will is done with thinly veiled love confessions.

But Mike is still pacing, and it doesn't look like he's ready to ask anything.

"Oh Christ," Mike groans and throws up his hands in frustration. "This is *so* hard and *so* weird."

Maybe Will underestimated Mike though, because he stops pacing, and instead walks towards Will with a special kind of determination in his eyes.

He stops close enough to Will to be within touching distance, but far away enough to not actually brush against any part of Will.

Even though the kitchen is dark, Will can see Mike's face clearly, maybe because he already memorized it years ago, or maybe because he's never seen it this expressive before.

Mike's eyebrows are scrunched upwards; his eyes are as wide as planets. A more usual sight are his parted lips, but he's panting like he just finished a marathon.

"Will." He chokes on Will's name.

Then—

"Did you want to kiss me?"

The force of the words hits Will harder than any hit he's ever felt in his life. They reach deeper inside him than even the Mind Flayer ever could. They burn harder in his chest than the time he was burned alive.

Those are words fifteen years in the making. Those words are a product of every single other word ever exchanged between Mike and Will, starting with '*Do you want to be my friend?*'

Those are words that Will has already had the answer to for a decade. An answer that, to this day, he's never said out loud.

And even now that the words are finally there, Will can't bring himself to give his answer. He feels frozen, like his body focused all of its warmth on his chest, so that his vocal cords froze shut.

He wants to speak more than anything, but he's terrified, paralyzed by fear of what will happen if he does answer. He can't form the words or move his lips, but he *can* use his eyes.

There it is, right in his peripheral.

The phone.

A couple of months ago, Will had the courage. He couldn't say it back then either, too uncertain and too fragile to even attempt it, but he managed to improvise. He has to do the same thing now.

It's on the wall right next to his head. He knows where he needs to grab and what he needs to do.

Mike and his eyes are locked. Will doesn't know if seconds, or minutes, or no time at all passed. But Mike is looking at him, and his eyes are slowly growing wider, like he's realizing he just made a huge mistake, and Will needs to stop that right now.

His hand darts out to his side, and without even looking, Will grabs the phone.

Then, while continuing to stare into Mike's eyes, he presses a kiss to the receiver.

He kisses the phone.

And Mike kisses him.

It all happens astonishingly fast. The second Will's lips leave the plastic with a wet smack, Mike's hands shoot out from his sides and take Will's face into his hands. Will lets the phone clatter from his hand until it's dangling above the ground without a care in the world.

Mike's hands are on his face, and he needs his own hands to hold onto Mike.

He clumsily places them on Mike's forearms and barely has time to adjust his grip, before Mike leans forward and crashes into his lips with his own.

All this time, this entire week, they've been slowly inching towards each other, testing the waters with every single hand drawn circle or knee bump.

There's nothing slow about this.

Mike's closed mouth presses onto Will's own with a strength Will didn't know Mike possessed. His hands clench around Will's head, and Will has to dig his hands into Mike's forearms, so he doesn't fall over.

He's pictured this moment a million times, and always he thought that somehow, kissing Mike would be as familiar as talking to him. It isn't.

It only lasts for a few seconds, but Will has no idea what to do. The pressure is on his mouth, but neither of their lips are parted, so there's no motion to it. Just one hard press, and somehow that's exactly what Will needs.

He presses back against Mike, exhaling through his nose, and Mike quickly pulls back in that exact moment.

There's a split, horrible second in which Will thinks that somehow, none of this was Mike's intention. But then he looks at Mike's blown pupils and shaking lips, and pulls at his arms to get Mike to dive back in.

For once in his life, Mike gets the hint.

He doesn't do the hard press this time. He still goes in with the same amount of eagerness, but he parts his lips upon impact so that Will's bottom lip can fit between Mike's.

Will feels Mike's spit coat his mouth and pulls him even closer, until it's not just their faces but also their chests that are pressed against each other. They aren't gently brushing their lips against each other, they are desperate and almost animalistic, because at least Will has been waiting on this for a *decade*.

He has no idea what any of this means, but Mike's tongue slipping between his lips makes him forget it all anyways. He tastes like toothpaste from the Wheeler's household, like fifteen years of being best friends.

The fact that toothpaste makes him moan should get him into jail, but Mike (*holy fuck, he's kissing Mike.*) doesn't seem to mind. He keeps his right hand steady on Will's face, right thumb rubbing the familiar circles into his cheek while his tongue licks up into Will's mouth.

Mike's left hand keeps gliding, never staying in one spot for too long, like Mike want to cover as much ground as humanly possible. Will is holding onto his arms like they're the railing on a cliff again, but how can Mike be both the cliff and the thing keeping Will from falling?

He has no clue why, but Will is holding himself back. He opens his mouth for Mike, more than comfortable letting Mike explore it, and he keeps Mike close to him, but he doesn't do anything on his own, even though he wants to.

He wants to press his tongue against Mike's wants to let his hands explore all the places they've never intentionally touched before, but something inside of him is holding him back.

At least, until Mike steps another step closer to Will, so Will's back is pressed against the wall, and Mike—*all of Mike*—is pressed against his front. The pressure makes Will gasp into Mike's open mouth, and something finally snaps inside him,

Feeling Mike against him like this is proof that *both* of them want this, for whatever reasons. Will doesn't have to think about that right now. But Will has wanted this, and wondered whether Mike wanted anything at all for his entire *life*, and now he has it, at least somewhat.

So he releases Mike's arms and slides his hands into Mike's hair instead. Mike's breath stutters when he separates himself from Will's lips for a split second, and Will takes it as an invitation to *pull*.

This time, Mike makes an actual noise, much louder than the one Will gave at the taste of Mike's tongue, so Will panics a little for a second, thinking that maybe Mike hissed out of pain. But then Mike's gliding hand slides up Will's arm, until it covers the hand in his hair, and he takes it to pull even *harder*.

The entire interaction wrings a gasp out of Will, and he almost automatically presses his own hips against Mike's, who pushes just as much as Will gives.

When Will gasps, Mike momentarily detaches himself from Will's mouth, trying to place kisses against his neck instead, but Will can't do that right now, so he pulls Mike right back up to meet his lips again. They're in a perfect place of lips working against each other, and Will can't stand a single second without it, even if it means suffocating.

It's all so intense, and there's so many feelings bubbling around inside of Will that he can't distinguish or pay real attention to any of them. He thinks his hands are shaking, and he's sure that his knees are close to giving in, but he also thinks that he can use Mike to prop himself up if needed.

The entire concept of them is absurd. Making out at almost three in the morning, pushing each other against kitchen counters and fridges until Will's knees are wobbly because of the pace he's keeping.

In the kitchen, where Will spent so much time listening to Mike's lips forming words over the telephone. And now, Mike's mouth is communicating with him in a manner that is so far-removed from language that Will can barely understand anything.

Mike pulls at Will's neck, urging Will to follow him, and Will does, without ever letting their mouths separate.

They only walk a few feet, Mike guiding Will by holding Will's hips in a firm grip. It almost hurts little, but not quite, so Will moves his own hand down to meet Mike's and pushes him to squeeze harder. Mike does, and Will relishes in the soft sting blooming beneath Mike's palm.

Mike stops walking, but keeps his hand on Will, pushing him backwards until his lower back meets a counter instead of the fridge. But Mike keeps pushing him further into the counter, until his hands eventually slide to Will's legs and lift, so he can be pushed onto the counter, Mike standing between his legs.

In between breathless kisses, Mike manages to squeeze out, "Shaking."

Will can't do anything but nod affirmation as thanks.

He's keeping all his feelings locked away, only letting every ounce of passion he's ever felt over the years through, so he doesn't go insane, or burst out into tears, which is equally embarrassing.

Mike bites his lips a few times, and every time their lips part for a few seconds, so they can breathe, a single string of saliva stays, connecting their lips anyways.

The only thing Will can taste anymore is toothpaste, and he wants it to stay like that for the rest of his life.

Mike's hand stays on his neck. A place on his body that is so explicitly haunted by his past, more than every single one of the scars he carries, being held by Mike, being kept *warm* by Mike. It sends shivers down his spine, but none like the ones he felt for years as a child.

Mike's other hand, however, starts digging beneath Will's shirt again, just as it did when they were reading comics. The touch burns all over Will's torso, in the best possible way, and Will hooks one of his legs around Mike's hips. He has to look down to kiss Mike now, but that's fine, because he's *kissing Mike*.

But then there's the clatter.

"Shit!" Mike hisses.

It's just like the living room. Except this time, they are in a situation that is *much* more difficult to get out of.

Mike immediately jumps away from him, and Will slips off the counter in the following second, and they prepare for the inevitable bow.

But it never comes.

The kitchen is completely silent. Will isn't even sure if they're breathing anymore.

They don't hear footsteps, or coughing, or another clatter. Everything is completely still. Carlton is asleep in his and Will's bedroom.

And then it hits him.

Carlton is still asleep in his and Mike's bedroom. He just made out with Mike.

They aren't making out anymore. Which means that Will doesn't have the means to keep all his emotions down anymore.

"Oh god." He whispers so quietly that he hopes even Mike doesn't hear him.

He feels sick. Out of everything he's feeling, there is one thing that takes up the most amount of space and even feeds off of all his other emotions.

Guilt; gnawing at him like it's an unsheltered dog and he's a bone.

He whips around to look at Mike.

Mike, who he's known since they were five. Mike, who's exactly sixteen days younger than him. Mike, who likes maple syrup on his eggs, and who knows Will likes it too. Mike, who knows Will. Mike, whose red lips are currently slick with spit because of *Will*.

This is a horrible mistake. Will should have never done this. Mike doesn't want him, not like *that*.

Yes, they made out. But there is a gigantic, uncrossable distance between wanting to make out with someone and being in love with them for a decade. Will just signed his death warrant by kissing Mike.

And he did it without even breaking up with Carlton. Months of defending himself against all the accusations thrown at him by Carlton and Carlton's friends, only to prove him right in the end.

Will thinks he'll throw up if he keeps thinking about it. But looking at Mike's face isn't any better.

His eyes are as wide as before the kiss, only this time, he seems stunned. Surprised. Like this wasn't planned.

Will inhales sharply. It's all the confirmation he needs.

"We— we should go to sleep."

Mike's gaze only gets worse. The awkward air from before is back, but Will can confidently say that it's worse now.

"What?" Mike asks, genuinely confused.

"Our— you know, we're flying back to Hawkins in like, eight hours."

It's the flimsiest excuse Will has ever made. He knows very well that he won't be sleeping tonight. He'll be too busy regretting every decision he's ever made.

Mike doesn't answer him right away. He just keeps staring at Will, confused, like Will is doing something wrong or confusing.

Will has to keep reminding himself that this doesn't *mean* anything to Mike, not like it does to Will at least. Will has no clue what's going on with Mike, but he's very certain that it doesn't have anything to do with *love*.

But even Mike can only be awkwardly silent for so long.

"Oh. No, no, totally. Yeah. Sleep." He nods a few times, taking steps backwards from Will. "Sleep. That's a great thing."

"Yeah." Will confirms, trying to keep the storm inside him from leaking into the words.

Another short pause, until Mike speaks.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Uhm." It seems like Mike wants to say more, but he doesn't. "Just— disrupting your sleep, I guess. Sorry."

"That's okay."

Will's legs are still wobbly. He doesn't know how he'll walk to his and Carlton's bedroom, and he knows even less how he'll lay next to him without crying.

He screwed up so badly. He ruined two good things in his life in one smooth motion, and now he'll have to balance it out again. But that's tomorrow. That's the *holidays*. For now, he just needs to get away from Mike, or both the guilt and heartbreak will come out at the same time.

"So uhm," Mike says, like he read Will's mind. What a stupid thought. "Goodnight then, I guess."

Will gives his best tight-lipped smile. It's not a good one. His lips are already starting to wobble, "Goodnight Mike."

He turns away from Mike and exits the kitchen, before Mike can say anything to make him stay. Because he would. Stay, that is. Apparently, he'd do whatever Mike offered him, no matter who gets hurt.

Will hates this. Will hates *himself*. He kissed Mike while Carlton was just a room away. Carlton being an asshole doesn't make this any better. And tomorrow, Will is going to have to introduce him to his entire family. Fucking amazing, truly. He has never messed up as royally as this time.

And the worst thing is that he's not going to tell a single soul about it.

Will's hand shakes as it turns the doorknob to his and Carlton's room. Carlton looks just like he did before Will left him. Sleeping, knocked out, completely unaware.

Will blinks back the tears already forming in his eyes and walks to his side of the bed. He scoots under the covers like nothing ever happened, like he never even left.

He's even staring at the same spot on the ceiling as before.

The only difference is that this time, silent tears are flowing from his eyes. And his lips are still coated in Mike's spit. His heart beats a little faster at the thought, no matter how hard he tries to stop it.

But then he drags the sleeve of his sweater over his mouth and turns to face Carlton's sleeping body.

And that's how he'll wake up too.

Chapter End Notes

THEY KISSED????? IN A MIMI BALDSTEN GIRL_ROTTHING AO3 FIC??????? IN FRONT OF MY SALAD?

i blacked out when i wrote the kitchen scene yall my bad idk what happened. Could tell how hard i was avoiding the mention of hard ons. This was lawless as hell for me okay i have never written make out scenes before dont judge. but i do ope u guys know that i made out with my best friend last week for the sake of writing thid chapter more realistically (this is not a joke i wish it were its just a bad habit of mine.)

But wow this is just. I got. Uhm. Yeah bro i dont even know.

Also shout out to sam and freya who have been theorising and guessing this entire chapter wrong i bet u guys are gagged.

wow. 80k into the story and finally. kiss. But ofc Will is struggling, because he would!!!! Will is kind guys. It's not in character for him to cheat. He HATES his life. also those last two lines are a hit to how the story will continue for will HAH lol he's miserable.

Who's ready to see the party in arc 2. #MEEEEEEE

also did all of u catch that ethel cain reference. Carlto's cousin from alabama is Willoughby. I just didn't call him by name bc i thoughts its weird that his cousin and boyfriend share a name LOL

anywho. Sleep for me now. yummers. BUBAY LOVE U ALLLLLLLLL

End Notes

@mimibaldsten on twitter for more :3
dont kill carlton. yet.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!