You're My Amen

by Julibean19

Summary

“Listen to me going on and on about pie. You tell me more about yourself, Just Jack,” Eric prompts, smiling encouragingly.

“Uhh,” Jack begins, forcing himself to put down his fork and actually make conversation.

“I play hockey.”

“You don’t say?” Eric says, smile widening.

“Chirp, chirp, chirp.”

Jack meets the love of his life while serving Thanksgiving dinner at a homeless shelter and struggling to learn the difference between sexuality and dysfunction. Along the way, he repairs some broken relationships and figures out how to let himself have nice things, one of which is a small southern baker with a habit of concealing the truth.
Hi everyone! This is my first time writing for this fandom, so please bear with me as I explore how to write these characters. If you think I've missed a tag, please let me know. I'm writing this story for NaNoWriMo 2017 and it's around 65k words right now. I anticipate it ending up around 85k, but you never know. I'm not guaranteeing a posting schedule right now since I have a lot of holiday exchange fics to write in December, but I'm devoting November to this story in particular. Please enjoy!

Special thanks to my dear beta, CaptainVonChan, for letting me drag her into yet another fandom (a whole week ago) and for already being in love with it as much as I am <3

The title comes from "Amen" by Hunter Hayes!

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Chapter 1

Jack is good with kids. The Falconer’s charity office knows that, and usually, he only has to do skating or teaching events, or the occasional arts and crafts project, but this year, Thanksgiving at the Providence homeless shelter is mandatory. Well, by mandatory, he means mandatory for all Canadians who don’t have family obligations, which means just him, Willis, and Erikson.

Traditionally, Jack struggles with this kind of appearance. There are cameras where no one wants cameras, shoved into the faces of homeless people who are just looking for some decent food and a warm place to sit. The one redeeming factor is that he has his Falconers cap low enough that his face is somewhat covered and the people he’s serving seem to be too tired to care who the local celebrity spooning them mashed potatoes is.

Every Thanksgiving for the last five years, Jack has been in the Haus, and later, in his Providence apartment, Skyping Shitty, who regularly hides in his parents’ bathroom raving about “entitlement” and “first world problems” like there being only one maid and no one to take coats at the door.

Jack sighs and commiserates while eating his rotisserie chicken, a Thanksgiving cheat he allows himself. He eats the whole thing, skin and all, standing over the kitchen sink with his phone propped up on a gallon of milk.

This year, he has an apron on and is listening to too-early Christmas carols being pumped through tinny speakers while he offers canned cranberry sauce to the downtrodden.

He feels for these people, he really does. It isn’t lost on Jack that he had every luxury as a child and every opportunity as an adult, but as much as he wants to, he can’t relate. The homeless of Providence have real problems, and Jack’s parents make sure that the Zimmermann Foundation does what it can to support the local shelters, but that doesn’t stop Jack’s heart from breaking every time he sees someone’s frowning face.

The people in his food line are hungry, cold, and more than a little dirty. Jack smiles at each of them as he spoons potatoes, giving an extra helping when he sees someone particularly thin, but he can tell it doesn’t meet his eyes. Jack is faking this, just like he fakes most public appearances, and that’s even more depressing than usual, given the circumstances.

His frown is made even more pathetic by the bubbly shelter worker who’s just a few stations down handing out bowls of apple and pumpkin pie a la mode. Jack can tell that the pie is hot because the ice cream has melted into a pool around it, soft and delicious looking. More than the food, he’s attracted to the southern lilt he hears each time the man hands over a slice.

“Happy Thanksgiving,” a soft, but bright voice says. “Ain’t nothin’ like a bit of pumpkin pie to get your spirits up, right sugar?” the voice says to a young girl, her mother wrapped tight around her shoulders.

Jack can’t see the person, his visibility is limited by the brim of his hat and there are several people in between Jack’s potatoes and cranberries and the pie at the end of the line, but he wants to.

“Extra whipped cream for you, darlin’,” he hears, the twang getting thicker with each endearment.

He leans backward surreptitiously, trying to catch a glimpse, but all he can see is a bit of blond hair before he needs to get back to scooping. Whoever the southerner is, he’s petite, short enough that he doesn’t even come up to Willis’ shoulders.
Jack thinks about the small southerner for the rest of the evening, always listening, taking in each word spoken in that accent like a prayer. It feels soothing somehow, the cadence of it, and Jack lets it wash over him as he scoops the last bit of potato out of his chafing dish at the end of the night.

It’s only as he looks down into the empty tin foil tray that Jack realizes how hungry he is. They’ve been serving for three hours straight, the line never stopping. His chafing dish had been switched out over a dozen times, and the thought of all of those potatoes making their way into hungry bellies makes Jack’s own hunger seem silly. He has a whole refrigerator of food at home.

Just as he’s thinking about stopping for a piping hot rotisserie chicken on the way home, that same voice speaks much closer to him, just a few feet behind his back. “Thank y’all for working so hard tonight. There’s a small little batch of everything waiting in the kitchen for all of us if you’re interested in staying for dinner.”

Jack feels his eyes widen as he turns around. The voice belongs to a young man. He can’t be more than 22, which is closer to Jack’s age than the man’s height suggested. The man is dressed nicely, a checkered shirt and a navy blue bow tie. He has on brown leather loafers that look well-loved and worn in blue jeans. The whole ensemble looks lived-in and warm, more inviting than it has any right to be. The man himself is pale, but there are freckles scattered across his nose and a shine in his hair that also suggest he spends time in the sun.

Jack can’t stop staring.

Nodding mechanically, Jack follows the group into the kitchen where a small table is set up. Willis has slipped out and Erikson is deep in conversation with a woman who Jack remembers as the manager of the shelter. An entire camera crew is clustered around them and the spotlight makes Jack wince. He turns away, silently thankful that he isn’t on point tonight and doesn’t need to sell himself for the camera much more than he did when he walked in.

As the team’s top scorer and captain, Jack is interviewed plenty, but most of the questions are centered around his gameplay. His robotic answers make it clear that personal questions will not be tolerated. They save the community appearances for the veteran Falcons that have been living in Providence for years. They come across as more genuine with the locals than Jack does.

“Lord, that looks awful,” the man says, not six inches from Jack’s elbow, passing him a plate.

“Trust me,” Jack says, fighting a blush. “It’s worse than you could possibly imagine.” There’s something about the honey-gold eyes that make Jack’s hands start to sweat. It’s in complete contrast to the sound of his voice, which is slow and soft enough that it makes something in Jack’s brain go calm and fuzzy.

“I’m sure you do just fine,” the man says, holding out a spoon full of cranberries above Jack’s plate with his eyebrows raised.

Jack nods dumbly, mouth going dry. He swallows hard, forcing something coherent to come out of his mouth. “They call me a hockey robot for a reason,” he finally manages. “I’ve never been great at dealing with the press.”

“Well I can’t imagine it’s easy for anyone,” the man says, eyes twinkling brightly in Jack’s direction as he holds out a basket of rolls. They look buttery and soft, and Jack mentally scolds himself for taking two. Not only are carbs a bad idea this late at night, but a homeless shelter is the last place he should be seen looking greedy.

“Having a camera shoved in your chubby little baby face must have made you a little gunshy,
Mister Zimmermann.”

“Just Jack, please,” Jack replies, voice softening at the wry little smile he gets in return.

“Eric Bittle,” the man says, holding out his free hand.

Jack discreetly wipes his sweaty hand off on his jeans before taking it. It’s dry and chilled, even though it’s more than warm enough inside. The bones feel almost delicate under his hand and Jack does his best to soften his grip. He knows from past experience that he’s stronger than is comfortable for most people.

“Nice to meet you, Just Jack.”

Jack smiles. It’s a small thing, but as soon as he sits down next to Eric, it begins to grow.

First, it’s the roll, soft and honey brown, dwarfed by his hand. Jack takes one bite and moans. “I see you like my baking,” Eric says, chuckling. Then it’s Eric’s laugh. The sound of it seems to fill Jack’s entire chest with light. He chokes on the roll, but can still taste it. It’s amazing.

“You made this?” Jack asks, swallowing roughly. The roll is soft and rich with that smooth eggy flavor that Jack is accustomed to in the context of omelettes and other protein-heavy foods he allows himself to eat. He rips the next one in half before eating it this time, marveling at the way the yellow square pulls apart.

“You bet your bottom, I did,” Eric tells him, still laughing as Jack savors every last chew of his second roll.

His hair is too long. Eric keeps reaching to brush it out of his eyes like he’s unused to the length. “And I’ll tell you a secret, too,” he says quietly, leaning in like it’s a particularly vicious piece of gossip. “That’s dollar store butter. You wouldn’t believe what I can do if I have the money for the good stuff.”

“There’s good butter?” Jack asks, curious. “Isn’t all butter just… butter?”

“I’m not gonna smack you, because we just met,” Eric says, pursing his lips, “but you should know that I’m thinking about it. Telling me all butter is the same? That’s just blasphemy. Don’t even get me started on the canned pie filling.”

“Is that what’s in these?” Jack asks, slipping his finger under the rim of a nearby pie tin.

Eric nods, face set in what Jack can only describe as fury. His face flushes and he looks down. Jack can feel his own face heat at the sight. It’s strange. The anxiety is almost welcome in this instance. It’s a sensation Jack has never felt before. He grows a bit more nervous every time Eric’s long fingers brush his hair, but he’s also eager not to sound like a complete idiot.

“And that’s… bad?” he asks, struggling to see the problem and already failing at not sounding stupid. The pies look amazing. The apple one even has that criss-cross pattern of crust on the top. It could be photographed for a magazine. In fact, Jack isn’t entirely sure it hasn’t been already as part of the Falconer’s philanthropy spread for the holidays.

“It’s a tragedy,” Eric says, looking down at his hands. “It’s shameful. But it’s what’s available. You don’t know what I’d give for some fresh nutmeg.”

Jack smiles, already formulating a plan for a return trip. If nutmeg and butter can put a look like
that on Eric’s face, he’s very interested in finding out what a whole crate of groceries could do.

“How long have you been working here?” Jack asks next. He knows he isn’t great at keeping a
conversation rolling, but his listening skills get better with every therapy session with Blaire. The
way Eric’s voice makes him feel has Jack thinking he would have no trouble listening to the man
speak for the rest of the evening, if not longer.

“Oh,” Eric says, startling for a moment. “I just come in to bake every once in a while. I’m not
here all too often.”

“Do you have another job?” Jack asks. “These rolls are so good, I’m sure you could have your
own bakery if you wanted.”

“Maybe someday,” Eric replies, cutting a slice of apple pie and sliding the plate over to Jack. He
cuts a piece of pumpkin for himself and takes a small, careful bite, his other hand clenched in a fist
on the table. “I’m just seeing where life takes me right now… doing a few part-time things.”

“That sounds nice,” Jack says, finding himself staring at Eric with his chin on his hand. He
changes positions quickly and picks up his fork, taking a large bite of the apple pie. It’s delicious,
flaky and rich and everything a pie should be. Jack can’t remember the last time he’s had such a
fulfilling cheat day.

“You look like you’ve died and gone to heaven,” Eric says, hand covering his mouth as he chews
another bite of pie.

“Crisse,” Jack says, swallowing his own mouthful. Eric is chirping him. It has no heat behind it,
it almost feels like flirting, but Jack doesn’t have a real frame of reference. When women and the
occasional man fling themselves at him, it’s obvious and for lack of a better word, dirty.
Sometimes it’s downright disgusting and makes Jack’s skin crawl. He isn’t overly comfortable
with sex, and he definitely doesn’t like hearing about it from strangers.

Eric is nothing like that. When Eric continues laughing and touches his arm briefly, Jack can feel
his heart beat in his chest, but for once, it’s in a good way. He isn’t nervous; he’s excited.

“Imagine what I could do with real butter,” Eric says, smiling around his next bite of pie.

Now Jack is sure Eric is flirting. He shoves another bite of apple pie in his mouth and chews
thoughtfully. Was the butter thing supposed to be dirty? Was it some kind of gay thing that flew
right over Jack’s head? It wouldn’t be the first time. Besides Kenny, Jack doesn’t have any
experience flirting with men. Hell, he doesn’t even watch porn. Maybe there’s butter in gay porn
now? He makes a mental note to ask Shitty about it.

Feeling like a complete idiot, Jack takes another big bite of pie so he doesn’t have to answer. Eric
takes that opportunity to put another slice on his plate. Jack smiles, even though his mouth is full.

“Listen to me going on and on about pie. You tell me more about yourself, Just Jack,” Eric
prompts, smiling encouragingly.

“Uhh,” Jack begins, forcing himself to put down his fork and actually make conversation. “I play
hockey.”

“You don’t say?” Eric says, smile widening.

“Chirp, chirp, chirp,” Jack says, desperately looking for something else to say.
Thankfully, Eric saves him from himself. “I used to skate as well,” he says, taking a sip of water before continuing. Jack notices that his hand shakes a bit, sloshing water almost out of the glass. “Trust me, teasing teammates is not limited to hockey. We figure skaters did our fair share of smack talking.”

“You were a figure skater?” Jack asks, looking down Eric’s body appraisingly. He’s small and compact, but out of shape. His wrists and arms look thin even under his long sleeves and his waist is impossibly small. There are several misshapen holes that looked to have been added to his belt leather.

“South Atlantic junior men’s champion three years in a row,” Eric says, puffing his chest out slightly. Jack can see the pride on his face, though it’s been quite a while since he’s seen the look in the mirror himself. Eric has the attitude of a champion that hadn’t quite made it. It only takes one more sentence for Jack to be proven right. “Would have medaled at Nationals, too, if I hadn’t had to move away from my coach.”

“You should come skate with us some time,” Jack offers, glancing around the room. Erikson is nowhere to be found and the camera crew has gone with him. “I bet you’re really fast, being so small.”

“I am not small!” Eric says sharply, offended but halfway to smirking. “I’m average sized for a skater, and trust me, honey, I could skate circles around you on your best day.”

“Circles, huh?” Jack asks, lips twitching with amusement.

“Quads,” Eric says, and then snaps his mouth shut when Jack raises his eyebrows. “Okay fine, triples. I’m out of practice.”

“Triples then,” Jack replies, letting his mouth curl into a smile. “You’ll have to show me sometime.”

“Sounds like fun,” Eric says, taking his last bite of pie.

Jack continues eating his slice, unable to keep the grin off his face. After helping clean up, he offers Eric a ride home, but the man refuses, saying he has some work to finish up. Jack walks away reluctantly, but turns back to wave, knowing he’ll return before too long.

Eric waves as well, and the glow of his smile makes Jack’s cheeks heat again. He has a shameless crush on a former figure skating champion. It’s an entirely foreign concept to him, and yet Jack knows exactly what he was going to do about it.
Jack hasn’t stopped smiling for days. So much so, that the rest of the team has started to notice.

“You get girlfriend, Zimmboni?” Mashkov asks in the locker room after Tuesday’s practice. Jack throws a roll of tape at him but doesn’t answer. “Big smile on Mister Captain today.”

“Don’t be so heteronormative, Tater,” Snowy says, clasping Jack on the shoulder.

“Oh yes, you right. Zimmboni get boyfriend?” Tater asks instead, throwing the roll back.

Jack catches it one-handed. “No,” Jack says, smiling again. “No boyfriend.”

“Maybe he just got laid,” Thirdy shouts from the corner, a shit-eating grin on his face.

“I did not!” Jack says back, scandalized. “And even if I did, it’d be none of your business,” he adds, pulling a clean shirt on. It sticks to his skin where the water dripped from his hair, but he doesn’t care. He has a free afternoon and plans to head to the farmer’s market. Maybe he had rushed through his shower, but he’s pretty sure he smells clean at least.

“Come on, Cap,” Thirdy says, coming up next to Jack and offering a reassuring look. “The boys are just looking out for you. It’s been months since you came out and you still haven’t brought anyone special to any of the team parties. They’re starting to worry about you.”

“Yes,” Tater says, shamelessly drying his ass with a too-small gym towel. “You do brave thing, saying you like men too, but then you don’t like any men? Why is we never see you with any man? They must like you back, yes? These...” he thinks for a moment, searching for the right word. “Puck foxes?” he settles on.

Jack laughs. Tater sounds honestly confused, like Jack isn’t taking advantage of his status as a famous bisexual. “I just don’t do casual stuff. It never feels right. I’ll find someone eventually. You don’t have to worry about me. Hockey is more important right now,” he says, turning back to Thirdy. It still feels wrong to hear the older man call him Captain, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t appreciate the gesture.

Jack has really come into his own in the last few years with the Falcs. He’s about to start his second season as captain and after losing in the playoffs last year, Jack has a feeling there’s a Stanley Cup in his future. He doesn’t want to jinx it, but his outlook is decidedly sunny these days and it feels good to be buoyed by the team’s collective positivity.

“You know there’s a word for that, right?” Snowy says from somewhere near his left shoulder. “Google demisexual when you get home. Might sound familiar to you.”

“Thanks, Snow,” Jack says, knowing he won’t be bothering to use Google when he could just ask Shitty about it on Skype later. He came out as bisexual last season following a heated argument with Kenny. After a few bad calls knocked the Aces out of the playoffs during a game with the Falcs, Kent had threatened to out them, claiming he had pictures of Jack in a variety of compromising positions.

Jack honestly didn’t know if Kenny was telling the truth or not. He’d been either drunk or drugged up every time they’d been together, so he assumed that the pictures existed and took the threat as an opportunity to get ahead of the story. He’d been with Kenny for almost two years back in the Q and they’d brought girls back to their room a few times, so he chose the label bisexual, even though
he didn’t know if it fit or not. At least if he ever found himself attracted to a woman in the future, he’d have his bases covered.

He’d come out on a whim after they lost the playoffs last season. Georgia and the team had taken it well so they went ahead with a press conference. Thirdy stood to his left, and Tater stood to his right, making threats toward anyone who even thought about bullying Jack for his sexuality. Since then, he hasn’t dated. He hasn’t even thought about dating anyone.

Until now.

He definitely needs to talk to Shitty tonight, but first, he has a delivery to make.

After begging off the usual after practice lunch, Jack heads to the farmer’s market on Hope Street. It’s inside the atrium building during the winter, and there are a variety of food trucks out front. He grabs a quick lunch full of quinoa, kale, and grilled chicken from the Z truck, which offers “soupz” and “saladz.” Jack isn’t impressed with the gimmicky names, but the food does the trick. Jack has a game tomorrow and he needs to try and keep his energy up. It takes a lot of calories.

He stops as soon as he enters the market, seeing a bright display of shiny green apples. He buys an entire crate, along with organic brown eggs, honeycomb, and some freshly churned butter. A large bouquet of wildflowers tops the whole thing off.

Jack smiles to himself and drives back over to the shelter, parking in the decrepit back lot. He has some trouble seeing over his burden but makes it inside to the front desk safely. “Is Eric working today?” he asks the familiar looking woman who is seated there.

“I think he’s inside eating his lunch,” the woman replies, gesturing behind her toward the cafeteria. Jack looks down, her name tag says “Marguerite.” He thanks her, and scans the tables for a head of blond hair.

“What in the world?” he hears from behind a faceful of flowers. “What are you doing here, Mister Zimmermann?”

Jack puts the crate down on the ratty fold-out table and smiles meekly, hoping he hasn’t made a mistake. “You told me you’d kill for some fresh ingredients, so…” he trails off again, reaching up to scratch the back of his hair. Eric’s hand immediately flies up to brush his bangs out of the way, mimicking the gesture. “Is it too much?”

“Honey, no,” Eric says, abandoning his soggy looking sandwich and carton of milk.

The minute his accent hits Jack’s ears, he melts. He’s not at all used to this feeling, and it’s starting to scare him a little bit, but maybe in a good way.

“You just didn’t need to go through all that trouble. You must be so busy practicing right now.”

“We have a game tomorrow night, but I’m done for today,” Jack says sheepishly, searching Eric’s face for a spark of interest. “Are you free?”

“Free as a bird,” Eric says, taking his sandwich and milk to the trash can. “What did you have in mind?”

“Well,” Jack begins, breath catching in his throat as he searches for the right words. “I’ve never made a pie before…” he trails off again, eyes hopeful. “Maybe you could teach me?”

“That sounds like fun,” Eric says, heading toward the kitchen. He pushes the swinging door open
and calls inside. “Hello, Miss Natasha? Could I use an oven for a bit? You have time before dinner?”

Miss Natasha is an older European woman with fiery red hair tucked up in a bandanna. “You’ll clean up after yourselves?” she asks, checking on a pot on the stovetop.

“Yes, ma’am,” Eric says, gesturing for Jack to put the apples down on the counter. “And I’ll leave a pie for you in your cubby, as a thank you.”

“Just do me a favor and stir this pot every once in a while? I’m gonna take a break.”

“No problem, Miss Natasha,” Eric says, eyes lighting up when he sees the mason jar of fresh butter. His jaw drops open and he shakes it in Jack’s direction mouthing, oh my God!

“You and your friend serve dinner and we’ll call it even,” she calls as she heads out the swinging door, shaking her head at Eric’s antics.

“You don’t have to do that, she’s just teasing,” Eric says, unpacking the apples and searching for two peelers.

“I don’t mind,” Jack says, studying Eric’s technique and attempting to mimic it. “I like talking to you. And I don’t have any other plans.”

“You’re sweet, Mister Zimmermann, but you’re mangling that apple something awful,” Eric says, laughing at Jack’s poor attempt at peeling.

“Can you show me?” he asks, dropping the apple to the countertop in his haste to stop the offense.

“Just do as I do,” Eric says, voice soft and patient. “Go to the bottom first, and press hard, just one circle around the bottom,” he says, hands quick and efficient. “Then do the same around the top, and slice broad down the sides all around. That’s the quickest way without a crazy countertop peeler. Trust me, I’ve done the research.”

“Made a lot of pies?” Jack asks, slowly getting the hang of Eric’s technique.

“Only enough to feed half of Georgia,” Eric says, sighing fondly.

“That’s where you’re from?”

“Yes, sir, just outside Madison,” Eric says, quickly moving through a dozen apples while Jack struggles with his third. “The land of Confederate Flags, shotguns, and Jesus. What about you?”

“Montreal,” Jack replies, studying Eric’s hands again to get a second lesson at apple peeling. “English is my second language.”

“Honey, coming from the south you could say English is my second language, too,” Eric says, laughing freely.

“I like the way you talk,” Jack says seriously. He watches Eric’s Adam’s apple bob in his throat as he swallows, a look of shock spread across Eric’s pale face.

“I sound like a hick.”

“Not to me,” Jack assures him, ducking his head when Eric’s gaze gets too intense. The kitchen is quiet. Eric has finished peeling the apples and now Jack isn’t sure what to do. Biting his lip, he
plants his feet and hip checks the small man next to him.

Eric stumbles but doesn’t fall. He looks up from his crouch, face red. “You did not just check me!” he calls, pushing against Jack’s chest with two hands. Jack doesn’t budge an inch. “Oh my God, what are you? Made of bricks?”

Jack chuckles and allows Eric to push him when he tries for a second time. He lets his chest give a little, his shoulders moving back a few inches. “Ouch,” Jack says, tone sarcastic.

“Do not sass me like that, Mister Zimmermann!” Eric says, rolling his eyes. “Just because you’ve been playing hockey since you were in diapers doesn’t mean the rest of us are used to checking! Especially not in the kitchen! There are knives in here! And fires!” he nearly shouts, but Jack can’t hold in a laugh.

“I learned to skate when I was two,” Jack says, still chuckling. “I was out of diapers by then. But I did poop in the Stanley Cup once.”

“You did not!” Eric cries, wiping a stray tear of laughter out of his eye. “Tell me that’s not true!”

“Well, not directly,” Jack says, deadpan. “But it was pretty obvious… and there are pictures to prove it. My parents love showing them to people when they think my head is getting too big, or they just feel like embarrassing me.”

“Maybe you should have been nicknamed Poots,” Eric says, gasping for breath as he continues to laugh.

“I didn’t get a nickname until Alexei Mashkov joined the team,” Jack says, turning around to lean against the counter. Suddenly remembering, he crosses the kitchen and stirs the gigantic pot of chili, happy to not incur the wrath of Miss Natasha.

“What is it?” Eric asks, sharpening a knife with quick, practiced motions.

“No one uses it but Tater,” Jack says, eyes transfixed on Eric’s face as he expertly slices the apples in half one by one. The man is so focused, eyes sharp and yet still such a soft honey brown. Jack wonders what it would feel like to be under that kind of scrutiny.

“You tell me yours, I’ll tell you mine,” Eric offers, picking up a melon baller and showing Jack how he should start coring the apples.

“You had a hockey nickname?” Jack asks, hands shaking a little as he pictures himself completely butchering the apple halves until there are only jagged chunks left.

“Well, it was for pee wee football, but it’s all the same really. Coach made me play until I was seven and put on my skates for the first time.”

“I can’t picture that at all,” Jack says, looking Eric up and down for what he’s confident will not be the last time. Eric looks soft, but strong. His hair is still shiny and gold, even in the harsh lighting of the industrial kitchen. Jack wonders what it feels like, how soft it might be rubbing against the skin of his cheek or sliding between his fingers.

“It did not end well for me,” Eric says, laughing it off. It sounds a bit forced, but Jack lets it slide, content to carry on watching him slice the apples. After a few minutes have passed, Eric looks up from the cutting board and raises his eyebrows saying, “Well?”

“Umm…” Jack hedges, having completely forgotten what they were talking about before he
started daydreaming about touching the man in front of him. “Oh,” he says as it comes back to him. “Tater calls me Zimmboni,” he finishes lamely. The hint of a smile spreads across his lips when Eric starts to laugh, putting the knife down on the counter to clutch at his stomach.

“And you let him?” Eric asks between gasps of laughter.

“He’s 6’5”. Most people let him do whatever he wants,” Jack points out.

“Are you saying you can’t take him?” Eric asks, eyes incredulous. “I can’t believe you would admit to such a thing, big moose of a man that you are.”

“Tater could lift me with one arm. I had to ask him to stop picking me up during cellys,” Jack admits, fiddling with a pile of apple peels. He pops a piece into his mouth and then immediately regrets it. The texture feels all wrong against his tongue, but he swallows it down anyway instead of fishing it out. He can feel himself blushing but can’t make it stop.

“I’m sure you could pick me up with one arm if you tried,” Eric says, pulling Jack from his thoughts.

“I’d never do that without asking first,” Jack says softly, forcing himself to look Eric in the eye and not at his waist, which is small enough that Jack thinks he might be able to touch his fingers around the middle.

“Such a gentleman,” Eric comments, picking up the knife to finish chopping the apples.

“You never said what your nickname was,” Jack points out, reluctantly reaching for another apple to core. He’s loathe to take his eyes off of Eric and the way his hands move swiftly on the cutting board.

“You caught that, did you?” Eric says, biting his lip.

“It can’t be worse than mine.”

“It’s not worse, just no one here uses it. It’s kind of strange telling someone. Back in Georgia, it’s just what everyone called me forever. Except for my mama,” Eric says, face going stone cold when he mentions his mother. Jack wants to ask but knows it isn’t his place. He barely knows Eric and doesn’t want to press his luck when things seem to be going so well.

“I don’t have to use it if you don’t want me to,” Jack says softly, barely noticing as he takes a step closer to Eric. He only just stops himself from reaching out. It’s so strange, Jack almost never initiates touch, and especially not with strangers. He doesn’t quite understand why Eric seems to be an exception to most of his rules. “You don’t have to call me Zimmboni. In fact, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t.”

Eric laughs and pushes his hair out of his eyes once more. Jack’s eyes follow the movement, again wondering what he might look like with a fresh haircut. “I don’t mind if you use it,” he says, taking a deep breath. “It’s Bitty. My name is Bitty.”

“Bitty,” Jack repeats, rolling the word around in his mouth. It feels right. The way it forms in his throat feels special somehow, like a secret. No one outside Georgia knows Bitty’s name. It’s just for him now, and it feels intimate in a way Jack hasn’t experienced in a long time.

Names have power, and nicknames, especially ones freely given, feel impossibly important. His mind flashes briefly to Kenny and the way he had whispered to him, hot and wet in his ear whenever he wanted something. That breathy, Zimms always seemed to get Kenny whatever he
wanted. Jack would never abuse Bitty’s name like that.

“I like it,” Jack says finally, a smile playing around his lips. “Nice to meet you, Bitty.”

“God, don’t wear it out, honey. You’ll give me a heart attack if you say it like that too often,” Bitty says, and it feels like a chirp, but Jack isn’t quite sure. Is this flirting? If this is what it feels like to be flirted with by Bitty, he might be okay with it.

“Okay, Bitty,” Jack says, pinching his mouth closed with an exaggerated gesture.

Eric swats at him playfully and then goes for the butter, tossing some in a large skillet. “Don’t you sass me, Mister Zimmermann. We’ve got pies to make, and we haven’t even gotten to the crust yet.”

“Yes, Chef,” Jack says, watching Eric fiddle with a burner that won’t light.

“Now, this may seem controversial, and Lord knows I’ve heard enough about it over the years from the Bittle clan, but I like to cook the fruit before I put it in the pie,” Eric says, setting off on a long ramble. “Fresh fruit is too watery and I don’t care for cornstarch in my pie fillings. Sure, some people use flour, but I can always taste it, no matter how it’s done, so we’re just gonna cook these beautiful apples just until they’ve given up their water. No more than that or they won’t have any texture at all once they’re baked. We add a little sugar to draw the water out and then our spices. And you finish that all with a few pats of butter to give ‘em a saucy finish.”

Jack has completely zoned out, lost in the sound of Bitty’s voice. It barely matters what he’s talking about, Jack just wants more of that soft Southern drawl in his ears. Eventually, Eric says the word saucy and Jack’s brain turns back online. When he looks up, Eric is tossing the apples in a pan that looks far too heavy, but Eric is strong and has no trouble with it. A few casual flicks of the forearm and the apples are well mixed. Jack stares at his muscles moving under his shirt sleeves for a few minutes, completely transfixed.

“Now Jack, why don’t you start measuring out the flour we’re going to need. There’s bins and a scale over there on that rack,” Eric says, pointing across the kitchen with his free hand. “We want this mix to cool completely while our dough chills, otherwise that steam will just give you a crazy dome on top of your pie, and we don’t want that, do we sugar?”

“No, Chef,” Jack agrees readily, reveling in the smile that spreads across Bitty’s face each time he uses the honorific.
Chapter 3

Update: It's the last day of NaNoWrimo and this thing is 85k words and I still have a few scenes to write. I'm gonna adjust my estimate to 100k. Hope that's cool with y'all!

Jack grills some chicken and roasts vegetables for dinner, a smile on his face the entire time. When everything is done he opens his laptop and sets it up on the breakfast bar, tapping the video button next to Shitty’s face on Skype.

“Jack Laurent Zimmermann, you beautiful mother fucker! How are you?” Shitty crows, lying across his bed, law books strewn everywhere. He’s studying for the bar, but has apparently taken a break to get particularly high, if the slight haze in the room and droop of his eyes is anything to go by.

“I’m good,” Jack says between bites of chicken. “Just a few more weeks before we break for Christmas. You’re coming to our game against the Habs, right?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world, Jackie boy,” Shitty says, mustache twitching as his smile grows. “It’s the day after my test, so I’ll be free and clear, ready to get shwasted!”

“Sounds great,” Jack says, smiling himself. “I have tickets for Lardo, and Rans, and Holster, too. Whoever can make it.”

“Your parents coming?”

“Yeah,” Jack says, laughing when Shitty pretends to swoon. “Try not to kiss them on the mouth when the cameras are rolling this time, okay?”

“No can do,” Shitty says, stretching out with his hands behind his head. “Your father is a beautiful man.”

“You’re not even gay,” Jack protests, chuckling.

“Doesn’t matter. I can still appreciate the male form, and you Zimmermann men are sheer perfection. If I were gay, I would’ve married you by now.”

“Thanks, Shits,” Jack says, sighing heavily. Everything seems so easy for Shitty. He’s always known exactly who he is and what he wants. He’s never been bogged down by labels or forced to come out by a crazy ex-boyfriend. Jack wishes he could be as brave as Shitty, not caring what anyone else thinks, free with his affection and his love.

“What’s wrong, my man? You’re looking blue.”

“Am I demisexual?” Jack asks, apropos of nothing.

“I don’t know, are you?” Shitty asks back, eyebrows furrowing.

“I don’t know. I don’t even know what it means…”
“Then why are you asking?”

“Snowy said it might sound familiar to me, since I never seem to date anyone,” Jack says, pushing his vegetables around with his fork. He knows he needs to eat them. Now is the time to be packing on the weight for the winter season if he’s going to be strong enough to play through the playoffs, so he swallows a forkful without chewing, knowing it’s what his body needs.

“That doesn’t mean you’re demi, brah,” Shitty says, sitting back up and pulling off his tee shirt. “I feel like I need to be naked for this conversation.”

Jack rolls his eyes but lets Shitty strip down to his boxers before looking back at the screen.

“Demisexuals need a strong bond to feel sexual attraction. They’re on the asexual spectrum. Some feel sexual attraction more than others, but generally, they need to know someone really well and feel a strong connection before they want to do the dirty with them.”

“Hmm,” Jack says, thinking it over. He doesn’t know what he’s feeling, but he’s certainly been thinking about touching a certain southern baker, and that doesn’t seem to match up with what Shitty is saying. “And if I were attracted to someone immediately?” he asks, wondering if he’s just a hockey robot after all.

“Then I’d ask for deets,” Shitty says, wagging his eyebrows.

Jack rolls his eyes again, but starts talking. It’s always been easy talking to Shitty. Not at first, when Jack was fresh from Montreal and hadn’t had friends in years, but quickly after that, when Shitty would crawl into his bed and hold him when he had panic attacks freshman year. It was always easier talking in the dark, wrapped up in someone’s arms. It never mattered what Jack said, as long as he got the words out, and Shitty would always wait patiently for Jack to figure out what he wanted to say and never pass judgment. It’s something he’s never taken for granted, not since they met.

“There’s this guy that works at the homeless shelter,” he says, licking his lips and pressing them together, searching for a description. “He’s blond, and small, and he likes to bake. He has a southern accent and used to figure skate in Georgia.”

“And?” Shitty prompts, smile growing by the moment.

“And I like his hair and the way he talks and his freckles.”

“That’s good,” Shitty says, nudging him along. “And do you want to date this adorable southern baker?”

“I…” Jack thinks for a second. He could date Bitty. He’s out, he’s single, he’s an adult. He could ask Bitty out and actually go on a date with him. That’s a thing that Jack could do, if he wanted. “I don’t know,” he says, lips twisting as he looks down at the chicken he left on his plate, now gone cold. “Maybe.”

“What’s stopping you, then?” Shitty asks, twirling the tip of his mustache like he’s pondering the great mysteries of the universe.

“I don’t know if I’m going to want… things with him,” Jack says finally, unable to say any of the other words that he’s thinking.

“Like bedroom things?” Shitty asks, still twirling away.
“Yeah, bedroom things,” Jack says, hiding his face with his hand. If he can’t even talk to Shitty about this, how is he going to be able to talk to Bitty about it?

“Do you feel attracted to him?”

“Well, yeah, but like, how do I know if he’s going to get the reaction that he’s looking for? I haven’t been hard in like, months,” Jack says, letting the words tumble out behind his hands. It’s more like a year, if he’s being honest with himself, and before that it wasn’t anything special, just a dream that had him waking up hard. He couldn’t even remember what it was about.

“Well, let’s come back to that in a minute,” Shitty says, knowing how uncomfortable Jack is talking about sex. “When is the last time you’d say you’ve been attracted to someone?”

“Kenny,” Jack says simply, knowing it to be true.

“No celebrities, no one in porn or on TV, not even some hot girl walking by on the street?” Shitty asks, just to be thorough.

“No.”

“Not even taking a peek at someone in the locker room?”

“No, I never do that,” Jack says. Even if he wanted to, he’s always kept his eyes to himself. He knows that’s one sure way to get kicked off a hockey team.

Jack hasn’t had to deal with much in the way of homophobia with his team. Even the press laid off him pretty quickly because he never seemed to date anyone. Hell, he rarely socializes outside the team, and he never gets to see Shitty anymore since law school keeps him so busy, so no one has even speculated that they might be dating. Every so often he gets pushed into the boards and called a fag, but he’s never let it bother him too much. He’s always been able to shake it off and focus on the hockey. That’s all that’s ever been important to him, even when he was dating Kent.

“You’re telling me, you haven’t gotten a boner for anyone, man or woman, since you were sleeping with Kent Parson?” Shitty clarifies, mouth falling open as he considers this.

“I don’t know that I’ve ever gotten a boner for a woman at all, to be fair,” Jack says. “More like happened to have a boner when a girl was in the room.”

“What about Camilla? Did you like her? You went out like… multiple times! You went to Winter Screw together two years in a row!”

“I liked her as a person. I never slept with her. We kissed goodnight once, but that was it. It was friendly more than anything.”

“But you came out as bi,” Shitty answers, staring at him with wide eyes.

“I slept with women when Kenny asked me to. It just seemed like the easiest answer.”

“Did you even want to sleep with those women, Jack?” Shitty asks, voice rising slightly though he’s obviously trying to fight it.

The tone makes Jack nervous, but he answers anyway. “Not really,” he says, biting his bottom lip. “Kenny liked them and I just, wanted him to be happy, so I did what he wanted.”

“That mother fucker,” Shitty mutters, hands clenched into fists in front of his mouth. “I’ll fucking
“We already know it wasn’t the best relationship,” Jack says. “I was in rehab for months talking about this stuff, working it all out. He knew how to control me, knew just what to say. When he threatened me, I just knew he wasn’t bluffing. He’s always wanted to keep me down.”

“Let me get this right… You came out as bisexual because your ex threatened to out you with nudes, and you’re not even sure you like women because he made you sleep with them, and now you’re worried about asking out the cute baker because you’re not sure you even like sex?”

“…uhh,” Jack says, scratching the back of his head with one hand. “Yes?”

“Have you been thinking about having sex with the cute baker?” Shitty asks, eyes narrowing as he puts all the pieces of Jack’s sexual history together.

“His name is Eric,” Jack says, not sure why he wants to make a point of it, but doing so all the same.

“Do you want to do the sex with Eric?” Shitty asks, catching Jack’s drift immediately.

“Maybe not sex so much as… kissing and stuff?”

“What kind of stuff?”

“I want to know what his hair feels like,” Jack admits softly, not meeting Shitty’s eye.

“Have you talked to Blaire about any of this?” Shitty asks.

“She told me when I started taking my meds that I might have sexual dysfunction, but I didn’t really want to have sex anyway, so I never thought to ask about it.”

“But you never wanted much sex, right? Even before you started taking the meds?”

“I wanted sex with Kent all the time,” Jack says. “I wanted to be with him all the time. However and whenever I could.”

“Jack… Did he ever give you any other sort of intimacy? Did you have to sleep with him to touch him? Because that’s not right either.”

“No,” Jack says, thinking back to days he would rather forget. “Kenny was always affectionate. We kissed and cuddled, but then we also drank and did drugs, and I don’t remember everything about us being together. I’m not sure I ever slept with him sober. I always wanted more, to push more, play better, beat him in goals on the ice. Not all of it was good, but not all of it was bad either. Not until the overdose, at least.”

“But he still blackmailed you,” Shitty says, practically grinding his teeth together.

“Yes,” Jack nods. “We did a lot of bad things to each other. But that’s not what this is about.”

“What is it about, Jack?”

“I want to kiss Bitty but I don’t know if I’m going to freak out if he tries to have sex with me,” Jack says in a rush, smacking his hands to his face and dragging them down in frustration.

“Well,” Shitty says, linking his fingers together. “I think sexual attraction is rare for you, and you owe it to yourself to find out if this Bitty person really does it for you. But I also think that maybe
your meds have been making it especially hard for you to... get hard and really sink the goal in the net, if you catch my meaning."

“Shitty,” Jack groans, hiding his face again.

“But if you’re really interested in the blond baker, you should make a move. If things look like they’re headed in the horizontal direction, just be honest with him.”

“How?”

“Now, I’m just spitballing here, but from what you’ve said, it sounds like you’re somewhere on the ace spectrum, my friend. Not demisexual so much as a grey ace, or something along those lines. You do experience sexual attraction, but it’s rare as hell and something to be cherished. So you put on your big boy boxers and tell him that you might get hard, and you might not, but ultimately, you want to suck his dick in the manner of a sonnet.”

“I am not telling him that!” Jack groans again, staring at the ceiling like it holds all the answers.

“It would be an honor and a privilege to get on your knees for Georgia’s finest peach!”

“You are the worst.”

“Tell him you want to get your hands on that majestic flow and sing *O Canada* into his ear as quiet as an angel’s wing!”

“I’m not telling him that either.”

“You called me, Jackie boy,” Shitty says, grinning into the camera. “I’m your best friend.”

“You’re my only friend,” Jack counters, the corner of his lip twitching as he fights a smile.

“Don’t let Lardo or the boys hear you say that,” Shitty warns him, holding a finger up to the camera.

“You’re still kind of my favorite,” Jack says, giving him a small smile.

“I love you too, Jack,” Shitty says, flopping back down on his pillows with his arms crossed behind his head. “Now why don’t you heat that chicken back up and tell me about your new camera?”

Jack shakes his head but stands to do just that, slowly turning the word “asexual” around in his mind as he waits for the microwave.
A few days later, after a roadie to California, Jack realizes that he never asked for Eric’s number. If he wants to see him again, he’s going to have to go back to the shelter and look for him. Tying on his obnoxious yellow running shoes, Jack checks that he has his keys, wallet, and cellphone before starting his run.

On days he doesn’t have practice, Jack usually runs upward of ten miles. He caps it at twelve because he doesn’t want to overwork himself but his speed had been lacking last season and he’s looking to work on his stamina. His usual route doesn’t take him to the seedier part of town where the shelter is, so he amends it for today, hitting his eight-mile mark as he jogs to a stop in front of the run-down building.

It’s not open yet, being 10 in the morning—they usually only start lunch at 11—but there’s already a line of tired and cold looking people waiting out front. Jack knows he looks out of place in his ColdGear, toque pulled over his hair and ears, but after only a minute, he sees Eric walk up the street.

Eric looks frozen to the pavement. He’s wearing a thin coat that’s a little too big on him and has a backpack slung over one shoulder. Jack watches him for a moment. Bitty is rubbing his hands together and blowing into them, the tips of his ears chapped red and wind-bitten.

“Eric!” he calls, jogging toward him. “You must be freezing!”

“Well, winter is more of a state of mind back in Georgia,” he says, eyes widening in shock when he sees Jack. “It never got anywhere near this cold. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to the climate around here.”

“Do you have to work right now? Or can I take you for a cup of coffee?” Jack asks, trying not to sound overeager.

“I could go for a cup, sure,” Eric says, tucking his hands in the pockets of his coat.

“Great,” Jack says, heading off in the opposite direction where there’s a Dunkin Donuts. Starbucks is far too expensive for this neighborhood. “What do you want?” he asks Eric when it’s their turn in line.

“I’ll have a mocha mint, please,” he says quietly, eyes scanning the crowd like he expects fans to descend any moment.

“Anything to eat?” Jack asks, figuring Eric doesn’t subsist on protein shakes and fruit like he does in the mornings.

“No, that’s fine,” Eric says hastily, looking nervous.

“A plain bagel with butter, toasted, and these,” Jack tells the cashier anyway, holding up a few bananas. Somehow he knows Eric is lying. He pays and they take a seat with food in hand. “How was your weekend?” Jack asks, sliding the bagel over to Eric as he peels his first banana.

“Not bad,” Eric says, staring down at the bagel like he’s not sure what to do with it.

Jack doesn’t know if he should mention it, so he presses on. “Do anything fun?”

“I was on the west coast. Won against the Aces, lost against the Ducks,” he says.

Eric’s eyes light up so he tries to elaborate even though pretending to be okay about playing against Kenny makes his chest ache. It never gets any easier, meeting Kent on the ice. This time they didn’t even say a word to each other and it still made Jack want to cry when the game was over.

He wasn’t sure if he really wanted to hear anything from Kent anyway, but somehow the silence is harder to deal with.

After Jack came out, it seemed like Kenny had lost his leverage and was even angrier than before. He couldn’t do anything to Jack without implicating himself, so he just stewed in rage. To this day, whenever Jack's phone chimes, a chill runs through him, thinking that it might be a hurtful message from Kent. The current silence from Kenny is deafening, and Jack finds that he’s always waiting for the other shoe to drop, always on edge when a game against the Aces starts to loom on the calendar.

“It’s always tough playing against the Aces.” Jack hates how he sounds like he's giving an interview. “They're a great team and I used to be friends with their captain,” he lies through his teeth. It had never been that simple between him and Kent. Friendship had never been a big enough word to cover what they were to each other, even in the beginning.

“But things have changed and…” he struggles to find the words, so he just continues spouting half-truths. “They're really tough on me, but my D men have my back. I got away with only a bruised hip this time around. Tater spent a few minutes in the sin bin, though.”

In the few moments since Jack’s been talking, the bagel has disappeared and Eric is staring down at his cup of coffee, fingers clenched around it tightly. They’re pinking up, as they were probably frozen outside since Eric hadn’t been wearing gloves.

Smiling fondly, Jack slides a banana over to him saying, “You should eat more protein. Need to store up some heat if you’re going to survive this winter, eh?”

Eric lets out a nervous laugh but takes the banana, peeling it with shaking fingers. “Thanks, Jack,” he says, taking a bite and swallowing slowly.

Jack watches the way his throat contracts with mild interest. He feels a little hot and decides to take his hat off, running his hands through his sweaty hair to flatten it. “I wanted to call you, but I forgot to ask for your number,” he says, licking his lips nervously.

“I…” Bitty hesitates for a moment.

“Oh no,” Jack thinks. He’s read this wrong, hasn’t he? Bitty’s not gay or not interested, or just doesn’t want to deal with his celebrity bullshit. Jack doesn’t know what he was thinking. He’s going to be an absent boyfriend at best and an inattentive one at worst. He can’t expect someone as bright and lovely as Bitty to want to live under the scrutiny that comes with Jack's career.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked,” Jack stutters out, clenching his hand into a fist. He lets out a huff of breath and goes to grab his coffee cup before a cold hand on his forearm stops him.

“It’s not that I don’t like you, honey,” Bitty says quickly, a blush rising on his pale cheeks. “It’s just that I don’t—I don’t actually have a phone. I uh, lost it a few months ago and realized that I could do just fine without it.”

“Oh!” Jack says, the fear leaving him with his breath. “Oh, okay. That’s alright. Can I call you at
the shelter or—"

“How about I give you my email address?” Bitty suggests, smiling when Jack passes over his phone for him to type it in. “I shouldn’t take personal calls at the shelter, is all.”

“That’s perfect,” Jack says, face heating up. “Thank you.”

“I’ll be glad to talk to you, Jack,” Bitty says.

Jack’s chest swells with warmth when Eric says his name. It’s not that he doesn’t hear it often enough. His parents, and Georgia, and some of the staff at the rink always call him Jack, but hearing it in that slight southern lilt just… does something to him.

“Do you have to get to work, or—”

“—I’d be happy to keep talking to you right now,” Bitty says, ducking his head to hide his smile. “Goodness, but you’ve got me nervous.”

“Me? Why?” Jack asks, taking a sip of his tea to hide his face.

“Well, you’re a celebrity,” Bitty says, exasperated. “If you haven’t noticed, there’s a group of girls in the corner who are just dying to ask for your autograph.”

Jack glances at the group out of the corner of his eye, not wanting to give them an opening. “I’ve gotten used to it, I guess,” he says sheepishly. “I’ve never liked the cameras or the press, but people have been following me since I was old enough to talk. I don’t have a Twitter or anything, so I guess they think I’m a bit of a mystery.”

“And what is it that you like to do, Mister Zimmermann?” Bitty asks, finishing his banana and accepting a second one from Jack’s hand.

“Uh… well, I play hockey.”

“You’ve mentioned,” Bitty says, fighting a giggle.

“Don’t laugh at me, I’m shy,” Jack says, laughing along, just a little.

“Oh honey, you’ve got nothing to be shy about.”

“I’ve never uh… dated anyone before. Not really,” Jack says quietly, afraid to look up and see Eric’s expression.

“Is that what you’d like to do, sugar?” Bitty asks, accent getting even thicker as the tension between them grows. “Date me?”

“If that’s okay,” Jack says, finally looking up to see Bitty smiling at him. It’s just shy of sexual, the look of interest on his face, and Jack finds that comforting. It doesn’t feel like too much too fast, or more than Jack can handle.

“It’s more than okay, Jack. I’d like that,” he says, hands clenched around his cup. “But I think maybe we should keep it a bit quiet, don’t you? I don’t care for the looks those girls are giving me, and I think it’d be nice to just keep this between us for a spell. If you don’t mind.”

“If you want,” Jack says slowly, thinking it over. “I don’t want anyone to bother you because of me. We can just be good friends if anyone asks?”
“That’s probably safest for now,” Bitty agrees, relaxing his shoulders slightly. “You’re going to make it to the playoffs this year and I think you should probably be focusing on hockey.”

“Don’t jinx me,” Jack says, trying to laugh it off. “Last year didn’t go very well.”

“You did a fantastic job, Jack,” Bitty says, voice going all soft. It goes straight to Jack’s gut and squirms there. “It was only your first year as captain, wasn’t it? That’s nothing to shake a stick at.”

“You follow hockey then?” Jack asks, fighting back a smile.

“It’s hard not to in this town,” Bitty says. “Your face is on a billboard just two blocks from here. But why don’t you tell me a little bit more about Just Jack, huh? What else do you like to do when you’re not playing hockey?”

“I read,” Jack says, biting his bottom lip. “I got my degree in history from Samwell, so I prefer nonfiction books. I like presidential biographies and some historical fiction, if the accuracy is there.”

“What else?” Bitty asks, eyes fixated on Jack as he finishes off the second banana.

Jack watches him closely as he cleans his fingers on a napkin. He’s meticulous, folding the peels back up and rolling them in the napkin when he’s finished. He wipes off the table in front of him and then leans his elbows there, attention back on Jack.

It’s interesting, Jack thinks. The spotlight is always on him, but it usually feels disingenuous. He knows he’s not that interesting, that the press have to focus on him because he’s the captain, but he always gives them banal answers, always what they expect to hear. This kind of scrutiny is a completely different sort. Bitty’s eyes are bright as they watch him, eager and beautiful.

“Sometimes I take pictures,” Jack says eventually, knowing he’s been asked a question and needs to give an answer. It’s something he’s been working on with Blaire in their bi-weekly Skype sessions, keeping conversations alive.

“Jack Zimmermann,” Bitty says, smiling again. “I didn’t peg you for an artist.”

“I’m not an artist,” Jack protests, looking down again. “I just took one class at school, but I liked it. It helps with my anxiety,” he says after a breath, remembering what Shitty said. Honesty is always the best policy. “To slow down every once in a while and be still. To catch things that might be fleeting and hold onto them for a second. If you get a photo of something… it’s forever.” Not for the first time, Jack thinks about catching some of Bitty's freckles on film.

“That’s a nice thought, Jack,” Bitty says, reaching out to touch his arm again and then thinking better of it.

Jack wishes he could feel those cool fingertips again. He’s already sort of regretting telling Bitty they could keep their relationship a secret. But if Bitty wants to stay out of the limelight, he’s certainly not going to be the one to drag him there. If Bitty wants privacy, Jack can respect that.

“What do you like to do?” Jack asks, realizing he knows next to nothing about Bitty. There are entire blogs dedicated to Jack’s hockey butt. Eric could easily find out about him on Google if he wanted to, but Bitty... Jack wants to take his time getting to know him. It’s a luxury he hasn’t had in some time.

“I tend to spend a lot of time at the library,” Eric says, looking to the group of girls in the corner
nervously.

He’s right to worry because they do come over on their way out, begging Jack for photographs. He accepts, polite as can be, but there’s nothing genuine in his smile. He signs a few pieces of paper and nods when they thank him, tittering the entire way out the door.

“I’m sorry,” Jack says, ducking his head again. “Occupational hazard.”

“It’s alright, Jack,” Bitty says, voice pitched low. “It’s nothing you can help, and nothing for you to apologize for.”

“It’s hard being with me,” Jack says, looking toward the door where the girls are still eyeing him through the glass. “I shouldn’t have asked you for this.”

“Don’t you think you’re getting a little ahead of yourself?” Bitty asks, slightly exasperated. “We haven’t even been on a date yet and you’re already trying to throw in the towel?”

“I just—”

“Let me decide what I can handle, Mister Zimmermann,” Bitty says, eyebrows raised in a challenge.

“I’ll try,” Jack says, nodding until Eric gives him an understanding smile.

“Good,” Bitty says, taking a sip of his drink. “I think you could use a little something nice for yourself. Something that’s just for you.”

“So when can we go on a real date?” Jack asks, hoping he’s not coming on too strong. “Coffee doesn’t count.”

“You can take me out to dinner tomorrow night,” Bitty says.

“I have a game tomorrow night,” Jack says, frowning slightly. It’s discouraging, to be running into scheduling problems so early on. “How about Monday night?” he suggests instead.

“Monday night is fine. Nowhere too fancy though,” he adds hastily. “I don’t have a suit and we should probably keep things casual.”

“How about that pizza place on Westminster?” Jack suggests. He’s been there with the team, so no one could call it fancy. The waitresses usually do a pretty good job of keeping the paps from bothering them.

“That sounds just fine,” Bitty replies, finishing his drink. “I’ll meet you there at 7?”

“Can we make it 6?” Jack asks, face heating as he adds, “I go to bed pretty early.”

“6 it is then, Mister Zimmermann,” Bitty says, throwing out his garbage and slinging his bag back over his shoulder.

“I’ll see you then,” Jack says, grabbing his hat before following Bitty out the door.

Eric is already shivering by the time they step outside. There isn’t any snow on the ground, but the weather has already hit that brisk cold, the kind that dries your skin wherever it touches you.

“Don’t you have any gloves?” Jack asks, seeing the way Bitty’s fingers are already chapped.

“Gave them to a kid at the shelter last week,” he says easily.
Jack smiles. Of course he did. Bitty is the kind of person who gives and gives and keeps nothing for themselves. After spending just one afternoon together, Jack already knows this for a fact.

“Well here,” he says, pulling his own Falconers toque down onto Bitty’s head. “You can’t give that away,” Jack warns, smiling when Bitty tucks his overlong bangs under the knit cap. “It’s a gift.”

“Thanks, Jack,” he says, backing away down the street. “I’ll see you Monday.”

“See you Monday,” Jack replies, beginning to pump the muscles in his legs. He jogs the eight miles back to his house, ears freezing all the way, but he can’t bring himself to be unhappy about it.
“I have a date tonight,” Jack says as soon as he sees Blaire’s face on his laptop screen.

“Are you excited?” she asks, letting Jack give as much or as little detail as he wants.

“Excited and nervous.”

“Nervous or anxious?” she asks.

Jack pauses for a moment and takes a deep breath. His body feels tired, worn down from their hard win in overtime last night, but not overwrought. He’s tired, but not tense, not today. Morning skate was tough, but he’d grit his teeth and pushed through. Plus, today is cheat day, and Jack plans on eating an entire pizza himself.

“Not anxious, not about the date,” Jack says.

Blaire is quiet, waiting for him to finish his thought. It’s something he loves about her, that she doesn’t push him when he needs to work through something. It’d taken Jack three tries to get a therapist that actually fit him, one that was also a psychiatrist and could manage his meds with him whenever necessary, all in one phone call. It was important to him that his doctor be available via phone or Skype because he traveled so often and his work was so stressful. Blaire had been a godsend over the past few years.

“Anxious about what comes after the date,” he says eventually, running his hands through his damp hair. He’s just taken his second shower of the day and plans to take a third before he gets ready to meet Bitty later. “About what a relationship means.”

“Can you explain that to me?” Blaire asks, face impassive.

“Eric asked if we could date in private… just be friends if anyone asks. And that shouldn’t bother me. I know how bad it can be to have the press follow you around, to never get a minute to yourself…” he trails off, trying to pinpoint where his discomfort is stemming from. “But I can’t help thinking it isn’t a good idea.”

“Why not? Are you afraid for him or yourself?”

“Not really,” Jack says, still struggling to find his words. “But I like him… a lot. And if it turns into something real, I’m not going to be able to keep it a secret. I’m afraid if I let something slip he’ll be upset with me.”

“Maybe that’s something you should talk to him about,” Blaire suggests. “If you have a concern
about your relationship, you should talk it through. Allow him to be part of the conversation.”

“I don’t know that it’s really a relationship yet,” Jack says, feeling like he’s getting ahead of himself again. Didn’t Bitty just tell him that he was thinking too far ahead? It’s something that he’s always struggled with, living in the present, capturing a moment. He wonders if Bitty would like to go on a walk sometime, somewhere Jack could take pictures and slow down for a while.

“What else has you worried?” Blaire asks instead of pressing the point.

“Remember when I went on the higher dose of Cymbalta and you told me it might have some sexual side effects?” Jack asks, words coming out in a rush.

“Yes,” Blaire says. Her tone is always soft and even, forcing Jack to slow his thoughts down.

“How can I know the difference between the drugs and my own… sexuality?” he finally mutters, ashamed to even say the word.

“That can be very difficult,” Blaire says, sitting forward a bit in her seat so Jack can see her better. “Can you tell me what you mean? Specifically?” Jack groans, but Blaire just adds, “You know nothing you say is going to shock me. And it will never leave my office. This will always be a space just for you, Jack.”

He hears Bitty’s voice in his head then, asking about Just Jack. The problem is, he doesn’t have any idea who Just Jack is.

“I think I might be some sort of asexual,” Jack says, rubbing at his eyes. He’s so tired, and all he wants is a little reassurance that he’s not about to make a huge mistake with the guy he likes. “But I don’t know if I don’t ever want sex because I just don’t, or if I’m experiencing a low sex drive from my meds.”

“It could be a combination of both,” Blaire says in her most reassuring voice. “And if you find yourself wanting to want sex, or wanting to try it at least, we can adjust your medication or find one with different side effects. You’ve had partners before, Jack. If you want to have sex, I’m sure we can find a way to make it work for you and your new partner. It might take some time, but I’m open to finding the medication that’s best for you.”

“What if I relapse again? If the depression or the panic attacks come back? I can’t afford to do that during the season. We can win the cup this year, I know we can.”

“I know you can, too,” Blaire says, a smile on her face. “There is no one more capable of it than you. So if you think it’s something you want to try, we can always wait until the season is over. Everything is on your terms, your schedule. You and Eric. If you want him to be involved, we can do that. If you want this just for you, we can do that too. You’re in control of your recovery, Jack. And I’ll be there every step of the way.”

“I… yeah,” Jack says, nodding. “Thanks.” It means a lot to Jack that she already picked up on the name drop. It comforts him to know that she's listening to every single word he says.

“It’s what I’m here for,” she says, sitting back in her chair when she sees that Jack’s shoulders are relaxing.

“I think I’ll wait and see how things go. Maybe it won’t be an issue,” Jack says, letting out a breath.

“It might not, but even if it is, that doesn’t make you a failure, Jack. There’s nothing wrong with
you. Even if you never want sex, that doesn’t mean it’s your fault, or that it has to be a problem. Just be upfront with Eric about what you want to do and what you think you can handle. Asexual people can have very satisfying relationships, even sexual ones.”

“That sounds good,” Jack says, huffing out a laugh.

“Do you want to tell me how Eric makes you feel?” she asks, letting Jack back into the driver’s seat of the conversation.

“Good,” he says, “nervous. But a good kind of nervous. I think I want to touch him, be touched by him. We had coffee a few days ago and he touched my arm. I want him to do it again.”

“Maybe you should tell him that,” Blaire says, a small smile on her face.

“Maybe I will,” Jack says, rubbing the back of his neck where his shoulder is still tight from a rough check. “I think I will.”

Bitty is waiting for him outside of the pizza place at 6 p.m. wearing a well-loved pair of jeans and his thin coat, carrying the same backpack. He’s standing there, loose-limbed, just reading the menu that is posted on the wall.

Jack spots him immediately and remembers that Bitty doesn’t have a phone to be looking at while he waits. He must see a lot more of Providence this way, always observing. Maybe Jack should leave his phone at home more often, not that he looks at it too much, but it might help his photography to be unplugged like Bitty is.

“Hi,” Jack says, hands in his pockets. His voice is soft, but Bitty still startles, nearly jumping a foot in the air when he hears it.

“Goodness, Jack!” Bitty gasps, hand to his heart. “You scared me!”

“I’m sorry,” Jack says, the vowels round in his accent, pushed forward with his tongue.

Eric smiles at him then, managing not to laugh, but only barely. “Oh Jack, we’re a match made in heaven, aren’t we?”

“We’re partway between Madison and Montreal, eh?” he jokes, beyond pleased that Bitty laughs with him. He holds the door open and the hostess seats them in a corner by the kitchen, away from the window. Jack sits down facing the corner, hoping no one will notice him.

“I watched some of your game,” Bitty says, folding the menu down in his lap so he can see Jack clearly. “It looked brutal.”

“I feel like I could eat a horse,” Jack says, leaning back in his chair with a sigh. “That game wore me out.”

“Don’t you mean a moose? Do you even have the same idioms in Canada?”

“You think you’re funny, don’t you?” Jack teases. “But no, we say uh, avoir l’estomac dans les talons? We have stomach in our heels, is the rough translation. Or that we have wolf hunger, in regular French, like my grandmother used to speak.”
“You’re hungry like the wolf?” Bitty asks, laughing.

“I’m missing something, aren’t I?” Jack asks, smiling fondly at Bitty even though he’s being laughed at.

“I’ll need to catch you up on pop culture. That song’s not even recent,” Bitty says, eyes bright with laughter.

“I am pretty far behind,” Jack says, only slightly embarrassed. “What kind of music do you like?”

“Pop and some country,” Bitty says. “And some rap and dance music,” he adds after a beat. “Beyoncé is my queen. I don’t think she actually listens to my prayers, but I tell them to her anyway. I also love Taylor Swift and Miley Cyrus and Christina Perri, well, you know, all the powerful ladies.”

“Uh, I haven’t heard of them?” Jack says.

Bitty’s face is blank, his mouth wide open in shock. “Mister Zimmermann. You cannot tell me that you can’t name a Taylor Swift song. That is just impossible. I refuse to believe it.”

“Umm, I think Obama quoted her once?” Jack says, thinking he’s heard that somewhere once.

“You shake the sauce or something?”

“You are unbelievable!”

“I’m sorry. I’ll try to listen to some Beyoncé for you,” he says.

A smile spreads across Bitty’s face. “I’ll make you a playlist and email it to you,” he says immediately, hands clapping together in excitement. “It’ll have all the best songs on it for dancing or working out. You can listen to it before games!”

“I usually listen to books on tape at the gym,” Jack says, ordering a water for himself when the waitress finally comes by.

Bitty orders a Sprite. “You’re secretly a grandpa, aren’t you?” he teases as soon as the woman is out of sight.

“I am a little boring,” Jack says, a bit of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“Not boring,” Bitty says, placing his hand on the table, palm up. “You’re just a little rigid for someone so young. That’s nothing me and some Beyoncé can’t fix.”

Jack wants to take it, but they had agreed to act like friends in public. Blaire’s words ring in his ears. He should talk to Bitty about how he’s feeling. There’s nothing stopping him from telling Bitty how he wants to hold his hand, how it makes his heart race in a good way. He lets Bitty keep talking instead. It doesn’t feel like a discussion they should have in public. Maybe he can walk Bitty home and talk about it then.

“I like routines,” Jack says, fiddling with the menu he’s still holding in his hands. “Doing the same thing every day, keeping my sleep schedule and my diet consistent, it all helps with my anxiety. Predictable things help me stay in control. I’m trying to work on being more flexible, but it’s hard for me.”

“Oh honey, I didn’t mean it was a bad thing,” Bitty says, flipping his hand over on the table and drawing it back when he sees Jack eyeing it. “I don’t want to change you. I’m glad you’ve been
“I think you could help me with that,” Jack says. “We could do something fun together sometime.”

“I’m having fun with you right now,” Bitty says, ducking his head to hide his blush. It runs down his throat. Jack can see how his skin has gone pink where his first two shirt buttons are undone.

“That’s good,” Jack says.

They eat and they talk, and it’s… good. Jack feels a little less nervous by the time they finish dinner.

He learns that Bitty prefers butter to lard in his pie crusts and the difference between a lutz and a salchow. Bitty listens avidly as Jack describes the rink at Faber and the one his parents had built behind the house after his father won his first Stanley Cup. Jack learns about what resources the homeless shelter is lacking and what Providence could do to help. He nods and hums, thinking about asking his mother what the Zimmermann Foundation has been doing for the local community.

Jack pays the bill and insists on Bitty taking the leftovers home. He did manage to eat a whole pizza himself, but there were also breadsticks and some of Bitty’s pie still on the table.

“Can I walk you back to your place?” Jack asks when they finally step outside into the cold.

Bitty is wearing his hat again, pulled down low over his ears.

Jack grins when he sees it.

“It’s actually quite a ways from here,” Bitty says, looking up and down the street nervously. “I’ll probably get a cab.”

“I’ll get it for you,” Jack says, looking down at his phone curiously. He doesn’t know the number for a cab company. He’s never called a cab in his life, always either driving his own truck or having a bus or limo to hop into.

“Good lord, you’re hopeless with this, aren’t you?” Bitty asks, reaching for Jack’s phone with frozen fingers. “Do you even have the Uber app on here?”

“Uhh, what’s that?” Jack asks, smirking when Bitty huffs out a sigh.

“Are you chirping me, Mister Zimmermann? I don’t appreciate that one bit, it’s freezing out here!”

“You can do it,” Jack says, peering over Bitty’s shoulder to watch the app download. “Just make sure I can pay for it.”

Bitty blushes but hands the phone back so Jack can enter his credit card information. They have a few minutes to wait for the car. Bitty’s hands are shoved in his pockets.

Jack eyes him curiously, reminding himself to pick up an extra pair of small gloves for Bitty next time he’s shopping online. He should have offered to have them wait inside. Bitty’s visibly shaking in his thin coat, his slim frame hunching in on itself. Jack wonders how he survived out on the ice figure skating in those skimpy outfits.

“I have another roadie this week, but I’ll be back next Tuesday,” he says, already thinking that’s
too long to go without seeing Eric. “Can I email you? Or maybe Skype?” he asks eagerly, wanting to keep their conversation going. He learned so much about Eric over dinner, and now all he wants is more.

“I don’t have a webcam,” Bitty says, rocking up and down on his heels as he tries to keep warm, “but I’d love to get some emails from you.”

“I’ll do that then,” Jack says, clenching his fist so he doesn’t reach out to cup Bitty’s flushed and frozen cheek. “It’ll be like letter writing, eh? Romantic.” The car pulls up then and Jack checks the license plate on his phone before walking to it and opening the door for Bitty.

“Yeah, romantic,” Bitty says, smiling as he ducks into the back seat. His hand is on the top of the car door when Jack’s gloved fingers brush his. “Talk to you soon.”

Even through the fabric, Jack swears he can feel the electricity between them. Eric’s fingers are cold, as always, but they light a fire somewhere in Jack. He pushes the door closed as soon as Eric is safely inside and taps the roof twice as it pulls away. He watches Bitty leave, the taillights heading west and wonders if their next date will be too soon to ask him back to his apartment.
“Did you kiss him?” Shitty asks. He’s on his couch this time, still dressed for class in a pair of khakis and a polo. His flow is just long enough to pull back into a half pony and he pulls the elastic from it to shake it out and run his hands through it. Jack can see him relax, taking off his armor for the day. There are no entitled Harvard pricks to argue with in the comfort of his own apartment.

“No,” Jack says, sighing. “He didn’t want to do anything in public, and I’m trying to respect that.”

“But you wanted to, right?”

“So much,” Jack says, a shy smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

“Well go get it then, Jackie boy!” Shitty calls from the kitchen where he’s gone to get a beer. He flops back down on his couch when he cracks it open, pulling the can to his mouth quickly to catch the foam that spills out.

“I’m on the road for another four days, Shits. And I can’t even talk to him on the phone.”

“Well buy the cute southern baker a phone then,” he suggests. “We all know you’re loaded.”

“He won’t take gifts like that. He doesn’t like having too many material things. I think it’s like a show of solidarity for the homeless that he works with. I think it’s inspiring really,” Jack says, chin in his hand.

“You look so fucking smitten,” Shitty says, smiling at him. “It’s bringing a tear to my eye, brah, I’m serious.”

“I do like him,” Jack says. “I’m just not sure when I’m going to get the time to get to know him. It’s hard when we can only meet in person.”

“Didn’t he say you could email him? Have you done that yet?”

“Not yet,” Jack admits. He’s been opening a blank email draft on his phone whenever he sits down on the bus or after his games when he’s in his hotel room, but nothing comes out. “Everything sounds so boring.”

“You’re worried he’s only after your good looks?” Shitty asks. There’s foam stuck to the ends of his mustache and it makes something clench in Jack’s stomach. He misses this, the easy companionship of Shitty being in his space, closer than anyone else had ever been. It’s been too long since he’s gotten a hug from his mother, or had Shitty sneaking into his bed to cop a feel, however platonic it may have been. He’d even go to a kegster at the Haus right now, just for some noise to drown out his thoughts.

“No, I guess not,” Jack says, thinking about the way Bitty had reached for his hand several times. “I guess I just like seeing him. He makes everything feel warm, even though he’s always freezing.”

“The little Georgian doesn’t know how to dress for winter, huh?”

“I gave him my hat, but he’s still not wearing any gloves. I’m afraid his fingers are going to get frostbitten.”
“I know one way to warm up some fingers…”

“Shitty! I’m not doing that with him!” Jack says, exasperated. He’s been thinking about it more and more, and while Jack is fairly sure he does want to be intimate with Eric, none of his thoughts ever stir a physical reaction in him.

“But you’re thinking about it, aren’t you?” Shitty asks, reading Jack far too well.

“Maybe.”

“Maybe is better than nothing,” Shitty says. “You can work with ‘maybe.’ Just stop being so cautious. You know what you want, now write the little guy an email and invite him over to your apartment for some ‘maybe.’”

“I’ll try,” Jack says, leaning forward to minimize the Skype window on his laptop and open his email.

“You’re going to do great, Jack. Just give him a chance to love you, ‘cause I bet he will.”

“Thanks, Shits,” Jack says, smiling as they say goodbye.

He closes Skype and maximizes his email window. The small black cursor seems to be mocking him, blinking there in an even rhythm. “Hi,” he types in the subject line, and then clicks into the body.

It’s torture, finding words that don’t sound completely stupid. He types and deletes, types and deletes, for over an hour. Eventually, he ends up with this…

Subject: Hi

Hi, this is Jack. I had another hard game today, but I got a hat trick and my wrist isn’t actually sprained, so things are going well. I share a room with Tater when we’re on the road, but he always goes out with the guys after games and I have time to myself. I think you would like him. Did you learn any Russian from Katya? I’m sure he’d love to meet you, just don’t let him squeeze you too hard if he goes in for a hug. I think he might break your ribs.

I had a really nice time at dinner on Monday. Would you like to do that again sometime? I’m free on Tuesday night. Could I take you out again? Or maybe you’d like to come to my house so we could have some privacy? It’d be nice to talk to you without anyone else listening. I hope your work week is going alright.

Jack

He clicks send before he can talk himself out of it. It takes some time, but he’s able to do a few breathing exercises and keep himself from working into a true panic. Jack thinks about calling Blaire, but it’s late and he should really be sleeping already. Plus, he probably got about the same advice from Shitty as he would have gotten from her.
He closes the laptop and makes sure his phone is plugged in, alarm set for 5:30 a.m. as usual. It’s hard to stay on a good schedule with all the time zone changes they go through, but Detroit is only an hour off so he probably won’t be dragging too badly in the morning.

When he wakes, there’s an email alert from Bitty. He forces himself to go for a run with Tater and do his strength training before looking at it. It eats at him all day, wondering what Eric has written him. Maybe Eric isn’t interested in seeing him again. Maybe he thinks emailing with Jack is dull and he can’t be bothered to read all his rambling thoughts.

He’s worked himself up so much that Tater asks him if he’s expecting bad news. He is expecting bad news, but he just shrugs and cuts his cool down short to run back to their room before Tater so he can read his email in peace.

In the end, it’s nothing to worry about, and he scolds himself for letting the panic color his entire day. He’ll read Bitty’s emails before working out next time. That should work.

Re: Hi

Jack,

Of course I would love to meet Tater and the rest of your friends. That Shitty sounds like a character. I only know a few words of Russian, but I could always study up before meeting him. Or maybe I should work on my French instead, eh? Ask them what their favorite desserts are and maybe we can make them together! You were almost getting the hang of those apples by the time we finished our pies last time.

As for our date, I had a wonderful time. Gosh, you were worrying about that, weren’t you? Please take a deep breath and relax for me. I’d love to go on another date with you, but in private does sound nice. Why don’t you tell me what your favorite meal is and I’ll cook for you at your place? No pressure, you can always call me an Uber and send me on my way whenever you like. Do you have a favorite dessert? I’ll look up some recipes so I’ll be ready for anything.

I do hope you’re taking care of yourself. Does your wrist hurt much? I worry whenever I manage to catch bits of your games. Are they always so rough in hockey, or is it just because you’re the captain? They seem to go after you something fierce. But then, you are the top scorer, aren’t you? I can almost see you blushing from here.

I didn’t have time to make you a playlist yet, but I’ve been thinking about it all day. I think you probably need a relaxing one to help you wind down. I’ll get working on it soon enough. I’m still wearing your hat, in case you were wondering.

Be safe.

I’ll see you on Tuesday, Mister Zimmermann,

Bitty

Jack hops into the shower with a smile on his face. Bitty worries about him. He had a good time
on their date and wants to do it again. He wants to cook Jack his favorite meal and learn French for
him.

He ducks his head and lets the water sluice down his back, beating down on his shoulder blades.
They have a flight in two hours and then it’s off to Buffalo to challenge the Sabres. Tomorrow he
has the Predators at home, and then the Penguins in Pittsburgh on Sunday. He gives himself
Monday to relax so he won’t fall asleep on Bitty, and then they’ll have their date on Tuesday night
after Jack’s workout.

Shaking his head, Jack tries to pull his thoughts away from hockey and back to Bitty’s email. He
said no pressure. Bitty wasn’t expecting to spend the night. They could just have dinner and talk,
and it wouldn’t be a big deal. People don’t usually have sex on the second date anyway, do they?

Jack has no idea what people do.

With Kenny it had just been a hormonal thing, falling into each other sideways when they were
high on adrenaline after a win. They’d never decided to do it. Being in each other’s pockets all the
time, sharing a room, it was just the natural progression of things. Kenny had stripped down after
a workout and Jack had looked, really looked. Then Kenny had smirked at him and asked if Jack
wanted to share the shower.

He gets a shiver thinking about it and turns up the water temperature. Things had been so easy
then, Jack thinks. Or maybe they weren’t easy so much as hazy. He’d been popping Xanax left
and right, numbing himself to everything that wasn’t hockey and Kenny’s hand on his dick. It was
easy to forget that nothing was easy, that he was just clinging to a raft, the rapids churning and
crashing right underneath the surface.

When the Xanax had stopped working, they’d given him Klonopin, then Ativan when he said the
former wasn’t strong enough. Someone should have stopped him, but he had learned to lie through
the symptoms by then. The team doctor didn’t bat an eye when Jack said he lost his pills on the
last roadie and needed a new bottle. He was the captain, and a serious one at that. No one
questioned him. He was always focused, always pushing harder for his team. Jack was someone
you could trust.

But he couldn’t trust himself. In the end, Jack had climbed into the pit of addiction willingly.
Blindly perhaps, but willingly. When the noise inside his head got too loud, when Kenny offered
him a beer and he knew he shouldn’t, when the ache in his stomach clenched so hard he couldn’t
even eat, he’d have done anything to make it stop.

When even an orgasm couldn’t lull him to sleep, when his heart pounded in his chest so hard he
thought he was having a heart attack, when a cold shower couldn’t wash the itchy heat off his skin,
he reached for the pills. When it was the night before the draft and Kenny scored one more goal
than him during practice… when he went just a little too far.

Jack pushes those thoughts away.

What’s done is done, and he knows there’s more to it than that. He’s come a long way since then,
since a bottle of pills and Kenny’s voice low in his ear controlled his life. Back then he was weak,
but now he’s the one in charge. He’s on a stable dose of his Cymbalta and has some Hydroxyzine
he can take in case of emergencies. They’re not too strong but make him just sleepy enough to
take the edge off. He carries them with him but hasn’t taken one in six months, not since the last
phone call he got from Kenny. Not since Kent described his latest conquest in great detail and then
said he had plans to have lunch with Jack’s father the next day, that Bad Bob had always liked him
better.
Even years later, Kenny still knew what buttons to press. He’d go through Jack’s last loss in an excruciating play by play, pointing out all of Jack’s mistakes, telling him he’s nothing without Kent on his wing, that his stupid expansion team couldn’t possibly make it to the playoffs. After the last time ended in a panic attack, Jack has stopped taking his calls. He hasn’t gone so far as to block Kenny’s number entirely, but every time he sees that little message bubble pop up with his old friend’s name, his chest tightens.

He tells himself that he’s doing well. He’s strong enough to have something nice in his life, and Bitty is very nice. Bitty, with his delicate wrists and his tiny waist. Bitty with his freckles and golden hair that swoops down over his eye whenever he blushes and dips his head. Bitty, who has a broad chest and strong thighs. Even if he hasn’t skated in a while, the power is still there, barely restrained under his favorite pair of jeans.

Bitty who might let him touch, might let Jack kiss him. His face heats. Jack can feel it even in the steaming hot shower. When he looks down, his nipples are peaked, hard on his chest. He runs a hand through his hair, imagining it’s Eric, whose shiny gold locks are becoming a constant feature in his dreams.

Jack lathers some soap between his hands and drags them down his chest to his cock, which is still soft. He grasps it, massaging and smoothing the soft lather up and down. He licks his lips, trying to picture what Bitty’s thighs might look like, if the hair there is soft and golden as well, how his ass might feel under his hands, and still… nothing.

Taking a deep breath, Jack tries not to get frustrated. He turns the shower a little cooler and shakes his hands and arms out. Maybe he’s going about this all wrong. Tipping his head back to the spray, he imagines what Bitty’s dick might look like. Is it broad or thin? Is it longer than Jack’s? He’s been told he’s gifted in that area, but soft penises in the locker room haven’t given him much to judge by.

He imagines that Bitty’s dick is broad, with a nice fat head and pronounced ridge. The thought of it makes his mouth water. Jack has always liked giving blow jobs, and now all he can think about is how Bitty’s fat dick could fill his mouth and reach down his throat. He imagines himself on his knees, Bitty’s hands in his hair, gently fucking into his mouth. He imagines how hot and thick Bitty’s come would feel on his tongue, how his dick would pulse and seize in Jack’s throat when he reached his peak.

Jack reaches down and still, nothing. He groans low and long in his throat, tipping his head against the cool tile with a thunk. The water slides off his back and down to his ass and Jack considers this for a moment. He knows he preferred to be under Kenny, and maybe that will be true of Bitty as well. Bitty is small but strong. If Bitty held him down and told him to stay there, Jack would do it.

This time, when Jack slicks up his hands with soap, he imagines Bitty’s fat head popping through his tight rim. When Jack teases at his hole in small circles, he thinks about Bitty’s tongue there, lapping and humming against what he’s been told is his best asset. He slips his finger in to the first knuckle and shivers, unable to remember the last time he’s felt such an intrusion. He must have been drunk.

But Jack isn’t drunk now, he’s sober as a nun and sweating, even in the cooling water. He slides his finger in even deeper and arches his back, keening in his throat. It feels good, better than he remembers, but when he reaches his other hand down, he’s barely half hard.

He wraps his hand around his dick, a finger just under his frenulum and rocks it there, praying he’ll chub up. Nothing happens. Jack shoves his finger in deep, getting desperate. He tugs and tugs,
and still, nothing. The water has gone cold now, and he hunches his shoulder, removing his finger.

When he looks down, his hands are pruned. He feels disgusted all of the sudden, with himself and with his thoughts. If he can’t even get hard by himself in the shower, how is he going to be able to do it with someone else watching him?

He rinses as quickly as possible and shuts the water off. Jack groans with his forehead against the glass door of the shower. He forgot to wash his hair.

The door opens and Jack can hear Tater kicking his shoes off in the other room. Sighing heavily, he turns the water back on and rushes through his shampoo and rinse. The water is freezing. Jack’s balls shrink up and his hole squeezes tight in shock, but he feels like he deserves it. What kind of man can’t even jerk off thinking about his boyfriend’s dick?

*Is Bitty his boyfriend?* He should probably ask.

“You fall in toilet, Zimmboni?” Tater calls through the bathroom door.

“No, I’m fine Tater,” he calls back, shaking as he shuts off the water and reaches for his towel. He feels worse than when he got in, the thrill he felt reading Bitty’s email gone.

Jack throws on a clean pair of underwear and dries his hair. Tater whistles when he exits the bathroom.

“You make some man or woman very happy someday, Zimmboni,” he says, wagging his eyebrows. “No one has abs like that, not in all of hockey.”

“Thanks, Alexei,” Jack says, giving the man half a smile. He knows his body is something to be proud of, but sometimes he wishes it was something different. There are a lot of rules that go with this body, and even heavier expectations. Sometimes Jack thinks he would trade his abs in for a Molson muscle if it came with some sanity. He would do a lot for a clean slate in his mind.

“You having bad day today, yes?” he says, pulling back his blanket and hopping on his bed. “We do something to cheer up Captain. What you like to do? Call your naked friend? Watch girl movie? I do good foot massage.”

Jack laughs, telling himself to remember to tell Shitty that his new nickname is “naked friend.”

“I’m alright, Tater. Thank you though.”

“I don’t think you telling truth. Something eating at you, in here,” he says, pointing to his chest.

Without warning, Jack finds himself with his arms full of 230 pounds of Russian. Tater tackles him to his own bed, ruffling his still wet hair and cackling. “No one break my Captain’s heart,” he crows, smacking Jack on the chest with a heavy thump. “I kick butt of whoever hurt my Zimmboni.”

“No one hurt me, Tater, lay off!” he laughs, throwing his friend to the ground. It takes some effort since Tater has 30 pounds on him, but no one can compete with Jack’s lower body strength. He’s been skating since he could walk and his thighs could move mountains.

Tater lands on the floor with a thump and cracks up. Jack can’t help but laugh right along with him. “We still watch girl movie though, yes?” Tater asks, grinning from ear to ear.

“Yes, alright,” Jack agrees, settling himself on the bed and reaching for the remote. He’ll write Bitty back when he gets on the plane.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

It took me so long to get these block quotes separated on AO3, I might cry if it doesn't post the way I want it. Pray for me.

Re: Re: Hi

Dear Bitty,

My wrist is fine. Thank you for asking. I am the top scorer, but you can’t prove that I’m blushing. I’m going to score another hat trick for you tonight as long as you promise to let me buy the groceries for dinner. I asked you out, after all.

Tater says his favorite dessert is medovik? But if that’s too hard he’ll settle for chak chak? Does that make any sense to you? Shitty and Lardo will devour anything chocolate. They used to fight over the Halloween candy we handed out at the Haus. As for me? I love tourtière, but it’s not exactly in my diet plan. I’m sure anything you make will be delicious.

I’ll help out with whatever you need, but I might need to buy some equipment. Can you give me a list of what tools you need along with the ingredients? I think I have a sheet pan and a spatula, but if you need more than that, you’ll be out of luck.

A playlist of calming music would be nice. I don’t need much to get me ready for a game. Everyone calls me a hockey robot for a reason. I’m too serious. Tater says my face-off face is the stuff of nightmares. Maybe some Kelly Clarton would lighten me up a bit, eh?

Thank you for your email, it was so nice to hear from you,

Jack

Re: Re: Re: Hi

Dear Jack

You completely ridiculous man! I can’t believe you actually scored a hat trick for me! You weren’t kidding when you said you were the lead scorer! I looked you up and
gosh, the Calder Trophy and the Art Ross in your first year in the NHL? And then another Art Ross last year? You really do take your hockey seriously, don’t you, sugar?

Don’t worry yourself about the calories, Mister Zimmermann. I can make a lightened up meat pie for you. And how about some mashed parsnips instead of potatoes? Would that suit your diet plan? I don’t want the Falconer’s nutritionist to come after me with a head of cauliflower. I know exactly what to make for Tater and Shitty and Lardo. I’ve attached a list of ingredients and equipment I need, but try not to go overboard, alright, honey? It’s only a couple of things.

You can’t fool me, Mister Famous Hockey Captain! I know you’ve heard of Kelly Clarkson! You were tapping your foot when Stronger came on in the pizza place last week! Anyway, I made you a couple of playlists on Spotify. You’re going to need another app. Ask Tater to walk you through getting it set up on your phone and then click on these links down here. There’s one upbeat and two slow. The third one I think you could fall asleep to if you need a little something to take your mind off work.

Bitty to Jack 1 (Amp Up)
Bitty to Jack 2 (Wind Down)
Bitty to Jack 3 (Sleepy Time)

I miss your smile. Can’t wait to see you again,

Bitty

Attach: listforJack.docx

Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Hi

Dear Bitty,

What’s the difference between raw and unfiltered honey? Does it need to be local? Is an offset spatula what I think it is? If you don’t answer by the time I make the grocery order, I’ll just get one of everything. Don’t worry,

Jack.

P.S. I’m not a complete grandpa. I already had Spotify! But I like list #2 the best. Thank you.

P.P.S. I had the chance to take my camera out in Pittsburg. I attached a few of the good ones.

Imag1.jpeg
Imag2.jpeg
Subject: Oh no you did not

We do not need three kinds of honey, Mister Zimmermann! I should have just gone shopping with you and you wouldn’t have been so tempted to overspend. I know how to pinch a penny better than anyone you’ve ever met. But I guess you don’t need to worry about that kind of thing, do you? I’m still reeling over the fact that you had an ice rink in the backyard growing up. Do you know how far I had to drive to get to my skating practices? I had to get up at 4 a.m.!

I’m glad you like the music, darling. When you get sick of the songs I’ll send you another one. Also, there’s this button you can press to get a list of similar songs, you… well nevermind, I’ll show you when I see you.

Good luck tomorrow night in Colorado. I might watch if there’s nothing better on :P. How about you get me two hat tricks this time and I’ll make you your very own dessert?

Bitty

Subject: I might have

Bitty,

I’ll take something maple flavored.

You’re welcome,

Jack

Re: I might have

GOOD LORD YOU DID, DIDN’T YOU!??!

Mister Zimmermann, do you realize that you are now tied for the highest number of goals in a single game by one person? That’s UNBELIEVEABLE!
I think you might deserve a little more than dinner and dessert, but we can negotiate terms later. ;)

Bitty

Re: Re: I might have

Bitty,

On the one hand, the Avalanche has the worst record in the league right now and their goalie is out with an injury. It wasn’t like they put up much of a fight. On the other hand, no one has scored seven points in one game in nearly 100 years of NHL hockey, so I think I’m allowed to feel just a little smug. Uncle Mario is super pissed I beat him by two.

I’ll be glad to negotiate with you. I think my starting bid is one kiss. Feel free to raise me.

Jack

Re: Re: Re: I might have

I can’t believe there are still people out here in the world that think you’re a hockey robot. You are pretty slick via email, Mister Zimmermann. But you don’t fool me, I know you’re just a shy little Canadian boy who loves to bury himself in history books. Speaking of which, I found something I think you might like at the library. Do you have a Goodreads account? I think it’s something you might like to do. It helps you keep track of which books you’ve read and gives you recommendations on titles it thinks you might like. Your PR team might even like to tweet about what books you’re reading. Then everyone would know how much of a dork you are, though, so that’s up to you. :P

Have I told you how much I’m looking forward to our date on Tuesday? Can you give me your address and let me know what time you’d like me to be there?

I’m beat. It’s so cold tonight, and the shelter is packed for dinner. The hot water has been out for two days and everyone has been complaining.

I hope you get home safe tomorrow. Goodnight, sweetheart,

Bitty
Subject: Tuesday

My address is 100 Exchange Street, #215. I’ve left your name with the doorman, but if you’d like me to walk you up to my loft, just have him call for me when you get there. His name is Leonard. I think you’ll like him. His wife loves to bake and he usually has a jar full of cookies at his desk.

I have a redeye from California and get in at 6 a.m. tomorrow. I’ll probably sleep most of the day and do laundry. Still think I’m not too boring for you?

I only have two different kinds of honey. But I may have gone overboard with the spice rack. They just all sounded so interesting and spices don’t have calories, right? Maybe you can show me what to do with them when you get here. I can’t wait to see you either,

Jack

When Jack gets home from a tough loss against the Kings, he falls into bed and sleeps most of the day away. It’s unlike him to sleep through his alarm, but even Tater’s calls can’t wake him up in time for their usual morning run on Tuesday. Luckily, they don’t have a skate and it’s only Tater he’s kept waiting.

It’s past 8 a.m. by the time Jack meets him at the corner.

“You look like corpse, Zimmboni,” Tater booms. It’s way too early for him to be so cheerful.
“Your friend keep you up all night?”

“No,” Jack says, covering a yawn. “I slept like the dead. All night and two naps yesterday.”

“Maybe you just getting old. Can’t take the travel like you used to.”

“I’m not old, Tater,” Jack says. They’re done warming up and stretching, so he picks up the pace. It’s faster than they usually jog and Tater groans, sprinting for a few seconds to catch up to Jack.

“Where fire, Zimmboni?” He huffs, pretending to pant in Jack’s ear. “You upset about something? Your face much more grrr than usual this morning.”

“It’s not——”

“—It is,” Tater insists. “I don’t mind. I know you not mad with me. I think maybe you need some action. Something more than run?”

“I’m fine Tater.”

“I have idea,” the Russian says, patting Jack on the shoulder and pulling him to a stop.

They walk for a few minutes until they reach an unmarked building that Jack has never noticed before. Tater holds the door open for him and then follows him inside. It’s cold, a breeze blowing from somewhere even though it’s freezing out. It must be to air out the smell, Jack thinks, because even with the fresh air blowing in, it’s pretty rank inside. He almost slips in a pool of sweat when
he takes a few steps inside the door.

Jack’s eyes adjust quickly and he realizes he’s in some sort of gym, but not the high-tech, clean kind he’s used to. There are men and women everywhere, strong ones, their muscles on display, bunching and rippling with effort as they work to leap on top of piles of wood or toss gigantic tires around.

There’s a lot of yelling and grunting. It echoes off the bare walls and grows in volume with each rep. One woman is hanging by her knees on a bar high above the floor, doing upside down crunches while holding two fifty pound barbells. Jack’s biceps ache just looking at her. Another man seems to be making his way across a cliffhanger with his wife clinging to his back, shouting encouragements over the din.

“Don’t worry, Captain,” Tater says when he catches the look of shock on his Jack’s face. “We here for something else. If you want to throw logs, I bring you back some other time. You need this more,” he says, walking along the outskirts of the open space and taking him through another door in the far corner.

It’s actually louder inside, if that can be believed. There’s music pumping, something angry and metallic. Over the noise, he can hear the thumps and slaps of pads hitting leather, of skin hitting skin. There’s a large ring in the center of the room, two men are there, barefoot, circling each other. They have soft helmets on, but otherwise seem to be incautious, swiping at each other with full force. On the outskirts of the room, dozens of men and women spar or jab at punching bags.

“We let off steam, yes? I wrap your hands and no one tell George,” Tater says, heading to a series of cubbies set into the wall. He pulls out hand wraps and fixes Jack up before pulling on some gloves.

Jack stares at his hands, bewildered, as Tater transforms them into something else. He can count the number of times he’s dropped his gloves on one hand. It’s something else entirely to bundle them up for the express purpose of hitting something. By the time he’s ready, Jack is actually excited to step up to the bag and square his shoulders.

“You punch from here,” Tater says, standing behind him and grabbing his hips. “All the power come from here.”

Jack nods, huffs out a breath, and lunges forward.

Tater laughs, pulling him back with a hand in his shirt collar. “Ho ho, Captain! This exactly what you needed, yes? But you stay back here. Don’t crowd bag.”

Jack follows his lead, shuffling forward and backward, swinging out to catch the bag with his fist in a cross body blow. It feels like he wishes therapy would feel sometimes, like pushing a heavy weight off his chest with every step in the right direction. Even when someone throws a slur at him on the ice, or skates him into the boards hard enough to steal his breath right out of his chest, Jack has never felt like fighting them.

Jack’s enemy has always been himself.

With only an inanimate object ahead, swinging ominously in front of his face like a monolith, Jack wants nothing more than to beat his own thoughts into submission. Every expectation, every missed shot, every failed attempt at intimacy, he strikes them all. Soon he’s out of breath, wiping the sweat from his brow with the arm of his shirt. It feels wonderful, cathartic and useful. Unlike running on the treadmill, Jack feels like he might actually be getting somewhere.
He wonders why Blaire never suggested this. Maybe it’s not actually as healthy as it feels.

Tater corrects his form a few times, moving him into the right position, helping him keep his arms up to protect his face. His abs burn and his fingers feel a little numb, but Jack pushes forward, pounding into the bag with all his strength.

“Good, good,” Tater says after a half hour. “Next time we take these off and show you how not to break your fingers on hockey player’s face.”

“I’ve never broken a finger punching someone,” Jack says, shaking his head. His whole body buzzes. It might be adrenaline, or it might be complete and total exhaustion. Jack secretly thinks it’s the thrill of satisfaction. Today he beat back his demons with his own two hands, and they didn’t claim him. He has not been dragged down to the depths of his own self-loathing.

Jack will live to fight another day.

“We run home now,” Tater says, patting him on the back hard enough to make him choke.

Jack smiles through it, high on natural heroin.

He says goodbye to Tater and sprints all the way home. The pace he sets for himself is punishing. By the time Jack gets home he is drenched in sweat and aching all over. When he slows to a walk for the final block, the wind is so cold it freezes his hair and his shirt until they are stiff.

Waving hello to Leonard, Jack declines the offer of a coconut macaroon and heads upstairs. He showers quickly, soaping and rinsing before the water has even gotten all the way hot. Looking down at his soft cock, Jack frowns, but doesn’t attempt to coax it to its reluctant hardness. Instead, he leaves the shower, towels off, and falls into bed nude.
Chapter 8

When he stirs awake some time later, Jack hears rustling in his kitchen. Caught off guard, he stumbles into the hall and peeks around the corner. No one is in the living room, but there’s a light buzz of music coming from his kitchen. He drags a blanket off the back of the couch and wraps it around his waist as he creeps forward.

Robbers don’t usually come with a soundtrack.

Leaning to the side, Jack still can’t quite see anyone. He steps into the room, back straight, ready to confront whoever it is.

When he sees Bitty dancing around his kitchen, his hands go slack and he drops the blanket. “Tabarnak!” he screams, squatting to the floor to grab the flannel blanket and quickly cover up again.

“Good Lord, Jack,” Bitty sighs, clutching a large chef’s knife to his chest. “I could have killed you!”

“I could have killed you!” he replies. “You’re in my kitchen!”

“Leonard let me up!” Bitty says, carefully putting the knife down on the cutting board where he was chopping carrots and celery. “I knocked for ages but you didn’t answer. And then I tried the door and it was open, so I just…” he trails off, waving his hands around the kitchen.

It smells amazing.

Now that Jack has calmed down, he can see a pot of something steaming on the stove and smell melted chocolate. The stand mixer he hasn’t touched since his mother bought it is whirring happily on the counter and Beyoncé is playing from his sound system.

“Is that alright?” Bitty asks, fluttering with nervous energy. His hair has fallen in his eyes again and when he brushes it away, chocolate smears on his forehead. There’s flour caked on his forearms and when Jack takes a good look around the room he sees a tart crust expertly rolled out in the pan he’d just ordered from Amazon.

“It’s...” Jack swallows nervously. “Good? It’s good.”

“Oh thank goodness,” Bitty says, letting out a sigh of relief. “I peeked in and saw you sleeping but I didn’t want to wake you. I know how hard you’ve been working lately and wanted you to have a nice home cooked meal for once.”

“It’s amazing Eric,” Jack says, smiling when he sees Bitty’s eyes drag down his bare chest. He can almost feel them there, like nails on his skin, scraping away the ache he feels in his stomach whenever Eric’s nearby. “Just let me put something on and I’ll help with whatever is left to do.”

“If you must,” Eric says, eyes glued to his abdominal muscles.

Jack’s hand flies there as soon as he notices, scratching purposefully at the hair that trails down below the blanket. “I think it’s a good idea,” he chokes out when Eric licks his lips. Jack feels a stirring deep down in his gut at the sight. He thinks... maybe... maybe if he stayed something might happen. But there’s food on the stove and chocolate on Bitty’s face and even as he thinks about licking it off, he realizes he’s not quite ready for this.
“I’ll be right back,” he says quickly, turning tail and all but running back to his room. When he gets inside, he closes the door and leans against it, kicking the blanket away from his body. He’s… well, not quite hard, but sort of getting there. He’s almost getting there, all from a brief encounter with an attractive man in his kitchen. But not just any attractive man.

It’s Bitty.

Shitty’s words echo in his mind as his heart pounds.

You do experience sexual attraction, but it’s rare as hell and something to be cherished.

Jack is pretty sure he has evidence now that Bitty “does it for him.”

Now all that’s left is to do something about it. No, Jack thinks. Not just do something about it. Talk about it first. Tell Bitty how he feels, set up reasonable expectations.

Don’t let Bitty down.

He rummages through his drawers and pulls out a pair of jeans and a well-worn grey tee shirt. He pulls his red flannel over it and rolls up the sleeves. It’s already warm in the kitchen, but something about the soft fabric makes him feel safe, so he wears it anyway.

When he sees Bitty at the stove, hips bouncing to the beat of the radio, he blushes furiously and buries his head in the refrigerator. He pulls out a large bottle of red Gatorade and fills a glass with ice. Jack sips the drink slowly, reminding himself to chug some water before he passes out after such a hard workout next time.

“You look white as a sheet,” Bitty points out when he catches Jack’s face. “Are you sick? I could throw some soup together.”

“I’m fine,” Jack insists, putting his glass down on one of the few free spots on the counter. “Just pushed a little too hard at the gym this morning.”

“How far did you run?” Bitty asks.

Jack stares at his feet. He forgot to pull socks on and they’re already a little chilled on the cold kitchen tile.

“How far, Jack?” Bitty repeats, sterner this time.

“It wasn’t so much as how far as how fast,” he admits, rubbing at his chin. He forgot to shave. There’s a bit of stubble scratching at his fingertips. Jack wonders if it will bother Bitty—if they’ll ever get that close.

“You need to take better care of yourself,” Bitty says, pointing at him with a wooden spoon.

“You’re one to talk,” Jacks says, gesturing at Bitty’s waist. “You’re skin and bones.”

“I’m dainty,” Bitty corrects, stirring the pot on the stove with more aggression than is strictly necessary. “Makes me faster on the ice. But that doesn’t mean I’m not fierce.”

“When’s the last time you skated?” Jack asks, eyeing Bitty’s form. He’s still wearing the same belt with the extra holes poked in it. His jeans are loose on him, but old, like they used to fit. Everything about Bitty screams vulnerable, and yet he’s still strong. Jack doesn’t know how he knows, but he just does. Bitty has lived, and what didn’t kill him made him stronger.
“It’s been a good while,” Bitty admits, shaking his head at the melted chocolate he’s stirring. “I sold my skates when I got to Providence. Didn’t have the time to train anymore.”

Jack doesn’t know what to say to that. He could no sooner sell his skates than walk the streets barefoot. There must be something more to it than that. Bitty must have been bullied. Or maybe he experienced some sort of lasting injury that forced him out of the sport. Jack would need to be nearly dead to stay off the ice for so long.

“Not all of us have ice rinks in the backyard, Mister Zimmermann,” Bitty teases, smiling at him.

“I’m never going to live that down, am I?” Jack asks, smiling back. It doesn’t feel like such a jibe coming from Bitty. Somehow, he thinks Bitty understands that growing up with money doesn’t mean you’ve never struggled. Jack has struggled more than most. It’s something that never leaves him, something that colors his world.

It’s only since he’s met Eric that things seem to be getting brighter. Bitty, with the paper thin skin and the golden swoop of bangs that ends right in the corner of his eye where crows feet are starting to form. Jack hopes they’re from smiling too much and not from stress. Bitty is far too young to be looking so weary, though Jack knows the same could be said about himself.

Even though it’s been years since Jack has had a drink or taken too many pills, even though it’s been months since he’s had an attack, the weight of his addiction is always with him. It’s what keeps him focused, what pushes him to do more, be better. Sometimes Jack doesn’t know what he’d be without it. He can’t imagine what his life would be like if he hadn’t swallowed that handful of pills.

“I’m just chirping you,” Eric says, winking at him.

Jack swallows. “Anything I can help with?” he asks once he’s gotten his bearings back.

“How about you come over here and crush these cookies?” Bitty says, dumping a package of Oreos into a bowl. “Put those giant hands to some good use.”

Jack can think of a lot of better uses for his big hands, but he’s too shy to list them. He puts his hands in the bowl and does his best to crumble the stiff cookies into dust. It takes some time, but it’s a good distraction. Jack’s grip is strong and he likes that he can use it for something other than holding a stick.

Meanwhile, Bitty whisks eggs over simmering water, flitting back and forth between that and the casserole dish he’s been spooning meat into. He shuts off the mixer and pours some hot brown liquid into the crisp pie shell. By the time Jack is finished there are eggs whisking away in the mixer and Bitty is arranging pecans in a design in the tart pan. His fingers are small and quick, dropping them into a starburst with ease.

“What’s that?” Jack asks, eyeing the tart pan.

“Something special,” Bitty says, smiling at him. He slides the tart pan into the oven and straightens back up, clapping his hands together and looking around the room for what’s next.

Jack tries not to look at his backside when he bends over, but doesn’t manage it. Instead, he listens while Bitty explains about “ribbon stage” and “seizing chocolate” and teaches him how to fold whipped cream without letting it deflate.

He botches it, but Bitty just laughs and shows him again. In the end, Jack’s favorite part is
pressing the cookie crumbs into the pie dish. It doesn’t need to be pretty, it can be uneven and messy, and it will still taste delicious. It’s just going to get covered up by Bitty’s chocolate mousse anyway.

There’s chocolate stuck under his fingernails, but Jack doesn’t mind. It feels like victory, and when he sucks a finger into his mouth and licks around the nail bed, he gets a prize. He rarely eats sweets. Even the taste of chocolate on his tongue is a marvel.

When he looks up, Bitty is staring at him, his expression unreadable. Jack furrows his eyebrows, but Bitty’s face doesn’t change. Eventually, he jumps, realizing he’s been staring. Jack licks his lips, staring at the smudge of chocolate that’s still on Bitty’s forehead.

Without letting himself overthink it, Jack leans in. Bitty’s mouth drops open, his lips forming a perfect O. Jack lifts his hand and swipes his thumb through the chocolate. He thought it would be hard by now, dry enough to brush off, but it wipes easily, heated by Bitty’s skin.

Their eyes are locked. Jack can’t think of anything else to do but bring the thumb to his mouth and suck the chocolate from it. It’s bitter and slightly salted, unsweetened. Jack reminds himself how much sugar Bitty had added to the mousse, but the taste still shocks him. It’s sharp on his tongue, lingering in his mouth.

“Jack?” Bitty asks, eyelashes fluttering as he lets his eyes fall closed.

“Yes?” Jack says, voice low and gravely. He can see a shiver run through Bitty’s body and can’t help but reach out to steady him. Jack places a hand at Bitty’s waist, his now clean thumb rubbing a circle just above his too big belt.

“I think I’ll take that kiss now,” Bitty says, voice breathy.

Jack wants to kiss Bitty, so he does. He doesn’t overthink it, he doesn’t ask himself why, or talk himself out of it. He doesn’t hesitate.

Jack kisses Bitty.

It’s long, but soft, just a gentle press of lips that seems to last an eternity. Eventually, Bitty pulls back to take a breath, but then leans in again to continue it. A hand comes up to cup Jack’s cheek and he leans into it, careful not to scratch Eric with his stubbly cheek.

They stay like that for a few minutes, barely touching, just one hand each and their lips moving against each other.

Bitty jumps when the oven timer beeps. “The tart is ready,” he says, lips still brushing Jack’s.

“I guess you should get it then,” Jack says, opening his eyes. They’re close enough that he can barely focus on Bitty. He might be imagining it, but he swears he can feel Bitty’s eyelashes tickling his face.

“I… yeah,” Bitty says, leaning in to press their lips together one more time. “I’ll do that now.”

Jack sighs when he moves away. His heart is beating wildly in his chest, but it doesn’t hurt. For the first time in a long time, his racing heart isn’t something to be afraid of. His tight chest isn’t cause for concern. Jack takes a deep breath and it actually fills his lungs along with the scent of…

“Is that maple?” he asks, eyes growing wide as he watches Bitty lean down to reach into the oven again.
“Yessir,” he says cheerfully, lifting the tart pan with a pair of bird-shaped oven mitts. Jack’s mom hadn’t been able to resist them, had said they reminded her of falcons. “It’s maple pecan!”

“Peecan?” Jack repeats, smirking.

“Oh don’t even start with me, Mister Zimmermann. You said you liked my accent!”

“I do,” Jack says quickly, watching Bitty put the tart down on a trivet and adjust the oven temperature. “I definitely do.”

“Then don’t chirp,” Bitty says, putting on a fake pout. “Or you won’t get any of this meat pie I made you.” He lifts the casserole dish off the counter and slides it into the oven.

Jack didn’t even see Bitty mash the parsnips, but they’re already layered nicely on top of the meat and vegetables in artful swirls. It wasn’t a flaky crust like he was used to, but he appreciates the fact that Bitty is trying to incorporate more vegetables. He can save his calories for the tart with the perfectly browned nuts on top.

He mimes zipping his lips up and Bitty laughs, taking off the oven mitts and tossing them at Jack’s chest. Jack catches them easily and then swipes them at Bitty’s hip, just barely hitting him with the padded fabric.

“You are in big trouble, Mister Zimmermann,” Bitty says, crossing his arms. “There is no spanking on the first date.”

Jack’s face heats, but he doesn’t miss a beat. “Isn’t this our second date?”

Bitty rolls his eyes and huffs out a breath. “No spanking on the second date either.”

“Agreed,” Jack says, dropping the oven mitts and putting his palms on the countertop, fingers spread wide. “Anything else to do?” he asks, looking around the kitchen. It’s messier than Jack has ever seen before. Buying a variety of pie tins and kitchen gadgets seems to have only served to make more dishes.

“I have the medovik in the fridge already,” Bitty says, opening the door and pointing at a crumb covered cake. He slides the chocolate mousse pie in beside it and closes the door. “So I think we’re just waiting for dinner to brown in the oven.”

“I’ll wash, you dry?” Jack offers, turning on the sink.

“But I don’t know where anything goes,” Bitty says, looking around the large kitchen at the dozen or so cabinets.

“Neither do I,” Jack says, scrubbing at the bottom of a pot. “Most of this is new.”

“It is not!” Bitty says. “Don’t tell me that.”

“I know how to make exactly three meals. I only had a sheet pan and a skillet until last week.”

“I’ll just have to teach you a few things, won’t I?” Bitty says, taking the pot from Jack to dry with a dish towel.

“That’d be nice,” he agrees, opening the dishwasher.

They wash and dry together, Jack smiling as he listens to Bitty humming along to the radio. He doesn’t need to talk. The silence is already full of Bitty’s soft voice and shimmying hips. Every
few minutes, Jack catches his eye. It’s new yet also comfortable, like his apartment was just waiting for something to slide into place. Bitty is the final note that makes the chord complete.
Chapter 9

Afterward, they have dinner, which is flavorful and delicious, the best thing Jack’s eaten in months. They leave the casserole dish soaking in the sink and run the dishwasher, circling around each other in the kitchen, never quite colliding. Eventually, they collapse onto the couch together, Bitty tucking himself under Jack’s arm as if he’s done it a hundred times before.

“Is this alright?” he asks, looking up at Jack through heavy-lidded eyes.

“It’s great,” Jack says, pulling Eric in even closer. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Me too,” Bitty says, burying his face into the crook of Jack’s neck. “I’m sorry I broke in.”

“I’m not,” Jack says, leaning his cheek against the top of Bitty’s hair. It’s as soft and silky as Jack imagined, though it smells heavily of sweat. Bitty must have been working hard in the kitchen while he slept. “You can break in any time.”

“Don’t tempt me, Mister Zimmermann. I might just take you up on that.”

“I’d like that,” Jack says, pulling away from Bitty so he can look into the man’s eyes. “I know I’m not home much, and when I am here, I’m usually sleeping or playing. I know I’m not going to be great at paying attention to you, or being there when you need me, but I’d like to see you whenever I can. I’d like to be your boyfriend.”

“Oh, honey,” Bitty says, eyes going wide. “I’d love that.”

Jack beams. He’d been worried. It’s not like they’ve been able to spend much time together, and Jack knows he’s not the most demonstrative of men. Words are hard for him, but sometimes actions are even harder.

Before Jack can even think of what to say next, Bitty is in his lap. There are knees on either side of his hips and hands on his shoulders. Suddenly, there are lips on his, opening quickly. There’s breath in his mouth and then a tongue, hot and wet licking inside.

He does his best to reciprocate, but it’s been nearly a decade since he’s been this close to a person. Jack is messy and uncoordinated, but Bitty doesn’t seem to care. He sighs into Jack’s mouth and presses even closer, lining their hips up and rocking down slightly into Jack’s lap.

Jack’s head is spinning as he runs out of air. Bitty’s arms are wrapped around his neck, his hands in Jack’s hair, tugging lightly with every grind of his hips. It feels amazing, like every neuron in his body is firing simultaneously. He doesn’t want it to end, and it doesn’t.

Bitty’s mouth leaves his, but only to peck across his cheek and trail down his neck. His lips are soft against his throat, sucking on his pulse point, nipping under his jaw. Jack’s breath is coming fast, his eyes closed against the overwhelming sensation of Bitty’s tongue rasping against his cheek, dragging against his stubble.

Teeth bite down on his collarbone, and Jack’s brain short circuits. He tenses, suddenly acutely aware of the bulge pressing against his hip, hitching in a rhythm of Bitty’s making. “Eric?” he asks, voice sounding like gravel. “Can we talk?”

“Hmm?” Bitty questions, lips still pressed against Jack’s jawline. “What is it, sugar?” he whispers.
It’s not that he doesn’t love the sensation, but Jack has to stop them before things get too far. “There’s something you need to know,” he says softly, eyes closing as he mentally prepares himself.

“Of course, darlin’,” Bitty says, pulling back. “What is it?”

Jack’s eyes are still closed. He can’t look. If this is the last moment he gets to spend with Bitty, he wants to remember it. Tilting his head forward, he leans against Bitty’s shoulder, breathing in his scent. It’s thick and heavy in his nose, comforting and intriguing in equal measure. Jack wants to taste it on his tongue, memorize the shape of it.

“Jack?” Bitty asks, reaching for the back of his shirt to drag him back up. “Are you…” he trails off.

He’s not sure what Bitty is going to ask, but it’s easier than forming words himself, so Jack waits for him.

“Am I doing something wrong?” Bitty asks, trying to swing his leg back over to get off Jack’s lap. “If you don’t want—”

“—it’s not that,” Jack says, grabbing Bitty’s hips and pulling him back down.

“You are bi, right?” Bitty asks next, eyes widening.

_They’re so brown_, Jack thinks. Brown like the honey in the cake he just made Tater, like sweet caramel or maple syrup. They’re brown like all of the things that Jack loves but never lets himself have. He wants to drink them in, a guilty pleasure that he will have to do 500 sit ups to make up for.

“Yes,” Jack says, and then catches himself. He wants to start off with 100% honesty. “Well no, I don’t think I actually like women,” he amends quickly before Bitty has a chance to lunge out of his lap again. “I’m gay.”

“Okay,” Bitty says, dragging the word out. “I don’t think I understand then.”

Jack closes his eyes again, trying to find the right words. He doesn’t want to say he’s asexual because he’s fairly sure that’s inaccurate and would only scare Eric off. He’s trying to remember the words that Shitty had used when Eric speaks again.

“Jack…” he says, tilting his head as he thinks. “You’re not telling me you’re trans, are you? Because while I don’t think that’s a deal breaker, I’m going to have a lot of questions about how you got to be the captain of an NHL team without anyone figuring that out.”

“No, no, it’s not that either,” Jack says quickly, though his mind is reeling from Bitty’s words. How would that not be a deal breaker? How does Bitty like him enough that the lack of a penis wouldn’t be a problem? That doesn’t make the least bit of sense to Jack. He must be misunderstanding something.

“Well, whatever it is, you can tell me,” Bitty says, hooking his finger under Jack’s chin and lifting until they’re looking at each other directly. “I can’t promise to understand right away, but I promise to try.”

“I uhh,” Jack says, still searching for the right words. “I like you a lot, but—”

“—but not enough? Oh Lord, I knew this was too good to be true. No one gets Jack Zimmermann
as their first boyfriend.”

“I’m your first boyfriend?” Jack asks, getting caught up on Bitty’s words again.

“Well, I was sort of hoping you would be,” he says, looking down as he blushes. “But this doesn’t sound like it’s going to end well for me.”

“If anyone should be nervous right now, it’s me,” Jack assures him, tilting forward again until his face is hidden in the curve of Bitty’s shoulder.

“You have nothing to worry about. I’m just a little confused.”

“I uhh…” Jack tries again, tongue feeling heavy in his mouth. “I don’t… like sex… often.”

“What’s often?” Bitty asks, tilting his head to the side to press his cheek to the top of Jack’s head.

“Like almost never,” Jack admits, squeezing his eyes shut tight as he waits for Bitty’s reaction.

“Okay,” is all he says, waiting for Jack to elaborate.

“I think Shitty called it, grey?” Jack says, still hiding his face. “Like it’s rare and hard for me to… want to.”

“OH!” Bitty says, wrapping his arms around Jack’s back and squeezing him tight. “Jack, sweetheart, that’s just fine.”

“Fine?” he asks, turning his head just slightly until his lips are pressed against Eric’s neck. “How is that fine?”

“We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do,” he says. “I’d never want to force you.”

Something in Jack tightens at the word *force*. He’d never felt forced when he was with Kenny, but now that he’s able to look back at the situation objectively, he knows he didn’t really want to do all the things he had done. He didn’t want to share Kenny, didn’t want Kenny to look at or touch anyone but him. Jack hadn’t needed anyone else and didn’t know why Kenny did, why he wasn’t enough for the person who was supposed to love him.

He hated watching Kenny touch the girls they brought home. Now he’s just mad at himself for being complicit, going along with it when he should have said no. Jack had always been so eager to please, putting his own wants and needs aside. It’s taken him years of therapy to understand how to combat those feelings and put himself first.

Sometimes, when he’s feeling low, Jack thinks about what would have happened if he’d been too drunk to remember a condom on those nights. If one day a girl would show up with a baby that she would insist was his, and how somehow the child would know that it was something Jack never wanted. A shiver runs through him as he thinks about it, of what Eric would think if he knew.

“Oh darling, it’s alright,” Bitty whispers, squeezing Jack so tight his chest constricts. “Don’t cry.”

Jack didn’t know he was. He pulls back quickly only to find that his vision is swimming. “I’m sorry, I—”

Bitty brushes his thumbs under Jack’s eyes and kisses his forehead. “There’s nothing to be sorry about. Everything is just fine. Shhh, honey, it’s all fine.”

Jack lets his eyes fall closed again. Tiny butterfly kisses brush against his cheeks, soft fingers
dabbing at the corners of his eyes until his breathing evens out.

“We’re never going to do anything that you don’t want to do,” Bitty says. “Not ever. Even if that means we do nothing but kiss. Alright? Well, I guess I should ask first. Did you like the kissing?” he asks, cupping Jack’s face with both hands now.

“Yes,” Jack says, finally opening his eyes. “You’re a really good kisser.”

“You’re not so bad yourself, mister,” he says, laughing even as his eyes get a little teary at the corners.

“I’m a little out of practice,” Jack says, lips curling into half a smile.

“So you’ve done this before?” Bitty asks, sitting back in Jack’s lap to talk. His butt hits Jack’s knees and they both smile as his body lowers. Jack’s a head taller than him again.

“Not for a really long time,” Jack says, twining his fingers with Eric’s. “It wasn’t the best relationship.”

“Trust me,” Bitty says, staring at their fingers. “The last guy I was with wasn’t so great either.”

“We’ll do better, I promise,” Jack says.

“I meant what I said, Jack. We don’t have to do anything.”

“I want to do things with you though,” Jack says, biting the inside of his mouth. This is the part that frustrates him, the part he can’t even begin to understand. “I really like you, and I want to touch you, I just…”

Bitty waits for him to speak this time. It makes Jack smile, that Bitty is already learning to be patient with him.

“I have trouble… getting hard.”

“But you want to have sex?” Bitty asks, head tilted to the side as he listens.

Jack finds it wildly endearing. “Yeah, I think I do. Just because I can’t… doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t.”

“Well that’s very sweet of you, Jack, but I don’t know how I feel about that,” Eric says, fiddling nervously with Jack’s fingers. “I’d feel guilty if I was the only one having any fun. Maybe we can just ease into things and see how it goes. I wouldn’t want to take advantage of you.”

“You wouldn’t,” Jack says quickly.

When he looks up, Bitty is biting his lip. “You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do,” Jack insists. From everything he’s already learned about Bitty, that’s one thing he knows he’s never going to have to worry about. Bitty would never hurt him if he could help it. All he ever does is help others. “I trust you.”

“I trust you, too,” Bitty says, giving Jack a smile. “How about we cool off for a little while and have a slice of that tart I made?”

“That sounds good,” Jack says, eager to get back to normal. “It looks amazing.”
“I hope you like it! It’s a little twist on the traditional butter tart. I thought you’d like the nuts,” Bitty says, heading back to the kitchen to slice up the dessert.

“Nuts are protein,” Jack struggles to admit. He reminds himself that he only had one serving at dinner and must have burned a crazy amount of calories at the boxing gym earlier. That doesn’t mean he won’t do a set of guilty sit-ups later, but he can at least wait until Bitty’s not looking to do them.

“Please tell me you don’t actually count calories,” Bitty says, plating up the tart and pouring Jack a glass of skim milk.

“Not out loud,” Jack says, smiling as he accepts the food.

“You’re built like a brick wall,” Bitty says, laughing at the confused look Jack gives him. “I bet you can eat anything you want.”

“I can eat a lot,” Jack admits, nodding as he takes a sip of milk. “But I try to eat things that will give me energy. Not just sugar.”

“Well, you’re gonna have to learn to be flexible,” Bitty says, pointing his fork at Jack and then at his plate. “Cause once you have some of my baking, you’re never going to want to stop.”

Jack rolls his eyes as he takes a bite, but then lets out a moan. “Câlisse,” he curses, holding a hand over his mouth. “Sacrament, that’s good!”

“Oh Lord,” Bitty says, laughing freely. “It must be good if I’ve got you forgetting your English.”

“Eric?” Jack says, eyes hard and serious.

“Yeah, sugar?” Bitty asks, taking another bite of tart.

“You can never make this again,” Jack says, pointing at his plate with his fork.

“I don’t think that’s something I can agree to,” Eric says, stifling another laugh. “Sometimes when I get stressed, pies just happen. You can’t tell me I’m not allowed to make you a little batch of cookies or something when you’re having a bad day either.”

“My nutritionist will kill you.”

“He doesn’t know me,” Bitty says around another bite of tart. “He’ll kill you first.”

Jack sighs around his fork, practically moaning as he finishes his slice of tart. “Put the rest away,” he insists, clutching his empty plate like he could break it in half. “If I can see it, I’ll eat it.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” Bitty says, smiling at him, refusing to move.

Jack groans but has another slice.

Twenty minutes later, the tart is gone. Bitty has a second slice, but Jack polishes off the rest as well as half the gallon of milk.
“Are you sure this is necessary?” Bitty says from his perch on Jack’s back.

“Yes,” Jack insists and continues doing his push-ups. Bitty barely weighs anything, but Jack likes the warmth of his body pressed against his back.

“You already did a hundred sit-ups!” Bitty says, body vibrating as he speaks.

“I usually do 500,” Jack mentions, dropping to the floor when his arms are about to give out.

Bitty drops his feet on the floor and stands, holding out a hand to Jack. “You are completely ridiculous,” he says, taking Jack’s hand and yanking.

He’s stronger than he looks, just like Jack thought. It’s not just anyone that can pull a professional hockey player to their feet. His hand is small, but there’s power behind it. It’s obvious Bitty uses his low center of gravity to keep unshakable balance on the ice. Jack can’t wait to see him skate some day. He’s sure it’s going to be something amazing.

“Get used to it,” Jack says, giving him a lopsided grin. “I have a pretty serious workout routine.”

“You say that like I’ve never been a competitive athlete,” Bitty says, rolling his eyes. “If I had a pair of sneakers I could probably keep up with you on your runs.”

“You don’t have sneakers?” Jack asks, completely bewildered. He must have at least a dozen pairs in various stages of wear.

“Not at the moment, no,” Eric says hands on his hips as he shakes his head. “Doesn’t mean I don’t keep myself fit.”

“That’s for sure,” Jack says, eyes trailing down Bitty’s form. “It’s getting late. How about we go to bed.”

“Seriously?” Bitty asks, eyes going wide.

Jack swallows. His mouth is dry and he’s sweaty again, but he’s never been more serious. “Yeah,” he says, licking his lips as he watches Eric’s hair fall in his eyes again.

“We can just sleep,” Bitty offers, brushing his hair back. It’s not quite long enough to tuck behind his ear, so it just kind of sits there, limp against his forehead.

“That sounds nice,” Jack says, holding out a hand for Bitty to take as he leads him to his bedroom. “Do you want a shower first? I can lend you some clothes.”

“Yes, please,” Bitty says, waiting for Jack to hand him a pair of sleep pants and the smallest tee
shirt he owns.

“Make yourself at home,” Jack says, showing him the bathroom. “There’s a spare toothbrush and razor in the bottom drawer.”

“Thanks, Jack,” Eric says, smiling shyly as he closes the door.

Feeling sweaty himself, Jack heads to the guest bath to shower. He dries himself off and slips on some boxer briefs. He’s just about to pull an old tee shirt over his head when Bitty steps out of the bathroom.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I saw you had a hair clipper and I just—Jack?”

“Huh?” Jack says, still staring at Bitty, eyes darting between the short buzzed sides of his hair and the Samwell Men’s Hockey shirt that is clinging to his damp chest.

“I cleaned up, so you don’t have to worry about there being a mess,” Bitty says.

Jack has no idea what he’s talking about, he’s still staring at the short little swoop of hair that’s hanging perfectly above Bitty’s left eye. The sides are short, cropped close to his head, but the top is bouncy and soft, shining in the light that spills out the open bathroom door. Jack stares at the diagonal of Bitty’s hairline, how it slopes into a neat point at the base of his neck.

“I’m sorry,” Bitty is saying. “You told me to make myself at home and I just—are you mad?”

“What?” Jack says dumbly, tilting his head to the side. “No!” he adds, finally understanding what Eric’s been saying. “You look… wow.”

“Is it even in the back?” he asks, turning to show Jack his neck. “I couldn’t quite see, but I just wanted something a little different.”

“It’s perfect,” Jack says, trailing his pointer finger down the edge of his hairline. It’s rough but neat, the short hairs tickling the pad of his finger.

Bitty shivers. Jack can feel it under his hand as he reaches for his shoulder, turning Bitty around to face him. Without thinking, Jack runs his fingers through the swoop of Bitty’s hair. It’s clean this time, less silky, but still shining. He smells like Jack’s soap.

“Oh,” Bitty whispers when Jack leans in, pressing his nose to the side of Bitty’s head. He inhales deeply, taking in the scent of Bitty wrapped up in the fruity aroma of his store brand shampoo.

Everything about the moment is exquisite. The feel of Bitty’s breath on his neck, the brush of his hair against Jack’s nose, the way Bitty’s fingers linger against the waistband of his shorts, his other hand clutching at Jack’s bare shoulder, all of it blurs together into this wonderful contentment. It burrows under Jack’s skin, settling there, deep enough that he’ll be able to carry it with him even when Bitty isn’t around.

“Is this okay?” he asks, rubbing his temple against Eric’s hair. He must look like a deranged cat, but he doesn’t care. Everything just feels so clear, like every square inch of him is covered in Bitty. Jack wants to roll in it, to press it into his skin and his clothes and his sheets, to do everything he can, anything that would let him take this feeling wherever he goes.

“Of course it’s okay,” Bitty breathes. His heart beats quickly against Jack’s chest, a stuttering
rhythm that Jack wants to chase with his tongue.

Suddenly, Jack wants nothing more than to make Bitty forget his English. He wants Bitty’s hair on his pillow, Bitty’s pulse in his mouth, Bitty’s gasp in his ear. Moving faster than lightning, Jack has Eric off the floor, one arm slipping under his knees as he lifts and tosses him to the mattress.

“Still okay?” Jack asks, voice hoarse as he looks up at Eric from where he stands between his legs.

Bitty just nods.

So far so good, Jack thinks, smirking as he goes to his knees.

Bitty gasps, eyes going wide as he follows Jack’s body down.

“Tell me if you don’t like it,” Jack says, biting his lip as he reaches for the waistband of the borrowed sleep pants Bitty is wearing.

“Honey, I’m pretty sure I’m gonna love whatever you decide to do down there,” Bitty says, accent thickening as his pupils dilate.

“I could be terrible at this,” Jack says, smirking a little bit as he slips his thumbs under the Samwell tee and presses into Bitty’s stomach.

“You’re already better than you think you are,” Bitty says, hand reaching down to run through Jack’s still damp hair.

“Well,” Jack says, trailing his hands down to cup Eric’s erection. “I’m going to try my best, at least. It’s been a while.”

“You’re sure?” Bitty asks even as he pushes his hips up into the touch.

Jack rolls his eyes and slips the pants down Eric’s legs, tossing them in the direction of his hamper. When he looks back, his eyes are drawn first to the fine blond hair on Eric’s thighs. He runs his palm there and feels the muscles tense under his hand.

Peeking up at Eric’s face, he can see that Bitty is biting his lip, eyes locked on Jack. He looks back down and finds that Eric is even bigger than he imagined. His dick is fairly long but the width is what’s more impressive. It’s wide, flaring to a frankly alarming girth in the middle before tapering a bit smaller at the head. He’s cut, which Jack is sad to say he’s used to from Kenny, but that’s where the comparison ends.

Jack’s mouth falls open as he stares at the head, flushed dark red with blood. He wraps his hand around the base and just holds it steady so he can lick at the tip. His tongue is barely brushing Bitty’s body when Jack is nearly kicked in the face.

“W-what do you think you’re doing?” Bitty yelps, pulling away.

“Uhh, blowing you?” Jack asks, eyebrows furrowed. He’d thought it was quite obvious. “Was that not what it looked like?”

“No honey, I know what you were doing. I just—”

“What?”

“Do you not have condoms?”
“Oh!” Jack says, laughing nervously. “Umm…” he thinks for a moment. “I don’t actually know. Let me look.”

Bitty laughs out loud as Jack stumbles to his feet and dashes into the bathroom.

“Don’t laugh at me,” Jack calls back through the door as he opens and closes drawers, shuffling through their contents quickly. “I haven’t had sex in like nine years!”

“What?” Bitty calls, voice sobering. “I thought you were kidding about that.”

“Why would I kid about that?” Jack asks, finally finding a box in the back of the bottom drawer. He pulls it out and carries it into the bedroom, searching for the expiration date.

“I don’t know, I thought you were just trying to put my mind at ease or something. It’s not every day a small town gay boy has an honest-to-God celebrity going to his knees,” Bitty says, still laid out on the bed. In fact, he’s taken off the Samwell shirt and dropped it next to him. If it’s possible to look tense and relaxed at the same time, that’s what Bitty looks like, draped over Jack’s sheets.

“I wasn’t being modest, I was being honest,” Jack says, pulling a condom from the box and dropping the rest to the bedside table. “Is that okay? Do you want to stop?”

“No. Absolutely not,” Bitty says, practically shoving Jack back toward the bottom of the bed. “I just want to get tested before you go sticking my dick in your mouth.”

“I can go tomorrow,” Jack offers, hiding his face by looking down at the condom to rip the wrapper open. “The team doctor does it for the guys all the time. I’ll get the results in a few days.”

“It’s fine, sweetheart,” Bitty says, sucking in a breath when Jack reaches for him again. “I don’t mind the condoms. But I’ll go myself tomorrow too, alright? And then we can do whatever we want.”

“That sounds good,” Jack says, rolling the condom down over Bitty’s erection.

“Good,” Bitty agrees.

Jack swallows him down. He’s out of practice, and can only get about two-thirds of the way before his throat starts to spasm around the intrusion, but Jack is determined. He just pulls off and drops down again, all the way this time.

“Oh my God, fuck!” Bitty shouts, grabbing at his hair.

Jack’s eyes water, but he doesn’t let up. He breathe through his nose and sinks down until Bitty’s dick is pressed against the back of his throat.

“You said… nine years.” Bitty gasps above him, fingers clenching in his hair hard enough to burn.

It’s a good burn though, one that Jack likes the feel of, so he keeps going, bobbing up and down, swirling his tongue whenever he can. The condom tastes artificial, but with any luck, it will be the last time they have to use one.

Bitty’s girth takes a bit of getting used to. It forces Jack’s mouth open as wide as it can go and he can feel his lips cracking at the corners. Soon, Jack’s throat is sore and his jaw is locking up, but he just redoubles his efforts, eager to pull as many breathy little sounds out of Eric as he possibly
“Fuck, Jack!” Bitty whines, scratching at his scalp. “You’re so good, fuck!”

His words hit Jack hard, harder than they have any right to. Jack moans around his cock, the vibration low in the back of his throat. He starts to pant through his nose, Bitty’s dick getting thicker as he nears the edge.

Not ready for this to be over, Jack pulls off. He holds Bitty tight around the base of his dick and looks up.

Eric looks completely wrecked. He’s sweating and his new wave of hair is plastered to his forehead. Chest heaving, nipples hard and pink, he looks like a dream.

“You okay?” Jack asks, wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand.

“You’re a menace,” Bitty says, lunging forward to capture his lips. “You can’t just look at me with your mouth like that. It’s obscene.”

“You want me to stop?” Jack asks, lips already curving into a smile as Bitty ravages his mouth.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” he says, pushing at Jack’s chest with both hands until he kisses down Bitty’s body back to his cock. “Unless you don’t want to,” he adds, blinking down at Jack who is already between his knees.

“I like this,” Jack says simply, stroking up and down Bitty’s dick as he talks. “I like your dick in my mouth. It’s so big… wide. It’s a lot, but I like it.”

“Fuck, Jack,” Bitty says again, leaning down to stroke Jack’s face. “It uh—it looks so good in your mouth,” he says, blushing furiously.

“Yeah?” Jack asks, voice rough like sandpaper.

Bitty nods frantically, running his hands through Jack’s hair. He’s still hard in Jack’s hand even though he hasn’t given him so much as a squeeze in the last minute. Jack marvels at it, wondering what he’ll have to do to get himself hard like this.

“Yeah, you’re amazing,” Bitty says, licking his lips.

“Want me to keep going?”

“Please.”

Jack ducks his head and licks a long stripe all the way up Bitty’s dick, from base to tip. He twirls his tongue around the head and then sucks it into his mouth, letting it fit snugly against his soft palate.

Bitty keens, hands clenching in his hair again. “Oh my God, fuck!” he moans as Jack sinks down as far as he can go.

Sensing Bitty is close, Jack takes his hand and grasps Bitty’s thigh. The fingers in his hair tighten and Jack pushes down deep, so far that he chokes. Bitty pulls back, but Jack chases him, pressing down on Bitty’s hands until he catches on.

Soon enough, Bitty is fucking Jack’s throat, the head of his cock ramming down hard, cutting off Jack’s air supply. If anything, it’s the choking that makes heat squirm in Jack’s stomach. It’s
subtle, but he can almost feel something, a little twinge in his underwear.

When Bitty starts to come, the pressure flooding his mouth even through the condom, spasming against his throat, making his head swim from a lack of oxygen, the tension in Jack’s groin is almost painful. He swallows furiously, working his throat, massaging the head of Bitty’s cock until he’s spent.

Jack pulls off, gasping. He’s hard, he knows he is. Bitty’s pleasure made him hard. And yet, when he drops a hand to his crotch, there’s nothing.

He’s still soft.

But he’d been so sure it was happening. He could feel something, he knows he could. If he could just try a little harder, he’s sure he could stiffen up.

“Fuck, Jack,” Bitty groans, throwing an arm across his face. “I think you killed me.”

Jack tries not to be disappointed in himself. He thought he’d be able to get a little hard in the shower just thinking about sucking Bitty’s cock, and now that he’s actually done it, he’s got nothing, not even a blip. How can he feel so aroused and still be soft? It doesn’t make any sense.

“Do you want anything?” Bitty asks, pulling Jack out of his own thoughts.

He looks up into Eric’s wide brown eyes and has to take a deep breath to stop himself from bursting into tears. “I do but I—”

“You’re not excited,” Bitty says, not a question, a statement.

“That’s just the thing,” Jack says, clutching at his hair as he tries to find words that won’t make him sound completely insane. “I am excited, it’s just… not translating.”

“Oh, okay,” Bitty says, pulling Jack into his arms. “We can work with this, it’s alright.”

“I liked doing that for you, a lot. And I want to come, I really do, but I just—”

“How about this,” Bitty says, laying Jack down next to him on the bed. He removes the condom from himself and tosses it into the trash can in the corner before pulling Jack close. “I’m going to kiss you, and touch you, and you just try to let yourself relax, and we’ll see what happens. Alright?”

“Yeah, okay,” Jack says halfheartedly. He’s not convinced anything is going to happen for him, and it’s already nerve-wracking. What if Bitty gets upset, or thinks it’s his fault? Then Jack will feel even worse. The thoughts creep in immediately, and Jack can do nothing except try to breathe through it.

For a few minutes, it’s easy to forget. Bitty kisses with purpose. His lips and tongue capture Jack’s mouth and stake a claim there, holding ground until Jack’s worries are pushed away. Swinging a leg over, Bitty settles in Jack’s lap, his hands trailing paths of fire down Jack’s sides, thumbs brushing over his nipples in soft circles.

Jack arches into the touch, his back bowing as he chases Bitty’s mouth. His thighs feel rock solid and steady on either side of Jack’s hips, grounding him, holding him captive against the mattress. For a moment, Jack’s fears slip away. Bitty is in control, and he can do nothing but feel each and every touch as heat builds in his gut.
Hands reach for his underwear, and he lifts his hips obediently until Bitty can tug them off his long legs. Immediately, there’s a touch at the jut of his hip, a warm palm trailing down his thigh to cup his balls. Jack tries to squirm, but there’s not enough room. Bitty’s other hand has claimed one of his wrists and pinned it to the mattress.

His mind goes blank for a moment as Bitty explores his body. He can do nothing about it, the hand on his wrist keeps him there, even though he could easily throw it off. He doesn’t want to. Jack doesn’t want to be free from this feeling.

Bitty’s hand massages him, rolling his balls in his palm, and it doesn’t feel good per say, but it’s interesting, and Jack hasn’t felt interesting in a long time. The hand leaves for a second as Bitty spits into his palm. It shouldn’t be sexy, but the action feels oddly deliberate, like Jack is in for something, for someone to be focused on him and only him.

They’re kissing again, hot and heavy, Bitty’s tongue in his mouth, his teeth biting into Jack’s lips. It stings in the best way, so much that Jack doesn’t freeze when Bitty touches his dick. Bitty squeezes and pulls back his foreskin, his wet palm rubbing over the exposed head.

Jack moans into Bitty’s mouth, desperate for more of this feeling, for something to build in him, because he knows he’s nowhere close. He’s going to need so much more, someone to take special care, to try. Jack needs someone to try so hard for him, to match his determination and surpass it. Jack is pretty sure he needs someone to force an orgasm out of him, and he’s praying that Bitty will be the one to do it.

They go on for ten minutes, Bitty stroking him, attempting to pull on his dick that stays stubbornly soft in its nest of black curls. Bitty devours his mouth, pressing their chests together, distracting Jack as best he can, but in the end, it’s no use. Jack is chafed and frustrated, so angry he’s close to tears again.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers against Bitty’s ear. “You can stop, it’s okay.”

Bitty is panting. His arm is tired, muscles straining as he fights to keep a rhythm going. “I have a few ideas,” he says, pressing a soft kiss to Jack’s closed mouth. “Want me to try something else?”

“Not tonight,” Jack says, pulling his hand away from his lap. “You’re tired. Let’s go to bed.”

“I’m not that tired,” Bitty protests, but Jack just hops out of bed to shut off the light.

He thinks about slipping his underwear back on, but Bitty is still naked, and he thinks he’ll like the intimacy of sleeping skin to skin. “Your arm is about to fall off,” he says, pulling back the covers and slipping under.

“I think I know what to do next time, though.” Bitty says, fighting a yawn as he joins Jack under the comforter. “I was paying very close attention.”

“I bet you were,” Jack says, checking his phone to make sure his alarm is set.

“I left dishes in the sink.”

“We’ll get them tomorrow. I’m going for my run, but then we can make breakfast.”

“You have to get those desserts to your friends. They won’t keep forever.”

“Shitty and Lardo are coming to my game tomorrow night. Do you want to come, too? I can get extra tickets,” Jack offers, knowing most of the Samwell guys won’t be able to make it. He
probably already has a few to spare.

“To sit with your friends?” Bitty asks, tucking himself in close to Jack, pressed tight against his back with one arm stretched beneath Jack’s pillow.

“My parents are coming too, you could meet them all if you wanted.”

“Jack Zimmermann!” Bitty says, sitting straight upright, dislodging Jack from his comfortable position. “Your parents are visiting this week and you didn’t tell me? I didn’t bake them anything! I can’t meet your parents empty handed!”

“Do you want to meet them then?” Jack asks, lips curving into a smile. The disastrous sex doesn’t seem as upsetting with Bitty like this. If he can be useless in bed and Eric still wants to be with him, be his boyfriend in a serious relationship, meet his parents, well then Jack’s not doing all that bad.

”Well I was hoping to wait a little while, but it’s not every day they come down from Canada, is it?” Bitty says, breathless.

“Not terribly often,” Jack says. “They’re still doing a lot of charity work and public appearances. They travel a lot. Sometimes they stay here when I’m not home, but I’ll try to let you know when that happens if you’re going to make a habit of breaking in to bake things.”

“I did not break in! I entered. There was no breaking!”

“Even so, better to break in on me without my pants on than my dad.”

“Your father is a very attractive man, Mister Zimmermann. I wouldn’t be so sure.”

“What is it with everyone and my dad? Half the guys on the team want to make out with him.”

“I would never do that to you,” Bitty exclaims, smiling. “He’s just nice to look at. You’re the one I’m in bed with.”

“Good,” Jack says, fighting a laugh. He’s come a long way in his recovery if he can let a comment about his father’s superiority roll off him like that.

“You said there would be other people there too, right?” Bitty asks, fiddling with the sheet and failing to make eye contact.

“Yeah, Lardo and Shitty and a few of the other guys from Samwell, why?”

“Just, sitting next to your parents… there are going to be cameras on them, aren’t there?”

“There will be plenty of other people there,” Jack says, taking Bitty’s hand. “You won’t have to worry about it.”

“Well, alright then. I’d love to come,” Bitty says, laying back down. He takes a minute to move Jack’s body to his liking before setting his head on the pillow just behind Jack.

There’s breath on the back of his neck and Bitty’s scent all around him. It feels good, better than good, it feels right. “Goodnight, Eric. I’ll try not to wake you in the morning.”

“Goodnight, Jack.”
Chapter 11

When Jack’s alarm goes off at 5 a.m. Bitty groans and buries his face in Jack’s hair. Arms wrap tightly around his chest and refuse to budge even when he tries to pull away.

“I have to meet Tater,” Jack says, attempting to pry Bitty’s fingers apart. It’s harder than he expects it to be. “Eric. I need you to let go, bud.”

“Call me that again,” Bitty says, eyes still closed as he clings to Jack, breath hot against his neck.

“You like it?” Jack asks, eyebrows arching. He hadn’t even realized he’d said it.

“Mmmhmm,” Bitty hums, rubbing his face between Jack’s shoulder blades. “I like everything you say.”

“Bits,” Jack says, trying the word out. Bitty seems to like that too, because he gets a trail of kisses from the middle of his back all the way up to his neck when he says it. “Let me get up and I’ll make you breakfast when I get back. I have eggs and fruit. And I’ll make the fancy coffee.”

“What time is it?” Bitty asks, lips brushing Jack’s throat.

“Just after five.”

“Ughhh! I swear, you work harder than God! Can’t we just sleep a little longer?” Bitty asks, nipping at the arch of Jack’s collarbone.

The one good thing about Jack’s inability to orgasm is that he can’t be tempted easily. It’s not hard to deny yourself when you’re 90% sure you’re just going to be frustrated anyway. “You sleep, I’ll work off that pie,” he offers, slipping away when Bitty goes to reach for his ass.

“Fine,” Bitty says, rolling into the warm spot on the sheets Jack just vacated. “But you owe me one lazy morning in bed, mister.”

“Okay Bits,” Jack says, pulling his ColdGear out of his drawer and padding out of the room. He closes the door behind him, but not before taking one last glance at Bitty’s sleeping form, golden swirls of hair spilling out of the top of the comforter.

Tater groans by way of a welcome when Jack meets him at the corner. It’s brutally cold, the wind whipping off the water in a chilling spray that feels like ice. They jog in silence, Tater quiet for once. Jack assumes he’s hungover because there’s not much that can keep Tater from teasing him, even at 5:30 in the morning.

By the time they’re done with their eight miles, Tater is looking a little green. “Take a nap when you get home,” Jack tells him, patting him on the back gently when they part ways. “And make sure you drink some water first.”

Tater nods, “Yeah, yeah, Captain.”

“And don’t forget to set your alarm! I don’t have time to come knock your door down later,” he adds, waving as Tater jogs backward away from him.

The apartment is still quiet when Jack gets back so he sets up the French press and chugs a protein shake while he finishes off the last of the dishes. He slips into the guest bath again to shower,
making sure it’s clean enough for his parents when he’s finished, though he knows they’ll probably offer their bed to Shitty and Lardo, opting for a hotel room instead.

Towel wrapped around his waist, Jack heads back to his bedroom, turning the knob as gently as possible. Bitty is face down on Jack’s pillow, so he does his best to find clothes quietly.

Eric’s ratty little backpack is sitting in the corner of the room. The sight of it makes Jack feel unbelievably fond. He wonders how many more nights he’ll be able to spend with Bitty before he’s on the road again, if it would be presumptuous to empty out a drawer for him or make some space in the closet.

“Do you have a rule about sex on game days, or is that just another thing sports movies have lied to me about?” Bitty asks, voice hoarse with sleep.

When Jack turns around he sees Eric, hair mussed, chest bare, leaning back on his palms, eyeing Jack hungrily. He looks incredible, and even if Jack had such a rule, he’d probably be about to break it. “I could be persuaded,” he says, shooting for suave and probably missing by a mile.

“Yeah?” Bitty asks, a smile spreading across his face. “Do you have any lube?”

“Uhh,” Jack panics again. He is so woefully unprepared for a sexual relationship, it’s embarrassing. “I don’t know. I never use it.”

“You don’t touch yourself, do you?” Bitty asks as Jack heads to the bathroom to check the drawer where he had found the condoms.

“Not really, no,” Jack says, returning with a mostly empty bottle. He has no idea how old it is and looks at the bottom to see if lube expires.

“Do you like to have things inside you, Jack?” Bitty asks. It’s a simple question, but in Bitty’s husky voice, it sounds overwhelming.

“I uhh…” Jack trails off again, looking down at the way the sheet over Bitty’s lap is tented. He swallows hard, searching for the words. “I like to bottom, yeah.”

“Oh, good,” Bitty says, patting the bed next to him and taking the bottle from Jack’s slack hands. “I think maybe external stimulation isn’t enough for you.” Even the clinical words sound obscene coming out of Bitty’s mouth. “Let’s see how my fingers work.”

“Okay,” Jack says, because he’s willing to try anything. He pulls the towel from his waist and hangs it on the back of the bathroom door before laying down on the bed.

“I know you probably hear this a lot,” Bitty says, trailing his hands down Jack’s chest. “But your body is unreal. You’re the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.”

“Funny, but that’s not what I usually hear in the locker room,” Jack says, swallowing around a lump in his throat as Bitty traces his abs with his fingers.

“I can’t believe you haven’t done a Body Issue yet,” Bitty says, mapping out the ridges of Jack’s chest, pinching at his nipples. “It’s a crime to look this good, Jack. Not that I’m interested in sharing you, but there’s a certain appeal to showing a person off and then getting to say, ‘hands off, he’s mine.’ I’d be so smug, letting people know I’m the one you let do this.”

Jack’s head swims. He hadn’t realized Bitty could be so possessive, and he has to admit, it’s working for him. Opening his mouth, he lets out a moan, letting Bitty know he likes what he
hears, that he’d like to hear more.

“I bet they’d be shocked, that little ol’ me is the one in charge right now. But you’d just let me do anything, wouldn’t you, sweetheart?”

His heart pounds when he hears the endearment. It makes everything go floaty in his head, hearing Bitty praise him like that, knowing that he’s wanted. Jack didn’t know he was missing that kind of reassurance until right now.

“I just want to feel you from the inside, darling. Is that alright? Do you want me to touch you, Jack?”

“Yes,” he breathes, heat stirring in his stomach again, sharper than the last time, like liquid fire.

“Would you ask nicely?”

“Please,” Jack says, eyes squeezing shut. “Please, touch me.”

“Oh Jack,” Bitty breathes, sliding down the bed beside him. “You’re so good for me. So perfect.”

Jack hears the snick of the lube bottle opening and then nothing. It’s completely silent in the bedroom, but he can feel Bitty looking at him, his big brown eyes taking in every inch of Jack’s body. Bitty had called him beautiful. Bitty likes what he sees, loves it even. Wants to shout it from the rooftops and also keep all of Jack for himself, a most compelling contradiction that makes Jack’s muscles quiver.

One hand grips his thigh, massaging it carefully, the other dips down under his balls, damp and slick as Bitty circles his hole with one finger.

Jack’s breath catches in his throat. He feels lightheaded, the only thing keeping him tethered is Bitty’s strong hand on his thigh, petting him now, petting the coarse hair, smoothing it down as his other finger presses in. It’s not too much, just the lightest of pressure, but Jack still hears his own voice call out.

“This okay, baby?” Bitty asks, turning the endearments back on him.

Jack can’t even form words, so he just nods, not even knowing if Bitty is looking at him, his eyes still squeezed closed tight enough that his temples are starting to throb.

“You’re doing so well for me,” Bitty says, soothing him. “I’m going to press inside now, alright? Feel how soft and warm you are…”

Jack nods again. He’s as ready as he’s ever going to be. Bitty’s words wash over him, like he’s sitting in the sun, a pool of light heating his skin, the scent of it in his nose, sweaty and warm like a day at the beach. But it’s just Bitty, Bits, Eric. Everything he smells, everything he feels, it’s all Bitty, taking over where he’s lacking, taking control from him. It’s like nothing he’s ever experienced before, the care of someone who isn’t seeking their own pleasure, the focus of someone who has infinite patience.

Bitty slips inside him. His finger is small, but it already feels overwhelming. He strokes in and out, testing the give, stroking the walls.

This feels nothing like when Jack tried it in the shower last week. He hasn’t been touched by someone else in so long. He can almost feel the blood rushing down, coiling in his stomach, filling his muscles with oxygen, making his pulse thunder.
“You feel so good, Jack,” Bitty says, keeping him focused. “Like you were made just for me. I’m going to give you more now, okay?”

“Yeah,” Jack says, nodding once more. His head rolls on the pillow, and he turns his head to bury his face in it when he catches a hint of Bitty’s scent. It feels better to hide his face. Now he can let his eyelids relax and ease the pressure in his head.

Bitty slides a second finger into him, petting his thigh the whole time. The stretch isn’t uncomfortable. In fact, Jack is pretty sure he could take more, but he appreciates the time Bitty is taking to work him up to it.

“You’re doing so well, sweetheart,” Bitty purrs, pressing a kiss to his hipbone as he scissors his fingers. It goes on like that for a few minutes, just building the pressure until suddenly sparks go off behind Jack’s eyelids.

“Ah!” he calls, his hand flying up to clench in his hair. “Câlisse!”

“There you go,” Bitty says, soothing him with kisses to his hips and thighs.

Jack arches his back as the feeling shoots through him. He cries out again and again, biting down on his lip as Bitty continues to press on his prostate. “Tabarnak!” he shouts, tears pricking at the corner of his eyes.

Bitty keeps it up, pulling back for a moment only to add more lube and a third finger.

Jack feels the stretch this time, but it’s a welcome one that quenches an ache deep inside him. He knows this place hasn’t been touched in years, that it’s been too long, too far for Jack to reach. It’s good that it’s Bitty who is doing this, making him remember what it felt like to be loved by somebody. Bitty, who is able to navigate his body without needing direction, who knows when to push and when to pull, when to hold tight and press down.

His fingers are relentless inside Jack, stroking and prodding, tapping little rhythms out in Jack’s most sensitive area. When he feels Bitty’s other hand touch his dick, he jerks, spine snapping in an uncontrollable curve. Jack’s neck arches, his breath caught in his chest.

“Look at me, Jack,” Bitty says, voice calm and sure.

Jack hesitates. He’s not sure he wants to look, doesn’t know what he’s going to find when he does.

“It’s okay, just look,” Eric prompts again, squeezing the base of his cock as he presses on Jack’s prostate.

Jack lets his eyes adjust to the light for a second and then looks down. Bitty’s hand is wrapped around his dick. His erect dick. Eric’s hand looks small around it, but there it is, standing tall.

“You didn’t tell me you had this in your pants,” Bitty says, stroking it again. “You must have gotten teased a lot in the locker room. Not just anyone has a ten-inch dick, Jack. This is like… a porn star dick.”

“It is not,” Jack groans, letting his head flop back down on the pillow. He feels like he’s going to cry, but he just laughs instead. He has an erection. It seems like such a stupid thing to get emotional about, but to Jack, it’s a miracle. He wasn’t sure he was ever going to get this with Bitty, but here he is, with an erection, Bitty staring at it in wonder.

“Now I know why you haven’t done a Body Issue,” Bitty says, squeezing him. “They wouldn’t
have been able to hide this thing, even with artfully placed shadows.”

“Stop it,” Jack says, feeling his face heat. He’s heard it before, back in the Q when Kenny would rile him up. He’s heard girls fawn over it, begging him to fuck them, to tear them apart with it. Jack never wanted to, but hearing about it from Bitty, he can’t help feeling just the slightest bit smug.

“I’m so glad you prefer to bottom because I’m pretty sure you could kill me with this,” he says, stroking Jack’s cock. “Lord, you’re incredible,” Bitty says, looking directly into Jack’s eyes. “So hot. I can’t wait to feel you come on my fingers.”

Jack bites his lip, but nods. He doesn’t want to get his hopes up, but if anyone can get him to orgasm, it’s going to be Bitty, who has just gifted him with his first erection in recent memory.

Bitty works him over, one hand stroking him hard and slow, the other massaging his prostate, stretching him wide.

Jack is panting, mouth open, drying out with every broken off moan that escapes him. His chest heaves and his muscles strain, but he just can’t get there.

“It’s okay, baby,” Bitty tells him, even though Jack knows he’s getting tired. His biceps are flexing and there’s sweat on his brow, but he doesn’t let up for a second. “We’re going to get there. You just let me do all the work.”

It’s impossible though, Jack knows this. He can’t put all the pressure on Bitty to make him come. It’s not Bitty’s fault that the drugs that keep him calm also numb him to death. Already, he can feel the panic start to creep in. Bitty’s either going to try until he passes out from exhaustion, or Jack is going to have to end it. But how soon is too soon? Will Bitty be upset if he pushes him away? Is it worse to let him try even though he knows it will be fruitless?

His body feels tight, coiled like a spring, but release is nowhere on the horizon. If it were a finish line he could see, Jack is sure he would be able to power through, but this isn’t a race. It’s something intangible that he has no hope of reaching.

“Bitty,” he breathes, a small, reassuring smile on his face. “You can stop.”

“No,” Bitty says, voice hard. “I got you this far. We can do this.”

“It’s okay, really,” Jack says, licking his lips. He wishes there was a way for him to explain it to Bitty, that it wasn’t for lack of trying, but some things just couldn’t be done. That it wouldn’t be forever. He could talk to Blaire and see what his options were.

“Do you trust me?” Bitty asks, ignoring Jack’s reluctance.

“Yeah, of course,” Jack says. It’s not even a question. Sure, he’s only known Bitty for a few weeks, but already he feels close to him. If he didn’t, he never would have let Bitty touch him like this.

“Just close your eyes and feel, okay?” Bitty asks. “Can you do that for me, sweetheart?”

“Yeah,” Jack says, doing as he’s told. He lets his eyes fall closed again and takes a deep breath, centering himself. He doesn’t think it’s actually going to do anything, but he tries for Bitty anyway.

“You’re so good for me, Jack,” Bitty breathes, pulling Jack’s attention back to the floaty feeling he
gets when he listens carefully. “You’re perfect, just swallowing me up, so hot. I can’t believe how big you are. I’m going to get my mouth on you next time, and you’re going to come so much I won’t be able to swallow it all.”

Jack groans. It’s a nice thought, filling Bitty’s mouth to overflowing. Too bad he’d have to be able to come for that to happen.

“I can hear you thinking from here, Mister Zimmermann,” Bitty says sternly, squeezing his cock hard to get his attention. “I’m in charge right now, so you just do exactly as I tell you, and everything is going to be fine. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” Jack says, sounding more confident than he feels. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, baby,” Bitty tells him, still pounding into his prostate. “You’re doing so well. I know this is hard for you, but you’re so good.”

Bitty’s fingers are strong and precise, rubbing just right with every stroke. Jack can feel the heat build in his stomach again, the sweat collecting in the creases of his abs as he strains to reach that unseen finish line.

He counts. Just ten more, he tells himself, like it’s reps at the gym. Just ten more and then he’ll be able to relax. His muscles tense, collecting their last bits of strength for the final push.

“You’re so close now, sugar,” Bitty says, voice light in his ear. “Just a little bit more and you’ll feel so much better, won’t you? Just a little bit and you’ll drench me with this big cock, won’t you? I bet it’ll hit my hair. You’re so strong, it’s going to cover me. Just a little bit more, baby. That’s it.”

Jack huffs out a breath through his nose, panting and sweating like he’s run a marathon. He’s parched and aching, every inch of his body taut with tension, his back arched. “Ah, ah, ah,” he moans, with every exhale. He can’t help it, his mouth is dry and every sound that comes out of it is broken and brittle. His muscles fill with lactic acid as he struggles to push himself that last little bit over the edge.

“Fuck, Jack,” Bitty says, voice strained. He must be exhausted, but he’s not giving up. His fingers move to the head of Jack’s dick, jerking quick and tight, just like Jack likes it. It’s only been a few minutes but it’s like Bitty already knows his body inside and out. “I know what you need, baby, it’s okay,” he says, and then there’s a hand around Jack’s throat.

He’s so shocked he doesn’t know what to do about it. He’s about to tell Bitty to stop when the hand squeezes, tight and quick, the curve of Bitty’s thumb pressing hard against his windpipe. Then all of the sudden the dam bursts.

He screams as he comes.

It feels like a punch to the gut. It hurts, but feels so good at the same time. Jack’s vision goes white and he’s still screaming. Tears escape his eyes and he’s pretty sure he pulls out a few of his own hairs as his entire body spasms.

Bitty’s fingers are still moving inside him, milking the last of his orgasm out. The pain is exquisite, so strong that he feels like it might crest again. There’s heat there, like burning, like he might piss himself. He sobs, begging for Bitty to stop.

The fingers retreat and the hand around his dick disappears. In less than a second, Bitty is wrapped around him, curling into his side, petting his hair. “You were so good, baby. So perfect,” he
mutters into Jack’s ear. “You’re okay, just let it all out.”

Jack is crying. He’s heard the expression before, *I came so hard I cried*, but he never expected it to feel like this, like it was wrenched out of him with a crowbar. His chest heaves, breath coming in giant gasps as he struggles to regulate his lungs. It’s near enough to a panic attack that Jack wonders if he’ll be able to tell Bitty where his Hydroxyzine bottle is, but eventually, with a soft hand in his hair and even softer words in his ear, Jack settles.

“Oh my God, are you alright?” Eric asks, sitting up to get a better look at Jack.

He’s a complete mess, Jack realizes when he opens his eyes. He’s literally covered in come, liquid streaks of it all over his chest and a puddle collecting in his pubic hair. His throat is damp with tears pooling in his collarbone and dripping down his sides. “Ayoille,” is all he can manage to say.

Bitty’s eyes widen and then he laughs. “Thank God, I thought you were dead,” he says. He raises a hand to wipe the sweat from Jack’s forehead but stops when he realizes it’s also covered in come.

“I think I was,” Jack says, blinking owlishly. “We can’t do that again. Not for a while,” he adds, rethinking. “That was intense.”

“It was okay though?” Bitty asks, looking concerned.

“Yeah, it was great, it was just… so much.”

“You’re telling me,” Bitty says, chuckling. “You almost took my eye out.”

“Do you want me to…” he trails off, gesturing toward Bitty’s lap.

“No. I’m uh… all set,” Bitty finishes, blushing.

“Really? Just from doing that for me?” Jack asks, completely floored.

“Is it bad that I came with my hand around your throat? Because it feels like something I should be ashamed of.”

“No, it’s fine,” Jack says, pulling Bitty in close, pressing a kiss to his sweaty cheek. “You were right. I needed more. You knew exactly what I needed.”

“Oh good,” Bitty says, letting out a worried breath. “Let me just get a cloth to clean up and we can rest for a while.”

“I could shower,” Jack says, looking down at the sticky mess he’s made.

“You could not,” Bitty says sternly. “Your legs won’t support you right now and I can’t carry you. Just stay right there.”

He leaves, first to the bathroom to wash his hands and get a warm washcloth. It takes several minutes, but Eric cleans him up, completely unembarrassed. Then he goes to the kitchen and pours Jack some Gatorade, propping him up with an arm around the back of his neck so he can sip it without choking.

Jack wants to tell him off for babying him, but his limbs feel like Jello and he’s not sure he would have been able to sit up himself. When the glass is empty, Eric fluffs his pillow and helps him settle down on his side. Bitty is the big spoon, wrapping his arm around Jack’s chest with his hand
against his heart, feeling his pulse through his palm.

“My parents will be here in a few hours,” Jack mutters, already drifting off.

“I’ll hear them, it’s okay,” Bitty says, kissing Jack’s temple.

“I have a game, I can’t sleep too long,” Jack insists, mouth slack against his pillow.

“It’s alright, I’ll wake you. Don’t worry about it. I’ve got you.”

“I know you do,” Jack says before he falls asleep.
“Jack?”

Eric is standing at the foot of his bed, dressed in his SMH tee again, squeezing his foot to wake him.

“How?”

“Your parents just arrived,” Bitty says, eyes wide like he’s panicked. “I uhh… what should I do?”

“Should I assume you already fed them?”

“Of course I fed them, Jack. I’m not an animal.”

“No. You’re a southern gentleman,” Jack mutters, scrubbing a hand up and down his face. He needs to shave, and brush his teeth. But first, he needs to find the strength to stand up. “Just tell them you’re my boyfriend.”

“I can’t just—”

“—Bits, you’re already wearing my clothes. I’m sure they’ve figured it out already. If you don’t want them to tell anyone, they won’t, but they know me. They’re going to know as soon as they see my face. I’m too happy to hide you.”

“Well, alright, I just—”

“It’s going to be fine, Bits. They’re going to love you more than I do,” Jack says.

Bitty gapes at him like a fish, but Jack doesn’t amend his statement. He didn’t say the words, not really. Bitty can take it any way he wants, but the first time Jack says it for real, he’s going to be more awake and preferably without his parents in the house.

“Okay, I’ll tell them,” Bitty says, straightening his back.

“I’ll be ten minutes,” Jack says, pulling the covers back. “Can you handle ten minutes?”

“Of course I ca—”
“Where is that beautiful mother fucker? I need to see that gorgeous mug!”

“That’ll be Shitty,” Jack says, smiling fondly. “I wouldn’t be so sure.”

“I just went through twelve hours of testing. I deserve a goddamn kiss from the love of my life! And there’s gonna be tongue! You bet your fine hockey ass there’s gonna be tongue!”

Bitty gulps visibly, but Jack just laughs. “Ten minutes. Don’t let my mom show you any baby pictures.”

“I’m sure you were a beautiful bab—”

“—Just don’t, trust me,” Jack says, pushing himself to stand. There’s a slight twinge in his backside, but it’s nothing he hasn’t skated through before. Bitty had been careful, more so than Kent ever was.

“Okay, see you soon,” Bitty says, coming around to his side of the bed to plant a wet kiss on his mouth. “Be quick.”

The only thing that worries Jack is the speed at which he decided which side of the bed was Bitty’s.

Jack showers and shaves quickly, nicking himself in his haste. Shaking his head, he spends a few extra minutes dabbing under his chin with some toilet paper until it stops bleeding. He pulls on clean underwear and sweats, slipping a long sleeved Under Armour shirt over his head as he rushes to the living room. It’s one thing to leave your new boyfriend alone with your parents, it’s another thing entirely to leave him with Shitty.

“There you are,” his mother says in Quebecois, stepping forward for a hug. “It’s been so long, Jack. We’ve missed you,” she says into his ear as he folds her up in his arms.

“Tu m’as manqué, aussi,” Jack says, resting his cheek on the top of her head. “A lot has happened.”

“That seems like an understatement,” Jack’s father says, stepping in to join the hug. “A secret boyfriend, Jack. Really?”

“He’s not a secret,” Jack protests even as he’s dragged in for a crushing hug. “Well, not from you. Eric doesn’t want to be out about it, so you can’t say anything. Please, Papa.”

“Of course, Jack. We wouldn’t do that to you,” Papa says, ruffling his hair. “We’re just happy you’re dating again… moving forward. It looks good on you,” he adds with a smile, patting Jack on the cheek affectionately.

Behind him, Jack hears the toilet flush and then the door of the guest bath slams open. “I have been waiting ages, Jackie boy! You cannot deprive me of your manly lips a minute longer!”

Jack laughs and holds out his arms, but in true Shitty fashion, he gets a kiss on the mouth instead. “I missed you too, Shits,” Jack says, switching back to English. He does his best to push Shitty away by the chest but it takes more effort than he expects.

“I was promised tongue!” Shitty crows, pulling Jack back in by the shoulders.

“You were promised nothing!” Jack laughs, catching Shitty in a headlock while his friend playfully
attempts to shove his tongue in Jack’s mouth.

“Oh my,” a small voice says from the other end of the hall.

“It’s not what it looks like, Bits,” Jack says, still laughing as he gets a palm on Shitty’s head and pushes him off.

“Don’t let me stop you,” Bitty says, fighting a giggle. “I thought he was joking about the frenching.”

“Shitty never jokes about affection,” Lardo’s voice says from somewhere behind Bitty. “Or putting his tongue on anything.”

Bitty makes a tiny little “meep” noise as Shitty screams, “I’m a man with a lot of love to give!” from his place under Jack’s armpit.

“Keep the love to PG in polite company, eh?” Jack says, ruffling Shitty’s hair with his large hand thoroughly before letting him go.

“I make no promises,” Shitty mutters, combing his hair back from his face until it falls how he likes.

“It’s not like your parents are any better,” Lardo says, uncaring of their presence in the room. They know how to take a joke. “Fucking crazy when old people start making out.”

“Who you calling old?” Papa booms from the living room.

“Who you calling crazy, Larissa?” Maman adds, popping her head up from where she has it buried in the fridge.

“It’s sweet to see older folks that are still crazy about each other,” Bitty says, shooting a smile over to Jack’s mother. “May we all be so lucky,” he adds, eyes drifting toward Jack.

“Here, here,” Papa calls back.

Bitty steps forward to take Jack’s hand. “When do you need to leave?” he asks softly, narrowing Jack’s focus down from the rest of his family.

“I only have about forty minutes,” Jack says, looking at the clock on the microwave. He’d slept most of the day away, worn out from their earlier activities.

“Well you need to eat something, don’t you sugar?” Bitty says, opening the fridge. “We have leftovers from yesterday if you’d like some.”

“Uhh,” Jack says, not quite sure how to politely turn down Bitty’s cooking. He doesn’t think a bowl of ground meat and gravy is a good idea right now.

“That’s probably a little heavy for just before a game, isn’t it?” Bitty says, digging into the back of the refrigerator. “I could grill up some chicken and make you a salad if you like,” he offers, returning with a pack of pre-cooked chicken breasts in his hand.

Jack’s heart swells at the sound of Eric offering to care for him, attuned to him without Jack having to say anything. He’s never had something like this before. Even when he was a teen, he lived with billet families. There was never anyone that thought about his needs specifically, that cared about him above everything else.
“T-that sounds good,” Jack chokes out, covering his mouth when he thinks his smile grows too wide. “Thank you.”

“It’s no trouble, Jack,” Bitty mutters, snagging Jack by the waist and pressing a kiss to the underside of his jaw. “What happened here?” he asks, cool fingertips brushing over the broken skin.

“Just tried to shave a little too fast,” he says, leaning down to rub his smooth cheek against Bitty’s. “Wouldn’t want stubble rubbing on any sensitive places.”

“Mister Zimmermann,” Bitty chides, bumping his hip into Jack’s. “Your parents are here. Don’t make me blush in front of Bad Bob and your mama.”

“So sorry, Bits,” Jack says, turning his head to press a kiss to Bitty’s cheek. “I like seeing you blush.”

“That’s for you and me, honey. No one else gets to see, okay?”

“Yeah,” Jack says dreamily, unable to pull himself away from Bitty’s body. He pulls Eric in by the hips and plasters himself to his back as he goes about heating a skillet on the stovetop.

“Good Lord, Jack,” Bitty says, swatting at him. “How am I supposed to get anything done with you hovering like that? Go and visit with your parents.”

“Okay,” Jack says pressing one more kiss to Bitty’s nape and then his temple before heading over to the couch.

He hears about the most recent ballet his parents saw and how their flight was, but it’s hard to keep his gaze from drifting back to the kitchen where Eric is shaking his hips, dancing along to the radio as he fixes Jack a salad.

“’You look happy,’” his mother says in Quebecois, pulling his attention back.

“Je suis désolé, Maman,” Jack says, ducking his head.

“No, non,” she says, patting him on the arm. “It’s nice. I like seeing you like this.”

“A little less intense than usual,” his father adds, giving Jack a conspiratorial wink.

“I’m not talking about this with you,” Jack says in English, attempting to end the conversation before it starts. He narrows his eyes at his father. “Either of you.”

“You used to tell me everything, mon petit,” Maman says, putting on a dramatic frown.

“I’m not talking to you about sex, Maman,” Jack says sharply, hiding his face when he knows a blush is heating his cheeks.

“So there has been sex!” Shitty crows, pointing an accusatory finger at Jack. “J’accuse, mon petit fromage!”

“Tabarnak,” Jack groans, dragging his fingers down his face. He should have stuck to the French. “I’m not your little cheese, Shits. You need to work on your Quebecois.”

“I didn’t hear a denial, Jacques!” Shitty adds, nearly vibrating out of his seat on the couch. “You dirty dog! Sullying the Georgia peach!”
“Lay off, bro,” Lardo says, patting his knee. “Let him and the little baker get their heads above water before you go asking for deets.”


“What’s good?” Bitty asks, sauntering in from the kitchen with a plate and utensils. He sits the steaming plate of chicken in front of Jack with a smile and places a large glass of milk next to it.

“Nothing,” Jack says quickly but Shitty is also saying, “Your dick,” which draws Bitty’s attention and puts a confused frown on his face.

“Nothing,” Jack says again. “Dinner!” he adds, picking up his fork and taking a bite of the spinach, strawberry, and pecan salad Bitty has thrown together as a side dish. “This is amazing. Thanks, bud.”

“You’ve got pet names already?” Lardo mutters under her breath, eyebrow arched.

“None of your business, sweetpea,” Bitty says sharply.

“I like him,” Lardo says, looking Eric up and down. “He’s spunky.”


“I think he calls it Southern Charm,” Jack says around a bite of chicken.

“You bet your sweet hockey bottom,” Bitty says, sitting down opposite Jack between Shitty and Lardo. “Now eat up. You’ve got a game to win.”

Jack spends the next several minutes being chirped by his parents and Shitty. Bitty holds his own against the onslaught, shooting witty one-liners back at the others, Lardo a silent support next to him. Between bites, Jack looks up at him, smiling every time he teases Shitty, giving as good as he’s getting.

He swallows hard, noticing that Bitty is wearing his SMH shirt again and a pair of his sweats. They’re too long on him, covering up his feet as he sits on the couch talking to Jack’s parents. Knowing how cold Bitty’s feet must be against the hardwood, the sight makes Jack feel incredibly fond. He finishes his meal, downing the last of his milk as he contemplates how perfectly Bitty seems to fit into his odd little family and the small home that he’s built for himself.

Before putting his plate in the dishwasher, Jack turns up the thermostat with a satisfied smirk.

It’s a tough win against the Habs but Jack sinks the puck past the goalie—top shelf, glove side—in overtime, clinching the win for the Falconers. He showers and does press and by the time they get around to having dinner, it’s nearly 11 p.m. All Jack really wants to do is fall into bed beside Bitty again, but he’s barely had time to catch up with his parents or his friends. It feels wrong to let them meet Bitty and then not even give them the opportunity to properly chirp him for it, so he drags himself to dinner. He’s starving for calories anyway.

They’re in a back room at Gracie’s—his father’s favorite local restaurant—before Jack even gets the chance to kiss Bitty hello on the cheek. “Everything okay?” he asks, sitting down between Eric
and his mother. The boys are so in love with Bad Bob, Jack doesn’t have the heart to take the chair next to his father even if he wanted it.

“Just fine, sweetheart,” Bitty says, clutching Jack’s hand under the table. “Lord, but you must be exhausted.”

“I am, but I can sleep in tomorrow.”

“You can but you won’t,” Bitty says. Less than a month in and he already has Jack’s number. “Are you sure you don’t want to go home?”

“I’m fine,” Jack insists, squeezing Bitty’s hand. “We can relax tomorrow... unless you have to work.”

“No, I’m free as a bird.”

“Good. I swear I’ll actually make you breakfast tomorrow, alright?”

“Mister Zimmermann, if anyone is going to be cooking breakfast for your parents tomorrow, it’s going to be me.”

“If you insist,” Jack says, already smiling.

“Of course I insist. I make the best crepes in Providence, just you wait and see.”

“Did I hear something about crepes?” Jack’s mother asks, cutting in with a nudge to Jack’s shoulder. “I absolutely love crepes.”

“I’ll make some for everyone in the morning,” Bitty says. He continues to chat with Jack’s mother—who insists he call her Alicia, which he refuses to do—for several minutes while they order.

“So how did you two meet?” Jack’s father asks, a hush falling over the large table. He’s always had that ability, that kind of gravitas that makes every hockey player within earshot stop and listen. Jack has always hated it, but right now it’s even worse than usual because all eyes are on him.

“Eric works at the homeless shelter. We served Thanksgiving dinner together,” Jack says, forcing himself to keep his head up. It’s nothing shameful or to be embarrassed about. They haven’t done anything wrong.

“That must be very rewarding, Eric,” Maman says, pulling the attention away from Jack, thank God.

“It has its moments,” he says, accent thick, betraying his nervousness. “There’s always some sort of drama. A lot of teenagers, gangs, crime. A lot of veterans too, and single moms with kids. Homelessness doesn’t pick and choose, does it?”

“Maybe we could get together and talk about improving the system there,” Maman says, pulling out her phone. “The foundation does a lot of work in Montreal, but we should really focus on the people in Providence too, since Jack has made his home here.”

“The foundation?” Bitty asks, voice rising in pitch.

“The Zimmermann Foundation,” she says, smiling fondly. “It’s the non-profit we started after Bob retired. We try to do it all, housing, education, healthcare, LGBTQ issues—whatever is needed. If you give me the name of the manager at the shelter I’ll talk to them about how we can help fill in
the holes in their services.”

“Oh,” Bitty says, running his hands through the swoop of his hair. “I didn’t realize.”

“You’re embarrassing him, Maman,” Jack says softly, reaching to take Bitty’s hand. “It’s all a little much for a first meeting, don’t you think?”

“Jack’s right,” Papa says, tossing his winning smile at Eric. “Let him think we’re just normal people for a little while before you try and bring him to a gala or something, eh?”

“I’m sure the galas are lovely,” Bitty babbles, searching Jack’s face for help, “but that seems a little disingenuous when you’re dealing with the homeless, doesn’t it? We’re really much more low-key than that. I like to focus on the immediate problems first. Where is my next meal coming from, where am I putting my head down tonight, is my coat warm enough, those kinds of things, you know? That’s what they need.”

“Of course you’re right, Eric,” Maman says, laying her hand on his arm. “We are a little out of touch, aren’t we?”

“Just a little,” Jack mutters, getting a laugh from the rest of the table. “I promise, they’re not all that bad,” he whispers to Eric, squeezing his hand. “They’re good people who don’t blow their money like other celebrities do. They just need a little perspective sometimes.”

They’re saved from continuing the conversation by Shitty who launches into a speech about income disparity and late-stage capitalism that has the rest of the Wellies rolling their eyes and digging into their meals. By the end of the night, they’ve heard everything they ever wanted to about the criminalization of homelessness and human rights violations.

“I hope y’all saved room for dessert,” Bitty says when they finally make it back to Jack’s apartment.

“Are you kidding?” Shitty says, racing Lardo to the kitchen. “I’ve been thinking about this pie all day. Get me a fork, Jack!”

He laughs, but does as Shitty asks, collecting enough plates and forks for everyone as Bitty slices up the chocolate mousse pie.

“What’s that?” Jack asks as Bitty slides a second pie tin out of the refrigerator.

“It’s a lemon meringue pie, silly,” he says easily, setting it on the counter while he searches for a clean pie server.

“Where did it come from?” Jack asks. He can feel his mother’s eyes on him.

“Where do you think it came from? Honestly Jack. You were asleep for hours today.”

“You made another pie while I was napping?” he asks, dumbfounded. He doesn’t even remember buying lemons.

“I made you a few easy dinners too. They’re packed in Tupperware with instructions for the rest of the week.”

“Keep him,” Maman whispers in Jack’s ear in Quebecois.

“You’re incredible, Bits,” he says, pulling Bitty in to press a kiss to his temple. “What did I do to
“You did plenty,” Bitty replies, cutting into the lemon meringue and serving up a slice for Jack’s father.

“Mister Bittle,” Shitty’s voice cuts through the room. “I’d like to offer you my hand in marriage.”

When Jack looks up, Shitty is kneeling on the floor, one hand outstretched toward Bitty. His plate is already clean.

“You’re already engaged to me,” Lardo says, slicing into her own piece. She takes a bite and her eyes go wide.

“I’m sorry, Lards, but we’re going to have to call it off. I’ve found my soulmate.”

“He’s right,” Lardo says, licking the tines of her fork. “If you don’t marry him, I will,” she says, looking seriously at Jack.

“No one is marrying anyone,” Bitty says, taking a bite of his own pie. “Well, except you two, you can do whatever you want,” he says, pointing his fork at Shitty and Lardo, who are now both on their knees. “Just leave me out of it.”

“Aww don’t be like that Bitty Bits!” Shitty crows, sliding forward on the floor. He pretends to swoon and Lardo catches him, rolling her eyes. “I would make an honest man out of you.”

“He’s already an honest man,” Jack protests, eying the lemon pie. He wonders how many sit-ups it would be to work off a slice. Jack worked hard today, pushing for every point, but he also ate two dinners.

“Children, please,” Bitty says, swatting at Shitty with a dish towel. “I’m taken.”

“This is divine, Eric,” Maman says, halfway through her own slice. “How do you get the meringue so shiny?”

They go off on a tangent, discussing whipping techniques and the virtues of an ice cold mixing bowl and different types of sugar while Shitty and Lardo polish off the rest of the chocolate mousse. Jack is filling the dishwasher when his father comes up beside him, placing a warm hand on his shoulder.

“You did so well tonight, Jack. I’m so proud of you.”

Jack knows the words are true, but somehow, they never mean enough. He waited for them for so long that now they feel hollow, too little too late. “Even against your team?” he says instead of what he really wants to say. *Am I enough, Papa? Have I done enough now? I’m so tired.*

“They never had a chance against you,” Papa says, pulling him in for a hug. “But that’s really not what I’m talking about.”

“What do you mean?” Jack asks, allowing himself the comfort of burrowing into his father’s embrace. He’s not a child anymore, but sometimes he still feels like it. When his dad clings to him, sometimes it feels like he’s eighteen again, stuck in a hospital bed. It comforts and infuriates him in equal measure.

“You look happy, with him, I mean,” Papa says in Quebecois, pulling back to cup Jack’s cheek. “You did good, Jack. You’re doing good.”
“Merci, Papa,” he whispers, swallowing down the rest of his thoughts.

“Marry that boy, Jack,” he says, pulling Jack back in for another hug. “Il est merveilleux.”

“I know,” Jack mutters, chest tightening. He doesn’t know how, but in one evening Bitty has managed to win Bad Bob’s approval, something Jack has been striving to do for his entire life. Something Jack almost died trying to do. He doesn’t want to be bitter about it, but he feels like he needs a minute alone.

Pulling away, Jack walks to his mother, kissing her on the cheek. “Is everyone set for bed?” he asks.

Shitty and Lardo are already snuggled up on the couch. Jack offers to blow up an air mattress, but Lardo brushes him off. Shitty is already asleep with his head in her lap.

He smiles at them, happy that he’s found such good friends, ones that are uncomplicated and accept him, love him unconditionally. Jack isn’t sure he deserves them, but appreciates the fact that he doesn’t have much of a say in the matter. Shitty had declared them “ride or die” all the way back in Freshman year when he’d climbed naked into Jack’s extra long twin bed.

Lardo is a calming presence, the one who says just the right thing to get Jack out of his head sometimes. He likes spending time alone with her because they can always just be. She’s never loud, doesn’t push, just lets Jack do his own thing and gather his thoughts in his own time.

She smiles at him, telling him to go to bed, and he does, taking Bitty by the hand on the way to his bedroom. His father waves from the doorway of the guest room, a smug grin on his face.

“Oh honey, you need some sleep,” Bitty says, peeling him out of his shoes and socks when he sits on the edge of the bed. “Don’t you dare set that alarm for tomorrow. You need a solid eight hours and it’s already 2.”

“I’m supposed to run with Tater in the morning,” Jack protests, muffled by the fabric of his shirt when Bitty pulls it over his head.

“Text that boy and tell him to come over for his dessert instead. It’s supposed to be four degrees tomorrow. You are not running.”

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“Text that boy and tell him to come over for his dessert instead. It’s supposed to be four degrees tomorrow. You are not running.”

“Okay, but we’re swimming in the pool at least,” Jack insists, knowing he has to get some cardio in, even if it’s his day off. He’s exhausted, but he manages to get his pants off and text Tater to bring his swimsuit over tomorrow.

“I don’t have trunks with me, but I’ll be happy to watch you do laps,” Eric says, pushing Jack back onto the mattress and covering him with the down comforter.

“Next time I’ll buy you a pair of sneakers. Then you can run too,” Jack mutters, stopping just shy of making grabby hands at Bitty, who is still undressing.

“I’m from the south, Mister Zimmermann,” Bitty says, hands on his hips. “I do not run in the snow.”

“Come here and let me keep you warm then,” Jack says, smiling when Bitty slides under the covers next to him, tucking in tight against his back.

Bitty is hard behind him, but Jack doesn’t mind. It’s nice knowing his boyfriend is attracted to him, and maybe he’ll do something for him in the morning, but not now. Right now all Jack cares
about is Bitty’s head on his pillow and Bitty’s breath on the back of his neck, lulling him to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

“Tu m'as manqué, aussi, Maman,” Jack says, resting his cheek on the top of her head.
“A lot has happened.”
"I missed you, too, Mom,"  

“Je suis désolé, Maman,” Jack says, ducking his head.
"I'm sorry, Mom,"  

“Merci, Papa,” he whispers, swallowing down the rest of his thoughts.
“Marry that boy, Jack,” he says, pulling Jack back in for another hug. “Il est merveilleux.”
"Thanks, Dad," "He's wonderful."

I think the rest are explained in context. If you need more info in any of the translations, let me know!
Subject: Date Request

Eric,

I miss you. How did I get so used to sleeping with you after only two nights? I’m back on Wednesday. Can I take you out to dinner? On a real date? I’ve been listening to your Wind Down mix on repeat. Did I remember to thank you for the playlists? If not, thank you, I love them. I hope your week is going alright. My parents have already started texting me about Christmas. Do you have any plans? What about New Year’s? Do you usually go home to Georgia for the holidays? You haven’t mentioned your parents at all. I hope they’re still living and I haven’t just made a huge ass of myself. Talk to you soon,

Jack

Re: Date Request

Jack,

Yes, my parents are living, but no, I’m not going to see them this year. The flights are expensive and they decided to go visit my mama’s sister in Alabama instead. I’d be happy to go to Montreal with you, but I don’t exactly have a passport. I don’t think I’d have the time to get one before Christmas. I’ll be just fine here, don’t you worry about me.

What kind of real date are we talking about here? I’m worried about the cameras. Do you think the paps will follow us to dinner? I don’t want nothing too fancy. You know I don’t have the wardrobe for that kind of thing and I’d just make a fool out of myself.

I’m glad you like the music. I’ll see if I can come up with any new songs for you and make a new list for Christmas, would you like that? I miss you too,

Bitty

P.S. My test results were clear.
Re: Re: Date Request

What if I got us a private flight to Montreal? I’m sure there’s a way around the passport issue. I don’t want you to be alone on Christmas. I’d love a new playlist. I want to know all your favorite Christmas songs. Please tell your parents I say hi. I don’t want them to think I’ve stolen you for all of the holidays.

Are you sure about the date? Because I may have already made some reservations at Hemingway’s. I can cancel them if you’d like, but please consider it. I even had my mom help me pick out an outfit for you. It’s hanging in a garment bag on the back of my bedroom door. You can just ask Leonard to let you in to get it. Next time I’ll remember to have a key made for you.

I don’t think you need to worry about the press. Snowy is sure I have a girlfriend because of the way I keep rushing to my phone to read your emails. Plus, the tabloids all think I’m dating one of the Kardashians. No offense, but I don’t think you have anything to worry about. They’re clearly not the smartest bunch of reporters.

I hope it’s not too much, I’d just really like to do something nice for you since I’ve been away all week. Please say yes?

Jack

P.S. So were mine.

Re: Re: Re: Date Request

You cannot just say things like that, Mister Zimmermann! Why would you get me a key to your apartment? We’ve been dating less than a month! I could be a drug dealer! And no, you can’t just get around US and Canadian customs! I’m not letting you smuggle me across an international border, you fool! There will be no political scandals on my account.

If you insist on spending Christmas together, why don’t you just ask your parents to fly back down here instead? But then I’d have to find something to get them for Christmas. On second thought, you should just go to Canada without me! :X

Yes, I will go to dinner with you, but don’t think I’m a pushover, I’ve just always wanted to eat at Hemingway’s! The windows overlook the river and it just looks so nice inside! Maybe if we go late there won’t be as many people around to gawk at you.

Do you even know who the Kardashians are? You had to google them, didn’t you?

You do nice things for me all the time, Mister Zimmermann. Just last week you ordered me swim trunks with two hour shipping just so I’d join you in the pool! And don’t think I haven’t noticed that new pair of sneakers at the bottom of your closet that are three sizes too small for you. How many times do I have to tell you that I am NOT RUNNING WITH YOU! Ask me again when the ground thaws in April!
Re: Re: Re: Date Request

Bits,

My parents said they would come here for Christmas if you promise to get your passport and visit their lake house for a while over the summer. No exceptions. Take it or leave it.

I got us a table at 8 on Wednesday. Does that sound alright?

Joke’s on you, those sneakers were a decoy! That means you still haven’t found your Christmas gift! You don’t have to get my parents anything. We can just bake some cookies together for them. I’m sure they’d love that. Christmas isn’t really about the gift giving anyway.

I can’t wait to see you. Will you stay over after dinner? I promise not to make you go running in the morning,

Jack

"Oh my God, Bits! What happened to you?” Jack exclaims, rushing out of his seat as soon as Eric comes into view.

He’s wearing his suit, his hair coiffed into a beautiful curl that brushes his forehead, new shoes nicely shined. He should look fantastic, but the black eye and large purple bruise on his chin ruin the effect.

“Rough day at the office,” he says sheepishly, brushing off the maître d’ when the man offers to take his backpack to the coat room. He slides it under the table instead and lets Jack push his chair in, even though it’s a gesture that could give them away.

Going for broke, Jack rubs his thumb down Bitty’s cheek, lighter than air. It looks bad. He’s gotten his fair share of bruises in the NHL. Maybe it’s Bitty’s pale skin and freckles that make the bruise look that much more unnatural, because the one on his cheek looks bad enough that it could have cracked bone.

“Are you sure you don’t need to go to the hospital?” Jack asks, pressing a kiss to Bitty’s temple before taking his seat.

Bitty looks around the room suspiciously, but the other patrons don’t seem to have taken notice of them.

“I’m sorry,” Jack says, knowing he’s overstepped. “I just can’t help wanting to run home and wrap
“It’s alright Jack, honestly,” Bitty says, biting his lip. “Just a little scuffle between some of the
guys at the shelter over the last bed. I was trying to break it up and I got in the way. Totally my
fault.”

“There aren’t enough beds?” Jack asks, brow furrowing.

“Of course there aren’t, honey. Do you know how many homeless people there are in Providence?
It’s freezing out and sometimes people get turned away. It’s cold enough to kill outside, and
we’ve all got that self-preservation instinct, don’t we?”

Jack nods solemnly. He had no idea. It’s something he’d never given much thought to, that there
might be people dying on the street outside his million dollar condo just because it was too cold.

“We try to make sure that the mothers and children get warm at least, but that always leaves a few
angry men on the really cold nights. Doors close at 7:30 for the night and people get desperate.
This happened a few nights ago, when it went below freezing again.”

“I… is there anything I can do?” Jack asks. It feels like a stupid question, but he doesn’t know
what to say. Surely there something he can do to prevent violent homeless men from beating his
boyfriend to a pulp whenever the weather gets bad.

“No, sweetie,” Bitty says. “It’s fine. I mean, well it’s not fine, but there’s nothing we can do about
it tonight, so why don’t we just enjoy this nice date you’ve taken me on?”

“You look great, Bits,” Jack says, smiling as he watches Eric fold his napkin in his lap and open
his menu. “I’m just sorry you’re hurt.”

“I’m fine, honey, don’t you worry about me. You’ve got enough going on with yourself,” Bitty
says, shooting Jack a smile over the top of the menu. “Have you even been home yet? I thought I
would run into you at your place when I stopped by for the clothes but you weren’t there.”

“I just landed a half hour ago,” Jack says, hoping there isn’t too much love in his eyes. He’s
already crossed the line with Bitty tonight and doesn’t want to embarrass him further. Anyone
looking at Jack right now would know what Eric is to him. “I changed in the airport.”

“We could have done this another night, Jack.”

“I didn’t want to do it another night. I wanted to see you tonight. Immediately. Every night.
Always,” Jack says.

Bitty’s mouth falls open. “You sure do know how to make a boy feel special. This suit is
amazing.”

“It would look better without the backpack,” Jack teases. “You know you could have left that at
my place.”

Bitty’s face falls. “I—” He looks terrified and close to tears, big brown eyes welling up. With the
bruises on his face, it looks like crying might actually be painful for Eric right now.

“I’m sorry,” Jack butts in, desperate to stop the tears before they start. He put that look on Bitty’s
face and he doesn’t know how or why, but he needs to fix it right away. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine, sweetheart,” Bitty says, looking down at his menu, face beet red.
“It’s not fine. I don’t mind the backpack. I’m sorry,” Jack says quickly, still confused. “It must be really important to you.”

“I’ll tell you why, but you have to promise not to laugh,” Bitty says, putting a mock serious face on.

“Cross my heart and hope to die,” Jack says, narrowing his eyes. He tries to mirror Bitty’s expression, but he can’t. He breaks out into a soft laugh when Bitty starts to pout. “I’m sorry, I’m taking this seriously. You can tell me.”

“When I was a baby, my mama gave me this stuffed rabbit. It’s kind of my security blanket. I’ve been sleeping with it since I was three,” Bitty says, fiddling with his napkin. “When I was skating, I used to bring him everywhere, especially to the kiss and cry at competitions. Well, the boys at school found out about him and tried to steal him from my locker.”

Jack knows where this story is going, and he’s already angry. Bitty’s got a black eye and he’s recounting tales of how he was bullied in school and Jack wants to strangle everyone who has ever hurt this beautiful man sitting in front of him.

“Coach got him back for me, but it was a near thing and I knew I couldn’t skate my best without him after we accidentally left him at home once at regionals, so I’ve been too afraid to let the poor boy out of my sight. His name is Señor Bunny.”

“Señor Bunny? He’s Spanish?”

“Well… yeah,” Bitty says simply, looking down at his menu again.

Jack is beaming. He’s just so incredibly fond of Eric and this is just another part of him that Jack immediately loves. “Is there a reason Señor Bunny hasn’t been sleeping in our bed?” Jack asks.

“O-our bed?” Bitty asks, stumbling over the words. “I didn’t think you’d want the competition,” he says, recovering quickly. “I’ve been keeping him in my bag.”

“I think I can handle it,” Jack says. “I am a celebrity, after all. Haven’t you heard? I’m dating a Kardashian!”

“Oh Jack, please. We’ve been over this. If you can name more than two Kardashians I’ll eat this napkin.”

“You’ve got me there,” Jack says, laughing.

“We have to work on your pop culture knowledge. Give me Shitty’s email address and I’ll recruit him to the cause.”

“I don’t know if I want you guys ganging up on me.”

“We already know I’m in charge of this relationship, darlin’,” Bitty says, raising his eyebrows at Jack. “There’s no fighting me.”

“Only if you go running with me tomorrow. Tater and I have something to show you.”

“You drive a hard bargain, Mister Zimmermann.”

Jack waits.

“Fine!” Bitty calls, heaving a put-upon sigh. “I’ll run, but you’re going to need to bundle me like a
“burrito before I go anywhere near that frigid water.” He gestures outside at the river view.

“I think I have something you can wear,” Jack says, already picturing Bitty in something of his. Seeing Eric in his worn out SMH tee had done things to Jack, and he has plans for his red flannel.

“Any drinks, gentlemen?” the waiter asks, coming up behind Bitty.

“I think we’ll share a bottle of chardonnay,” Bitty says, pointing at something on the wine list. “It’ll go well with the fish.”

“How do you know I was going to order the fish?” Jack asks, mouth turned down as the waiter leaves.

“You always order the fish,” Bitty says, laughing. “Chicken at home, fish when we’re out. I know you, Jack. But I think it wouldn’t kill you to try a pork chop every once in a while. It’s the other white meat, after all.”

“I—” Jack starts when the waiter returns and shows Bitty the bottle.

“Or God forbid you have a steak on a special occasion. They have a porterhouse we could share, but nooo, you have to eat the salmon, don’t you?”

“Bitty I—”

“Maybe for Christmas? You will eat red meat on Christmas, won’t you? Because I saw a recipe on Pinterest the other day for a tenderloin wellington that looked—”

“Bitty, I don’t drink!” Jack huffs, pushing a full wine glass away from him as the waiter makes a hasty retreat.

“It’s okay honey, it’s a pretty dry white, I think you’ll like it.”

“No Bitty, I’m not saying I won’t like it, I’m saying I don’t drink,” he sighs heavily, knowing Bitty will just keep babbling.

“Oh, well, I can’t finish the whole bottle my—”

“Hi, my name is Jack, and I’m an addict,” he cuts in, holding out his hand across the table.

Bitty’s eyes go wide for a moment before he claps a hand over his mouth. “OH!” he gasps, grabbing the glass in front of Jack and pulling it towards himself. “Oh my God, Jack. I’m so sorry! It never came up and I just completely forgot.”

“It’s okay Bits,” Jack says, lips curving into a smile as he retracts his hand. “I’m not mad. I just wanted you to hear me. I assumed you knew already,” he says, fighting back a laugh.

Bitty just looks so scandalized, he can’t help it. It’s nice almost, that when Bitty looks at Jack he doesn’t see a drug addict. Most of the rest of the world looks at him and sees a coke head, a junkie, someone who threw his one chance away over strippers and blow, but not Bitty.

Bitty sees the real Jack. Just Jack. It’s a revelation.

“I did read your Wiki page, honey, just after we met. I didn’t know I’d be seeing you again so it didn’t feel like too much of an invasion, but then I kind of just got sidetracked looking at photos of your butt,” Bitty says, babbling through the awkward moment. “Do you want to talk about it?”
“It’s okay,” he says, smiling at the comment about his big hockey ass. “Alcohol wasn’t my real problem. But you should probably know the truth, since the press has never gotten it right.”

“I’m listening,” Bitty says, putting his hand out on the table palm up.

Jack’s heart flutters when he sees it. Even though Bitty wants to hide, he knows that this is hard for Jack and wants to give him the support he needs. He extends his hand and touches the pads of Eric’s fingers, running down each one to the palm. It gives him strength, knowing Eric will put him first when times get tough. It’s something he’s never had with anyone before.

“I’ve always had trouble with anxiety. It started when I was a kid. Even in peewee, I had people telling me I’d never be as good as my dad. I just wanted to play the game. I loved hockey and there was nothing else I’d ever wanted to do, but the pressure just built, every year, every goal, every game was harder.”

Eric squeezes his hand, and Jack keeps talking.

“When I got to the Juniors, everyone was looking at me, judging me, and the anxiety got to be too much. They prescribed me a few things, stuff to take when I started having panic attacks. I took the pills and I played better and they made me captain. That’s when I met Kenny. I was sixteen.

“The next two years were brutal. Every time I lost, I took a pill, and every time I won someone would tell me my father could have done better, and I’d take even more. Kenny and I started fooling around, drinking and smoking. The voices in my head got worse and when I couldn’t keep them quiet I’d take more pills, and when those stopped working I got stronger ones, and when those stopped working I took more and more. I’d wash them down with booze and go completely numb, because that was the only way I could play and I needed to play because I had to go first in the draft.

“Kenny and I pushed each other. I was terrified he’d beat me. My dad loved him and I always felt inferior. I clung to him and did whatever he wanted, sex, shots, parties, I’d do anything he would do and more, anything to make him touch me, because when he touched me the voices were quiet for just a little bit. We shared a room for two years, practically on top of each other. We were supposed to get drafted together and take the hockey world by storm. It was our year.

“I thought I couldn’t do it without him, that I was nothing without him on my left, but then I realized, I couldn’t do it with him either. They wouldn’t take both of us, not on the same team. If I couldn’t do it with him and I couldn’t do it without him, then I couldn’t do it at all. The press was hounding me, my father was telling me it was nothing compared to what he dealt with when he was in his prime. I told my doctor I kept losing my pills on roadies and they kept prescribing me more.

Jack takes a deep breath and looks up. Bitty’s eyes are bright and a little watery, but he’s looking at Jack with such fierce loyalty that he thinks he’ll be able to do it. He opens his mouth, and nothing comes out for a second, but then Bitty gives him the tiniest little nod of the head, and that does it. A slight nod and a squeeze of the hand and Jack’s been given permission to fall apart, because Bitty is right there, holding on tight, listening to every word.

Bitty’s hand is cool in his, steady as stone, and Jack clings to it like a lifeline with his shaking, sweaty fingers. He takes one more deep breath and lets his carefully constructed walls come down.

“But then I—I couldn’t sleep, and I couldn’t breathe and the voices were just so loud. I needed to beat Kenny, but I knew I couldn’t. I started slipping and I needed more pills to stop my hands from
shaking and to stop from hyperventilating before every game. I needed more pills to sleep and make it to practice in the morning. I needed stronger pills to get the voices to stop and to keep my body numb. I needed the pills to remember how to play hockey and I needed the pills to help me forget that I was my father’s son. I couldn’t do anything without them...

“The night before the draft… I couldn’t get the voices to be quiet and I knew I was going to fail, so I just…”

He trails off. This is the first time he’s ever really told someone this, someone who mattered. Blaire had gotten the gist of it from the doctors at his rehab clinic and he never spoke up in group therapy. Shitty only knows bits and pieces, little snippets that were whispered between sobs in the dark of their dorm room. He’s never had to explain his own feelings and inadequacies to someone who he still wanted to be there the next day, to still look at him the way Bitty looks at him.

Eric squeezes his hand, and Jack stares at the fingers. Their waiter hasn’t been back and the tables around them have emptied out. It’s just the two of them, alone with a view of the river, a white tablecloth under their hands and the scent of chardonnay in the air. They could be the only two people left in Providence, and for that, Jack is grateful. It helps him get the words out.

“I took a handful of Ativan and washed it down with vodka,” he says finally, still staring at their intertwined fingers. “I still don’t know if I was actually trying to end it or if I just needed to make the voices stop, but it had roughly the same effect. My heart stopped. I was dead for two minutes. Kenny found me and got me to the hospital in time, but nothing was ever the same afterward.

“My parents felt so guilty. Things with my father still aren’t great. My mother goes to therapy because I made her so anxious with my own anxiety. She’s good at hiding it, but I know I aged her ten years in that two minutes. Kenny hates me. I couldn’t talk to him afterward. He was just so wrapped up in my feelings and what led me to my overdose, I couldn’t look at him anymore. He was so mad, but I just stopped answering his calls. We weren’t good for each other, and he proved that with his behavior.”

“Did he hurt you?” Bitty asks, finally speaking up.

“No,” Jack says, shaking his head. He knows what Bitty’s thinking, that he took control in bed and put his hand around Jack’s throat and now he’s asking Jack if he’s been abused? Jack thinks he might be in love. Eric is just so… good. Too good even. More than Jack deserves.

“Kenny he… he’s charismatic and charming and he gets what he wants. He’s someone that you feel like you need to please, and I was never able to please my father, but Kenny… I knew what he wanted and being able to give it to him, that was something I needed at the time. That was my fault. He never deliberately hurt me, but he contributed to a lot of my issues, fed my self-doubt, played into my weaknesses.

“He was controlling. Without even realizing I was doing it, I would do whatever he wanted. Kenny knows how to push. He pushed my buttons and pushed my boundaries. I don’t even know why, maybe he just wanted to see if he could, but it’s always been that way between us. If he was good, I had to be better. If I was better, he had to tear me down. I died and he still pushed me to join his team, to come right back to him, right back in the hole that I dug for myself.
“After we stopped speaking, he was angry. He knew me so well it wasn’t hard for him to find the right words to hurt me. He came to the hockey house when I was in college, demanded that I leave school and join the Aces. I refused. He said he had pictures of me… threatened to out me, so I outed myself. I didn’t want him to have that power over me anymore. I needed to know that I did it myself. I got myself clean and healthy, and I got my degree, and I got signed by a team that had nothing to do with him. I was worth something to the Falconers. I earn my paycheck. Not my father, not Kenny, me.

“He called and texted, pushed me and I pushed back. Eventually, I stopped answering, because just seeing his name on my phone was enough to make my anxiety skyrocket. Now we only meet on the ice and those games… they’re brutal. It’s unbearable to play against him, but it’s something I have to do. We both hurt each other, and we both fucked up, but I… I paid a higher price for my mistakes. He lost his best friend, but I almost lost my life.

“So that’s why I don’t drink,” he says, finally getting back to the original point. “I have a history of addiction and mental illness. I have a very stressful job that takes all of my mental and physical strength, so I talk to a therapist and my meds are very strictly controlled.

“I can’t afford to slip up again, so I don’t drink. I don’t mind if you do, and I can control myself, but it’s something I will always struggle with. I just wanted you to know that…” he pauses, waiting for Eric to say something, but he hears nothing. “Now we can order dinner and talk about something else,” he says, letting out a deep, heavy breath.

He did it. He told Eric. And Eric is still sitting here, holding his hand. Now Jack’s sure he’s in love.

“Okay,” Bitty says, squeezing his hand tight. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Thank you for staying,” Jack says, looking up to see that Bitty has tears in his eyes.

He takes a deep breath and lets go of Jack’s hand to dab at his face with the corner of his napkin.

Jack does order the fish, which is delicious, and Bitty doesn’t tease him about it.

Bitty drinks one glass of wine and leaves the rest on the table.

They share dessert and they don’t look over their shoulders when Jack feeds Bitty a bite. He doesn’t argue when Jack picks up the check at the end of the evening and he lets Jack carry his ratty backpack and walk him to the car.

Jack takes Señor Bunny out of the bag and props him up to sit against the pillows while they share the shower. Bitty lets Jack ice his cheek and curls up on his chest to watch a movie. They fall asleep wrapped together, naked but not wanting, Señor Bunny clutched tightly in Jack’s arms, Bitty’s legs tucked up behind him.
Chapter 14

The next morning, Jack wraps Bitty up in three layers and forces him into his new pair of sneakers. They jog down to the river and meet up with Tater who leads them back to the hidden gym at an easy pace. Bitty looks confused when they stop to head inside, but once he looks around, his jaw drops open.

“Have I died and gone to heaven?” he asks, looking around at the variety of half-naked bodies on display. “Is that guy throwing a tree?”

“I think yes,” Tater says, nodding as he watches a tall man adjust his grip on a caber. “But we here for something else. Come now, Bitty. We teach you to fight!”

Eric trails behind them as they enter the boxing gym, a look of nervous wonderment on his face. “I am not fighting one of y’all. I’ll die!”

“No, no, no, you misunderstand,” Tater says, leading him to the corner to wrap his hands. “You learn to throw punch on bag. Next time maybe men at shelter don’t break your face, yes?”

“I’m a lover, not a fighter,” Bitty protests even as he strips off his outer layers.

Jack slips a head guard over his hair, just in case, and says, “We just thought it might be a good idea if you learned how to protect yourself. You’re strong, but you scare easy—”

“Because you’re itty bitty!” Tater adds, patting Eric on the head. Bitty swats at him but misses, “That’s better! We start now!”

“Show me your face-off face,” Jack prompts him, moving Bitty until his hips are square with the lowest bag in the gym.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he huffs, hands on his hips.

“Come on. You’ve seen mine,” Jack says, putting on his death stare.

“And it actually works because you’re, you know… huge!” Bitty protests.

“I’m completely average for a forward,” Jack says, hands on Eric’s shoulders. “Tater is the one that’s huge!”

“I am tiny runt in Russia,” Tater says, puffing out his chest. “Make Bitty look like hungry squirrel.”

“I am not a squirrel!” Bitty shouts, swiping at Tater’s side.

“Not me, you punch bag!” Tater says, directing Bitty toward the bag again. “Pretend is bully, mean man who want to hurt you. Pretend is someone you really hate!”

Jack thinks he hears Bitty mutter Kent Parson under his breath, but he can’t be sure. His brow furrows. He didn’t mean for Bitty to come out of their talk hating Kent. He isn’t even sure he hates Kent anymore. But even so, something about the thought makes Jack happy. Eric has his back 100%, even against his millionaire ex-boyfriend.

He watches Tater show Eric how to throw from his hips. The look of determination on Bitty’s face is enough to make his stomach clench. Worrying he’ll do something stupid like kiss his boyfriend.
in front of a room full of strangers, Jack wraps his own hands and heads to his own bag.

It feels good to let out the frustration from the night before. Bitty had made allowances for him, let him show emotion and touch him like a lover would in public, but he knows it won’t last. Jack knows it’s something they should talk about, how desperate he is to have Bitty with him all the time, to wear his heart on his sleeve.

Eric is being harassed at work and there’s nothing he can do about it, nothing but let Tater show him a few things that still might end with the person he loves getting hurt. All Jack wants to do is show the world how special and important Eric is to him, how loved, but he knows it’s too soon. He knows it’s something Bitty doesn’t want, but that doesn’t stop Jack from imagining what it would be like. He could bring Bitty to the Falconers events, introduce him as his boyfriend, show everyone that he’s worthy of Bitty’s love…

He pounds the bag until his knuckles ache and his arms burn, until his shirt is drenched in sweat. By the time he’s done, Eric looks like he could take on the world. Tater is so proud, rubbing Bitty’s shoulders and pumping him up. “Now we give Bitty show. Come on Captain. Show me what you can do!”

Tater leads them back to the main room where they set up a few drills. With several hundred pounds of weight on the sled, Jack pushes it easily. They strap it to his back and make him pull it, and that’s a little harder, but still manageable. Tater insists he can do better and makes Bitty sit on the sled, and then both Bitty and Jack. They laugh and heckle him, but Tater just winks and takes them for a ride around the empty part of the gym.

Jack impresses nearly everyone in the room when he manages to do a full set of pull-ups with Tater hanging off his hips. Bitty snatches Jack’s phone and takes a video, promising to post it online the next time Tater calls him Itty Bitty. A rope ladder suspended from a beam in the middle of the room becomes their next challenge and Jack blows everyone out of the water… until Bitty gives it a try, flying up thirty feet in half the time it took Jack.

He draws the line when Tater insists they can throw Bitty between them instead of a medicine ball. “You are not tossing me around like some rag doll!”

“He’s right,” Jack says, leveling Tater with a serious look. “Let’s see who can do the most squats with him on their shoulders!” he calls, grabbing Bitty around the waist and hoisting him into the air like he weighs nothing.

“Put me down this instant, Mister Zimmermann!”

Jack laughs, but does as he’s told, setting Eric down on his feet. “Sorry Bits,” he says, blushing. He just loves the feel of Eric’s body pressed against his. It reminds him that he still needs to talk to Blaire about adjusting his meds. He wants to sleep with Bitty again, but more than that he wants to not feel like dying after he does it.

“Race you home!” Bitty screams while Jack is lost in thought.

Jack takes off after his boyfriend, Tater close behind, but the few seconds Bitty has on him turn into a bigger and bigger lead as his workout catches up to him. Tater falls behind quickly, disappearing when Jack turns a corner. When he finally makes it back to his building, Eric is leaning against the door, a smug smile on his lips. He’s panting, but he looks so beautiful.
Throwing caution to the wind, Jack pushes him against the wall, kissing him hard. They’re both sweating, salt on their lips and dripping into their eyes, but Jack doesn’t care. “Let me tell people… about you. About us. Please?”

“I uh…” Bitty trails off, pushing Jack’s chest until he has room to breathe. “Not just yet, alright? I’m sorry but—”

“—No, it’s alright,” Jack says, ducking his head. “I shouldn’t have asked. You told me no, and I said it was okay. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to, sweetheart,” Bitty says, sighing sadly. “Trust me, it’s for your safety as well as mine.”

“Is— is someone after you, Bits? If they are you can tell me and we’ll—”

“No, it’s nothing like that,” Bitty says, clenching at Jack’s arm. “It’s just that if word gets out at the shelter. If the press hounds me there… it wouldn’t be helpful for anyone.”

“You’re right, of course, you’re right. I’m sorry,” Jack says, shaking his head. “I just— well… I love you,” he says finally, raising his eyes to look at Bitty. “I love you and it’s hard for me to hide. I feel like everyone can see it all over my face.”

“Oh my God, honey! I love you too!” Bitty says, smiling brightly. “I just need a little more time, okay? Maybe to find a new job. Something a little less to do with the public.”

“Yeah, okay,” Jack says, nodding quickly. “I’ll help you look if you want. I’m just so happy you love me too.”

“Of course I do, Jack. That’s not even a question.”

“It was to me,” Jack says, a smile gracing his face. “No one has ever said that to me before. No one that mattered.”

Bitty pushes into his space then, capturing his lips and grabbing a handful of his sweat-soaked shirt. “Fuck, Jack. I don’t know why that’s so hot, but it is.” Bitty kisses him again, biting at his lips, stroking his tongue, kneading his scalp with his knuckles.

“So this is girlfriend,” a voice says from behind them. Tater is smiling broadly, clapping his hands together in glee. “I knew it! Hockey robot has been little less robot lately! You happy, you sad, you happy, you sad! You like malfunctioning toy. Why you making Captain sad, little Bitty?”

“Tater, you can’t tell anyone, okay?” Jack pleads, spurred by the way Bitty seems to have frozen in his arms, doing his best to melt into the wall behind him and disappear.

“You happy now?” he asks, eyeing Bitty suspiciously “You not making Zimmboni sad anymore?”

“He was never making me sad, Tater. I’ve just been upset trying to hide him and working through my own feelings. None of that is Eric’s fault.”

“If you say so,” Tater says, eyes still narrowed in Bitty’s direction.

He’s not quite convinced and Jack isn’t sure how he would go about explaining it to him anyway, so he doesn’t try. “We’re doing fine now, Alexei,” he says, grasping his shoulder. “Thank you for looking out for me, but I promise, we’re doing okay.”
“Okay,” Tater says finally, giving them both a sharp nod. “You tell me if I need kill someone.”

“There will be no killing of anyone,” Bitty cries, crossing his arms when Tater looks like he’s going to argue.

“Someone still break little baker’s face. That means someone is needing killing.”

“It was just an accident, Tater,” Jack assures him, ruffling the older man’s hair. “I promise.”

“Oh, Tater,” Tater says, pulling Jack into a quick, sweaty hug. “I leave you alone with Itty Bitty now. Looks like I interrupt something, yes?”

“Get out of here, Tater!” Jack says, pushing the man off him.

Bitty lets out a nervous laugh, but follows Jack inside. They wave a hello to Leonard and take the elevator in silence.

“I think I’d like to call Blaire,” Jack says when he finally closes the door behind them. He feels like his strings have been cut. His entire body aches and his head buzzes. It’s partially excitement. Bitty said he loved him and that’s something to be happy about, but Tater seeing them kiss made his heart race.

Maybe Bitty is right. If he can barely handle one of his best friends knowing about them, he definitely shouldn’t go public with Bitty just yet.

“I can go,” Bitty says, pointing at the door. He looks so small wrapped up in Jack’s clothes. The extra layers only add to the effect. Jack feels like if he were to peel off each piece, there’d be nothing left when he reached the center.

“No,” Jack says, grabbing his hand. “Stay. We can talk to her together.”

“Are you sure?” Bitty asks, eyes going wide. “That’s really personal.”

“It’s to do with both of us,” Jack says, pulling Eric by the hand all the way through his bedroom and to the shower. “I’d like this to be a long-term thing, you and me. And if you’re going to be here, I think you should know everything. It’ll be better if you understand my condition. It might help you know how to deal with having a mentally ill boyfriend. If you want to, that is.”

“Of course I want to, Jack,” Bitty says, testing the water with his hand before stepping under the spray.

Jack joins him, pulling him in by the hips and burying his face in the curve of Bitty’s neck. He kisses Bitty there, open-mouthed and desperate, not for sex but for reassurance. He wants to taste Eric on his tongue, to know that this is real. Bitty is here with him, wants to be here with him, to support him when things get hard. It’s only been a month and Eric is already the best thing that’s ever happened to him. It makes him nervous, but also incandescently happy.

“I love you,” Jack says again, happy that this time they’re alone, in their own space with no one around to walk in.

“I love you so much, sugar,” Bitty says, accepting a small kiss.

They finish in the shower and then dress and sit on the couch, Jack’s laptop set in front of them on the coffee table. Jack texts Blaire and waits the ten minutes until she can log onto Skype. He clicks on the video icon next to her face and waits, Bitty’s hands clasped tight in his.
“Hello, Jack,” she says, sitting back in her desk chair. “And this must be Eric.”

“Hello, ma’am,” Bitty says, voice high. He coughs to try to cover it.

“Aren’t you polite,” Blaire says, smiling at him. “You can call me Blaire. What can I help you with today, Jack?”

“Bitty and I have been getting to know each other,” he starts, unsure this was such a good idea now that he’s here. Does he really want to discuss his sex life with his therapist with his boyfriend in the room? The crushing weight of his inadequacy hits him and he falls silent.

“We were uh—” Bitty starts, waiting for Jack to nod his permission before continuing. “We were wondering if maybe we could make some changes to Jack’s medication that might make it easier for him to… be intimate.”

“Has the problem escalated, Jack?”

“Uhh, yes?” Jack says, face heating. “It just didn’t bother me as much until I met Eric. I haven’t wanted to umm… do anything in a long time. But now I do.”

“Okay,” Blaire says, pulling a file folder in front of her and skimming down to the bottom of one page with her eyes. “Right now we have you on 30mg of Buspar and 60mg of Cymbalta with 100mg of Hydroxyzine as needed. Have you taken any of that since we last spoke?”

To Bitty’s credit, he doesn’t flinch when Blaire lists out his meds. Jack loves him for that, loves him for sitting next to Jack and discussing their sex life with a stranger, hand never leaving his.

“No, I haven’t taken any at all this season,” Jack says. He’s thought about it, but the closest he’s come was the day he and Bitty had sex, and that’s what this discussion is about anyway. They’re going to come up with a plan so it doesn’t happen again. “I thought about it after Bitty and I… it was so hard the first time and I just didn’t want to try again until we talked to you. I don’t think sex is supposed to feel like that.”

“Can you tell me what it felt like?” she asks lightly, patiently.

When Jack doesn’t answer, Bitty takes over. “He was sobbing, heart racing, short of breath. It looked like a panic attack to me, though I’m not him. But I’ve had them before myself, so I’m somewhat familiar.”

“Okay,” Blaire says again, taking it all in stride. “Have you been feeling depressed at all lately, Jack? Finding it hard to get out of bed? Not wanting to go to practice or play hockey or take pictures?”

“Not really, no,” Jack says. “I’ve been tired, but no more than usual. It’s been getting harder to sleep on the road, but I think that’s because I have Bitty when I’m here.”

“Well, Jack,” she says, clasping her hands together on the desk. “The Cymbalta you take is mostly for depression symptoms, and it’s the most likely culprit of your sexual side effects. You’ve been taking it since you were in rehab at varying levels based on your symptoms. 60mg is a pretty high dose, and if you feel like you’re not experiencing depression symptoms, we can consider lowering it or eliminating it altogether. The Buspar will still temper your anxiety fairly well without it.”

“Is that safe?” Bitty asks immediately, tensing at Jack’s side.

“We can taper it off slowly, so it should be perfectly safe. I do worry that as the season progresses
you might need to up your dosage again, and it can take weeks for your body to adjust. It won’t be a quick fix to get you back on if you need it. Do you think you’ll be able to handle that, Jack?"

“I don’t feel depressed,” Jack says. “And it’s early enough in the season I think it would be better to try sooner rather than later. I’m a little worried that maybe Eric is propping me up, and I don’t want that kind of pressure on our relationship.”

“We can’t be sure about that, Jack. And you can’t help how you feel. Your feelings aren’t good or bad, they’re just facts. If things go badly with Eric, and you get depressed, that’s something you can’t help. You can only control how you react to the feelings, Jack, not the feelings themselves.”

“We don’t have to do this right now,” Bitty says, voice cutting through Jack’s thoughts. “I don’t want you to risk your career just so we can get busy every once in a while, it’s not worth that to me.”

“It’s not a risk,” Jack says, turning his face to Eric. “I don’t think I’ve been depressed for a while, just lonely. Maybe I’ve been taking extra drugs that I don’t need because I wasn’t thinking about the consequences, but now I am. I think I can handle it. What do you think, Blaire?”

“I think now is a good time to try, Jack,” she says, an encouraging smile on her face. “If I had known about the side effects I would have suggested a different drug in the first place.”

“I didn’t know,” Jack says. “I just thought I didn’t like sex after Kenny. I thought I was broken, but I’m not. I haven’t felt this way in a long time, but it’s real, and I want to make it work. For me and for Eric.”

“Okay,” Blaire says, nodding. “I think I understand. We’ll knock you down to 40mg of the Cymbalta and in another month, if things are going well, we’ll do 20, and if anything happens, we’ll adjust. If you start to feel depressed, there are some faster-acting drugs we can try. As long as you keep me in the loop about how you’re feeling, I’m confident we can make your meds work for you, not the other way around. Alright?”

“Yeah, okay,” Jack says, looking to Bitty. “I’m not ashamed of being attracted to you, Eric. I’m allowed to want you for real. I think we can handle this, do you?”

Eric is biting his lip, but he nods. “Honey, you already got me.”

Jack smiles at him. It helps knowing that he has Eric’s support. It’s even better knowing that Eric wants to be with him just the way he is now, that he’s willing to work within Jack’s limits, that he helps to push his boundaries in positive ways.

“I’ll write you a new script and send it to your pharmacy so it’s on file, but you can start taking the lower dosage now, it’s just two pills instead of three. And if you feel dizzy or nauseous, if you can’t sleep, feel anxious or depressed, you call me, alright?”

“Alright, thank you, Blaire,” Jack says, nodding.

“Thank you, Miss Blaire,” Bitty says, squeezing Jack’s hand. They wave goodbye and end the call.

Jack closes his laptop and leans his head back on the couch, closing his eyes.

“Are you alright, honey?” Bitty asks, running a hand through his hair.

“Yeah, I think this is good. We would have been fine either way, but now we have the potential to
be great. I want to be great with you, Bitty. In bed and out.”

“Well I can’t argue with that,” Eric says, huffing out a laugh. “I feel a little selfish for wanting it, but if you’re confident, I’m confident. I’ll be right here the whole time.”

“Thank you,” Jack says, leaning into Eric’s body. They doze off that way, half sitting, half curled into each other. When Jack wakes, he has a crick in his neck but feels more rested than he has in weeks.

After another roadie and yet another string of home games, the Falconers are two games out of the lead. Jack is confident. He feels good, even after the change to his meds. If anything, he thinks he’s sleeping better and feeling less anxious. He hadn’t realized that antidepressants could sometimes cause anxiety as well. They had been a necessary evil when he was back in Montreal, fresh out of rehab, but now he’s pretty sure he can handle the change.

It’s Thursday and for once, Jack doesn’t have any plans with Bitty. It’s actually been a day and a half since he’s last gotten an email. He’s thought about going to the shelter to look for him, but decided against it. Bitty had made it clear that he didn’t want anyone at work knowing they were together, and Jack was going to honor his wishes. Still, it makes Jack a little nervous not knowing where his boyfriend is. It makes Jack wish he had insisted on buying Bitty a cell phone.

Attempting to stave off the worst of his panic, Jack logs onto Skype to see if Shitty is available. The little green light next to his name makes Jack let out a sigh of relief.

“Lardo, hi!” Jack says immediately when he sees her. “You staying with Shitty for a while?”

“I’m thinking about moving in, actually. I got that job at the gallery and they’re letting me put together a collection to keep on reserve in case any of their artists ever flake off. It’s not a done deal or anything, but they’re paying my materials, so…”

“Wow, that’s great,” Jack says, smiling when he sees the way her eyes light up. Lardo’s never been very demonstrative, but he’s never had trouble reading her. It must be a quiet person thing.

“If I’m gonna marry this fucker, I should get used to his bathroom habits and shit, you know?”

“Yeah, absolutely. Is he there?”

“Out on a beer run,” she says, checking her watch. “Should be another ten minutes or so.”

“Do you have plans for the holidays yet?” Jack asks. Lardo’s family doesn’t really celebrate Christmas, so it usually depends on if her sister feels like doing anything.

“Well since Shitty proposed he’s been officially uninvited from all Knight family shindigs at his grandmother’s house. So no. You?”

“He didn’t tell me that,” Jack says, frowning. “Is he upset about it?”

“No more than usual,” she says, running her knuckles over the buzzed half of her hair. “He’s kind of in limbo waiting to hear about his test results. Like it’s Schrodinger’s fucking disownment happening over there.”
“How much longer will it be?” Jack asks, upset with himself for not paying more attention to Shitty’s life.

“Could be up to three months, bro. Shit is fucking brutal.”

“Wow, that’s terrible. You think Christmas here might take his mind off it? My parents are coming down and Bitty will be staying with me. I’d really like it if you guys came.”

“Yeah, we’d love to come,” she says, nodding. “Things are getting really serious with you two, aren’t they?”

“Yeah, they are,” Jack says, lips twisting into a small smile that he saves especially for quiet moments with Lardo. “He said he loves me.”

“That’s great, Jack. He seems like a good egg. Good for you, too.”

“Yeah, he’s the best,” Jack says dreamily, resting his chin on his fist.

“You get him anything for Christmas yet?”

“I don’t really know what to get him,” Jack says, frowning slightly. “I bought him a pair of figure skates, but I’m afraid he’ll think it’s too much. He doesn’t really make any money and I know he’ll be embarrassed he can’t reciprocate. I just want to see him skate. It’s a gift for me more than anything, really.”

“You keep telling yourself that, Jack.”

“It’s too much, isn’t it?” he asks, sighing. He hadn’t thought about the skates since he bought them and hid them in the top of the coat closet that Bitty can’t reach even with the step stool. “What should I do?”

“You could always do some romantic shit like giving him your game sweater. He’s probably the only WAG without one.”

“He’s not a WAG,” Jack says, though it isn’t a bad idea.

“Maybe you should talk to the team about changing it to PAGs,” she says. She has a point. Though if you’re going to change “wives” to “partners,” you’d probably need to come up with an alternative to “girlfriends” as well.

“I would like to see him in it,” Jack muses, wondering if his jersey would even cover Bitty’s knees.

“I bet you would, you sly fucker,” Lardo teases.

A loud noise tells Jack that Shitty has arrived with the beer and it’s just a few seconds before he’s flopping down on the couch next to Lardo, passing her a can.

“Jack, my man, love of my life, how the fuck are you?”

“Talking about what to get Bitty for Christmas.”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t bought a ring yet,” Shitty teases, foam clinging to his mustache. “You are so gone on that little baking angel!”

“He doesn’t want to go public yet. I can’t propose and then not tell people, that would kill me,”
“Just give him your game sweater like we all know you want to and call it a day,” Shitty says, throwing his arm around Lardo and pulling her close. “Our little Jackie, all grown up. It just makes a tear come to your eye, doesn’t it Lards?”

“It does actually,” Lardo says, faking a sniffle. “Tell him about the figure skates.”

“You didn’t,” Shitty says, slapping his knee.

“They really weren’t all that expensive,” Jack says, hiding his face.

“Yeah sure, without the blades maybe,” Shitty says, laughing.

“He’s won championships! I can’t believe he doesn’t even have skates anymore!”

“Well, after he’s done crying, we can all go to the rink and see what he’s got. Can you book it for the day after Christmas?”

“Yeah, that’s a great idea, Shits, thanks. Why don’t you tell me more about your test?”

“Good God, Jack. You have no idea how bad I had to piss, but there was just no fucking time!” he says, launching into a rant that goes on for over an hour.
“Are you sure about this, Jack?” Bitty asks, wringing his hands.

“Of course. It can’t be that bad,” Jack says, pulling into the parking lot of the Whole Foods. They really shouldn’t have waited until the 23rd of December to do their holiday shopping, but Jack had been in Arizona and then Texas until about two hours ago, so it couldn’t be helped.

“Honey, you have no idea,” Bitty says, unbuckling his seatbelt. He’s still wearing his thin coat even though Jack has left practically a whole new wardrobe in his side of the closet over the past few weeks. Bitty will wear them around the house, but then for some reason, he always leaves in his own ratty clothes and worn loafers.

Jack assumes he’s just trying to look modest for work, but he had hoped Bitty would at least put the heated coat he’d bought him to good use. It worries him every time he sees Eric show up at his apartment shivering with frozen fingers, and today is no exception. Every time Bitty leaves, Jack makes sure he at least calls an Uber to take him home, but Jack still has no idea where that even is or how liveable it might be.

“Do you have the list?” he asks Bitty, wondering how quickly they’ll be able to make it back home. It’s been a very long day for Jack and he’s already jetlagged.

“Of course I do, sweetheart,” Bitty says, grabbing a cart and heading inside.

It’s a madhouse. They make it through the produce and meat departments alright, but the baking aisle is completely insane. Jack can’t get his cart anywhere near it, so he sends Bitty on ahead and braves the back wall to grab a truly alarming amount of butter and cream.

“I nearly lost an eye back there,” Bitty says, tossing several bags of sugar and chocolate into the cart. “Let’s get out of here.”

“We’re done?” Jack asks, praying that it’s true.

“They were out of cranberries and pecans, but we can ask Shitty to pick some up, can’t we?”

“I’ll text him,” Jack says, driving their shopping cart like he’s in a high-speed police chase. They make it to the checkout line and have to wait nearly half an hour to pay for their groceries. By the time they make it back to the apartment, Jack is dead on his feet.

Taking one look at his face, Bitty tucks him into bed with Señor Bun and puts the groceries away himself. Jack is eternally grateful.

“I just realized,” Jack says sleepily when Bitty finally crawls into bed. “I didn’t ask you if you wanted to go to church tomorrow or Christmas day.”

“Oh, that’s so sweet, darling, but no. I don’t think so,” Eric says, rolling over so his back is to Jack.

“Is your family religious?” Jack asks. He doesn’t want to stereotype, but he’s pretty sure going to church is a big thing in the south.
“They are,” Bitty says slowly, choosing his words carefully. “But church going folk aren’t always the most welcoming, especially not in Georgia. I haven’t gone since I left home and my mama made me.”

“I’m sure we could find an accepting one somewhere if you’d still like to go,” Jack offers. He’s not sure what Bitty is trying to say without saying and hopes he isn’t being insensitive. “We shouldn’t let bigots keep us from celebrating if you want to.”

“That’s alright, sweetpea,” Bitty says, pressing his back into Jack’s chest.

Jack appreciates it, if only for the fact that it proves Eric isn’t mad at him.

“I don’t know if I believe anymore anyway,” he says finally, grabbing Jack’s hand and pulling it around him to tangle their fingers together. “I’m happy just being here with you if that’s alright.”

“Of course it’s alright,” Jack says. It’s clear there’s more to it than that, but he lets it go. Bitty will tell him when he feels comfortable. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, sugar,” Bitty says, yawning. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” Jack says, closing his eyes. Even though he’s exhausted, he stays up for a while listening to Eric breathe, wondering what it is that Bitty’s not telling him and if he should have pushed a little harder.

Shitty and Lardo show up around noon on Christmas Eve bearing pecans and cranberries. Bitty immediately sets them to work prepping vegetables. He plays his Christmas mix on Jack’s phone, an early gift he’d spent hours putting together. The songs are a blend of classic, country, and pop and he spends long minutes watching Bitty’s hips sway to the beat as they put together several different pies.

Jack is just about to start peeling another batch of apples like Bitty showed him—was it really only a few weeks ago—when his phone rings.

“Bonjour, Maman. Have you landed yet?” he asks, slipping into his native tongue quickly.

“No, darling. Il y a un orage. Ils ont annulé tous les vols. Nous ne serons pas là,” his mother says, audibly disappointed. There’s nothing to be done about it though, no flights will be leaving Montreal for at least two days.

“Is Papa angry?” he asks, not wanting to add another disappointment to the never-ending list.

“Not with you darling. He just wanted to see you and Eric. Try not to worry.”

"Bitty t'a fait une écharpe. Je vais vous l'envoyer avec des palmiers. Je suis désolé, Maman,” Jack says, frowning and shaking his head when Eric looks over at the sound of his name.

“Try not to worry, Jean. We’ll visit when the weather is clear. Maybe after the New Year,” she says, voice flitting over the Quebecois, as sweet as it’s ever been.

Something in Jack’s chest clenches. Now that he knows he won’t see his parents for Christmas, he wants nothing more. It’ll be the first time since his overdose that he won’t be spending the
holidays in Montreal. It kind of feels like the end of an era, but as he looks over to see Eric showing Shitty and Lardo how to cut butter into flour, he thinks maybe it’s not the worst thing in the world. Change can be good sometimes.

“That sounds good, Maman. I love you. Tell Papa I love him, too.”

“I will. We love you, too. Tell Bitty Merry Christmas for us. We’ll talk to you soon.”

“Their flight got canceled,” Jack says, ending the call. “They’re not coming.” He knows his voice is flat; he must be slipping back into robot mode.

“Oh no! I’m so sorry, honey!” Bitty says, coming over to give him a big hug. There’s still flour on his hands. A bit of it dusts his cheek.

Jack finds it absolutely endearing. He buries his face in Bitty’s neck and inhales the sweet scent of cinnamon and brown sugar. “It’s okay. I’ll see them after New Year’s, I’m sure. It’s just the first time since the Q I haven’t seen them for the holidays.”

“We’ll just have to Skype them and pretend, alright?” Bitty says, pressing cheek to cheek as he whispers in Jack’s ear. “I know it’s not the same, but I’m getting used to being away from family for special occasions. I know how to go through the motions. With the four of us, it’ll feel almost as good. I promise.”

“Thank you for being here with me,” Jack says, pulling Bitty in tight, palm against the back of his hair. It’s freshly buzzed. He must have done it the night before while Jack was sleeping. “I love you.”

“Gosh, darling! There’s no place I’d rather be. I love you so much. Now let’s get back to the kitchen before those two make a mess of something. I don’t want to spend Christmas Eve in the emergency room.”

“Bits!” Shitty screams from the kitchen.

“Oh, Lord! What did you do?” Bitty calls back, rushing toward the kitchen.

“Nothing! I just want you to tell me why you think Halo is a Christmas song!”

“Angels have halos, Mister Knight,” Bitty says, exasperated. “And so do saints, like Mary and Joseph. What a silly question, honestly.”

“It’s a love song!” Shitty protests, hands covered in bits of flour and butter.

“Christmas is all about love,” Bitty shoots back, swatting at him with a kitchen towel. “Don’t insult Queen Bey like that.”

It’s a perfect day.

They finish the pies and set them to cool on wire racks Jack purchased at Bitty’s insistence. As Jack works on the dishes Shitty and Lardo settle down on the couch and make a drinking game out of the Harry Potter marathon that always plays on TV during the holidays. Bitty nurses one beer for the entire afternoon, smiling at Jack over the lip of the brown bottle whenever he gets the chance.

Jack takes roughly a hundred pictures. Some are the food in various states of preparedness; a few are of Shitty and Lardo roughhousing and making a mess. The majority are of Eric, the light
filtering through Jack’s windows, glinting off the golden swoop of his hair.

They’re all perfect. Every single one of them. Before even seeing the prints, Jack has already pegged a few to frame.

Their *mis en place* is all ready for the morning and there are enough pies baked for them to all eat one themselves. Bitty makes hot chocolate and they play a round of Pictionary, laughing good-naturedly at Jack’s pitiful attempts at art. When Shitty and Lardo crack a window to smoke a bowl, Jack and Bitty head to bed.

They kiss on the way, Bitty pushing Jack backward until the back of his knees hit the mattress and he falls down on it, bouncing slightly. Bitty locks the door and stalks forward, settling himself in Jack’s lap, covering his mouth with his own. “Is this okay?” he asks, already out of breath.

“Yeah, it’s great,” Jack says, arms sliding under Bitty’s to wrap around his shoulders, caging him in. “You’re so beautiful. You should see some of the photos I took,” he says between kisses, moaning when Bitty starts sucking a mark on his throat.

“Maybe I’ll pose for you sometime,” Bitty says, moving to nibble on his ear. “Would you like that, sugar?”

“Câlisse, yes,” Jack breathes, eyes fluttering closed as Bitty licks a stripe up his throat and runs his hands under his tee shirt.

“Would you like to do something tonight? We don’t have to be up early or anything,” Bitty hums, fingers tickling Jack’s sides, trailing toward the center line of his abdominals.

“Yes, please,” Jack says, lifting his arms so Bitty can pull his shirt off. “Anything you want.”

“Anything?” Bitty asks, lips brushing Jack’s. “Have you been feeling anxious? Do you think it would be too much for me to try to make you come?”

“No,” Jack says. There are a few things he’s thinking about, like missing his parents, and if Bitty will like his Christmas gift, if Eric will agree to come watch him play in the All-Stars game, but none of them feel overwhelming. “I think I’m less anxious since lowering my dose. I think it could be good… maybe.”

“Oh honey, I know it’ll be good. I can make it so good for you.”

“Please,” Jack begs again, hands clenching tightly around Bitty’s hips. “Want you.”

“You do, don’t you?” Bitty says, though it’s obvious Jack isn’t hard.

It helps that Bitty is trying to play along. Maybe going through the motions will be helpful in more ways than one this Christmas. Jack had hoped he would be a little quicker to respond to a change in his meds, but no such luck. Nothing ever comes easy for him, so why should orgasms be any different?

“So much,” Jack says, capturing Bitty’s mouth again as he clutches his ass and stands, reversing their positions.

“Oof,” Bitty says, bouncing on the mattress.

Jack smiles and starts divesting Eric of his clothes, first his shirt, then his ratty old jeans and too big belt. He goes to his knees to reach for Bitty’s underwear only to find that he’s wearing a pair of
Jack’s skimpy workout briefs. They’re far too big on him, but Bitty’s bulge is filling them up quite nicely.

“You’re wearing my underwear,” Jack says, deep voice rumbling in his chest.

“I couldn’t find any of mine this morning. Is that alright?” Bitty asks, leaning back on his elbows.

“It’s hot as fuck,” Jack groans, slipping his thumbs into the waistband and pulling to reveal Bitty’s dick. He licks his lips and looks up through his lashes. “Can I?”

“Yeah,” Bitty says, swallowing. “Just take my socks off first, okay?”

Jack does as he asks and then wraps a hand around Bitty, stroking. Going on instinct, Jack leans forward and rubs the head against his cheeks, spreading a little precome on his face. Bitty is so warm and soft, hissing as he’s scratched by Jack’s stubble.

“Do you grow a beard for the playoffs?” he asks, voice hoarse already.

“I do,” Jack says, pressing little kisses to Bitty’s lightly furred thighs. “But don’t jinx me yet.”

“I’m not jinxing you, honey. I’m just imagining what beard burn will feel like.”

“If we keep winning you’ll find out in a few months,” Jack says, nipping Bitty’s inner thigh, mouth inching closer to his cock.

“I’ll hold you to that, Mister Zimmermann,” Bitty says, breath hitching into a gasp when Jack swallows him down, condom free.

Jack works him for a few minutes, sucking and bobbing his head, relearning every inch of Bitty with his tongue. When hands reach for his hair, he goes even deeper, breathing through his nose as he takes Bitty into his throat.

“Fuck, you’re so good at that,” Bitty whispers, clutching at Jack’s head.

His nose is pressed to Bitty’s groin now, soft gold curls tickling his face. Bitty hardens in his mouth and he thinks he’s about to get a mouthful of come when he’s pulled roughly away by the hair. The pain shocks him, and he can feel a little twitch in his groin as it sizzles down his spine.

“I’m sorry,” Bitty pants, chest heaving as he strokes Jack’s cheek. “I don’t want to come like that. I want to fuck you, if you want.”


“Then come here, Jack,” Eric says, patting the space between his thighs as he sits up. “I need to get my hands on you.”

Jack steps forward, shivering as Bitty pulls at his hips, hands reaching for his sweatpants. He’s not hard, and he’s sure Bitty knows that, being as close as he is, but somehow, it doesn’t seem to matter.

Bitty is smiling, hands reaching for his ass, squeezing and kneading with a sly look on his face. He’s enjoying this, loves feeling every inch of Jack’s body, every muscle that Jack has worked so hard to perfect, it all belongs to Bitty.

Hands slip into his waistband and hitch his sweatpants and boxer briefs down under his balls,
stretching the elastic tight across the swell of his ass. Bitty leans in and just breathes on his cock, still soft and hidden in his foreskin. Fingers trail down the cleft of his ass, clenching tight when he groans.

Feeling hot all over, Jack’s hands reach for any part of Bitty he can get, settling on his smooth back, rubbing at his shoulder blades as he attempts to coax Jack to hardness. It’s not quite working, but that doesn’t seem to bother Bitty, who continues to brush his fingers over Jack’s hole, squeezing his ass in a steady rhythm.

A tongue dips into his belly button, running over the ridges of his abs, teeth scraping over the sensitive skin. Bitty licks down his happy trail, continuing on to his soft dick, sucking it into his hot mouth.

Jack jerks under his touch, torn between pushing into Bitty’s mouth and back against his finger. The heat around his cock is nice, but doesn’t seem to be doing anything for him, so he runs his hands through the swoop of Bitty’s hair and pulls him off.

“Can you open me up?” he asks, face heating at the words. He’s not used to asking for things in bed, but Bitty’s smiles and soft reassurances make him feel like he gets to have whatever he wants. Bitty may be in charge, but he always gives Jack exactly what he needs in the end. Jack knows Eric would never deprive him of pleasure, especially not when it’s so hard-fought.

“Absolutely,” Bitty says, sliding the sweatpants down and off Jack’s legs. “Did you buy more lube, honey?”

“Yes,” Jack says, knowing he’s blushing. Thankfully he orders most of his groceries online and doesn’t have to deal with people taking grainy cell phone photos of him at the store. “In the drawer.”

“Come here, Jack,” Bitty says, holding out a hand.

Jack goes immediately, slotting his legs between Bitty’s and marveling at the strong arms and tiny waist in front of him. His hands look huge cupping Eric’s face. Jack knows he’s not as fragile as he looks, but there’s still the hint of a bruise around Bitty’s eye and Jack can’t help but want to protect him from everything bad in the world.

He kisses each of Bitty’s eyelids, then his cheekbones, like he can melt the pain and the hurt away with his lips. Hands wrap around his hips and pull him down into Eric’s lap so they’re close enough to kiss properly. Jack can’t get enough.

They stay like that for a long time, until their lips go numb and they’re just breathing into each other’s mouths. Bitty smells like his shampoo and the spices of the apple pie they’d baked together. His skin tastes salty and sweet, like every good thing Jack has ever wanted. He licks into Eric’s mouth, scratching at his scalp with uneven fingernails, trying to memorize this moment, the feeling of Eric’s hands on his hips and his hard dick pressing against the cleft of his ass.

“Let’s lie you down,” Bitty says, bursting into motion to reverse their positions, Jack landing on his back in a pile of pillows. “God, you look good like that. Unreal.”

Jack stares at him, eyes wide, as he pours lube into his hand and waits for it to warm. He exhales as Bitty presses a finger into him, coating his insides, making room for himself. “Tabarnak,” he curses, eyes fluttering closed as he’s breached. All of Jack’s attention narrows down to that one slim finger inside him.
“Do you want me to fuck you, Jack?” Bitty asks, eyes soft and bright.

Jack chokes on his words. The way Eric says his name, like he’s precious… it’s overwhelming. He nods, not the least bit hesitant. Even if he never comes, even if he never gets hard, he has to know what it feels like to hold Bitty inside him.

“I just need to get you nice and loose, honey.” Bitty narrates, distracting Jack as he slides in a second finger. “I want to make sure this is good for you, only the good things, only the best for you, baby.”

Jack groans, turning his head to muffle himself with a pillow as Bitty scissors his fingers, making room for a third. He’s pretty confident that Shitty and Lardo are either passed out or otherwise occupied in the guest room, but he still doesn’t want his first time doing this for Bitty to have an audience.

“It’s okay,” Bitty says, fluttering his fingertips over Jack’s prostate. “There’s no one here but you and me. You can let me hear you, sugar.” He adds a third finger and Jack nearly shouts, his back arching off the bed.

“Sacrament!” he moans, tossing his head from side to side.

Bitty is relentless, with a singular focus; getting Jack hard. It shouldn’t be so difficult, but thankfully Bitty takes his task seriously, never complaining when his arm starts to ache or sweat beads at his brow. It takes a good five minutes of Bitty rubbing and Jack whimpering for Bitty to say, “There you go. So perfect for me, Jack. So good.”

He pulls his fingers out as Jack looks down to see his dick standing tall out from his lap. He almost wants to laugh, it’s such a relief. It’s only semi-hard and he doesn’t know if he’ll be able to keep it up the whole time, but at least this way Bitty knows Jack is interested, that Jack wants him in every way possible. Jack’s consent always feels hollow without it, even to his own ears.

“How about you turn over for me?” Bitty asks, pouring more lube into his hand. “Do you want me to use a condom?”

“No,” Jack croaks, slowly getting on all fours. “Just you.”

“Alright honey,” Bitty coos, returning his fingers to Jack’s hole, making sure he’s slick and loose.

The angle is different and it makes Jack’s spine tingle. Bitty isn’t hitting his prostate anymore, but he feels fuller.

“You touch yourself all you want, okay sweetheart? I want you to come if you can, whenever you want. Don’t hold back.” Bitty says, adding lube to his cock.

Jack can’t see him, but he feels him, his compact body hot right behind him, slippery hands reaching for his hips, lining himself up.

“You ready?” he asks, pressing a kiss between Jack’s shoulder blades.

Jack locks his arms, curves his back, and nods. “Ouais.”

“Don’t you go using French on me right now,” Bitty says, squeezing his butt. “We’ll be done before we even get started.”

"C’est québécois pas français—” Jack insists, words trailing off into a moan as Bitty enters him.
Bitty takes his time. The stretch is okay at first, but after the head pops in and Bitty gets to the wider middle portion, Jack tenses. “Tabarnak,” he mutters, clenching his hands into fists in the sheets. “Wait.”

“Oh God, am I hurting you?” Bitty panics, withdrawing until only the head of his dick is still inside Jack.

“It’s just so big,” Jack whimpers, pressing into the touch when Eric reaches to run a hand down his spine.

“You sure do know how to flatter a boy,” Bitty whispers, massaging Jack’s shoulder. “Gosh, Jack, it’s not even as big as yours.”

“It’s so wide though,” Jack insists, shifting his hips back to take a little more. He hisses at the stretch, but breathes through it, rocking back and forth until it only burns a little. When he gets to the widest part, he squeezes, pulling a gasp out of Bitty as his body clenches down hard.

“Fuck, Jack! You’re so tight,” Bitty moans, hands going to Jack’s hips to steady himself. “Give me a second.”

Jack stills, breathing through the stretch. He’s gone soft, but that’s not surprising. It was a miracle he was hard in the first place. He bows his head, breathing slowly, in and out, in and out, until he isn’t quite so tense.

“That’s better,” Bitty says, inching his hips forward slightly. “You ready for more?”

“Ouais,” Jack says, rolling his head on his shoulders. He presses back, focusing on the slide of Bitty’s head as it brushes just past his prostate. Finally, he bottoms out, Bitty’s hips pressed tight to his ass, gold curls scraping his sensitive cheeks.

“Oh my God,” Bitty groans, hands squeezing Jack’s hips hard enough to bruise. “You are just… too much Mister Zimmermann,” he pants, sweat dripping from his brow onto Jack’s back. “Are you okay?”

“Ouais,” Jack says again, wriggling his hips to try to urge Bitty to move.

“If you were speaking English, I might believe you,” Bitty says, reaching forward until he can brush through Jack’s hair.

The change in angle does something to Jack, who feels the heat stirring in his belly again. He reaches down with one hand to find that he’s half hard and growing.

“I’m going to move now, okay honey?”

“Please,” he whimpers, head hung low as he watches his own hand pull back his foreskin and stroke his cock. This might just work. If he can keep it going long enough, he might be able to come for Bitty, to squeeze around his cock like he’s probably expecting, internal muscles fluttering while he comes. He focuses on that image and starts to stroke harder.

“Okay,” Bitty says, probably talking more to himself than to Jack. “Fuck you’re tight,” he mutters again, pulling out and then sliding back in.

Jack gasps. It’s been so long since he’s felt this, he almost starts to cry. It’s not just the sensation that’s getting to him, it’s the fact that it’s Bitty. It’s Bitty’s cock inside him, nudging his prostate, making him hard. It’s Bitty that’s going to fill him with come. Jack strokes faster.
Bitty speeds up, reaching for Jack’s shoulder with one hand. As he leans forward, the angle changes and Jack starts to cry out. Bitty’s hitting his prostate on every stroke and the widest part of his cock never leaves Jack’s body, just stretches his rim to the limit.

“Is that good, baby?” Bitty coos behind him. “Are you hard for me?”

“Ouais,” Jack pants, working himself even faster.

“Are you close?” he asks, mouthing at Jack’s shoulder blade.

“Non,” Jack says, not knowing what else to do.

“That’s okay, honey, that’s okay,” Bitty assures him, slowing his pace until the ridge of his dick is just a slow slide of pressure over Jack’s prostate. “We can take our time.”

Jack tries to speak, but all that comes out is a broken whimper. His arm is aching and sweat is running into his eyes, burning him. He doesn’t want to give up, but it hurts so much, he drops his dick, pressing his palm to the mattress instead.

It feels so good to have Bitty inside him, but it’s not enough. It’s never enough. Exhausted, Jack drops his shoulders to the bed and tries not to cry. His shoulders shake and his chest heaves and it’s still not enough.

“Baby, baby, it’s okay,” Bitty says, draping himself across Jack’s back.

He’s sweaty and disgusting and he doesn’t even know how Eric is still touching him right now. He moves his hips forward, wondering how far he’ll need to move for Eric to slip out of him, but Bitty’s hands are at his waist, pulling him back in.

“You’re doing so well, honey. Let’s just try something else, alright?”

Jack shakes his head. It’s a lost cause. He knows it. Eric can finish, but he knows he’s just chasing a dream at this point.

“Listen to my voice, Jack,” Bitty says, voice hard and clear. “If you want to come, you’re going to come. You just have to breathe and let me tell you what we’re going to do, okay?”

Jack whimpers, but nods. “Ouais,” he mutters, wiping the snot and tears from his face. “Ouais.”

“Good, now why don’t you get back on your hands and push back into me, just like that. Good,” Eric says, soothing hands running up and down Jack’s sides. “Now head up and arch your back, alright? Push into me until it feels right.”

Jack does as he’s told. He shifts his hips and tosses his head back until Bitty’s dick is right where he wants it, the head of his cock a blunt pressure directly on his prostate. He knows that if Bitty were to move right now, he’d just pummel it, the hard push that Jack needs. It’s probably something that would be too much for anyone else, but for Jack, the extreme is the only thing that works.

“There you go, now get your hand on that big beautiful cock for me,” Bitty says, starting to move his hips again. “Keep stroking yourself like it’s me doing it, tight and fast at the tip, just like you like. So hot. That’s perfect, baby.”

He’s panting now, Bitty rubbing him in just the right place. Jack’s arm feels like lead, but he does as Bitty says, tugging at himself just under the head in quick, hard strokes. He grips the headboard
with his left hand for leverage and arches his back even more.

Bitty pounds into him, balls slapping against his, sweat dripping everywhere. Eric has one hand on his hip, fingertips digging in tight, keeping them from slipping apart, his other hand wrapped around Jack’s shoulder, yanking him back onto his cock in a punishing rhythm.

“How about now, baby?” he asks, leaning forward to mouth at the arch of Jack’s back. “Is that better?”

“Tabarnak,” Jack hisses when Bitty changes the angle again. The pressure inside him seems to double and his stomach squirms with heat like it’s full of liquid glass, twisting and folding in on itself. He’s hard now, the intensity building in his body hot enough to burn.

“You like that?” Bitty asks, and it doesn’t sound like a stupid question to Jack. It sounds hot and dirty and perfect. “You like it hard like this? Want more?”

Jack nods, practically bouncing on Eric’s cock now. “Please,” he begs, voice low and broken, just barely more than a whisper. “Please more.”

Bitty reacts immediately, hand tightening on Jack’s shoulder as he pounds into his body. Their balls slap together almost hard enough to hurt, and Jack ducks his head to see if there’s room for him to watch. The heat pools right above his dick which is leaking in his hand, harder than it’s ever been. He’s so close, but he can’t get there. The sweat drips in his eyes blinding him.

“Come on, baby,” Bitty says, digging his nails into Jack’s hip before releasing him.

Jack’s body sways without Bitty’s hand there, but the one on his shoulder clamps down to hold him in place.

Bitty’s pace quickens, so Jack mirrors him, clutching at the headboard with white knuckles. “So close,” he cries, words thick in his mouth.

“I’ve got you,” Bitty says, shifting his body forward. “Want me to make you come, Jack?”

“Fuck yes. Please,” he sobs, dick almost going numb as he jerks himself, harder and harder, tingles shooting up toward the head. He’s desperate and about to collapse, but then he feels Bitty’s fingers twine in his hair, yanking his head back.

The angle is sharp and the change immediate. Breath catches in his throat as his neck curves, chasing the pain of his hair being pulled. The shock of it is nearly enough, but Jack still can’t make it. The relentless pressure in his abdomen crests and hangs there, like an incomplete pass, like a missed shot on goal. He can almost hear it ping, bouncing off the post.

“I’ve got you,” Bitty says again, snapping his hips as his other hand wraps around Jack’s throat and pulls.

Breath cut off, head yanked back, Jack jerks in a full body spasm, coming all over the mattress. It feels like a punch to the gut, barreling into him, one jab after another until he’s empty. He tries to gasp, but Bitty’s hand is still tight around his throat, making his face heat and burn as he chokes.

Just when he feels like he’s about to collapse, Bitty comes, tensing and stilling behind him until he’s flooded with warmth. The hand around him releases and Jack can finally breathe again, but the hand in his hair is still there, making his eyes water as his hair nearly rips from his scalp.

“Fuck Jack, fuck,” Bitty is muttering, hips still rocking in tiny jerks as he finishes. “Oh god.”
Eventually, Bitty’s fingers unclench and he pulls his hand back. Like his strings have been cut, Jack falls to the mattress. The sheets are soaked and stick to his skin, smelling like sweat and come, but also sweet like Bitty, who is still inside him, softening, but still present.

“Are you okay?” Bitty asks.

To Jack, he sounds very far away, but when he turns his head, Eric is right there, searching his face with those wide brown eyes. “Ouais,” Jack says, a dopey smile crossing his face. “Je vais bien. Fabuleux,” he adds, eyes closing as he rides the high.

“That was crazy,” Bitty says, kneeling to Jack’s side. He lifts a hand and traces Jack’s brow, running his fingers over his temple and into Jack’s hair. “I didn’t know it could be like that.”

“You haven’t done that before, have you?” Jack asks, peering at Bitty with the one eye that isn’t shoved into his pillow.

“No,” Bitty says, hands fiddling in his lap. He’s soft, but covered in come, his entire body glistening with a sheen of sweat. He worked hard, and Jack knows it, is grateful for the effort that Bitty continues to put into his pleasure. “Is it always going to be like that?” he asks, still petting Jack’s hair.

“Hopefully it’ll get easier as I wean off my meds,” Jack says, slowly getting his breath back. He doesn’t feel as shaky as the last time Bitty got him off, but he does feel floaty, like he’s become separate from his body, an outside observer to the scene below. “I can’t believe you could focus on me like that. We should focus on you too.”

“You know I don’t mind,” Eric says, leaning down to kiss Jack’s forehead. “I’m just glad you’re starting to feel better. You do feel better, don’t you?” he asks, eyebrows furrowing.

“I feel great,” Jack says, raising his head slightly so he can see Eric more clearly. “You’re wonderful, and you do so much for me. I love every bit of you.”

“I love you too, honey,” Bitty says, kissing Jack softly on the lips. “Now do you think you can get up? Because we should really change the sheets. Do you have another set?”

“I’ll get them. You can get in the shower if you want,” Jack offers, pulling his discarded underwear off the floor and slipping them on. He gets another kiss from Bitty before leaving the bedroom to look through the linen closet.

Pulling up short, Jack nearly runs into Lardo, who is looking just as embarrassed as he is, caught in her underwear and one of Shitty’s crop tops, a glass of water in her hand. “Uhh,” Jack stutters, eyes going wide. He’s never seen so much of Lardo’s body before and it takes him by surprise.

“Having a good night?” she asks lightly, a knowing smirk crossing her face.

“Yeah,” he manages, coughing through the word. “You?”

“Didn’t sound as good as yours,” she says, winking at him.

Jack is suddenly hit with the urge to cover up, even though it would be useless. His hands may be big, but they can’t cover everything that he’s showing, which is basically everything except his crotch.

“Please never mention this again,” he pleads, hiding his face with one hand. “And promise me you won’t tell Shitty.”
“I’m not saying anything,” Lardo says, pulling the sheet of hair out of her face and behind her ear.

“I love you Lards. You’re my favorite,” Jack says, reaching into the linen closet for a spare set of sheets.

“I’m pretty sure Bits is your new favorite,” she says, ruffling his sweaty hair when he ducks his head. “But I can’t blame you. He’s really something, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, he is,” Jack says as she heads down the hall. “Goodnight Lardo.”

“Goodnight, Mister Zimmermann,” she teases, slipping into the guest room and closing the door behind her.

Jack sighs and shakes his head, ready for bed.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

“No, darling. Il y a un orage. Ils ont annulé tous les vols. Nous ne serons pas là,” his mother says, audibly disappointed. There’s nothing to be done about it though, no flights will be leaving Montreal for at least two days. “There’s a storm. They canceled all the flights. We won’t be there.”

"Bitty t’a fait une écharpe. Je vais vous l’envoyer avec des palmiers. Je suis désolé, Maman,” Jack says, frowning and shaking his head when Eric looks over at the sound of his name. "Bitty made you a scarf. I’ll send it with some palmiers (elephant ear cookies). I’m sorry, Mom."

"C’est québécois pas français—” Jack insists, words trailing off into a moan as Bitty enters him. "It’s Quebecois, not French,"

“Ouais,” Jack says, a dopey smile crossing his face. “Je vais bien. Fabuleux,” he adds, eyes closing as he rides the high. "Yeah, I'm good. Fabulous."
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to everyone! Hope you're all having a great season! I'm chasing children and a dog around the house this Christmas, but there's always time for Zimbits <3 Especially that update *fans self*.

Christmas Day passes in a whirlwind of color and sound. The carols play nonstop, Shitty hollering along as loud as he can. They eat until they’re stuffed and then eat some more. Bitty is never far away, always within arm’s reach. Jack can’t stop himself from pulling him close every time he passes, kissing his cheek, his temple, the crook of his neck, whatever is closest. The tree flashes silver and gold, lights twinkling as they settle around it and exchange gifts.

Jack gets a large painting from Lardo. It’s beautiful, swirls of blue and white, only slightly reminiscent of the Falconer’s logo. He hugs her tightly and bounds to the linen closet for a toolkit so they can hang it in the entryway immediately. Shitty gives him a boxed set of the first season of Vikings on DVD. He trades them for a set of acrylic paints and a framed photo he’d taken of Shitty and Lardo snuggling under a blanket on the roof of the Haus.

Bitty surprises Jack with a first edition set Winston Churchill books he found in a used bookshop. He leafs through them reverently, careful of the brittle pages, eager to soak up every word.

“These are incredible, Bits,” he says, leaning in for a kiss that lingers. Jack can’t help it. His heart is overflowing, fit to burst. Hands cupping Bitty’s cheeks, Jack presses forward, opening his mouth, deepening the kiss. “I love you,” he whispers, leaning his forehead against Eric’s.

“I love you, too, darling,” Eric says, cheeks flushed red.

Jack isn’t sure if it’s the wine Eric’s been drinking or arousal, but he doesn’t much care. Bitty glows with holiday joy, and Jack drinks it in. “Your turn,” he says, pulling a slim box out from under the tree.

“This just isn’t fair,” Bitty says, unwrapping the box. “Those books set me back a whole five dollars.”

“This didn’t cost me anything,” Jack says, gnawing on his bottom lip as Bitty opens the lid and pulls out a Falconer’s jersey.

“I don’t think it’s quite my size,” Bitty says, holding it up.

“It’s my game sweater,” Jack says, eyes hopeful as Bitty traces his name with his thin fingers.

“I know it is, honey, I’m just teasing,” Bitty says, bringing the jersey up to his face and inhaling. “Smells like you.”

“Smells rank, you mean,” Shitty mutters. Lardo elbows him in the ribs causing him to spill some of his beer on the hardwood. He cleans it up with the bottom of his sock.
“I’m captain of the Atlantic All-Stars team next month in Tampa. Would you come with me?” Jack asks, already anticipating the answer. Bitty’s never been to one of his games alone before, let alone traveled across the country for one. It will look pretty suspicious to the press for there to be a young man in his jersey sitting alone in the VIP section, but he can’t stop himself from wanting it.

“It’s really important to you, isn’t it?” Bitty asks, searching Jack’s face.

“Yeah, it really is,” Jack says. He knows Kent has been named captain of the Pacific team. He knows he’s going to have to face him on the ice and in interviews, hell, even in the elevator in the hotel he knows they’re putting all the players up in. It might be selfish, but Jack wants Bitty by his side for all that.

“Then I’ll be there,” Bitty says, tracing Jack’s brow with one finger. “With bells on.”

“Thank you,” Jack says, ignoring the way Shitty and Lardo have started batting their eyelashes at each other, mocking them. “That’s just a hand me down,” Jack says, reaching under the tree for the last gift. “This is your real present.”

“Jack,” Bitty whines, eying the bag. “This is all too much. I know you already bought me a plane ticket to Florida.”

“That’s for me,” Jack says, smiling sheepishly. “This is for you.”

Bitty rolls his eyes, but reaches into the bag, pulling out tissue paper until he can reach the strap of the canvas bag inside. He’s not an idiot. Jack knows he can recognize a skate bag when he sees it.

“This is way too much, Jack,” Bitty insists, hands hesitating on the zipper. “I can’t accept these. I just can’t.”

“This is a gift for me too, really,” Jack says, starting to babble almost as badly as Eric does when he’s nervous. “I really want to see you skate. I booked the rink for all of us tomorrow. Please say yes?”

“You are a menace, Mister Zimmermann,” Bitty says sighing and shaking his head. He opens the bag to pull out one skate. The black leather is stiff, and when he pulls off the blade guard, the metal shines in the light of the twinkling Christmas tree. “I’m so out of practice. And these aren’t broken in. I’m not going to be able to keep up with you, sugar.”

“Well Lardo doesn’t even skate, so you’ve already got her beat,” Shitty chimes in, arm wrapped around his fiancée.

“I’m sure you’ll be great, Bits,” Jack says, twining their fingers together. “I know it.”

“You’ll skate with me?” Eric asks, eyes so wide and round he looks five years younger.

“I can’t wait,” Jack says, leaning in for a kiss.

“That’s not intimidating at all,” Bitty mutters against his lips.

“You’re the championship skater,” Jack argues, kissing him again. “I’m just good at getting a little biscuit in a net, eh?”

“Yeah, sure, that’s it,” Bitty says, rolling his eyes. “That’s all you’re good at, Mister Zimmermann.”
They Skype Jack’s parents and watch the Yule Log on Jack’s big screen TV while sipping hot chocolate, some spiked with whiskey, some not. When they go to sleep, Bitty hands Jack Señor Bun, a small smile on his face as he watches Jack set him down gently between their pillows.

They kiss goodnight for a solid twenty minutes, breathing each other in. It’s slow and comfortable, not leading anywhere. Jack falls asleep with their lips only a hair apart, Señor Bun cradled between their chests.

When they get to the rink the next morning, Bitty just lights up. Jack has never seen him so alive as when he’s gaining speed, skating backward flawlessly. His crossovers and choctaws make Jack’s mouth go dry. The way his glutes flex in his borrowed spandex running pants is frankly obscene and Jack knows it’s only the beginning.

Bitty’s right, he is out of practice. Breaking in new skates is serious business, and yet, he’s still magnificent. He stumbles a few times, his extensions not quite what they should be, but even so, watching him on the ice is nothing short of incredible. Jack stares. Shitty and Lardo can’t even make fun of him because they’re doing the same.

When Bitty launches into what looks like a well-rehearsed routine, Jack takes his camera out. Eric doesn’t even flinch when the shutter echoes through the entire rink. He must be used to the attention. Jack takes dozens of photos, and when he looks down at his camera to check a shot, he sees Shitty recording Bitty’s routine on his cell phone.

As Eric gains speed and bends his knee, the three spectators hold their breath. He pushes off the ice and launches himself into the air, spinning once, twice, nearly three times before coming down hard on his blade, wobbling wildly, but not falling. Bitty skates through it and does a camel spin followed by a sit spin. When he tries the jump a second time, he lands it.

Lardo and Shitty whoop and scream. Jack just smiles, his heart in his throat. Bitty isn’t just talented, he’s illuminating. Every movement, every expression has a fierce grace to it. When he starts skating forward and readies himself for another jump, Jack swallows hard. He knows just enough about figure skating to know that axels are the hardest jumps to land.

He watches intently as Bitty winds up and leaps spinning two and a half times before sticking the landing. “Tabarnak,” Jack curses, feeling his eyes start to water. He’s in love with a beautiful championship figure skater, and Eric is just working at a homeless shelter. Jack feels his heart clench as he mourns Bitty’s lost potential. He still doesn’t know why Eric quit skating, but lack of talent or injury sure don’t seem to be possible reasons.

Shitty is screaming, cheering Bitty on as he skates out of his landing and slides effortlessly into a Biellmann spin, fingers hooked through the loop of his left skate’s blade. “Fuck yes, you beautiful animal!” Shitty screams, forcing a smile out of Bitty’s set expression.

“Did you know he could bend like that?” Lardo asks out of the corner of her mouth, eyes alight with mischief.

“Non,” Jack says, swallowing down any further comment. If he knew about how flexible Bitty was, they wouldn’t have left the bedroom this morning.

“Do a flip! Do a flip!” Shitty is screaming as Bitty completes a double toe loop.

“I can’t do a flip!” Bitty shouts back as he passes them, so fast Jack can barely focus on him. “I can do this though,” he shouts from the opposite side of the rink, voice echoing off the empty chairs as he leaps into the air and does a split jump.
“Holy shit,” Lardo says, grinning and laughing as she applauds. “That’s fucking sick!”

“What else can you do?” Shitty calls, cackling like a madman.

“I’m out of shape. My legs are already burning,” Bitty says, sliding to a smooth stop in front of them. “Toe pick!” he says in an unidentifiable accent while Lardo giggles. “Don’t tell me you’ve never seen The Cutting Edge,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest while he glares down at Jack. He’s taller in his skates, and Jack enjoys the feeling of looking up at him from his seat on the bench.

“Uhh… no?” Jack says, feeling very dumb.

“We’ll watch it when we get home,” Bitty says, laying a hand on his forearm.

Home. He said home. It makes Jack’s heart soar. Bitty’s home is with Jack. He’s never heard anything so beautiful in his life. “That sounds good,” Jack mutters, coughing through the lump in his throat.

“I thought you said y’all were going to skate with me,” Bitty says, hands on his hips.

“We’ve been having too much fun watching you,” Shitty says, turning his phone toward Bitty. “Your jumps are kickass, brah. Can I put this on YouTube? Or maybe just send it to the SMH chat? They’d love to see some of this.”

“Well, alright,” Bitty says, blushing. “It’s not nearly as good as I can do, but I suppose it ain’t bad for my first time in these skates.”

“You’re incredible,” Jack says, tone so serious he has to try to back off it. “I said you could do it, didn’t I?”

“I suppose you did, yes,” Bitty says, pushing away from the wall in a wide arc. “I can do a few more for you, then I want to see Lardo get on the ice.”

“Please,” Jack says, lifting his camera again.

“Put the camera down for a second, Mister Zimmermann,” Bitty says, passing by the bench again in a quick swoop. “You don’t want to miss this one.”

Jack frowns at the camera, but does as he’s asked, letting it hang heavily around his neck. He watches intently as Bitty picks up speed, mouth dropping open as he springs into the air and twirls. He manages a full three turns before he lands cleanly this time, and Jack leaps from his seat to clap happily.

Without stopping, Bitty extends his leg and begins to spin in place. He bends until he can catch the blade in his hand and pulls, stretching into a full split with his ankle nearly pressed to his face.

Jack stares, completely transfixed as Bitty continues the I spin, barely traveling at all. What really catches his attention is the bulge that is pressed prominently against the shiny fabric of Eric’s borrowed spandex pants. He thinks he stares long enough that his eyes go dry. Blinking, Jack traces Bitty’s face, still spinning in a blur.

As he watches, Jack comes up with all sorts of ideas. Most of them include him, retired and couples skating with Eric. A few of them include Bitty standing on the top tier of the Olympic medal stand, crying tears of joy. NHL players have been banned from participating in the 2018 Olympics, but that doesn’t mean that decision will hold forever.
He can see them now, cheering each other on during competition, sharing a hotel suite at night, sneaking kisses in back rooms, carrying a rainbow flag in the parade of nations, walking hand in hand.

Jack’s not an expert on figure skating, but the passion he sees on Eric’s face is something that can’t be denied. There’s no way Bitty isn’t good enough to compete, if not to place. He wants to be there for all of it, every second, every win, every loss, every spin, and twirl.

Bitty ends the routine in a wide lunge, his bulge on display again, sitting proudly between his wide-set thighs. Jack can’t help but gape as Shitty and Lardo pound their applause on the floor and boards, hooting and hollering.

“Your turn,” Bitty says, skating over to the bench, panting. “Let me see what you’ve got,” he prompts, groping at the door latch to open it, welcoming the rest of them onto the ice.

“I’ve got nothing on you,” Jack says, practically tripping over his feet in an effort to get to Bitty. He takes his boyfriend’s hand and does his best to keep up with him as they whip around the rink. Even if Jack were warmed up and full of adrenaline, he knows he would never be able to beat Eric in a race. Even now, without padding, he barely has a chance.

“You can lift me, though,” Eric says, smiling at Jack as he struggles to reach his hand. “I always had to play the guy when we practiced couples skating as kids. I bet I could teach you a thing or two, even in those silly hockey skates. Think you can keep up?”

“Not a chance, but I’ll try,” Jack says, skating hard until he can get his hands around Bitty’s waist. He can nearly touch his fingers together around him, but he lets Bitty move his hands into a proper hold and walk him through synchronized skating. It’s electric, the way he falls into step with Eric, the way he’s always exactly where Jack expects him to be, like they can sense each other. Jack listens carefully to the displacement of air, to the scrape of Bitty’s blades on the ice. Every time he looks up, Eric’s flushed face is right there, close enough to kiss.

They laugh and fall and bruise their butts, but by the end of the afternoon, Eric and Jack can do a few different holds and Lardo is nearly staying on her feet. When they pull their skates off, Eric’s feet are swollen and bleeding. Jack takes it upon himself to baby his boyfriend, carrying him to the car, soaking his toes in salt water and treating his blisters. It’s the least romantic thing he’s ever done with someone else, but Jack can’t keep himself from smiling even as he dabs Neosporin between Eric’s toes.

He’s so far gone on Bitty, Lardo isn’t even teasing him anymore. She just smiles and nods, bumping their shoulders together while they sit on the sofa. “You did good, Jack,” she mutters into his ear.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Sorry things slowed down a bit for the holidays. I'm still struggling with the ending, but I've written through chapter 31 so far. It's over 120k words and growing slowly as I figure things out. Thanks for your patience!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack’s parents ask him to come to Montreal for New Year’s and he can’t talk his way out of it. They have a gala for the Zimmermann Foundation planned and want him to attend. He hates every minute of it, most of all because Bitty isn’t on his arm.

Before he left, he made sure to give Eric a key to his apartment, but he knows his boyfriend won’t use it. He hates to admit it, but Bitty’s noble streak is starting to grate on him. It’s not that he thinks Eric is ungrateful, but it hurts to see the clothes in the closet go unused when he knows Bitty is freezing out there caring for the homeless. He also knows that he left a tablet at home and if Bitty were there, they could be Skyping right now. Instead, he has to settle for waiting for an email like they’re back in the Stone Age.

It’s a close call, but Jack lives. He puts up with drunk donors hanging off his arms and members of both sexes making passes at him while they shamelessly grope his ass in full view of his own parents. The next day he skates out back with his father.

For once, it’s easy. They pass and shoot and laugh and gently tease each other, racing around the ice and hip checking. The Quebecois flows freely from his lips, making it feel more like home than Providence ever does. He smiles thinking about how Bitty will probably tease him about his thickened accent when he gets back. It makes Jack wonder how Eric would sound after a week back in Georgia.

"Comment vont les choses avec Eric?" his father asks as they take off their skates, like he’s reading Jack’s mind. Though, to be fair, his thoughts are never far from Eric these days.

“They’re great,” Jack says carefully. He doesn’t know why, but talking to his father about Bitty always feels like a tightrope walk. “I know it’s early, but I think he’s really it for me.”

“Your mother and I just adore him,” Papa says, and then it hits Jack. That’s why it’s hard for him to discuss Eric. First it was Kenny, and now Bitty that gets showered with praise by Bad Bob Zimmermann. It shouldn’t sting, but it does, how his father can so effortlessly say that he adores Eric but can’t so much as tell Jack he loves him at all.

It’s not fair. Jack knows he’s being unfair, that things have been stilted between him and his father since his overdose. He knows his father blames himself and bites his tongue, never knowing when he’s about to make things worse, but the result is a relationship that is so frail it feels like one or both of them could snap it at any moment.

In all honesty, Jack doesn’t know if he blames his father or not. The emotions are too tightly wound, his motivations for his overdose never quite clear to him. Either way, Jack feels like he shouldn’t have to be the one looking out for his father’s feelings, even though he does. Papa was
the adult back then, even though they’re both grown men now, he should have been the one to
make things right.

Bob was always a mentor to Jack, not a father. He would give him career advice, tell him what he
thought of his gameplay and which contracts he should consider, but never give that unconditional
acceptance that he needed so badly. His mother does a pretty good job of showing her love, but his
father has never quite gotten it right. Even now when he says he’s proud of Jack, it feels hollow
without the years of praise behind it.

“He said he loves me, too,” Jack says eventually. It’s something that he wants other people to
know, that Bitty has chosen him, loves him unconditionally. The list of people who are in on their
secret is small, Jack takes pleasure in the fact that he can prove to just one more person that he’s
worthy, that he’s good enough to be loved.

"C'est génial, Jean," Papa says, squeezing his shoulder. “We’ll be happy to welcome him to the
family whenever you’re ready.”

“I’m ready now, but I’m going to give him some time to get used to the idea,” Jack says. He’s
probably giving too much away, showing a bit too much of himself to his father. If love is a
weakness, Jack is weak with it. It feels wrong to admit to someone he’s been trying his entire life
to prove his worth to.

"Je suis sûr qu'il dira oui," Papa says, ruffling his hair. “We Zimmermann men are irresistible.”

“Yeah, sure we are, Papa,” Jack says, ducking away from his touch. “Didn’t Maman turn you
down the first time you asked her out?”

“She turned me down the first three times I asked her out, actually,” Papa admits, chuckling. “But
the proposal stuck on the first try, and that’s what matters, eh?”

“I guess you’re right,” Jack says, a small smile playing on the corner of his lips.

When he checks his phone later that evening, he has an email from Bitty. It’s nothing out of the
ordinary, just a few lines about what’s going on at the shelter and a reassurance that he misses Jack
just as much as Jack misses him.

Feeling a little homesick, Jack spends the rest of the night with his mother, curled up on the couch
as they watch the fire. He wants to ask her if he’s doing alright, if she thinks his father is proud of
him, but he swallows down the words. They won’t mean anything coming from her. He knows he
needs to hear it from Bad Bob and no one else.

The next day they skate again, and Jack tells his parents about how amazing Bitty is on the ice.
They ask all the right questions, getting to know their future son-in-law the best they can. It just
makes Jack miss him more. He wishes Bitty were here to take hold of his hand and make him feel
like he can handle his father’s poor attempts at familiarity. He wishes Bitty was here to make him
brave.

Stuck on that thought, Jack spends the evening making a playlist of songs that remind him of Eric
and sends it off via email. The response he gets is exactly what he didn’t know he needed.

Re: Re: Missing you

Thank you so much for the songs, honey, though they’re not doing much for your
grandpa reputation. Even so, a classic is a classic. I like the Fleetwood Mac the best. I think it suits you.

I know I’m not your therapist, but I do know quite a bit about difficult family relationships, so I’m going to tell you a thing or two and you can decide yourself whether to listen or not.

*Your father loves you.* He does. He accepts you, with all your strengths and all your faults. He accepts your sexuality, and your anxiety, and your career path, and even your chosen partner. He loves you, but he doesn’t know how to say it. There’s so much past hurt between you two that I think sometimes you shut him down before he’s even had the chance to disappoint you. I think if you managed to read between the lines you’d realize that he’s doing his best to love you.

The next time he says something to you that makes you upset, I want you to take a step back and listen to it again. Just because he says he loves me doesn’t mean he loves you any less. He’s trying to say he approves of your choices and wants you to be happy. Me? He doesn’t know me from Adam. But you? You are everything to him and your mama. You followed in his footsteps and you’re taking the NHL by storm. You’re still so young and you’re already captain of your team with all these awards after your name. It doesn’t matter one bit if he’s got more cups than you. You know what does matter?

You.

You, sweetheart. You survived. You have this huge disadvantage with your anxiety and your battle with addiction and you are still doing something only a handful of other people in the world can do. You get up every morning even though your brain is telling you to throw in the towel and you fight. You fight so hard and you are doing amazing things.

Every day you step out on that ice you show some other kid with anxiety that they can do it, too. Every day you show a little gay boy in a small town that they can do it, too. Your papa never had to deal with any of that, so he can’t relate, but I know one thing for damn sure, he is so proud of you.

I know it’s hard to see beyond that fog of all the hurt from when you were young, but I promise you, it’s clear as day to me. Your father’s heart aches for you because he knows you have battles to fight that only you can win. He knows he can’t help you, but he wants to. He and your mama would do anything to keep you from pain, but every day they watch you struggle, and as hard as that is for you, it’s hard for them too.

Imagine if you had a little boy of your own and he had all these demons dragging him down and every time you tried to tell him you’re proud, he just heard the worst. I’m not saying he’s right, but I am saying he’s trying, and maybe you could try to give him the benefit of the doubt. That man is trying to love you, and I know that you want to let him, so you just have to give each other a chance. I don’t think you’ll be disappointed if you do.

Tell your mama hey for me. I have a new lemon bar recipe I think she’s going to love. I attached it for you to give to her. I love you so much,

Bitty
As soon as Jack is back in Providence, he immediately has to leave for a roadie. He’s not even home long enough to see Eric before he’s heading back to the airport, though he does have time to notice Eric has left his key on the hook by the door. They email back and forth a few times over the next week, but Jack quickly comes to realize that his game is a little off on the days he doesn’t get a message. He reminds himself to revisit the idea of getting Bitty a cell phone when he gets back to Providence.

Regardless, they win all three of their games and he rushes home in high spirits. Bitty and Jack meet at a small sandwich shop that he’s fond of and the minute he catches sight of Eric, his face falls. It’s like the black eye all over again, but somehow worse. Bitty looks awful. He’s pale and his nose is rubbed raw.

“You’re sick,” Jack says, walking up to the booth Bitty is sitting in. “Let me get you some soup. How about chicken noodle?”

“Thanks, Jack,” Bitty croaks, a weak smile on his face.

Jack’s heart clenches when he hears Eric’s voice. He must be in so much pain for it to have gone down two octaves. Jack waits in line and carries over two trays of food, making sure he’s got a good pile of honey packets for the tea he’s picked up for Bitty. “Be careful, it’s hot,” he says, sliding the tray in front of Eric and handing him a spoon.

“Thank y—,” Bitty tries to say again, but it turns into a coughing fit.

“Do you have a fever?” Jack asks, brow furrowing in worry. He wants to reach out and feel Bitty’s forehead, but he stops himself.

“I don’t know,” Bitty rasps, blowing on a spoonful of broth.

“You haven’t been to the doctor?” Jack asks, ignoring his own tray of food. “I can take you to an urgent care clinic once you’re done.”

“I don’t have health insurance, honey,” Bitty says, swallowing down another cough. “I’m fine. It’s just a cold.”

“It’s not just a cold,” Jack insists, frowning hard. “It could be the flu or something worse. What if
“People get the flu every day, Jack. I told you, I’m fine.”

“I know you don’t like me to pay for things,” Jack says, choosing his words very carefully, “but I’m not going to mess around with your health. Once you finish your soup, I’m taking you to the doctor, and I’m paying. Alright?”

“It’s really nothing to worry about,” Bitty protests once more, but he’s too tired to try very hard. “I’m fine, and I don’t need the doctor.”

“Please?” Jack says, laying his hand out on the table in case Bitty dares to take it. “Please, will you just go for me? I hate to ask, but you have me so worried. I can’t let anything happen to you.”

Bitty stares at him for a long time, but Jack refuses to relent. His face must say it all.

“Alright, honey. Put the sad puppy dog eyes away. I’ll go.”

“Thank you,” Jack says, giving Eric a small smile. “How’s the soup?”

“It’s not bad,” Bitty says, blowing on another spoonful.

“Do you have a recipe I could follow? I can make some homemade for you when we get home,” Jack says. He has two days of practice before his next home game so he should have some time to properly pamper his boyfriend. “You will come home with me, won’t you? Let me take care of you?”

“If that’s what you want,” Bitty says, swallowing down another fit of coughing.

“You know I want you there all the time,” Jack says, finally picking up his own spoon. “I know you’re not ready to move in, but I just want you to know that you’re always welcome. Sometimes I wish you’d never leave again.”

“I promise to think about it,” Bitty says, sipping on a spoonful of soup.

“That’s all that I ask,” Jack says, eyes brightening as a small blush of color kisses Bitty’s cheeks.

It turns out that Bitty has both bronchitis and pneumonia and needs antibiotics. Jack is even more upset to realize that Bitty is too exhausted to bother protesting when Jack pays the bill and picks up Bitty’s script while he sits in Jack’s truck with the heater running.

“They said you should feel better in a couple of days,” Jack says lightly, handing Eric the paper bag that holds his pills. “If you don’t, I’ll take you back to the clinic. I only have a morning skate tomorrow. Then I can spend the rest of the day making sure you feel better.”

“I’m really fine, Jack,” Bitty says, voice hard. “You don’t have to baby me.”

Jack can tell that Eric is mad because he doesn’t use a pet name. “You take care of everyone but yourself. Why can’t you let me help you get better? You know what happens if you don’t treat pneumonia, Eric? The infection could spread and you could die. Do you even care about that?”

“Of course I care,” Eric says, a flush rising in his cheeks as his temper flares. “I’m not going to die.”

“You don’t know that,” Jack says, voice faltering. “Look, Eric. I know you’re a grown man and you can take care of yourself, but if you die… I can’t do this without you, alright?” He swallows
hard, fighting back the fear that floods him at the thought of a life without Bitty. “I need you to be okay. And I know it’s selfish and that this isn’t a big deal in the grand scheme of things, but can you just accept the fact that it feels like a big deal to me? I need you to understand that you’re important. You’re my everything. So I need you to care about this.”

“I care, honey. Of course, I care,” Eric says again, grabbing Jack’s hand off the steering wheel and holding it tight to his chest. “I’m sorry I’m being stubborn. I just hate feeling weak. I’ve been on my own for a long time now, and it’s hard for me to admit that I need a little help sometimes. All those people out there, sleeping on the streets, eating at the shelter… none of those people get any help at all, so it’s hard for me to take something that feels like charity.”

“It’s not charity. You’re my partner,” Jack says, licking his lips. “You get that, right? That we’re equals? It doesn’t matter how much money I make or how many trophies I win. I’m always going to need you. I need you to take care of yourself when I can’t.”

There are tears in Bitty’s eyes, and Jack reaches up to brush them away.

“I know,” Bitty says, kissing Jack’s knuckles. “I’m going to try to let myself need you too, okay? That’s all I can do for now.”

“Thank you,” Jack says, squeezing tightly on Bitty’s frozen fingertips. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Bitty replies, using his free hand to wipe the tears from his cheeks. “But you do know I didn’t get pneumonia on purpose, right?”

“Yeah, I know,” Jack chuckles, forcing a smile. “I’m sorry I got upset with you. I know it’s not your fault. I’ve just been missing you so much, it hurts to see you sick like this. Especially when I wasn’t home to do anything about it. You didn’t even say you weren’t feeling well.”

“I have a bad habit of hiding my feelings,” Bitty says, mouth still pressed to Jack’s fingers. “I’ll try to work on that.”

“I’m never going to think you’re weak, Eric. Never,” Jack assures him, leaning in to kiss his temple. “If anyone’s weak out of the two of us, it’s me.”

“It’s not you, Jack,” Bitty says softly, leaning into his side. “You get stronger every day.”

“Knowing you love me helps a lot,” Jack says. When he turns to look at Bitty he sees that not only is the skin on his nose cracked open, his lips are so chapped they appear to be bleeding at the corners. “Let’s get you home. You need rest.”

“Thank you, honey,” Bitty says, squeezing his hand one last time before releasing it so he can put the car in drive.

And just like that, with one word, Jack knows he’s forgiven.

Bitty spends a full three days asleep in Jack’s bed. He rolls his eyes, but lets Jack feed him homemade soup and Pedialyte. On the third day, Jack has a game against the Oilers, but he brings his tablet into the bedroom and makes sure it’s propped up nicely for Bitty to watch the live stream.
On the fourth day, Bitty insists he can make it to the couch, but Jack still helps him in the shower first. Despite the protests, Jack’s glad he’s there because Bitty wobbles like he’s about to pass out when he hits the steaming water. They spend the rest of the day curled up on the couch with mugs of tea and watch the Mighty Ducks, Ice Princess, and the terrible sequels to the Cutting Edge.

The next day, Jack has to leave for an away game in Winnipeg. It almost breaks his heart to leave Eric there when he’s still feeling so ill, but he tries to remind himself that Bitty is an adult. He does, however, insist that Bitty stay in his apartment and makes Leonard promise to call him if Eric even tries to leave before he gets back. Thinking ahead, Jack sets up a grocery delivery for while he’s gone and makes sure there’s plenty of soup and tissues before he leaves.

He leaves his tablet for Eric and makes sure to Skype him as soon as he gets to his hotel room. Tater hops onto Jack’s bed to say hi and the three of them joke around for nearly an hour before Jack has to get his beauty sleep.

“It’s just here and then Calgary,” Jack says, chin in his hands as he lies on his stomach, eyes tracing every line on Bitty’s face. He looks tired, but healing, and Jack is grateful that he’s agreed to stay home from work for another week.

“I want to tell you that I miss you, but I also want you to know that I’m fine here without you,” Eric says, smiling back at his boyfriend longingly.

“I’ll be home in three days, bud,” Jack says, trying to keep his spirits up even though it feels like forever.

“I’ll be waiting,” Bitty says. “I went downstairs to bring Leonard a cup of tea and he shooed me all the way back upstairs. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Jack says, lips twitching. “Leonard’s getting old. Maybe he’s going senile.”

“You bite your tongue,” Bitty says, stifling a giggle. “That man is going to live to be a hundred, no thanks to you.”

“I’m very kind to him,” Jack says, a fake look of betrayal on his face.

“I know you are, sweetpea, I’m only teasing,” Bitty says. “He loves you, by the way. Says he’s been worrying you’ve been lonely and he’s real glad you’ve found me.”

“Me too,” Jack says, smiling when he sees Bitty start to blush.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
"Comment vont les choses avec Eric?" his father asks as they take off their skates, like he’s reading Jack’s mind.
"How are things going with Eric?"

"C'est génial, Jean," Papa says, squeezing his shoulder. “We’ll be happy to welcome him to the family whenever you’re ready.”
"That's wonderful, Jack,"
"Je suis sûr qu'il dira oui," Papa says, ruffling his hair. "We Zimmermann men are irresistible."
"I'm sure he'll say yes,"
One more week of lounging around the apartment and Bitty is finally feeling like his normal self again. Jack is overwhelmed with gratitude that Bitty gave into his coddling and took the time to get better. He plays two more home games, a win and a loss, and then it’s one more week of away games before it’s time for them to fly to Tampa for the All-Stars weekend.

Bitty has never flown first class before and Jack delights in his awe at the squishy seats and other amenities. Tater makes the All-Star team as well and travels with them, boisterous and gleeful as always. They have to remind him several times to treat Bitty as just a friend of Jack’s, but his enthusiasm for their combined happiness is hard to hide. It makes Jack’s heart swell even as he struggles to keep his hand from slipping into Bitty’s as they walk through the airport.

He shares his earbuds with Bitty and they listen to the Wind Down mix he made. Eventually, Eric drifts off next to him and Jack turns on the Sleepy Time mix instead. He smiles down at Eric, thoughts churning in his head.

It’s something he should have brought up long before now, long before Eric met him at the airport, looking tired and unshowered, his ratty backpack in tow. He must be working so hard to keep everyone at the shelter fed during the winter, and Jack realizes he still hasn’t been taking care of himself. He’s worried that Bitty is going to let himself get sick again and there’s nothing he can say to make any difference.

Even though they’ve discussed it and fought about it multiple times, Jack still feels like he’s not really allowed to take proper care of Bitty, though he’s sure his boyfriend would disagree. It’s one thing to buy him clothes and pay for cabs and groceries, to give him tea and soup when he’s sick, it’s another to really cater to someone else’s emotional needs. Jack knows that better than anyone.

They talk about Jack’s fears and anxieties all the time, but Bitty never offers up his own personal details. It strikes Jack as unfair that he hasn’t been paying enough attention or asking enough questions, allowing Bitty to change the topic and put the focus back on Jack’s life and Jack’s career. He needs to make sure that Bitty is healthy in mind and soul, and not just body. It’s time for Jack to suggest again that Bitty quit the shelter and look for another job, one that would be fulfilling without draining the life out of him.

As their flight passes the halfway mark, Jack knows that he’s almost out of time. He never should have let Bitty agree to come on this trip without telling him that Kent would be there. He and Jack didn’t speak the last time they met on the ice, but since the All-Star weekend is mostly a publicity stunt, he knows they’ll be put together for interviews and press conferences. They’re going to have to look at each other, speak to each other, be in the same space for hours at a time. As captains, Kent and Jack will be bandied about with the other two division heads, pitted against each other for the delight of the fans. Jack isn’t sure how he’s going to handle it.

Bringing Bitty along with him had been selfish, but at the very least he should have warned Eric what he was getting himself into. At best, he was going to get a weekend of a grumpy, on edge boyfriend. At worst, he was going to have a first-row seat to a mental breakdown full of harsh words and frustrated tears.

Kenny hadn’t said anything to him the last time they played each other, but Jack could just feel a storm brewing. Every time their sticks smacked together or they pressed each other into the boards, Jack could feel the tension build. He knows it’s only a matter of time before one of them explodes. The only thing he can realistically hope for is that it doesn’t happen in front of the press.
Jack’s been doing a good job of keeping his private life private, even after coming out, but he’s not an idiot. He knows that the fans want him and Kenny back together, sharing heated looks, if only for the fanfic fodder. They were supposed to be one of the best partnerships the sport had ever seen but instead, they avoid each other like the plague.

“Hey, bud,” he says an hour later when Bitty starts to stir. “There’s something we should talk about.”

“I know I smell,” Bitty says, lips curving into a little smile before he even opens his eyes. “But it’s not polite to comment on, Mister Zimmermann. I didn’t get the chance to shower yesterday like I had hoped.”

“You smell fine, Bits,” Jack says, even though it’s not quite true. Eric’s hair is greasy and the scent of grilled meat seems to linger around him. He must have helped with dinner at the shelter the night before. “That’s not what I was going to say.”

“What’s the matter, sugar?” Eric asks, sitting up straight in his seat and pulling the headphone from his ear.

“You know I haven’t seen Kent since the last time we played in Vegas…”

Bitty nods, pressing his knee into Jack’s thigh as silent a show of support.

“Well we haven’t even spoken in months, but he’s going to be there this weekend. We’re both captains, which means press and interviews.”

“Are you afraid he’s going to say something to you?”

“Well… yes. But I’m more afraid he’s going to say something to you, actually,” Jack admits, frowning.

“You think he’s going to try to turn me against you? Because I just don’t see how that’s possible, honey. I’ve already made up my mind about you.”

“No, I just mean…” he doesn’t know what he means, but the fear is still there, like a cage around his heart, making his chest seize up. Keeping his voice low in case someone can hear them over the roar of the jet engines, Jack says, “He’s going to try to rile me up, push my buttons, get a reaction from me. He’ll try to make me look crazy in front of the cameras, but I just want you to know that I love you. Nothing he says about me or you means anything, okay? He doesn’t get to do that to us.”

“Okay, Jack,” Bitty says, eyes wide and so trusting. “I’ll be careful.”

“I might be in a bit of a mood this weekend,” he says, already upset with himself. It’s their first trip together and Jack already feels like he’s ruined it. “But don’t for a second think that I don’t want you here, or that I don’t love you.”

“Of course, sweetheart. I love you, too,” Bitty says quietly, hooking their pinkies together. “I’ll be here the whole time for you. Try not to worry.”

“I always worry,” Jack mutters, leaning his head back against the headrest and letting his eyes fall closed.
“Well, this time I’ll do the worrying for you. I’ll take care of you. There’s nothing that man could say to me that you haven’t already told me, right?”

“No, I guess not,” Jack says. He’d tried to be honest with Bitty when they’d talked about his overdose. Even the unflattering things, the embarrassing things, the ones that made Jack feel weak and needy, he’d bared them all to Eric.

“Then there’s nothing left to do. We can’t control what he says, but we can control us. I think we’re going to be just fine, honey.”

“Yeah…” Jack says, handing an earbud back to Bitty. “We’ll be fine.”

When they touch down a half hour later, Jack feels relaxed. He can’t hold Bitty’s hand until they’re safely in their hotel room, but just having him by his side makes him feel like he can take on the world. They check in and go immediately to sleep, even though it’s too early. The next day Jack heads to the arena while Bitty relaxes in their suite, catching up on some much-needed rest.

He gets through press and their team practice with little drama. Yes, he’s happy to be here, yes, it’s an honor to be selected as captain from all the stars on his team, yes, it’s great to have Alexei here with him. By the time they’re suiting up for the Skills Competition, he feels good. It’s not until he gets on the ice for the relay that he sees Kenny’s jersey.

Jack tries his best to ignore the panic that wells up in him when Kenny turns and Jack can see his light brown eyes through his visor. He nods, almost automatically, and Kent nods back, a dopey smile crossing his face. “Ready to get your ass kicked?” he mouths. Jack is stunned. It’s teasing, but friendly. Has he been reading the situation wrong this entire time? Has something changed? Is Kenny ready to be friends again?

“You’re going down,” Jack mouths back, raising his eyebrows. He can’t help but smile back as he circles around the rink. Maybe he can do this. Maybe they can do this, exist in the same space and not torture each other. It’s almost too much to hope for.

Jack’s team faces off against the Metropolitan division for the relay, and they come out ahead. The Pacific team beats their overall score though, so they’re a point down at the start. Jack is set as the fourth shooter in the four line challenge and manages to make both shots in the goal from the far goal line. He gets a hug from the rest of the guys and points his stick at the crowd, eyes locking on Bitty when he finds him.

Sitting right there next to him in the VIP section are Jack’s parents.

“Fuck,” he mutters, face falling. He hadn’t expected to see his father here, and all the excitement over the pleasant exchange with Kenny seems to fly out the window when he sees Bad Bob waving at him from the front row.

“Why long face, Zimmboni?” Tater asks when they’re resting on the bench between games.

“It’s nothing, Tater,” Jack assures him, trying to put his worries out of his mind. It doesn’t help that his parents and Bitty are now being featured on the Jumbotron.

“We doing well,” he says, pointing at the scoreboard. “Just Metro team put goalie in last game. Not so bad.”

Tater is right, the Metro team got an extra ten points for their goalie sinking a goal, but their team should have no problem pulling ahead. It should make him happy, that he’s giving the crowd a good show and giving something back to his fans, but really, Jack can’t help but think that none of
this matters at all. So he gets a few goals during the All-Stars weekend, it’s not a real game, it doesn’t count toward a Stanley Cup. His father doesn’t hold any All-Star game records that he can break, so none of it matters.

He can see the moment Eric reads his expression, his face falling on the big screen above the rink. Eric chews on his lip, and Jack knows he wants to mouth something encouraging, but can’t be seen doing it. It hurts all over again, the fact that Jack doesn’t get to have him in public, always has to hide some part of himself, be it his sexuality or his anxiety or his relationship. It shouldn’t have to be this way, but it is. Jack will always be hiding, shoving his true self deep down so far he can’t even remember what it is anymore.

The next contest is the fastest skater, and Jack gets to sit out. He watches his teammates whiz by and thinks idly how Eric would beat all of them, even in full pads. It’s odd to him how quickly his perspective can change. He’s known Eric less than three months and already it’s been a complete paradigm shift.

He never wants to go back.

Jack does well in the hardest shot competition, but it’s really no contest. Mike Strahan from Montreal holds his record for the fourth year in a row. It’s not until they get to the accuracy shooting game that Jack really gets to shine. When he hits the ice, everything seems to click. The people in the stands melt away and he can just focus on getting the little biscuit in the net; easy as pie.

When the buzzer sounds, he’s tackled by Tater and a few other bodies. It’s not until someone shouts in his ear that he realizes what happened. “You beat the record, you crazy fucker!” Stapinski is yelling, banging on the top of his helmet. “They said you were good, but holy shit!”

Jack looks up at the monitor to see his new time blinking in multicolored lights. He smiles, waving at the crowd and searching for Bitty’s face. When he finds his boyfriend, there are tears in his eyes and he’s standing on his seat, shouting wildly. Next to him, Jack’s father is shouting into his cupped hands. He lowers them, and Jack can see that he’s also close to tears.

It’s not a Stanley Cup, but it’s something.

Jack grins, watching his mother wave at him from the stands. He waves back, and when he looks up, he sees his own face on the Jumbotron. All eyes are on him, and for once, it doesn’t feel like a death sentence. For once he’s proud of himself.

“The tiny baker is going to pass out, Cap,” Tater mutters at him, nodding toward the stands where Bad Bob Zimmermann has Bitty in such a tight hug he looks to be turning blue.

Jack laughs and hugs Tater, smiling when he sees that the camera is on him and not his dad hugging someone who could easily be identified as his boyfriend if anyone bothered to report on it.

Eventually, the crowd dies down and they’re able to move into the last event; the shootout. Jack plays hard, making every pass count, taking as many shots as possible. In the end, it’s over so fast he barely remembers what happened. They win, though it’s a close call, and the Atlantic division comes out on top.

As the fans cheer, the players circle the rink shaking hands. When Jack reaches Kenny he says, “Good game, eh?”
A sly smile crosses Kent’s face when he replies, “I’ll get you next year.”

“Good luck beating that record,” Jack says, though he’s not sure it’s wise. He and Kenny are on thin ice and he doesn’t know if he’s walking into a trap or not.

“These things are all luck anyway. We’ll see who wins the games tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” Jack says, eyes searching Kenny’s face for any hint of his mood. “We’ll see.”

The contests are over, but the rink doesn’t clear out. Some of the guys start showing off, doing puck handling drills and tricks. Kent does a series of pickup tricks that have the crowd shouting and cheering. Jimmy Linkov wows them by knocking down a pyramid of pucks one at a time. Simmons has every player on the ice and the entire crowd counting as he bounces the puck on his stick 57 times before dropping it. Eventually, they devolve into contests of their own, seeing who can bounce the puck while skating laps around the rink the most times and who can pick up three pucks at once on the blade of their stick.

“What about you Zimmermann?” Plaminsky, the captain of the Metropolitan team asks. “You must have some hidden talents after growing up with Bad Bob. You did these kinds of tricks in the womb, didn’t you?”

“I’m good with a puck, but not like that,” Jack says, shaking his head. “There is one thing I’ve been working on though,” he says, taking off backward around the rink. Sensing something is about to happen, the guys clear center ice and watch as Jack launches himself into the air and spins once and nearly halfway around again before landing. He wobbles and needs to stretch his arms out to keep his balance, but he doesn’t fall.

“Holy shit, Zimmerman! What the fuck was that?” Plaminsky shouts, laughing so hard he’s doubled over.

“Something a friend taught me,” Jack says, grinning ear to ear. “I’m not as graceful, but I can almost stick the landing, eh?”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” a voice says from behind him.

Jack doesn’t need to turn around. He knows who it is.

Kenny skates around to face him, leaning his arms on the butt of his stick, smirking knowingly. “You thinking about giving up hockey already, Zimms? Going to do a second career in the ice capades?”

“We’re all just fooling around, Parse,” Jack says, refusing to show too much familiarity.

“That’s not what it looks like to me,” Kent says, tilting his head in the direction of Bitty, who is currently deep in conversation with Jack’s mother, hands waving wildly as he expresses himself.

“That’s my best friend, Eric,” Jack says, gritting his teeth. It already feels like a betrayal, and this is just Kent. He can only imagine what it’s going to feel like when he has to tell a whole room full of reporters that the love of his life and him are “just friends.”

“Like hell it is, Zimms,” Kenny sneers, letting out a disbelieving huff. “You think I don’t know what you look like when you’re bending over for someone? I know you, Jack.”

A frisson of fear slices through Jack. Kent knows. Kent knows and if Jack makes one wrong move, he’ll tell the entire world. That’s not what Bitty wants. Jack said he would respect his
decision to stay in the closet, and he meant it, but now it seems it isn’t up to him anymore. Jack never should have asked Bitty to come here. This is all his fault.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jack says, though the denial feels like ash in his mouth. All he knows is that he can’t let Kent see him sweat. If he admits anything, he’ll just be digging himself into a hole that he’ll have to negotiate his way out of, and there’s nothing that Jack’s willing to give Kent, least of all power over him or Bitty.

“I think you do,” Kent says, a predatory grin on his face. “I think you know exactly what I’m talking about.”

Jack straightens up, mustering all of his courage. “Why can’t you just leave me alone, Kent?”

“Because I’m still in love with you, you asshole,” Kenny hisses, looking over Jack’s shoulder to see if the rest of the guys are still occupied.

Jack freezes. Of all the things to come out of Kenny’s mouth, Jack had never expected those words to be flung at him like an insult.

Jack skates around in a semicircle, making sure his back is to whatever cameras are still left in the arena. He waits until he’s blocking Kent from the rest of the room before saying, “I don’t think you know what love is,” he says, voice hard as steel. He refuses to give Kenny an inch. “You don’t get to throw that in my face after all these years. If you loved me, you wouldn’t hurt me like you did and like you keep trying to do. Like you’re doing right now.”

“I can’t get your attention any other way,” Kent says, shoulders slumping.

Jack is taken aback. He’s never seen Kenny this way before, defeated. “That’s not love, Kent. That’s control. Maybe if you grew up a little, you’d understand that.”

“What is that? Some bullshit your therapist told you? I don’t need you to psychoanalyze me.”

“You were happy, Kent,” Jack says, trying to get control of his anger. “I was sick. I was dying. That wasn’t happy. It’s fucked up that you can’t tell the difference.”

“Look, I know I was shitty back then. But we were fucking 18 years old, Jack. I didn’t know what to do with you. I was just trying to have a good time,” Kenny argues, smacking his stick on the ice for emphasis.

Jack flinches at the noise, even though he’s hearing it from every direction as the rest of the guys fuck around trying to teach each other puck tricks. He had never been afraid that Kenny would physically hurt him, but the tone in his voice is bringing back all sorts of memories that Jack would rather keep hidden.

“I know we were young. That’s why I try not to blame you for what happened. It wasn’t your fault I took those pills, okay? But we weren’t good for each other and I wasn’t wrong to take the space I needed to get better.”

“And you’re better now, so what’s the problem?” Kent asks, like he literally can’t think of anything wrong with them picking up where they left off.
“The problem is you’re still pushing me. I don’t want to be with you, Kent. I can’t put it any plainer than that. I’m not my best when I’m with you, and I’m putting myself and my mental health first. You don’t get to be mad about that.”

“Like hell I don’t,” Kenny nearly shouts, making a few heads turn in their direction.

Jack is painfully aware of the numerous cameras that are still in the arena. A few flashes go off and he prays that no one was filming them from an angle that could read their lips.

“I’m happy now. I found what I needed and I’m happy and I’m sorry, but those things don’t include you.”

Kenny sighs, face tight as he shakes his head. “Zimms—”

“No,” Jack says, cutting him off. “I’m not listening to any more of your arguments. You said what you had to say, and so did I. I want you to be happy, Kent. I really do. But that can’t be with me.”

“Because you’ve found someone else,” Kenny fills in, looking back at the stands again where Bitty is now an inch from the plexiglass, staring at them.

“Because I’ve grown up! I have self-respect now and I can’t be what you need anymore,” Jack says, hoping it’s the right thing. He doesn’t want to be malicious, but he also wants to make it clear that there’s no hope for him and Kenny. He knows how badly it can hurt to think there’s hope when there is none.

“Jack—”

“I’m sorry Kent. I don’t feel that way about you anymore. But I really hope you find someone who does. You deserve to be happy.”

“So that’s it?” Kent asks, sighing heavily. “That’s all I get?”

“I think I’ve been more than fair,” Jack says. And he feels like it’s true. He almost thinks that Kenny is maturing a little bit, because a few months ago he would have been spewing insults the minute it looked like things weren’t going to go his way.

“I’m always going to love you,” Kent says, looking down at the ice.

Jack has no idea what to say to that. It feels like closure, but at the same time, it doesn’t. Kenny barely said those words when they were dating, and now he’s said them twice in only five minutes.

“I care about you, too,” Jack says, skating closer so he can put a hand on Kent’s shoulder. “I’ll always care about you, but I can’t love you anymore. I hope you understand, and maybe one day we’ll be friends.”


“Goodbye, Kent,” Jack says, squeezing his shoulder once before skating to the tunnel.
“You were incredible, son!” Papa booms once Jack is out of the locker room. "Je suis si fier de toi!"

“Thanks, Papa,” Jack replies in Quebecois, smiling over his shoulder at Bitty, who is giving him an encouraging look. “I’m glad you came.”

“We couldn’t miss it!” Papa says, patting Jack on the back with enough force to knock the wind right out of him. “We wanted to be here to support you! And Kent, of course,” he adds.

Eric’s eyes widen in fear at the mention of Kent’s name, but Jack doesn’t react. After their talk, Jack thinks he almost feels bad for his ex. Kent has been holding a torch for him for nearly a decade, and Jack is confident he never even told anyone about it. He’s under no illusions that Kenny hasn’t been with other partners since then, but he also knows that Kenny doesn’t trust easily or let people in.

Sex isn’t love. He knows that now and it’s hard for Jack to imagine what he would be like now if he hadn’t had Shitty and Blaire to help him work things out.

“We were so happy to see Eric here, too!” his mother says, leaning in for a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “I was worried you might be here all alone.”

“I have Tater with me, at least,” Jack says, wrapping his mother up in his arms and squeezing tight. She feels small in his arms, but not smaller than Bitty, and for the first time in a long time, he finds that he’s glad his parents were watching him play.

“Do you think he’d want to come out to dinner with us?” she asks, still pressed in tight to Jack’s body.

“I can go ask him in a minute,” Jack says into her hair.

Jack is looking at Eric, but he doesn’t want to let his mother go. He wants to keep squeezing her and feeling her hand in his hair and hearing that everything is going to be alright. Something about speaking to Kenny makes him feel like a teenager all over again, one that needs the comfort of an adult.

After rehab, he’d taken solace in sitting quietly on the couch with his mother. She was terrified for him, of course, but always worried silently. He’d broken down in her arms on more than one occasion and drew comfort from her soft muttered Quebecois in his ear.

Jack feels like he’s grown up a lot since then, but Kent has a way of dredging up old memories and even older habits that Jack wishes he could keep buried with his feelings. Regardless, he thinks he handled the situation well and managed to not let Kenny get the better of him.

Finally letting go of his mother, Jack ducks back into the locker room to ask if Tater would like to join them for dinner. It’s a loud affair, Tater and Papa trading stories of Russia, Tater’s from his own childhood and Papa’s from commentating at the Sochi Olympics. They end up seeing several other players at the restaurant and before too long the press arrives, shining lights at them and thrusting microphones in their faces.
“How are you feeling after your team’s win in the Skills Competition, Jack?” someone asks.

Jack can’t even see who it is, the lights are too bright. He startles for a moment, forcing himself not to look over to Eric for help. That would be a clear giveaway. “I’m very proud of what we did out there tonight. It’s an honor to be chosen for an All-Stars team, and an even bigger honor to be named Captain. I’m just happy I could be an asset to my team and raise some money for a great cause.”

“You set a record tonight for the fastest shootout,” someone else says to Jack’s left. “Can you tell us what that means to you?”

“Uhh…” Jack freezes. Honestly, it doesn’t mean much to him one way or another, but he knows that isn’t the right answer. It’s odd how fleeting the feeling of accomplishment can be. A few hours ago he was gleeful, smiling at the cameras and rubbing it into Kent’s face. But now it’s a hollow feeling. With Jack it’s always been about moving on to the next thing, never giving himself time to appreciate the wins. “I just focused on the task at hand and it seemed to work out for me.”

“Captain just being modest,” Tater booms, standing up from his seat. “We all know he best player on team.”

“Jack has always had impeccable handling skills,” his father jumps in, taking the heat off them for a few seconds so he can catch his breath.

Jack loves him in this moment, right here, right now, shielding him from something that has his anxiety prickling at the back of his neck. He wipes his hands on his jeans and takes a deep breath, trying to control himself.

“He’s one of the fastest shooters in the league and his accuracy is second to none. I think if you take a look at the stats, you’ll see that Jack here gets more goals in glove side than any other player. You don’t make those shots if you’re not shooting accurately. Some people will try to tell you that it’s just luck, but I know for a fact that it’s not. Jack has been practicing those figure eight and dribble shots since he was four years old. Puck handling like that—it’s not luck, it’s not even just talent. It’s hard work and the dedication of your entire life to a sport.”

“You sound very proud, Mr. Zimmermann,” the reporter comments.

“Of course I’m proud,” Papa says, grinning that grin that has had women falling all over themselves for decades. “Alicia and I were blessed with successful careers and it’s clear to see that Jack is only just getting started. The Falconers are a great team and Jack has been doing wonderfully since he’s been named Captain.”

“It looks like you’re having more fun than you used to, Jack. I don’t think any of us would have expected you to learn a figure skating jump. Would you care to comment on that?” a reporter asks, pushing the microphone right under Jack’s nose.

For this question, Jack can’t help but smile just a little bit. “I have a friend who is a figure skater. He’s the fastest thing I’ve ever seen on the ice, and I’ve been learning a lot from him. Even hockey robots are allowed to goof off every once in a while, eh?” he adds, hoping he’s not blushing.

“Would you say this person has helped your game? The Falconers are in second place right now and you’re leading the league in personal goals.”

“Absolutely. I feel very confident in myself and in my team. I think we have a great shot at the
playoffs this year and I’m looking forward to having a little fun on the ice tomorrow. We’re playing for a great cause and it feels good to give back to the fans that voted us onto the team.”

“Thank you everyone, but I think it’s time we head out,” Papa says, patting Jack on the shoulder as he gestures for the check.

The reporters thank him again and when Jack turns around he sees that Bitty has distanced himself from the cameras and is sipping a glass of water at the bar.

“You ready to go, bud?” Jack asks, heading over once the coast is clear. “I’m sorry about the cameras.”

“Oh that’s just fine, honey,” Bitty says, though there’s tension in his shoulders. “I don’t mind. You looked good out there.”

“You think so?” Jack asks, leading him back to the table.

“You barely sound like a robot at all these days,” Bitty adds, smiling fondly when Jack hands him his coat. It’s Florida, and Bitty is still wearing his thin coat, which just goes to show Jack how little it actually does to keep him warm in Providence.

“Someone’s been thawing my cold robotic heart,” Jack says, ducking his head.

“I swear, Mister Zimmermann. You are such a menace. Saying things like that in public when you know very well I can’t kiss you.”

“We’d better get back then, before you change your mind.”

“Chirp, chirp, chirp,” Bitty says, eyes dancing as Jack holds the door open for him and they exit the restaurant.

The drive back is quick and Jack relaxes in the privacy of his parents’ rental car. He’s able to hold Eric’s hand the entire way to the hotel, only letting go when they pull up to the valet stand.

“Are you alright?” Bitty asks immediately once they’re back in their hotel suite. “That thing with Kent looked… heated.”

“I think I’m good actually,” Jack says quietly, letting out the last bit of tension he didn’t know he’d been carrying since their confrontation on the ice. “He said some things I wasn’t expecting, but I think I handled it well, all things considered.”

“What did he say?” Bitty asks, slipping off his shoes and digging through Jack’s suitcase for a pair of sweatpants to wear.

Jack hesitates. He’s not sure it would do Bitty any good to know that Kent still has feelings for him. On the other hand, he’s been honest with Bitty about everything else, it seems wrong to start lying now.

“He said he wanted me back,” Jack says, staring at his feet.

“And what did you say?” Bitty asks.

He’s attempting a casual tone, but Jack sees right through him. It’s not hard to see how uncomfortable he is. Jack thinks if he was any closer he might be able to see Eric’s heart beating in his chest.
“I told him the truth,” Jack says, unbuttoning his shirt. “That I don’t feel that way about him anymore.”

“Is that all?” Bitty asks, voice breaking.

“I told him that I’m sober and healthy and happy now. That he was never good for me and that I’m not the same person he used to know.”

“Did you tell him about me?”

“I didn’t think you’d want me to,” Jack says, treading carefully. “You said you didn’t want people to know about us. Is that still true?”

“It is but—” Bitty hesitates, a flush spreads over his face and down his chest. He pulls at the swoop of his hair, visibly frustrated. “I don’t know, Jack!”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Jack says, pulling Bitty down next to him on the edge of the bed. “You can tell me anything.”

“It’s stupid…” Bitty admits, shaking his head as he tries to shrug off his own emotions. “I know it’s stupid, but I guess I just wanted him to know. To rub it in his face a little bit, I guess. I’m sorry. I know that’s immature and unhelpful.”

“He knew, Bits,” Jack says, rubbing Eric’s back. “He knew the minute he looked at you that you were someone special to me.”

“Really?” Bitty asks. When he looks up, there are tears in his eyes.

Jack can’t bear it. “Of course, really,” he says, pulling Eric close and kissing his temple. “I love you and I’m not great at hiding it, but I’m trying for you. I don’t want to hide you, but I am because that’s what you wanted. The minute you tell me you’ve changed your mind, I’ll go on TV and tell the world about you. I’m not ashamed. Not for one second have I ever been ashamed of you. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Bitty hiccups, burying his face in Jack’s chest. “I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for. It’s okay for you to not be ready. No one gets to decide when you’re ready but you, alright?”

“Alright,” Bitty says, sniffling.

“I’m never going to be mad at you about this. I know you didn’t sign up for a media circus. You shouldn’t be punished for loving me.”

“It’s not a punishment,” Bitty says, still pressed in tight to Jack. “I just wish I could give you more.”

“You’re enough. I have you and that’s more than enough,” Jack says, prompting Bitty to lie down with him. He’s still half dressed, but he can’t force himself to pull away from Eric. They fall asleep like that, side by side, staring at the ceiling, hands clasped together, bedside lamp still on.
In the morning, Jack is scheduled to do a press conference with the other three captains. He doesn’t know what he expected, but a head nod from Kent when he sits down next to him at the fold-out table wasn’t it.

“Have a good night with your boy, Zimms?” Kent asks, completely casual. He’s not smirking, he’s not angry, he just… is.

Jack is taken off guard yet again. What is it about Kenny that makes him feel like he’s always on the back foot? “Please,” Jack says, dropping his head. “Not here.”

“You’re already out. What’s the fucking problem?”

“It’s none of your business, Kenny,” Jack says, painfully aware of the reporters and cameras that are filing into the press room. “You don’t get to threaten to out me and then be pissed about how I deal with it.”

“Is he a hooker? Is that it?” Kent is fiddling with his snapback, leaning back in his chair like he owns the place.

“Don’t you fucking dare talk about him like that,” Jack says, turning in his chair. “You want to insult me? Fine, but don’t you dare start in on him. He’s done nothing to you.”

“He has you and I want to know why. What does he have that I don’t?”

“It’s not like that,” Jack says, slowly shaking his head. “He doesn’t have anything. You’re completely different people.”

“What am I supposed to do with that? You’re not fucking telling me anything!”

“I’m not telling anyone anything,” Jack says calmly. “I don’t owe anyone anything, least of all you. It’s my life. Mine.”

“I don’t know why you won’t just talk to me,” Kent argues, rubbing his hands up and down his face.

“Because I don’t trust you anymore,” Jack says easily. He’s angry and getting angrier as more members of the press and players file into the room. He has to get this out quickly, and finds that the words just spill right out of him.

“You get angry and you lash out and I’m sick of listening to you talk about how you love me when all you ever do it tear me down to make yourself feel better. I’m not doing it anymore. You can talk to me when you figure out how to do it without making it about yourself and what you want. Try putting someone else first for once in your fucking life. Until then, just smile for the damn cameras.”

Kenny opens his mouth to argue, but that’s when Forrest, the Central division captain, and Plaminsky take their seats on the panel. The moderator introduces them and then it’s business as usual. Except that it isn’t. Kenny is stiff and cagey, not nearly as suave as he usually is in front of the press. He’s stumbling over his words instead of charming the reporters.

It’s so disarming, Jack has to ask the woman holding the microphone to repeat the question before he actually hears the words.

“You and Kent Parson have been rivals on the ice since you joined the Falconers. Can you tell us what’s changed and how it feels to be playing against each other without your teams behind you?”
“Kenny and I were best friends back in the Q and it was hard for us to keep in touch when he got drafted and I didn’t. I think there was jealousy and resentment on both sides and now we’re finally getting past that. We’re on the road to being friends again and it’s easier to do that here when the hockey is friendly and the stakes aren’t quite so high,” Jack says hoping he hasn’t given too much away. He also knows that no matter what he says, he can’t escape the follow-up question.

“You famously overdosed the night before you were slated to go first in the draft. Is there anything you can tell us about that? Do you feel like you’re at a disadvantage having missed out on several years of your prime in the NHL?”

Jack fights the urge to roll his eyes. He opens his mouth to answer, to tote the same line as always. That’s a personal question and he’d prefer not to talk about it. He’s been clean and sober for many, many years and if it’s good enough for the Falconers, it should be good enough for everyone else. He doesn’t get the chance.

“Are you listening to yourself right now?” Parse cuts in, leaning forward in his seat. Kent is shorter than Jack, downright lithe for a hockey player, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t have four inches and fifty pounds of muscle on the man asking the questions.

“Kent, it’s fine,” Jack tries to head him off, but it’s no use. Kenny is mad.

“It’s not fine. It’s fucking ridiculous,” Kenny says, reaching for the microphone and making sure it’s pointed straight at his mouth. “Jack Zimmermann is one of the best players on the ice. His stats speak for themselves and if he had been healthy, there’s no way I could have gone first in the draft that year. The only reason you know my name right now is because Jack couldn’t play and I got to take his place. You think that’s talent? That’s a fucking tragedy.”

Jack knows that Kenny is exaggerating. He’s an incredible player and had made a name for himself in the Q even before he’d been teamed up with Jack. Even knowing it’s not true, Jack can’t help but feel flattered. Kenny is sticking up for him. Jack has no idea why, but he’s touched by the gesture regardless.

“They all think you’re a fucking coke head, Zimms,” Kent says, jaw set hard like he’s itching for a fight.

“It’s fine,” Jack says again. He’s thought about making a statement about his overdose dozens of times, but in the end, it never felt worth it. Jack doesn’t see how trading a party boy reputation for a mentally ill one would be any better for him. “Please, just let it go, Kent.”

“We are talking about this later,” Kent says, leaning back in his chair and taking his hand off the microphone. “Just fucking lay off, alright?” he says, looking back to the press core. “Zimmermann can skate circles around the rest of us and he set an All-Star record yesterday. Just let him play the fucking game.”

The reporter backs down and the rest of the questions are standard and non-invasive, but the room is still tense after Kenny’s outburst. Even Plaminsky and Forrest look like they’re ready to abandon ship. Thankfully, they end the press conference with Jack, as the captain of the winning
team, choosing who they would like to play first. He goes for the Central team, knowing for a fact he’ll be facing off with Kenny for the final. At least this way he’ll have time to talk to Bitty before meeting Kent on the ice again.

“Are you alright?” Eric asks. He slips his hand into Jack’s and squeezes his fingers, eyes wide with concern.

They’re back in their hotel suite. Jack is supposed to be napping for an hour or two before the first game, but he doesn’t know if he’ll be able to. The games are only supposed to be twenty minutes of play time each anyway, but after the press conference, Jack feels heavy and tired.

“I’m fine, Bits,” he says, leaning down to rest his forehead on Eric’s shoulder.

“You don’t sound fine,” Bitty points out, running his hands up and down Jack’s back in a soothing gesture. “You’re dead on your feet.”

“I just hate when they start dredging everything up again,” Jack says, falling onto the bed. Bitty sighs but immediately starts pulling off Jack’s shoes and settling them both under the covers. “They have no right to talk to you like that. You’re just trying to do your job. I don’t know what they think they’re accomplishing, dragging you through the mud every time they see you.”

“I’m getting used to it,” Jack says, tucking Bitty into his side with an arm under his neck. “They just want something juicy and drugs always generate a lot of clicks. It’s not even about me. It’s about them.”

“What did Kent say to you?” Bitty asks, voice soft where his cheek is resting against Jack’s chest.

“He wanted to set the record straight about my overdose,” Jack says, letting his eyes fall closed. Bitty feels so warm and right next to him. It’s times like this that make Jack stop and think about how insanely lucky he is to have been roped into Thanksgiving at the homeless shelter. “He said it wasn’t fair for them to think I’m a crack addict, or whatever.”

“It’s not,” Eric says clearly. “But it’s not his place to tell your secrets either. He already tried to out you once. That boy doesn’t know the first thing about respecting a person or their privacy.”

“I think he’s getting better, actually,” Jack says, pressing his lips to Eric’s forehead. “He stopped when I asked. That’s never happened before.”

“You really think he’s growing up?”

“Maybe,” Jack says, breathing in the scent of Bitty’s hair. “Maybe he is.”

“I’ve got to get up,” Bitty says after a few minutes. “We left the light on.”

“It’s alright,” Jack says, slipping his arms around Eric’s waist and squeezing tight. “I don’t want you to move.”

“You can’t sleep with the light on, sweetpea. I know that lamp had you tossin’ and turnin’ last night.”
“Alright,” Jack says eventually, lips twisting into a small smile. “But come right back.”

“You’re still wearing your jeans,” he protests, slipping from the bed to hit the light and get Señor Bun.

Jack hears a rustle of fabric and knows that Eric is pulling on a pair of his sweatpants. His smile widens when Bitty gets back into bed and he can feel the soft flannel against his hand. The thought of Eric feeling the most comfortable in Jack’s big, worn out pants makes him bite his lip. He has all sorts of ideas about how to show his appreciation, but doesn’t have the time to act on any of them right now.

It’s been all about Jack for so long, he’s worried that Bitty might be getting sick of following him around the country just to watch him play. It was selfish of him to expect Eric to wait in his hotel suite alone all the time, like Jack’s hiding him. Even if it’s what Eric wants, he’s concerned it will wear on their relationship and Bitty will start to resent him before too long.

Jack has two short games to play today and then a day off. As he falls asleep he starts to mentally plan their last day in Tampa and how he can spend every waking moment making sure that Eric knows just how much he loves him.

Chapter End Notes

Translation:

“You were incredible, son!” Papa booms once Jack is out of the locker room. "Je suis si fier de toi!"
"I'm so proud of you!"
They beat the Central team 4-1. It’s an easy game, even though Jack doesn’t have Thirdy on his wing, and he scores three of his team's four goals himself. Every time he looks up, he sees his parents and Bitty smiling and cheering him on. It’s almost like the cameras don’t exist for a few minutes and Jack can just enjoy the game.

The crowd is on its feet and Jack feels like a god when his third goal goes in. It isn’t for a trophy, it isn’t even his real team, but it still feels like a victory. As he skates off the smooth ice to accept the congratulations of his teammates, he feels lighter than air.

“Maybe we suggest whole season of ten minute periods,” Tater says, smacking him on the back as they head back to the locker room.

“I don’t think the league would go for it,” Jack says, laughing. It hardly feels worth it to shower when he’s going to be back on the ice in less than an hour, but Jack does it anyway. Once he’s under the hot spray, he’s glad for it. The water rains down on his back, beating his muscles into submission. It’s only when he turns around to wash his hair that he regrets ever undressing.

“Holy fuck,” a voice says. “Is that thing even real, Zimmermann?”

Jack has no idea who is even talking. He doesn’t recognize the voice and doesn’t want to open his eyes while there’s still shampoo in his hair. “What kind of question is that, eh?” he says instead, already frustrated. Jack thought he left the locker room mentality behind long ago, but maybe it’s just the Falcs that keep it professional yet friendly. “How old are you?”

“Chill out, dude,” the voice says. “Your giant cock take blood away from your brain, or what?”

Jack wipes the soap off of his forehead and opens one eye to see who it is. It takes him a minute to place the face, but eventually, he identifies the other man in the shower as Westie, the second string goalie from his team. He looks a lot smaller without his pads on.

“I’m not your dude,” Jack says. He can hear how his tone might be ill-fitting of a captain, but right now he doesn’t care. “If you have a problem with my body, you can shower later. I’m almost done.”

“Nevermind,” Westie says, shutting off the water. “Don’t want to shower with faggots anyway.”

“You’re the one looking at my dick, and you’re calling me a fag?” Jack says, shaking his head as he huffs out a laugh. “I don’t even have the effort to explain how dumb you are.”

“Screw you, Zimmermann.” Westie spits. “You’re a shit captain anyway. I’m not surprised. You must take it up the ass so much you can’t skate for shit,” Westie says, backing away. “Are all the Falcs fucking fags? No wonder your team is garbage.”

Jack is just about to say that his argument would make more sense if they hadn’t just won when Tater enters the room.

“You have three second to leave showers before I feed you teeth,” he says, hands on his hips. His shadow looms, dwarfing Westie and casting the entire shower room into darkness.

Westie opens his mouth to argue, but Jack cuts him off. “I’d listen to him if I were you. He just taught me how to box and he’s really good at it.”
The goalie nods hurriedly, sidestepping around Tater’s massive form and attempting to scurry from the room.

“Oh, and Westie?” Jack calls, shielding his eyes from the soap. “Don’t bother dressing for our next game. You’re off the team.”

“You can’t—”

“—yes, he can,” Tater says, making a shooing motion with his hand. “Be gone now, tiny goalie. Go cry to mother about own tiny penis.”

Jack stifles his laugh until West is out of sight. “You know I probably can’t ban him, right?”

“Don’t worry. I tell coach what he said,” Tater says, stepping into the stall next to Jack and dropping his towel.

“You don’t have to do that, Alexei,” Jack says, already losing steam. He just doesn’t have the energy to fight these small injustices. It’s much easier to just keep his head down and play the game.

“No,” Tater says, looking him dead in the eye. “You don’t let one get away with it. That make it okay for everyone and no one gets to use those words with my Captain. No one.”

“Thanks, Tater,” Jack says, ducking his head to hide his face. He wants to give his friend a hug, but they’re both naked.

“No thanks,” Tater says, grinning widely. “Just more dessert from tiny baker, yes?”

“Alright,” Jack says, shaking his head. “I’ll ask him.”

West is in fact banned from the rest of the weekend’s activities after Tater speaks with the organizers. Jack can’t help but smile when the rest of the team theorize about what happened to him while they dress for their second game. Apparently, the organization is trying to save face by not publicizing the incident.

“We don’t need him anyway,” Jack says, clapping a hand on Balinski’s shoulder. “Dimitri has been doing great in goal.”

“Thanks, Zimmermann,” the man says, giving him a small smile. “I think we’re gonna win this one, too.”

They head out onto the ice in high spirits, but the second Jack reaches center ice, he comes face to face with Kent and the world seems to tilt. It’s just a few words that throw Jack completely off his game. Considering how long Jack’s waited to hear them, he never expected them to catch him so off guard.

“I’m sorry, Zimms.”

Jack stares, dumbfounded. The ref skates between them and says something, showing them the puck before dropping it between their skates. Jack barely even registers the extremely familiar action and misses the face-off entirely. He wasn’t even in position before Kent had stolen the puck
and passed it off to his left wing.

No matter how hard Jack skates, he can’t manage to shake off Kenny’s words. He misses every third pass and even though he takes dozens of shots on goal, nothing goes in. By the time they break for halftime, his team is two goals down and giving him concerned sideways glances as they leave the ice.

“I’m sorry, guys,” he says as soon as they’re back in the locker room. “I’ll do better next half.” Jack wants to say that he doesn’t know what’s got into him, but that’s a complete lie. He knows exactly what his problem is. It’s Kenny. His words in Jack’s ears and his thoughts in Jack’s head, slowly driving him insane.

“It’s just a charity game,” Lukas tells him, stretching out his back as he sits on the bench. “Maybe don’t try so hard. This is supposed to be fun.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Jack says again, rubbing the back of his hair. “You’re right. Let’s just go back out there and try to give the crowd a good show, eh?”

The boys clap and stomp their feet and they head back out to the ice with their heads held high. Their enthusiasm doesn’t last long.

Jack plays better, but it’s not enough. In the end, Kenny sinks the puck in past Dimitri in the last minute bringing the score to 5-2.

“Good game, Jack,” he says, taking off his helmet and flipping his sweaty blond hair out of his eyes.

“Really?” Jack says, letting out a dark laugh. It feels like poison leaving him, but he can’t make it stop. “That’s what you have to say to me? Good game?”

“Fine, it was a crappy game. You played like shit, Zimms,” Kent says, smiling that lopsided smile that used to make Jack’s heart pound out of his chest.

“I know I did. And why do you think that is, Kenny?”

“I don’t know,” Kent says, slinging an arm around Jack’s shoulder and turning them toward the cameras. “Rough night with your boy? You looked like you were skating pretty slow there at the beginning.”

“Don’t talk like that with the cameras around,” Jack says out of the corner of his mouth. “You know there are microphones everywhere.”

“Whatever, Zimms. You’re just jealous I finally kicked your ass.”

“I’m confused.” Jack says. “You’re confusing to me. Yesterday you were saying we need to talk and today you apologized. What’s changed? Were you just trying to win today? Get in my head?”

“You know what, Jack?” Kenny says, leaning in close to speak into his ear. “I think I figured something out.”

“Yeah? What’s that?” Jack says, eyebrows furrowed.

“Some things might be more important than hockey,” he says, pulling Jack into a hug. Jack lets himself be hugged, patting his gloved hand on the top of Kenny’s head. It feels good, like
the end of an era, or the start of a new one. As he drops his hand to Kent’s shoulder and pulls him in even tighter he feels some of his anger toward Kent slip away.

“It’s a hard lesson,” Jack says softly. “It took me forever to figure out myself.”

“Better late than never, right?” Kent says, finally pulling away.

“Right,” Jack says, squeezing Kenny’s shoulder. “This is better.”

The cameras are going crazy and as Jack is blinded by the flashes he tells himself it’s worth it. No matter what the headlines say tomorrow, today Kenny apologized and hugged him. Today, they both learned how to move on.

It may have taken them nine years, but Jack feels a tiny little piece of himself settle into place. He was so angry at Kent and himself, holding onto guilt and resentment that therapy could only chip away at. Letting even a little bit more of it go feels like a revelation.

They can be friends again, like they were as kids before everything got wrapped up in hormones and drugs. It’s something Jack didn’t even know was weighing on him, finally realizing that everything in his life wasn’t completely ruined the night he overdosed. That he hadn’t ruined both of their lives in one stupid moment of weakness.

When he hugs Kenny, it feels good, like embracing a part of himself he thought had died.

Finally, right there on the ice with the whole world watching, Jack forgives himself.

When he looks out toward the crowd, he can see his father hugging his mother, one hand waving madly at them like he’s seeing the prodigal son return. His eyes land on Bitty who is smiling at him, approvingly. Jack smiles too, turning into the camera, arm slung over Kent’s shoulder. When the flashes go off this time, he doesn’t flinch.

Between going out again with Jack’s parents and the rest of the team and the two hockey games, Jack is exhausted when they finally fall into bed at 2 a.m. They share a goodnight kiss and sleep like the dead.

Jack wakes with his nose pressed in against Eric’s throat. He inhales deep, letting the scent settle him. The motion wakes Bitty who turns into him, nudging his leg with his morning erection.

“Morning, darlin’,” Eric drawls, stretching his arms high above his head. It just serves to push his dick harder against Jack.

“Uhh,” Jack says, words getting lost on the way to his mouth. “Morning?”

“Oh Lord, I’m sorry,” Bitty yelps, pulling away when he realizes what’s got Jack all sheepish.

“Do you uhh… want something?” Jack asks, licking his lips.

“Gosh, Jack,” Bitty practically whimpers. “Your voice is so low in the mornings.”

“I’m sorry,” Jack says, not sure where to go from here. “I could um, help?”
“Do you want anything, honey?”

“Well…” Jack trails off, taking stock of his body. He isn’t hard, but he is warm and comfortable. “No, but I could still touch you.”

“Not if you don’t want to,” Bitty says, eyes wide. “I don’t want you doing it just for me.”

“I love you,” Jack says easily. “Today is about us. So let’s start it off right, eh?”

Jack ends up on his knees in the shower, Bitty’s hand clenched tight around his hair, pushing him down. He feels a little twinge when his breath gets cut off, but not enough to make him stir.

“I’m good,” he says when Eric offers to reciprocate.

“Are you sure?” he asks anyway, leaning into Jack’s body as the steam billows around them.

“I’m perfect,” he says, and it’s true. He’s completely content and even more determined to show Bitty that not everything has to be about him all the time. He’s completely capable of focusing on Eric’s needs, even the sexual ones.

Jack has a full day planned; a few museums, lunch out, and maybe even a trip to the aquarium if they’re not too tired. They take their time getting dressed and eating breakfast. Jack packed Eric’s sneakers when he saw them in his closet and smiles when his boyfriend agrees to spend the day on the Riverwalk as long as they don’t actually run anywhere.

It’s as close to a perfect day out as Jack can imagine without them being out with their relationship. They walk close, but don’t touch. They eat together, but don’t share food. They take photos together, but don’t share them with anyone.

A few people ask for autographs, but it’s easy to lose them in the photography museum. They spend an entire hour sitting in front of a photograph of a pool of water, just enjoying the quiet. It’s a simple thing, but even just sitting next to Eric as he experiences something new feels momentous. Suddenly, Jack can’t wait for the end of the season when he’ll have more time to just be with Bitty.

“Do you want to check out the aquarium?” he asks Bitty after lunch. “I hear they let you feed the penguins.”

“Really?” Bitty’s face brightens. “That sounds neat.”

“Let’s go,” Jack says, holding out his hand before he thinks better of it and shoves his hand in his pocket.

Eric’s face crumbles for just a second before he puts his cheery mask back in place. “Yeah,” he says, plastering a smile on his face. “Let’s go.”

Jack and Bitty end up being the only people there without a child, but it’s so much fun they don’t spare a moment being embarrassed about it. He takes dozens of photos as Eric sits up front with the kids, squealing in delight when a penguin practically hops in his lap to get to the fish he’s holding.

For a few minutes, there’s no one else in the universe except them and the click of Jack’s camera. They spend the rest of the evening meandering through the exhibits, enjoying the cool blue light. When it comes time for dinner, Bitty suggests ordering a pizza and Jack only puts up a token protest before agreeing.
They sit on the couch wrapped around each other, sharing bites of pizza and bits of garlic bread. Bitty clicks through the TV guide until he finds something mindless. As they drift off against one another Jack thinks that maybe planning days out with Bitty is overrated. They’re much more comfortable alone where they can touch each other. He tries not to examine that thought too harshly as he carries Bitty to bed in the middle of the night, a crick in his neck and a small smile on his face.
They get back to Providence late the next day and it’s not long before they’re asleep again. When Jack wakes, Bitty is gone. A note on his bedside table tells Jack he had to get to the shelter. Jack frowns, upset he is missing out on another morning with Eric, but he only has a few hours to go for a run and pack before he’s due back at the airport.

It’s another slow week of away games where Jack clings to the two emails he receives from Bitty. He asks yet again if he can buy Eric a cell phone so they can talk more frequently while he’s away and is told no, yet again. Bitty cites his splurge of a Christmas gift and tells Jack that they can discuss it again when his birthday comes around, which is not until May. Jack promises himself that he’ll take Bitty skating more often and make sure he gets more use out of his skates if he’s not allowed to buy him anything else for four months.

They win against the Ducks but lose to the Blues. Jack takes that one hard. They usually do well against St. Louis but no matter what he does, he can’t get off the boards to take a clean shot. When he sees West mutter to his teammates as they take the ice for the second period, it all becomes clear. They have it out for Jack in particular and no matter how hard their defense tries, Tater and Thirdy can’t protect him from everything. The muttered words in his ears as he gets checked hard into the plexiglass only cement his understanding of the situation.

He goes down hard in the third period and while there’s nothing actually wrong with his knee, it’s bruised and swollen much like the rest of his body. The team doctor has him forego his hot shower in exchange for an ice bath and by the time he gets back to his hotel, he feels completely miserable. Jack refuses to take anything stronger than Tylenol, and while it’s good for his sobriety, it doesn’t do much for his pain. Even with his knee wrapped, he’s still hobbling.

“They let you play Thursday?” Tater asks as soon as he sees Jack limp into their hotel room. He gets up to help Jack inside, stooping to lend him a shoulder.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine,” Jack says, thankful they have nearly two days until their next game. Too bad most of it will be spent on the road. “I’m scratched from practice tomorrow but I still have to get up to ice it and see the doctor. If I sleep through my alarm can you get me up when you leave?”

“You never sleep through alarm,” Tater says, helping Jack sit down on the bed and kneeling to take off Jack’s shoes.

“Well, I’m feeling a little more tired than normal,” Jack says, attempting to stand again and get his pants off. It doesn’t work. He’s able to pull the elastic of his sweats down to his thighs but no further. “You don’t have to—” he says when Tater helps him get them over his knees and off.

“—even captains need help sometimes,” Tater says, laying a hand on Jack’s chest until he lays down. Tater yanks on the covers as Jack rolls back and forth until he can throw them over his body.

“Thank you, Alexei,” Jack says, burying his face in his pillow when Tater takes too long to shut off the light.

He putters around the room for a few minutes, brushing his teeth and undressing.

Jack sighs heavily. He has no reason to be annoyed with Tater, but he’s in enough pain that the irritability is hard to suppress.
“Did you call Bitty after game?” Tater asks, finally crossing the room to the light switch.

“He doesn’t have a phone, Tater.”

“Still? He lose phone months ago, no?”

“He won’t let me buy him one,” Jack says into the pillow, jaw set tight.

“I talk him into it,” Tater says, slipping into bed. “You should tell him what happened before he worry.”

“I will,” Jack says, falling asleep before he can even reach for his phone.

Physical therapy the next day is brutal and it’s not until late in the afternoon that Jack can look at his phone. Bitty hasn’t emailed him. It shouldn’t hurt so much, but it does. Maybe he has been working late and didn’t get a chance to see Jack’s game. Doing his best to shake off the frustration boiling in his stomach, Jack writes Eric an email.

Subject: Mostly Fine

Bits,

I don’t know if you saw my game against the Blues, but I got knocked around pretty hard. I’m mostly fine, but my knee is bruised to hell and will need a few days to heal. I sat out of practice today and will hopefully be alright for our game in Calgary tomorrow, but I’m not sure if I’ll be allowed to play.

Martin West is their goalie and he must have said something about me to the rest of the team because they went after me so hard I barely got to touch the puck. My whole body hurts and I spent most of the day on ice with the trainers. I hope you’re doing better than me. I love you,

Jack

Once the guys are done with practice, they eat an early dinner and head back to the airport. Jack’s knee is wrapped but he can’t find a comfortable position on the bus to save his life. He checks his phone once more as he takes his seat on the plane, but there still isn’t a response from Bitty.

Jack thought he’d get the chance to spread out once they’re in the air, but if anything, he feels worse. The position is easier on his knee but the change in air pressure makes his injuries throb with every beat of his heart. By the second hour of their flight, Jack’s eyes are watering and he’s chewing on his tongue so hard it starts to bleed.

“You look bad,” Tater says, getting up from his seat. “I getting coach.”

“No, Tater,” Jack protests, trying to grab his arm. “I’m fine.”

“I know what you look like when fine. You not fine,” Tater says, pulling his arm away. His face is set firm and Jack knows he doesn’t have a leg to stand on.
“Alright,” Jack says, rubbing at his temples with his fingers. He’s been clenching his teeth so hard he’s getting a tension headache. “I’m sorry.”

“No worries, Zimmboni. I fix for you.”

“Thanks, Alexei. Really.”

After speaking to Blaire on the plane’s wifi, the team doctor agrees that Jack can take a combination of Toradol and a topical pain gel. What he would really like is something to help him sleep, but Jack has never done well with sleep aids, so he just puts on Bitty’s Sleepy Time playlist and tries to clear his head. Sleep doesn’t come, but by the time they land Jack feels like he’ll be able to get off the plane under his own steam.

When Jack is finally back in bed in their new hotel, he checks his phone one last time and sees a message from Bitty.

Re: Mostly Fine

I’m so sorry, Jack. I didn’t get the chance to get to the library until now and didn’t see your game. Are you sure you’re alright? What did they give you for the pain? Please tell me it was something more than Tylenol and please tell me you’re not lying to the doctors about how much it hurts. I know you like to put on a brave face, but you need to tell them the truth so they can help you.

What did West say to you? You never did give me the specifics. Have you spoken to PR about the issue? What about Georgia? I’m sure it’s something she’d want to hear about. The NHL goes on and on about how anyone can play but it’s what they do in sticky situations like this that really make the difference. I’m sure you don’t want to make a spectacle out of it or put an even bigger target on your back but I think the Falconers and the league owe it to you to put a stop to this kind of thing.

Are you sure you’re going to be alright to play tomorrow? The replays of that hit look terrible and I’m sure you’re hurting worse than you let on. You know you can sit out one game and the world won’t end, right? I know you hate sitting on the sidelines, but if it means you’ll heal and be able to play better the next game, that’s worth one loss, isn’t it? And who knows, maybe the boys will win even without you scoring double hat tricks.

I love you and I wish I was there to help keep your mind off of everything. Tell Tater he’s in charge of making sure you get your rest. There’s another honey dessert in it for him if you manage to heal without making yourself worse first.

Please be safe and come home to me in one piece,

Bitty

It’s hard for him to admit, but Jack knows Eric is right. It is something he should talk to Georgia about. She hadn’t been at the All-Stars game and Tater had been the one to speak to the organizers about West’s behavior. For all Jack knows it never went further than them and the Blues’ coaches
know nothing about the situation.

Jack feels like a coward for not speaking up about it sooner. If Tater hadn’t stepped in, he’s not sure he would have actually said anything at all during the All-Stars weekend. Something about it feels wrong to him, though. The Blues hadn’t done anything illegal on the ice—according to the refs at least—it was only their motivations for checking Jack that were suspect. Was it really worth it to complain? Or should he just suck it up and try to skate through it all.

He has the whole next day to think about it because he’s banned from practice again. It’s a Skype call to Shitty that puts everything in perspective. “If someone did it to Bitty, or me, or Lardo, or Tater, what would you do?” he asks, and just like that, Jack knows he has to take action.

While Tater is still at practice, Jack calls Georgia. She answers on the first ring. “Hello, this is George.”

“Hi, it’s Jack,” he says, wincing at the way his voice comes out all high-pitched and nervous.

“Jack, what can I do for you?” she asks, still tapping away at her keyboard.

“I uhh…” Jack starts, searching for the words. “There was an um… incident? At the All-Stars weekend?”

“What kind of incident?” she asks, the clacking of her keys stopping abruptly.

“West from the Blues was second string on my team and he uh… made some comments toward me in the locker room.”

“What kind of comments?” Georgia asks, tone even.

“I guess you could call them slurs,” Jack says, closing his eyes and rubbing at his temples again. He doesn’t know why it’s so hard to admit. It’s not like he’s the one who used the words. And it’s not like they’re inaccurate. But it always makes him feel like he’s on the defensive, that he has to tiptoe his way around other people’s issues.

“Homophobic slurs?” she asks, still keeping an even temper.

Jack doesn’t know how she does it. She’s gay too. He’s met her wife and there’s a picture of the two of them and their adopted son right there on her desk for anyone to see. Everyone in the industry knows that George is gay and it’s completely fine. Why does it have to be different for Jack?

“Yeah,” Jack says finally.

Georgia lets out a sigh. “And that’s why he didn’t finish the second game last weekend?” she asks, making sure she has a full picture.

“I don’t know exactly what happened. I chickened out. Tater talked to the organizers about it.”

“It’s not chickening out,” she says, voice firm. “I don’t think you know how brave you are, just being out in this industry. You’re the only one, Jack. The only one who spoke up. It’s not an easy thing you’re doing, even just living your life. I’m proud of you, I really am, but I’m actually surprised it took this long for it to escalate.”

“So you saw what happened at the game?” Jack asks.
“Of course I saw what happened, Jack. I’ve been screaming at people for the last 12 hours trying to get the Blues to own up to what happened. I know you probably think it’s all part of the game, but those were dirty hits, Jack. They should have been called for it, regardless of what was said about you.”

“I’m sorry,” Jack says, exhaling heavily.

“You have nothing to be sorry for. This is the second incident in two weeks and it’s going to stop now. I’m not going to sit around and let these people bully you for being bisexual,” she says.

Jack can hear the squeak of her desk chair as she spins away from her computer. “I uhh… “ he tries again, knowing he should probably be honest with the one person who has always had his back in the NHL. “I think I’m actually gay, for the record,” he says, biting his lip. “I mean technically speaking I’m on the ace spectrum, but I only like men.”

“Alright,” George says slowly, taking it in. “Do you want to make another statement about that? There aren’t too many asexual role models out there for young people.”

“I think that might be a little confusing for people because I umm… sort of have a boyfriend?”

“Sort of?” she echoes, trying not to laugh. “We’re not back in high school, Jack. Either you have a boyfriend or you don’t.”

“I do,” he says quickly. “I definitely do. His name is Eric and we’ve been going out for a few months.”

“Is this the cute blond who has been sitting with your parents at some of the home games?” she asks.

Jack can hear the smile edge into her voice. She’s happy for him.

“Yes, that’s him,” Jack says dreamily. “We met at the homeless shelter where he works when we were serving food over Thanksgiving.”

“That’s too adorable,” she says, tapping away at her computer again. “The press is going to eat that up.”

“Wait,” Jack nearly shouts at her. “Eric doesn’t want anyone to know.”

“Ever? Is he not out?” Georgia asks, leaving her keyboard again. She’s being blunt, but it’s really not her fault. George has a lot on her plate and keeping track of Jack’s numerous issues can’t be one of her top priorities. He knows when push comes to shove that she’s the one that’s going to have his back.

“He’s not out at work and he’s from the south so I don’t think everyone back home knows. He doesn’t want the media circus all over the homeless. That’s not fair to the people who really need help and his coworkers.”

“Of course. You’re right,” Georgia says, pausing for a moment. “Just because you’re out doesn’t mean you have to give the whole world a view into your private life. I’m sorry for jumping the gun.”

“I just wanted you to know that I’m not alone,” Jack says. “I also wanted to make it clear that these things are affecting him too, so I’m more likely to speak out against it now.”
“So what do you want to do, Jack? This is entirely up to you and Eric.”

It makes Jack happy to hear Georgia include Bitty by name. It feels so much more real now, that another one of the most important people in his life knows about Eric and what they are to each other. He wishes Bitty were here now, so they could all talk about this together. Jack wants them to be a team, but that can’t happen right now because he’s stuck in a hotel room in Calgary and Bitty still doesn’t have a phone.

“I want to not have a bruised knee and I want to be able to play. I just want to be able to play, George. And they’re making that difficult,” Jack says. It sounds trivial, like he’d be willing to put up with the homophobia if he was just allowed to play the stupid game he likes, but it’s more than that. It’s Jack’s entire career he’s trying to protect, it’s his ability to live his life and do his job just like anyone else.

“I think we need the Falconers to make a statement about the situation, explain the incident. At the very least West should be fined for unsportsmanlike conduct. I’ll push for him and the people who listened to him to be suspended from a few games, to show that the league is taking this kind of thing seriously,” she says, flipping through papers on her desk. “I also want you to call Brian from You Can Play. You only did a few events with them when you came out, but I think he could be helpful to you as things go forward, especially if you want to take a more active role in the LGBTQ community.”

“Okay,” Jack says, already feeling overwhelmed.

“There are going to be questions about this. They’re going to want to know what language was used, exactly what he said to you—”

“—well,” Jack says, a smirk coming to his face. “First he complimented my penis. *Then* he called me a fag.”

“You’re kidding,” Georgia says, stifling a laugh. “As hilarious as it would be, I think we should probably keep that detail to ourselves. What I meant was that you don’t have to use the same words he used. You can say whatever you want, but you are going to have to say something because this is the only thing you’re going to be asked about after the game tomorrow. Are you ready for that?”

“I guess I have to be,” Jack says, taking a deep breath. “I’ll tell them West harassed me and I have reason to believe he instructed his team to do the same. Can I tell them that the league supports You Can Play and will not tolerate homophobia or homophobic language?”

“That’s perfect, Jack. Say it just like that,” George assures him. “If I have my way there will be some league consequences for you to comment on tomorrow, too. Alright?”


“You don’t have to thank me. It’s my job to protect you and I’m happy to do it. We all just want you to be able to play your best game, Jack. You should be able to live your life and love who you love and still play your best game.”

“Thank you,” he says, swallowing hard. “That means a lot to me.”

“You’re welcome,” she says. “And Jack?”

“Yeah?” he says, throat feeling tight with unexpressed emotion.
“I’m really happy for you and Eric.”

“Thanks,” he says. “Me too.”

In the end, Bitty is exactly right. Jack sits out the game against the Flames and the Falconers still win 2-0. He sits on the bench and cheers on his team, accepting hair ruffles and fist bumps whenever there’s a shift change. It’s not as good as being out on the ice, but Jack finds that he still enjoys it. He gets to see his team from a new angle and thinks he might have a few ideas on how to tighten up their offense at practice.

When he hobbles into the press room after the game, Jack’s first thought is that he really wishes he had time to talk to Bitty before answering these questions. He’s stiff and in pain, but it’s not as excruciating as it was the day before so he plasters a smile on his face and takes his seat at the table.

“Hi everyone,” he says, giving a shy little wave. “I’d just like to congratulate the team on a great win today. If you ever needed proof that hockey is a team effort, you just got it. One person doesn’t win by themselves and the Falcs showed that today. They did amazing out there and I’m proud to be their captain. I’ll take a few questions now.”

The room practically explodes with noise as reporters shout over each other to be heard. Jack has no idea what’s being said, so he just points at someone at random and hopes for the best.

“The NHL just suspended Martin West and three other players from the Blues after your injury. Can you tell us what happened?”

Jack takes a deep breath. He prepared for this. It had been embarrassing, but he’d talked to the team about it and Thirdy had even offered to role play likely scenarios after practice. None of it matters though. There’s nothing that can ever truly prepare you for a room full of flashing cameras and screaming reporters.

“West verbally harassed me in the locker room during the All-Stars weekend and was thrown off the Atlantic team by the organizers of the event. This week his team took that one step further by physically harassing me during our game to the point of intentionally injuring me. The league was made aware of the situation and acted accordingly.”

“What did he say to you? What did you say back? Do you think Martin West is a homophobe?”

The questions come from all angles and Jack has no idea what to say or who to answer first. “Uhh…” he starts, already wincing at how stupid he sounds. He goes for direct and clear but is afraid he comes off as a hockey robot again. “He used a homophobic slur and made some other inappropriate comments while I was in the shower.”

Shit, Jack thinks. That was a little too much detail. Now they’re probably all picturing him naked and starring in some trashy gay porno.

“Do you think West is gay? How do we know you’re not lying? Are you dating Martin West?”

“I can’t speak about anyone’s sexuality besides my own. Alexei Mashkov was there as well and was the one who spoke to the All-Stars organizers and no, I am not dating West. I don’t date...”
homophobes and I don’t think anyone else should either.”

There it is. That’s going to be the sound-byte. A clip of that sentence is going to be replayed on Sports Center for the rest of Jack’s life. He wants to hide his face, but he doesn’t. Jack looks straight ahead into the cameras and dares them to ask something else.

“Are you happy West was suspended? Are you dating anyone? Do you think the NHL is doing the right thing?”

Jack answers very carefully. He promised Bitty he wouldn’t give anything away and he knows that the moment he says he’s dating someone they’re going to search through every grainy cell phone picture every person on the street has taken of him in the last two months and find Bitty. Jack is not going to let that happen.

“I think the league supports me and will also support other LGBTQ+ players if and when they choose to come out. The Falconers were one of the first teams to support You Can Play and do a great job showing everyone that being gay or bi or ace or questioning isn’t something to be ashamed of. Everyone should be welcome to play in the NHL and I think that we owe it to young hopeful hockey players, and our friends and families, and most importantly to our fans to show diversity on the ice in every way possible. Fans need to know that being LGBTQ+ doesn’t preclude you from liking hockey, that they’re not going to be harassed when they go to a game or rejected by the teams and the players that they support.”

He takes another deep breath. The noise has mostly died down and he has the attention of the room. Jack tells himself not to squander it and keeps talking.

“There is a stigma in the professional sports industry that only the most macho and manly can participate and succeed and that everyone else is weak and incapable. People often equate that to being gay or feminine or mentally ill, but I know that’s not true. I’m gay and I suffer from anxiety and struggle with addiction, but that doesn’t mean I can’t play the game and that doesn’t mean you can’t either. People like to say that it’s only what happens on the ice that matters, but when you have to keep your head down and bite your tongue and pretend you don’t hear the abuse that’s shouted at you from all sides, it makes a rough sport that much more difficult. Hiding who you are is intolerable and the prejudice has to stop, on and off the ice.

“I’d like to ask everyone to take a stand against intolerance and to protect those who might not be able to speak out themselves. This is a diverse and thriving community, and I want us to act like it. I want the NHL to continue to support You Can Play and to continue to take action that makes the league safe for people of every race, religion, and sexual orientation. We owe it to our fans and we owe it to ourselves to make sure we have the best talent available on the ice.

“Thank you to the Falconer’s staff, especially Georgia Martin, for their continued support. I know I don’t always make it easy for them, but they always try to do the right thing by me and the rest of my team. I’m proud to see the NHL and the organizers of the All-Stars weekend step up and protect their players from bigotry and harassment by punishing the perpetrators. Taking a stand on this particular issue is an important first step on the road to a more inclusive NHL and I hope it continues.”

When he stops talking, the reporters start shouting again, but Jack doesn’t think he has anything left to say. He stands, pressing his palms to the table to support his knee and strides from the room. Jack desperately wants to leave with his head held high, but it isn’t easy. His knee hurts and he has to hobble from the room and into the back hall.

It takes some time, but he limps all the way out of the building, head down, until he can feel the
cold breeze on his face. Jack pulls his phone out of his pocket and checks his inbox.

No new messages.

He hangs his head and does his best to breathe.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After another excruciating flight home, Jack finally makes it back to Providence. Much to his surprise, Bitty is already in his apartment when he gets there. He has dinner in the oven and seems to have cleaned the whole place in a nervous frenzy.

“Oh my goodness,” he says, abandoning his dusting and rushing to the door when Jack arrives. “I saw your interview. I’m just so proud of you, Jack!”

He doesn’t even have the energy to respond. Jack just collapses into Eric’s arms, thankful that the other man doesn’t fall down under his weight.

“You must be beat,” Bitty says into his neck. “I’ve got dinner cooking and new sheets on the bed, so you can just lie down if you want to.”

“I feel old,” Jack says, heading toward the couch. “If this is what it’s going to be like when my hip starts to go, maybe I should just give up now.”

“Oh hush,” Bitty says, slapping him lightly on the shoulder. “You’re going to be fine. You think I never took a fall like this skating? One more day at home and I bet you’ll be begging me to let you go back to the rink.”

“You’re staying?” Jack asks, painfully aware of how hopeful it sounds.

“I took a few days off,” Bitty says, smiling softly. “You better believe I’m going to mother the stuffing out of you after what you did while I was sick. Fair’s fair.”

“I take it back,” Jack says playfully. “Maybe I don’t want you to move in anymore.”

The oven timer dings and Jack smiles as he watches Bitty putter around the kitchen making him a plate. Then he grabs Jack’s suitcase and starts some laundry. The view is so domestic it hurts Jack’s teeth.

“What did the doctor say?” Bitty asks from the laundry room.

“I’m supposed to stay home tomorrow, but then I’m allowed to skate easy in practice the day after. No pads, no checking.”

“Well, that sounds good,” Eric says cheerfully. “Does it hurt much?”

“It’s fine as long as I don’t have to go anywhere this week. All the air travel and squishing myself into coach busses was getting to me.”

“I’m so glad you’re back,” Bitty says, collapsing on the couch next to him with his own plate. “I knew you were going to get asked questions, but I wasn’t expecting it to be like that.”

“I tried to decide what I was going to say beforehand, but it didn’t help. Was it alright?”

“It was more than alright, honey,” Bitty says, dropping his fork so he can take Jack’s hand. “You were incredible. So many people are going to see that and know that if you can do it, they can do it.”
“I didn’t tell them about my overdose,” Jack says, lips twisted into a frown.

“It’s okay. Maybe it wasn’t the right time.”

“Maybe,” Jack says, jaw tight. “I want to tell the truth. To prove to people that I’m better, but nothing comes out right. I said I was gay and I don’t even know if that’s true, but saying anything else just sounds so confusing and I don’t want to be known as the person who can’t make up his mind about his own sexuality. Not if I’m going to be the poster boy for gay rights.”

“Hey, hey,” Bitty says softly, squeezing his hand. “It’s alright. Labels don’t have to mean anything. It’s okay to keep them for yourself or change them when you figure things out. It’s okay to question. I think that uncertainty is a pretty good representation of the experience. And you don’t have to tell them about your history until you’re ready.”

Jack nods, but it feels all wrong. He didn’t even get to play hockey this week and yet everyone is still talking about him. All they care about is his sexuality and the gossip surrounding his injury. All the press wants to do is comment on whether or not he should just suck it up and take the hit like everyone else. What makes Jack so special? Why should players get suspended for checking him and not other people? He’s been hearing snippets of the coverage every time someone turns on a TV and it’s driving him insane.

He feels like he should have done more and also like he should have kept his mouth shut. It’s overwhelming and even talking to Blaire does nothing to ease the stress. If this were happening to anyone else, they’d be able to deal with it. No one else has all of these things to contend with. How is Jack a gay grey-ace, mentally ill NHL player in a closeted relationship with a man who needs to choke him to get his dick hard? How does he have a drug addiction and a famous father and a bum knee? How are all of those things true at once?

That’s just too much for one person. It’s way too much.

“Jack,” Bitty says. “Jack, can you hear me?”

“Hmm?” he asks, head snapping toward his boyfriend.

“You look white and you’re sweating. Are you alright?”

He knows Bitty is talking to him, and he can even hear the words, but they don’t seem to make sense in the order they’re in. Everything feels like it’s going through a tunnel and getting distorted on the way out. Jack can see Bitty’s fingers on his wrist but doesn’t feel them there.

“There’s no reason why I shouldn’t just call Blaire,” Bitty says, eyes searching the room for Jack’s phone.

It’s in his pocket, but Bitty doesn’t know that and Jack can’t seem to find the words to tell him. His chest feels tight and he has to close his eyes to block out the way the room seems to go hazy. The moment his eyes slide closed though, the room tilts and he feels like he’s about to faint.

Eric’s hands are on him now, checking his pulse and making sure that he’s not actually unconscious. Jack tries to reassure him, but his chest is too tight and he doesn’t have enough air to speak. He opens his eyes and Eric’s face is right in front of him, swimming in a haze of motion. Even through the fog, Jack can see that Eric is terrified. His mouth is moving and there are tears
in his eyes, but Jack can’t do anything to stop it.

Desperate, Jack reaches for his pocket but his fingers are going numb. He can’t get his hand inside, but Eric realizes what he’s trying to do and fishes his phone out of his sweatpants. Jack closes his eyes again and waits, breath coming in short gasps. He goes through his list and tries to talk himself out of it, but he barely makes it past the first one.

Recognize you’re having a panic attack.

True. Jack recognizes it. It’s all he can think about. He’s not getting enough air and he’s already dizzy which means he’s probably close to passing out. If he passes out he’s going to traumatize Eric, so he focuses on stopping that.

Jack can hear Bitty talking and tries to hone in on the sound of his voice. It’s high and fast. Bitty must be nervous, and Jack doesn’t blame him. He tries to take a breath but there’s no room for it in his chest. A sharp pain hits him right in the sternum and he struggles not to choke.

“Jack, honey?” Bitty’s voice calls through the din. “Blaire said I could give you two of your pills but you have to be able to swallow.”

It’s hard, but Jack tries to focus on the words and what they mean. He nods, thinking it’s probably the right answer to agree. For a few seconds, nothing happens, then Bitty hops up and runs to the bedroom. Jack tries to count the seconds that he’s gone, slowly, one at a time.

He’s only gotten to six by the time Bitty is back and coaxing his mouth open. Twelve seconds later there’s a glass of water pressed to his lips and he forces himself to swallow down the pills.

They don’t work immediately, nothing does. But they’re better than nothing and Jack focuses on getting the water down without choking. His hands are still shaking so he clenches them into fists.

Bitty’s hands cup his cheeks. Jack can see that he’s still talking but none of the words make any sense. He nods mutely, trying his best to tell Bitty that he’s going to be okay. A small smile flits across Eric’s face and then he’s climbing into Jack’s lap, straddling his thighs.

He doesn’t think it’s going to help, but it does. Eric’s weight settles against him, arms wrapping around his neck, breath blowing across his throat. Their chests are pressed together and Bitty is forcing him to sink further into the couch.

For a few seconds, Jack freezes, but then he lets out a tiny exhale and gasps in some air. It goes to his head immediately, making him dizzy, but he fights against the feeling. Eric moves with him, his entire body rising and falling when Jack’s chest expands and contracts. Jack focuses on that, making Eric move. Pushing him away and then pulling him back in.

It feels like it takes forever, but eventually Jack gets his breath back. Eric’s fingers are in his hair and he’s whispering sweet words into his ear. Jack doesn’t hear any of them, but he knows they’re sweet by the tone of voice Bitty is using.

Somewhere along the way, Jack’s meds must kick in because he falls asleep. When he wakes up, he’s laying down lengthways on the couch, Eric tucked into his chest with a blanket draped over them both. Their plates of dinner are still on the coffee table. Señor Bun is clutched in Bitty’s hand.

Eric’s hair is just under his chin, the soft blond strands smelling like Jack’s shampoo again. He breathes in the scent and presses a kiss to the top of Eric’s head. Pain radiates from his chest and
his knee that he should have iced twice already since he got home, but he’s so tired he can’t make himself move. Jack falls back asleep just like that, his boyfriend’s hair tickling his chin, the metallic taste of medication in his mouth.

When Jack wakes up again, it’s to the smell of brown sugar and maple syrup. Bitty is making french toast, which is certainly not on his diet plan, but he can’t bring himself to complain. Señor Bun is laid right next to his chest.

Jack sits up and an ice pack falls off his knee. He smiles, beyond grateful that Bitty remembered to tend to his injury. As he massages his chest, he groans. The memory of his episode floods his mind.

It takes a minute, but he pulls himself off the couch and heads to the kitchen. “I’m sorry,” he says immediately once Eric is in view. “I’m sorry you had to deal with that.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Bitty says, handing him a glass of blue Powerade with ice in it. “I’m just happy I was here to help.”

“Thank you,” Jack says softly, staring.

Bitty is just standing there in a pair of Jack’s too-large boxer briefs and his old SMH tee. He looks beyond beautiful, soft and full of life. There are bowls all over the countertops and egg yolks congealing in the sink, but Jack doesn’t care. Bitty is here, happy and in his life. Even after a panic attack, he’s still here, still smiling, still making breakfast in Jack’s kitchen.

It’s the first time in his life that someone has wanted to do that. He feels a warm contentedness. Eric saw the worst of him last night, his weakest, basest self, and he’s still here.

“I do feel like I should ask…” Bitty trails off, biting down on his bottom lip as he fusses with the toast in the pan. “If you’re having attacks… Do you think we should talk to Blaire about increasing your meds again?”

Jack’s good thoughts halt abruptly and his fingers clench around the cool glass. He focuses on the sensation, willing himself to remain calm and think about Bitty’s words rationally. Should he increase his meds?

Jack understands where Bitty is coming from, the logic tracks. He decreased his Cymbalta dosage and has had a bit of an easier time orgasming, but now he’s having panic attacks again. Was the attack a one-off, or is he setting himself up for a bad pattern? Should he have seen this coming? Isn’t this what Blaire warned him about? Even if she did, is it something he can live with? Is it something Bitty can live with?

”Would it be okay if I didn’t want to?” he asks, voice shaking slightly.

“Didn’t want to change your meds or didn’t want to talk to Blaire?” Bitty asks, brow furrowing.

“I’ll talk to Blaire about it, but I’m not sure I want to go back to the way things were before,” Jack says, letting out a breath when he sees the concern color Eric’s face. “I know it’s selfish, making you deal with my anxiety when I might be able to control it, but I like what we have right now. I like making love to you.”
Eric’s expression softens a bit, and Jack takes that as a sign to keep talking.

“I know that’s kind of crazy, to trade an erection and a few orgasms for mental health, but that’s kind of where I’m at right now. It might be stupid, but I feel like I can handle a little more anxiety every once in a while if it means getting to be with you like that whenever I want,” he takes a breath, looks down at his glass and licks his lips, unwilling to take a sip even though his mouth is dry. “I’ll tell Blaire about it, but I think I’d like to stick it out and see how weaning off the meds goes. Is that okay with you?”

Bitty clutches his spatula in both hands, eyes shining as he prepares himself to speak. “I’m not going to say it was easy, seeing you like that,” he says eventually, arms falling to his sides as he tries to relax into the conversation. “You scared me, but I think we handled it okay. And I know work has been really stressful for you this week, so maybe it won’t always be like this for you.”

Jack nods solemnly. The condensation on the glass makes it slippery in his hand and he has the forethought to put it down before his hands go numb and he makes a mess.

“I can’t begrudge you wanting something that the rest of us come by easily. It’s not silly to want to be comfortable and happy with your sex life, sweetpea. It’s your body and your decision. If you want to keep trying without the meds, I’ll be right here with you.”

“You’re sure?” Jack asks, heart beating wildly in his chest. Sometimes Bitty seems too good to be true. His support is always genuine and warm. It never wavers.

“I’m sure,” Bitty says, lips twitching into a watery smile. “I love you. I love us and I love what we have. You’re in charge of your recovery. If you’re feeling good and Blaire’s okay with it, I’m okay with it.”

“Thank you,” Jack says, swallowing around the thick feeling in his throat. What Eric gives him… Jack isn’t sure he’ll ever deserve it. “Seriously, thank you,” he says again, hobbling forward to wrap Bitty up in a hug. “I can’t tell you what it means to me, mon coeur. Je t’aime.”

“You cannot be using French on me so early in the morning, sugar,” Eric says.

”Je t’aime tellement, mon petit chou,” Jack breathes into Bitty’s ear. ”Tu es la meilleure chose qui me soit arrivée, mon lapin. Je t’adore.”

“You need to stop that right now or I’m going to burn your breakfast,” Bitty chides, though he’s leaning into Jack’s touch.

“You don’t want me to stop,” Jack mutters, lips grazing the sensitive skin below Eric’s ear.

“You are in no position to be making a pass at me, Mister Zimmermann,” Bitty says, even as a visible shiver runs through him. “You’re barely standing upright.”

“I’m fine. I’m going to skate tomorrow,” Jack says, gripping Bitty by the hips.

“Not if you don’t take care of yourself, you’re not.” Bitty says, brandishing the spatula at him. “Why don’t you sit down and put that gel on your knee and I’ll bring you some toast.”

“Ouais, mon coeur,” Jack says sweetly, a small smile on his face when he sees Eric lick his lips.

“Don’t make me spank you. I’ll do it, just try me,” Bitty says, waving the spatula again.

“Promise?” Jack jokes, raising his eyebrows.
“I swear! You are going to be the death of me, Jack Zimmermann,” Bitty huffs, plating up some toast and pouring on a good amount of real maple syrup as Jack settles himself at the table with his pain reliever.

“Laurent,” Jack supplies, smiling as he pulls up his pant leg. “My middle name is Laurent.”

“Oh Lord, that is just the sexiest thing,” Bitty whines. Though he’s heard the name before, it probably came from Shitty, whose accent just does not compare. He pushes the plate over to Jack and then leaves again to get utensils, blushing hard.

“What’s yours?” Jack asks, suddenly upset that he doesn’t know every minute detail about Bitty.

“Richard,” he answers, putting down his own cup of coffee and Jack’s glass.

“Really?” he asks, finishing up with the gel and getting up to wash his hands.

“It’s Coach’s name—that’s what I’ve always called my daddy,” he adds when Jack opens his mouth to ask. “He calls me Junior and my mama calls me…” he hesitates. “Promise not to laugh?”

Jack smiles as he traces his index finger in an X across his chest.

“She calls me Dicky.”

“I promise never to call you Dicky, so help me God,” Jack says, smile growing, holding a hand over his heart.

“Thank the Lord,” Bitty says, pressing his palms together and looking toward the heavens.

Jack sits down with a pained sigh and tucks into his breakfast. They eat in silence for a few minutes until Bitty says, “Do you want to talk about it? What caused the panic?”

“Umm…” Jack starts, licking the syrup from his lips. He doesn’t know how to explain it, has never even tried to tell someone who wasn’t Blaire or Shitty.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to, but I’m here to listen if you do,” Bitty says, taking another bite of his breakfast.

“I just got overwhelmed, I guess,” Jack says. He knows that’s nowhere near an explanation, but it’s hard for him to admit these things, even to himself.

“There’s a lot going on with you right now,” Bitty says, putting his fork down. “It’s okay to be upset by what happened. I know I am.”

“I just…” he struggles again. “Everything feels so complicated. I’m gay but I’m not. I’m an addict but I’m recovered. I’m mentally ill but I’m fine. I want to be honest, to quit hiding. I have so many secrets that are eating at me, but I know that if I try to explain them to people they’re going to get muddled. Do you know what I mean?”

Bitty nods.

“I don’t want to be that hockey player that can’t keep his shit together. It’s going to sound like I want to throw a press conference every time I have an identity crisis, and that’s just not what I want.”

“What do you want, Jack?”
He opens his mouth and then pauses. It’s the same exact question Georgia asked him two days ago. What does he want? It should be easy to answer, but it’s always felt overwhelming. Jack thinks for a second and then tries to put his feelings into the simplest possible terms.

“I want to play hockey and I want you.”

“Well you’ve already got me and in a few more days you’ll be back on the ice. So I think the rest can wait, don’t you?”

Jack pauses again. He can’t decide whether it’s dismissive or completely genius. Is he making a bigger deal out of this than he needs to?

“Do you remember what I said yesterday about labels? That you don’t owe them to anyone?”

Jack nods. It’s one of the last things he remembers from yesterday, actually.

“It sucks that you were the first and that all of this is falling to you, but you don’t have to do any more than you feel comfortable with. I know the press is getting to you. And when you’re feeling better maybe you should think about doing a magazine interview or writing your own article. That way you can take your time and make sure the editing is done right.”

“Yeah… maybe,” Jack says, turning the idea over in his mind. He doesn’t really want to do an interview without Bitty, but he can’t really ask his boyfriend to out himself just for his benefit. “I’ll think about it.”

“Good,” Bitty says, picking up his fork again. “Now how about you finish your breakfast and then we get you in the shower?”

“Yeah, that sounds good,” Jack says, mind still churning.

He doesn’t know why he has this burning desire to explain himself to the public. It’s only been a few months since he’s even remotely figured out his own sexuality. Who is he to be a role model for other gay and ace people? Maybe it’s the fact that he and Bitty have been hiding their relationship. Something about the situation makes him want to share the hidden parts of himself, to make it feel like he isn’t so alone.

They shower and watch movies for the rest of the day, but all Jack can think about is what it will be like when he can walk down the street with Bitty on his arm and not be afraid. He’s tried to give Bitty his space and autonomy, but if the stress of hiding their relationship is bleeding into his every thought, maybe it’s time he and Bitty discuss a timeline.

Chapter End Notes

Translation:
“Seriously, thank you,” he says again, hobbling forward to wrap Bitty up in a hug. “I can’t tell you what it means to me, mon coeur. Je t’aime.”
“Mi corazon. Te amo.”

“Je t’aime tellement, mon petit chou,” Jack breathes into Bitty’s ear. "Tu es la meilleure chose qui me soit arrivée, mon lapin. Je t’adore.”
"I love you so much, my sweet," "You're the best thing that ever happened to me, my
rabbit. I adore you."
They don’t discuss it. Jack can’t come up with any way of asking about it without making it sound like he’s trying to force Bitty into coming out of the closet all over again. He decides that it’s not worth it. He’d rather have Bitty and hide him than give him an ultimatum. It wouldn’t be fair to Eric and Jack isn’t sure he could survive the rejection if Bitty decided to break up with him over it.

Jack feels selfish for even thinking about it, but he can't stop. He repeatedly wonders what it would be like if someone caught them out on a date and outed them. It’d be out of his hands. It wouldn’t be his fault. He feels so guilty after that thought crosses his mind that he makes Bitty dinner and cuddles him to death for hours.

Days go by and Jack gets back on the ice. His knee throbs, but the pain is manageable and he’s able to play in their home game against Columbus without much incident. Bitty goes back to work and still doesn’t take his house key. However, Jack notices that he takes his skates with him this time, so he counts that as a victory.

Jack speaks to Blaire, and while she suggests many other options for new drugs and therapies to try, they ultimately agree to keep Jack’s meds as they are and give him a chance to see how he can adapt. With a hope that the press conference about West was the trigger for his episode, Jack tries to put it behind him and focus on hockey and not what the press is doing.

He plays another home game against Minnesota before leaving for yet another roadie. By the time they’re playing against the Stars, Jack feels back to his old self. He drapes himself across his hotel bed, sore but happy. There’s a certain kind of weary contentment that comes from doing good work on the ice. His muscles ache, but it’s not unpleasant. It feels like he’s carrying his weight again, like he’s earned back his title as Captain.

Smiling to himself, Jack reads his latest email from Bitty.

Subject: Getting Closer

Jack,

Did you know that the public rink has free skate every Wednesday from noon to two? I think it’s a pretty well kept secret because there’s barely anyone on the ice! It’s almost like having the whole place to myself! I even sweet talked the radio controller
until he put on Beyoncé!

My jumps are getting better, but boy are my legs tired. I’ve started running before work, but I should probably lift weights too. My triple axel is coming along and I think my lutz is near perfect, if I do say so myself. I can’t wait to show you.

I saw some of your game and you’re looking good, Mister Zimmermann. Was that a smirk I saw when you got that second goal in? How is your knee feeling? It looks like it doesn’t hurt at all. Have I told you how sexy you look when you get a breakaway? Smug is a good look on you. I’d like to see it more often.

Love you, hot stuff ;)

Bitty

Re: Getting Closer

I can’t wait to see what you can do on the ice. Have you been practicing a lot? I bet you’re going to be skating circles around me by the time I get home. We have one more game against the Hurricanes on this trip and then I’ll be back. What if I booked the rink for us on Wednesday? You could teach me a bit more about couples skating. Anything where I get to hold you would make me happy.

I’m glad you liked the game. My knee feels great, thanks for asking. I can’t wait to see you. J’taime, mon lapin,

Jack

Once Jack is done writing the email, he goes online and orders himself a pair of figure skates. He won’t have them broken in by Wednesday, but if he tries them out after practice every day for the rest of the week he might get used to the feel of them in time.

Jack feels good after practice on Tuesday. He’s starting to get the hang of the difference between his hockey skates and his figure skates but he’s still pretty much incapable of using the toe pick. It’s a small thing, but he can’t wait for Bitty to teach him how to use it. If any of the guys notice him carrying an extra pair of skates, none of them mention it. It’s not uncommon for Jack to stay for hours at the rink after everyone else has gone, so he doesn’t raise much suspicion.

He emails Bitty and confirms that he’s going to pick him up from the shelter tomorrow at noon for lunch and then a few hours at the rink. After cleaning the bathroom and making sure there are enough groceries to make dinner, Jack spends the evening reading the books Bitty gave him for Christmas and Skyping with Shitty and Lardo.

Shitty nearly cries when he tells Jack that he passed the bar, just like Jack knew he would, and
plans to start work at the Boston Legal Services Center in just a few weeks. Jack couldn’t be more proud. Lardo looks unbearably fond as they listen to Shitty go on and on about all the underprivileged people the office supports.

On Wednesday he goes for a morning run with Tater and then eats a dozen scrambled eggs and does his weightlifting. There’s a spring in his step when he carries his new skates down to the truck and drives through town to pick up Bitty.

The trunk opens and Bitty throws his skates inside before slamming it shut. “Good Lord, it’s cold,” he says immediately upon entering the car. He’s wearing the Falcons hat Jack gave him, but his hands are bare.

Jack has the heat blasting and made sure to turn on the passenger side seat warmer as soon as he got in the car. It should be toasty warm by now.

“You wouldn’t be so cold if you’d just wear the coat I bought you, bud,” Jack says with a bit of a smile. He’s not mad really, but he does wish Bitty would accept his help every once in a while.

“That thing probably cost hundreds of dollars,” Bitty says, holding his hands in front of the vent. “I can’t wear that around a homeless shelter. Everyone would hate me.”

“I’m going to ask you something and I want you to actually think about it before you answer,” Jack says, heading toward a small cafe they like for lunch.

“Alright,” Bitty says slowly.

“Are you actually open to looking for a new job?”

Bitty doesn’t speak for a few moments and Jack holds his breath, preparing for the worst.

“I don’t know, Jack,” he says, audibly flustered. “There’s still so much work to do and I’d feel bad leaving them in the lurch, especially during the winter.”

“I understand. I’m just trying to think ahead. To maybe one day when you might be okay with being my boyfriend in public,” Jack says. He didn’t expect Bitty to say yes, but he just had to know if he was even considering making a sacrifice for their future life together. Unfortunately, Jack doesn’t get the answer he had been hoping for.

“I don’t know, Jack,” Bitty says, shaking his head. “There are so many people that need help. So many mouths still to feed.”

“If you still want to work with the homeless, maybe you could take a larger role. My parents could start a new branch of their foundation. I’m sure they’d love to have your input. You could run it yourself… have millions of dollars at your disposal.”

“I can’t do that, honey. That’s too much,” Eric says, staring straight ahead. “It would feel too self-serving, to get a job like that just because I’m your boyfriend.”

“It wouldn’t be like that,” Jack protests. “It’s not like you’re unqualified. Just think about it. Please?”

“I promise to think about it, but I just don’t see that happening, sugar.”

“Okay,” Jack says, defeated. “I… okay. I understand.” He doesn’t really, but he knows there’s nothing more he can say today to make Bitty change his mind.
They both stay quiet for the rest of the ride, but when they get to the cafe, it’s like a light has been switched on. Bitty is back to his bubbly self, exclaiming over the new menu choices and letting Jack pay without protest.

When they get to the rink, it’s blessedly empty. Jack leads them inside and nods to Jerry the custodian who turns the lights on for them. He reminds himself to give the entire maintenance staff bonuses this month.

Bitty’s face when he pulls out his new pair of figure skates is priceless. “What in the world?” he exclaims brightly as Jack kicks off his sneakers and loosens the laces on the new skates.

“I figured we should at least be on even footing,” Jack says. “I’ve been practicing a bit.”

“You are just too much, Mister Zimmermann,” Bitty says, smiling every time he looks up from his own laces.

“Okay,” he says, stepping onto the ice. “I need some help with this pick thing.”

“It’s called a toe pick,” Bitty corrects, gliding up next to him. “I always hated sharing the rink with hockey players and their huge honking skates. All those hockey stops just tore up my poor ice, and God forbid you fall into a divot and break your ankle. I mean honestly. Toe picks are much more civilized.”

“Alright, show me how it’s done,” Jack says, eyes bright as he watches Bitty flit away from him in the blink of an eye.

They practice for a solid hour until Jack can match Bitty’s crossovers and even skate close without drifting into him. After twenty more minutes Jack is shadowing Bitty’s arm movements and keeping up with his reduced speed.

“I think it might be time to practice some hand holds,” Bitty says, smiling when he catches Jack wiping the sweat off his forehead on the back of his sleeve. “If you’re not too tired, that is.”

“How much have you been practicing?” Jack asks, trying to hide how hard he’s breathing. “You’re so fast.”

“Oh honey, I’ve been dumbing it down for you,” Bitty says with a small laugh. “No offense, but you’ve got a thing or two to learn about stamina.”

Jack throws him a wounded look, but he just laughs harder.

“Why don’t you go sit and take a little break and I’ll show you what I’ve been working on?”

“Okay,” Jack says, not because he’s tired but because he wants to see Bitty’s jumps. They had been incredible looking weeks ago when Bitty had been out of practice and in brand new skates. He can only imagine what they look like now.

“Turn on some music, sweetpea,” Bitty calls.

Jack fumbles with his phone for a few moments but then finds a new mix on his Spotify called “Skating.” The speakers aren’t very loud, but the rink is empty and the beat can still be heard. The first tune is catchy and Jack finds himself tapping his foot as Bitty zooms around the rink at top speed.

He hadn’t been lying, Bitty really was dumbing it down for him. It looks effortless, the way he
speeds around the corners and crosses the ice in bracket turns. Jack could never hope to keep up in a real competition setting.

Bitty is so beautiful, hair glinting in the overhead lights as he bounces around to the lyrics of “Dear Future Husband.” The way he hops on the tips of his skates and then seamlessly steps into spins is dizzying and fun. His jumps are incredible, smooth and high. Jack has no idea what the technical requirements are for them, but as far as he’s concerned, Bitty is Olympic material.

The song changes to something slow and Bitty falls into a backbend. The sight of it makes Jack’s mouth go dry. He does a full routine to this one and Jack gets caught up in the grace of it, the way his arms move like he’s a ballerina, how his face goes soft and serene. Bitty’s eyes fall closed and he just breathes, gliding across the ice like royalty, chest high and chin up.

*I need to marry this man*, Jack thinks as Eric’s jaw tenses and he launches himself into the air.

But Bitty won’t even take a key to his apartment and hasn’t offered to introduce him to his parents. Even so, it’s hard for Jack to control his thoughts. It doesn’t need to be soon, and they have a long way to go before Jack thinks Bitty will accept his offer, but his mind still races as he pictures their life together.

Bitty could compete again. They could buy a house and get a dog. Jack could retire and maybe they could adopt some kids. As he watches Eric spread his arms and float, a picture of it tumbles around his mind.

Another upbeat song starts and Bitty reacts immediately, gaining speed and throwing himself into another jump. Jack counts the turns this time and it’s not quite four, but it’s close. He leaps out of his seat and applauds, the crisp noise bouncing off the boards and around the empty rink. It’s a combination, and before Jack has stopped clapping he’s up in the air again, spinning another three times before sticking the landing.

Jack whoops and jumps. It’s a far cry from the simple fist pump he usually does when he scores a goal. Watching Bitty excel at this makes his heart race. He knows it has nothing to do with him, but he still feels a huge sense of accomplishment every time Eric lands a jump.

He continues dancing across the ice, backbending in an impossible looking arc as he completes a few spins. It’s clear that Bitty has been working hard to get back his former flexibility. The way he catches his foot and twirls around looks fluid and effortless.

It’s been ten minutes of high-level skating and Bitty is finally starting to look tired. He slows down to do another sweep across the ice and his jumps turn into doubles and then singles before he does one last sit spin. There’s sweat dripping from his hairline when he skates back over to Jack, smile wide.

“You almost had the quad,” Jack tells him, as breathless as Bitty looks. “I can’t believe you can do that. You’re incredible.”

“It’s close, but it’s not quite there yet,” he says, wiping his face on the towel Jack hands him. “You think you’re ready to learn a few holds?” he asks, wagging his eyebrows at Jack.

Jack nods and rushes back onto the ice, shivering when Bitty slips his ice-cold hand into his.

“Now you’re going to hold hands with me like this,” he says, demonstrating. “And then you’re going to match my feet. Left, right, left, right, just like that.”

They stumble a few times when Jack loses his balance on the unfamiliar blades, but after a few
minutes, he gets the hang of it.

“Then you can come in close and put your hands on my waist,” Bitty says, stepping in front of Jack and directing him with a soft touch.

Jack gulps. They’re pressed close, Bitty’s ass against his crotch, his hands tight around Bitty’s slim hips. He can feel the sweat on his palms slowly seeping into Eric’s shirt. When he looks down, he can see that the buzzed hair on the back of Bitty’s neck is sticky with sweat. It’s grown out some and Jack has a sudden desire to feel it against his tongue, to taste the skin underneath.

“Yeah, just like that,” Eric says, voice a little high. “So then if we push off with our right, you can skate with me like this. You kind of just chase me around the rink, but you have to make sure our feet are in synch or we’ll fall over each other. Okay?”

Jack doesn’t hear half of the words, he’s concentrating on the scent of Bitty’s hair and the way his hip bones fit perfectly against his palms.

“Jack?” Bitty asks, trying to get his attention. “Are you listening?”

“Yeah,” he says, coughing when the word catches in his throat. “I’ll follow you.”

Bitty pushes off, counting their steps again, his hands wrapped around Jack’s at his waist.

It’s impossible for Jack to keep their hips together, but he chases after Eric anyway and does his best to shorten his stride to match. When he stops counting, they glide to a soft stop and Jack pulls Bitty into him, pressing in tight. Jack feels warm all over, panting even though he’s not tired. He drags his hand away from Bitty’s hip and settles his palm low on his stomach until they’re lined up perfectly, back to chest.

It’s hard to be sure, but Jack thinks something might be happening. Bitty is warm against his front and the curve of his ass is just brushing his crotch. He freezes for a second, realizing that something is different about the interaction this time.

“Oh my God,” Bitty says, practically choking on his words. “Jack, honey… is that what I think it is?”

“Uhh…” Jack trails off, taking stock of his body. Heat is pooled in his stomach and there’s an unfamiliar sense of tension trailing down further to his groin. He can’t be sure without reaching down to check, but he thinks he has an erection. Or at least half an erection. It’s the first time that’s happened without Bitty relentlessly teasing his prostate.

“I think I know why the girls were always whispering about me after we practiced couples skating. I’ve definitely never had this problem before,” Bitty says, stifling a laugh. “Not that it’s a problem, sugar. Far from it…”

Bitty spins in his arms to face him, a sweet smile on his face. “How do you feel?” he asks, wrapping his arms around Jack’s neck and sliding a thigh between his legs.

They’ve been talking like this a lot, checking in on Jack’s anxiety, comparing it day by day in an effort to keep track of his symptoms. Jack thinks it might be working, because he doesn’t feel anxious at all right now and has no qualms about telling Eric as much.

“I feel good,” he says simply, his smile audible. Jack’s grip on Bitty’s waist tightens, dragging him in impossibly closer. He can feel Eric’s hardness against his hip and sucks in a breath when it grinds into him. Biting his lip, Jack lets his hands slip lower, cupping Bitty’s ass as he leans down
for a kiss.

It’s hot, all tongue, and Jack finds himself dizzy with it. He feels his dick twitch in his pants and the realization that he can have this is almost enough to overwhelm him. Forgetting for a moment that they’re on ice, Jack bends his knees and lifts.

Bitty reacts immediately, squeezing Jack with his thighs instead of mauling them both with the blades of his skates.

Arms locked tight, Jack supports his weight, his wide hands covering all of Bitty’s ass and then some. Their kiss breaks off as they both start to laugh. Jack isn’t an expert on figure skates, so the motion makes them start to drift across the ice.

“I don’t think this hold is regulation, Mister Zimmermann,” Bitty teases, eyes going wide as they move.

Jack checks his grip and pushes against the ice, holding Bitty in the air as he skates to the side of the rink and sits Eric down on the wall. As soon as they’re stable again, Jack’s hands are back on Bitty, cupping his face and gripping his waist. Their mouths meet and for a few minutes, Jack can ignore the pulsing pressure in his pants.

But then Bitty says, “Do you want to go back to your place?” and all of Jack’s self-restraint goes out the window. He nods and lets out a breath, trying to center himself. How does anyone get anything done if this happens all the time, he wonders.

Chapter End Notes

In case you were wondering, in addition to "Dear Future Husband," Bitty also skates to "Praying" by Kesha and "Classic" by MKTO, which can be found on the Skating playlist if you click the Spotify link. More skating to awesome pop hits to come later!
Chapter Notes

I know some of you have been very patient waiting for the crux of this fic to happen, and I'd like to say thank you! It's been a long journey and you've been very kind in letting me torture you for so long, but it's not quite time yet! Can I appease you with an entire chapter of porn? No? Well, I'm going to try anyway!

I'm struggling with whether or not to break this fic up into a multi-part series because I found a somewhat satisfying conclusion at the end of Chapter 35 (or so) but still have tons of plot I'd like to cover. That would leave a lot of little plot threads unresolved until the next installment and I'm not sure how I feel about that. The climax of this story is really emotional for me and I might need a wee bit of a break to focus on other projects before coming back to this for a second fic. Let me know what you think! Your comments and kudos are very much appreciated! Much love and kinky sex to all of you faithful readers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As quickly as they can, Jack and Bitty get back to the bench and yank off their skates, trading kisses every few seconds when they can’t stand to be apart any longer. The drive home is excruciatingly long. Jack softens from the lack of contact and starts to worry that he won’t be able to get his erection back once it’s gone, but then Bitty slides a hand onto his thigh and all those thoughts fly out of his head.

They dart through the door, giving a quick nod to Leonard who laughs as they race through the lobby. Once they’re in the elevator, Jack crowds Bitty up against the wall, clenching a hand in Bitty’s hair as he devours his mouth.

Eric hitches one thigh up, making room for Jack in between his legs as Jack’s large form presses him into the corner. “Oh my God, Jack,” he moans when he starts to trail kisses down Bitty’s throat. “I don’t know how you can even walk like that. Fuck, you feel huge against me.”

Jack knows people throw that kind of flattery around a lot. He’s heard plenty of it in the locker room over the years—West’s recent comments a notable example—but coming from Bitty, he doesn’t mind it as much. Even though he can’t always get hard, it’s nice to know that what he does manage is something that Bitty appreciates.

Hands reach for his ass, pulling him in until they’re rubbing together. Eric moans into his ear, kneading his ass and hitching his hips ever closer. It’s a heady feeling, knowing what he’s doing to Bitty. Jack has never really felt sexy before.

When the elevator dings, they barely part. Eric grabs his hand and pulls him to the door, plastering himself to Jack’s back as he fumbles for his keys. “Open the door, Jack. I want you to fuck me,” he whispers into Jack’s ear.

“Tabarnak,” Jack groans, scraping the key against the lock as he struggles to fit it inside. It feels like a bad metaphor and the thought distracts him even further. Bitty grinding against his hip doesn’t help much either. Finally, Jack gets the door unlocked and darts inside.
As soon as Bitty slides in beside him, Jack reaches above his head and pushes the door closed. He ducks down for a kiss and grabs Bitty, lifting him up in the air. To his credit, Bitty reacts immediately, wrapping his legs around Jack’s back and his hands in Jack’s hair.

Jack kisses him deeply, sucking on Bitty’s bottom lip and teasing it with his teeth. Their breath sounds loud in Jack’s ears as they melt into each other. Jack steps forward letting the wall and his hips take Bitty’s weight, pressing them together as he reaches for the hem of Bitty’s shirt.

He pulls it off when Bitty raises his arms, their mouths finding each other after only a moment apart. “Yours too,” Bitty says, yanking at the collar of Jack’s flannel shirt.

It takes a bit of maneuvering, but Jack gets the shirt off and balances Bitty on one knee as he pulls off his tee as well. They’re chest to chest now and Jack can feel Bitty’s body heat against him. Bitty clutches at his shoulders, squeezing and kneading the muscles there as they continue to kiss. He presses in with his hips, happy to feel an answering hardness from Eric.

“Can you feel that?” Jack asks, honestly not sure if what he’s feeling is true.

“Yeah, baby,” Bitty breathes, eyes bright as he nods. “You’re so hard for me. Now what are you going to do about it?” he asks.

Jack doesn’t think, he just acts. Wrapping his arms around Bitty’s back, he braces himself and pulls Bitty away from the door, carrying him toward the bedroom.

“Mister Zimmermann,” Bitty exclaims, tightening his arms around Jack’s neck. “What has gotten into you?”

“I don’t know, but I like it,” Jack says, kicking open the bedroom door and laying Bitty down on the bed. The sheets are clean and cool to the touch. Bitty’s skin looks soft and golden against the white cotton when Jack pulls back to take in the view.

“Were you serious about what you said?” Jack asks, nuzzling into Bitty’s shoulder, kissing at his throat. “Do you want me to…”

“Yeah,” Bitty says, arching into Jack’s touch. “I know we’ve never done that before… but I’d really like to. And I know you normally prefer the other way, but since it looks like a possibility tonight... I think we should go for it. What do you think?”

“Yes, please,” is all Jack can manage. He shivers at Bitty’s touch. Cool fingertips trace down the midline of his back and land on the waistband of his pants. A moan escapes his lips when Bitty squeezes his ass, pulling him in. He can’t remember the last time he’s been hard in his sweatpants long enough to frot against someone.

Bitty turns his head and reaches up for a kiss, rocking rhythmically up into Jack’s erection. “I’m going to need some time before I can take all that, sugar. Do you want to help?” Bitty asks between kisses.

Jack nods, still kissing Eric. When he opens his mouth to say yes, Bitty deepens the kiss, sucking on his tongue and stealing his breath. By the time they break apart, Jack is hard as a rock and aching. “Now?” he asks, worrying how long he’ll be able to hold on to his arousal, if it will last long enough for him to get inside Bitty.

“Yeah, now is good,” Bitty says, pushing on Jack’s chest until they can both sit up.

Jack stands and retrieves the lube from his bedside table, a new bottle that he has high hopes for,
and turns back to Bitty to find that he’s completely naked. His mouth falls open and he nearly loses his grip on the bottle. Bitty is hard and leaking, the head of his cock flushed and knocking against his stomach.

“Okay, baby,” Bitty says, patting the mattress next to him. “Come on over here with that.”

“Uhhh… ouais,” Jack says, hurrying to comply. He kneels between Bitty’s thighs and squeezes them with his palms, feeling the tight muscles there. The blond hair feels soft under his hands and he leans down to lick a trail from Bitty’s knee all the way to the crease of his thigh just to feel it on his tongue. Looking at his work he sees that Bitty’s hair is matted down and dark.

He likes the way Bitty squirms under his gaze, so he does the same to Bitty’s other leg, trailing his mouth down over his balls this time. “We could shower if you want to do that,” Bitty offers, a blush riding high on his cheeks.

“I don’t mind,” Jack says. “I like how you smell.”

“Oh, Lord,” Bitty whines, gripping the sheets with his hands. “I don’t believe you but I don’t really care.”

Smirking, Jack ducks down and traces the crease of Bitty’s thigh with the tip of his tongue. Bitty squirms again, making a high pitched noise in his throat so he keeps at it, spreading his thighs with his hands and digging his fingers into the muscles there. “Would you turn over for me?” he asks, lowering his voice the way he knows Eric likes.

Bitty’s eyes go wide but he doesn’t protest when Jack gently nudges his hip and he quickly flips onto his stomach. He reaches for a pillow and buries his face in it, arms nestled underneath. The embarrassed flush that was on his face colors his neck and spreads down over his shoulders.

Hockey players are known for having strong quads and large assets and as a figure skater, Bitty’s are no less impressive. Jack slips his thumbs under the cheeks and then lets go, watching them bounce as Bitty groans into the pillow. He massages the flesh, spreading Bitty apart with his thumbs and breathing over Bitty’s exposed hole.

Jack has never done this before. He never topped for Kenny either, who would only tolerate a finger in his ass if Jack was blowing him. It’s so foreign that when he flicks his tongue over the tight bud, he’s surprised to find that he likes it. Bitty is so responsive and feels like velvet under his tongue; it’s a sensation Jack never could have imagined.

He delves deeper, pressing in with broad licks. Bitty is musky, the salt of their earlier exertion sharp on Jack’s tongue, and Jack finds himself craving more. He chases the tingling sensation all the way inside Bitty until he reaches the scorching heat of his core. He makes a point and darts inside, sucking at the rim with his lips as Bitty moans above him.

“Is this okay?” he asks, pulling back for a moment to wipe his chin.

Bitty’s back arches as he lifts his head. “It’s better than I expected, actually. I thought it would be weird.”

“Can I keep going?” Jack asks, licking his lips and squeezing Bitty’s ass.

“You actually like doing that, don’t you?”

“Uhh, yeah?” Jack says, blushing furiously. “Is that bad?”
“Not at all, sweetpea,” Bitty says, giving him a shy smile. “You do whatever makes you happy.”

Jack smiles back and presses a hand down on Bitty’s shoulder until he’s laying back down. He spends several minutes working Bitty over, listening to every noise and feeling every shiver. By the time he pulls back again, Bitty is shaking all over and his hole is puffy and glistening.

It’s clear that Bitty is affected. Sweat shines in the curve of his back and Jack reaches up to wipe it off. The motion makes Bitty jerk under his hand and Jack does his best to soothe him back down. “Want me to keep going?” he asks, not sure how much more Bitty can take.

“I think I might come if you keep doing that,” Bitty says, voice raspier than Jack has ever heard it.

“And that’s a bad thing?” Jack teases, ducking down to press his tongue in once more.

“Honestly, Jack. Don’t toy with me right now,” Bitty whines, jumping when he feels Jack enter him. “I don’t want to tighten up. You’ll never get inside.”

Jack ignores him for a moment, flicking his tongue and sucking with his lips. One day he’ll do this for an hour until Bitty comes apart, but today he allows himself just a few more seconds of feeling that muscle flutter under his tongue before pulling back.

Ready to move things along, Bitty flips over immediately once he’s released. His cock bobs against his stomach, leaving a sticky trail of precum across his abs.

Jack stares at it for a second before lunging forward to lick the fluid from Bitty’s stomach. The taste is bitter on his tongue, but Jack chases it back to the source, swirling his tongue around the head and sucking just a little to get the last of it.

“Jack, honey,” Bitty says, breathless. He’s looking down at Jack, supported by his forearms. “Get your fingers in me right now or I’m going to smack you.”

“It’s been enough dates by now,” Jack says, licking a stripe up Bitty’s cock. “I think spanking is fair game at this point.”

“Don’t tempt me, Mister Zimmermann.”

Jack smirks, feeling a twitch in his underwear at the thought. If he’s not mistaken, he’s still at least semi-hard. It seems like such a silly thing to do, but Jack reaches down to check. He grabs his crotch, and Bitty’s eyes go wide.


“I thought I was supposed to be fingering you,” Jack muses, still squeezing his cock. It’s not hard like Bitty’s, but it’s more than he expected while still on 20mg of his meds.

“You can finger me with your pants off,” Bitty says, exasperated. “I want to see you like this.”

It takes him a minute, but Jack gets off the bed and pulls his sweats down. When he looks at himself, he’s actually filling out his tight boxer-briefs. It feels good and Jack can’t help the smug smile that crosses his lips. Maybe he could do a body issue now without embarrassing himself. As long as Bitty was in the room, that is.

He slips his underwear off and kneels on the bed, smiling as Bitty’s honey brown eyes fixate on his dick.
“Wow, just look at you,” Bitty says, leaning forward to take Jack in his hand. “I can’t wait to get this inside me.”

“Tabarnak,” Jack hisses when Bitty’s cold fingers close around his dick. “Your hands are always so cold!”

“I’m trying to warm them up!” Bitty laughs, squeezing Jack’s hot flesh.

“We’re supposed to be working on you right now,” Jack protests, reaching for the bottle of lube.

Bitty spreads his legs invitingly and Jack slicks his fingers, warming up the liquid for a few moments before reaching below. It feels better than Jack remembers, letting his finger sink into Bitty’s warmth. Bitty’s relaxed from Jack’s tongue and he can easily switch to two fingers.

A small gasp escapes Bitty’s lips and his fingers clench down on Jack’s dick in surprise. “Does that feel good?” Jack asks, unsure of himself.

“Yeah, baby,” Bitty breathes, rocking his hips down to sheathe Jack’s fingers fully. “You can do more.”

“You’re sure?” he asks, reaching for the lube again and adding more.

“Yeah, your mouth was a good warm up,” Bitty says, his laugh breaking off into a moan when Jack adds a third finger.

“I’m going to do that longer next time. You felt so good shivering on my tongue like that.”

“Good Lord, Jack. You can’t just say shit like that,” Bitty whimpers.

Jack crooks his fingers and finds that special spot inside Eric. When he brushes against it, Bitty’s eyes flutter closed. “Is that good?” Jack asks again, trying to be as observant and patient as Bitty has always been with him.

“Fuck, yes,” Bitty says, clenching down on his fingers in punctuation. “I think one more maybe.”

“Really?” Jack asks, unsure. His fingers are large and three already seems like enough. He spreads them, just to be sure and Bitty’s hole clenches down painfully tight around him.

“I don’t think you appreciate the size of your cock, Jack,” Bitty says, stroking him. “Just go slow until I can take your fingers and then it won’t hurt when you get inside me.”

“If you’re sure,” Jack says, adding even more lube to his hand, because he’s read that there can never be too much. He tries to fold his hand to cut down on the stretch but pulls back when Bitty freezes. “Are you okay?” he asks. As far as he’s concerned, his pinky is never going to make it inside.

“Yeah,” Bitty pants, eyes closed. “Maybe that was a little too much.”

“We can stop,” Jack says, starting to slowly slip his fingers out of Eric.

“No,” Bitty protests, immediately dropping his hips to keep Jack’s fingers inside. “We’re not stopping, just waiting.”

Jack’s eyebrows furrow, but Bitty just strokes his cock and leans forward to kiss him. Soon enough, Bitty is rocking down onto his hand as he sucks on Jack’s tongue. It’s comfortable. His erection doesn’t feel urgent, but Bitty’s hand is keeping him hard. After a few minutes, Bitty is
just panting into his mouth, his thighs shaking with the effort of fucking himself on Jack’s fingers.

“Let me help,” Jack says, pressing in deep with his hand and letting Bitty lie back. “You’re getting tired.”

“I think I’m ready,” Eric says. There’s sweat collecting at his brow again. The blond swoop of his hair is plastered to his forehead and his fat cock looks so hard it hurts.

Jack nods mutely, reaching for the lube one more time to slick his cock. When he removes his fingers, Bitty doesn’t close up all the way. Jack can’t help but stare for a moment.

“Come on, honey,” Bitty says, reaching behind his knees to hold himself open. “I want you.”

“Sacrament,” Jack curses, looking between Bitty’s hole and his face. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I’ll tell you if it hurts,” Bitty assures him, licking his lips. “I promise.”

“Okay,” Jack says slowly, taking his own cock in his hand and angling it toward Bitty’s hole. It’s still mostly hard, but he’s nervous it won’t last. Maybe the trick is to get inside quickly and get Bitty off before he has the chance to go soft.

Easing forward slightly, he presses until the head pops in. “Oh my God,” Bitty practically screams. “This might be over kind of fast,” he adds quickly, bearing down so Jack can slip a little further inside.

“That’s okay,” Jack says. He doesn’t have much recent experience to go on, but from what he remembers, sex doesn’t always have to be a long, drawn-out process. Not everyone needs as much stimulation as he does to get off. In truth, Jack is praying that’s the case because he doesn’t know how long he’ll be able to keep it up. “Do whatever feels good for you.”

“Just go slow,” Bitty reminds him.

Jack nods and presses in a little further. He can see the tension course through Eric’s body. His abs are shaking with exertion as he holds his knees up, almost folding himself in half.

“Oww, hold on,” he says, dropping his head to the pillows as he fights to adjust to the stretch. “I need a second.”

“Okay,” Jack says, holding himself as still as he can. “Just tell me when.”

Bitty takes almost a full minute, breathing deep and squeezing down on Jack so tight it almost hurts. Finally he nods and Jack inches his way inside, marveling at the heat and the pressure around his cock.

He pauses for a second to adjust his grip on Bitty’s hips and hears, “Is that it?”


“Is that all of your dick, Jack? Because I don’t know if I can hold out much longer.”

“Uhh…” Jack starts, frowning as he looks down. “That’s like…. half? Maybe a little more than half?” he adds, though that’s being generous. It never looked so big to Jack, especially not in his own hands, but in comparison to Bitty’s hole, there’s just a lot of him left.

“You’re kidding,” Bitty whines, hands clenched in the sheets.
“No,” Jack says, still frowning. “Want me to just do this half?”

“No, silly,” Bitty says, shoulders shaking as he fights not to laugh. “What kind of a question is that? I do not want just the tip. I want the whole thing.”

“Okay…” Jack says, reaching his hand down to wrap around Bitty’s dick. “I’m going to distract you a bit, but still tell me if it hurts too much.”

He strokes slowly, from root to tip, watching Bitty’s face intently as he slowly rocks his hips in and out. Eric lets out a slow, shaking exhale and Jack takes that as a good sign. Still working with just the first half of his dick, he finds a slow rhythm, matching his hand with his hips.

It feels good, so tight and hot around him, but Jack isn’t feeling that squirm of pleasure in his stomach that means he’s working toward orgasm. He feels so confused by the conflicting information. Isn’t this supposed to be the best thing ever? He doesn’t want Bitty to think he’s not good enough for Jack, but what if fucking Bitty isn’t enough for him to come? Is Bitty going to feel like a failure?

Pulling him from his thoughts, Eric lets out a low whimper. His eyes are closed, head thrown back against the pillows, the arc of his beautiful neck on display. Leaning down, Jack plants his other hand on the bed and changes the angle.

Immediately, Bitty arches his back, his eyes flashing open. “Keep doing that,” he pants.

Jack stretches just a little bit further until he can get his mouth on Bitty’s collarbone. He sucks a mark there as he works his hips closer. When Bitty doesn’t complain, he releases his dick and uses both hands to support himself, stroking inside deeper. “Is that okay?” he asks, lips brushing the bruise he’s just made on Bitty’s throat.

“Fuck. Yeah, baby,” Bitty breathes, turning his head until they’re close enough to kiss. “That’s good.”

“Can I do more?” Jack asks. He’s used to getting feedback on the ice, will always strive to perform as well as possible. He just needs a little direction. “Tell me what you want.”

“I can take more,” Bitty tells him, eyes widening in shock as Jack pushes a little bit further inside.

Bitty releases his legs and wraps them around Jack’s waist instead. Now his hands are free to tangle in Jack’s hair, pulling him in as they kiss and kiss and kiss. It’s sloppy as Jack rocks above him, moving in and out of his reach, but that only makes Bitty moan more around his tongue.

Adjusting his hands, Jack changes the angle just slightly and Bitty screams out. “There! Right there!” he says against Jack’s mouth.

Jack ducks his head, biting kisses along Bitty’s throat as he moves in and out, lengthening his strokes inside. “Okay,” he says a minute later when their hips are pressed together. “That’s all of it.”

“F-fuck, Jack,” Bitty moans, voice stuttering as he lets out a shaky breath. “You’re so good. So hard for me.”

He nods, not even sure if Bitty is giving him the truth. It’s so difficult for him to tell. Jack can feel the pressure in his groin, but it’s never what he expects. He wonders if anyone else has this problem, this burning sensation that builds until it hurts, almost like the scrape of nails inside his stomach. He wonders if anyone else worries they’ll accidentally pee in their partner.
Jack has no idea what is happening in his own body, but is determined for Bitty to enjoy himself. “I love you,” he says, smiling when Eric pushes the sweaty hair off of his forehead.

“I love you too, sugar,” Bitty says, pecking him on the mouth. “Now fuck me.”

“Okay,” Jack says. It’s always easier to get out of his head when Bitty tells him what to do. Now that he’s free to use his full range of motion, Jack fucks Bitty in earnest, head bowed low as he concentrates on moving his hips.

Eric’s thighs tighten around him and pull him in deeper. Jack responds immediately, shortening his strokes until he almost never leaves Bitty’s body. He can tell the moment he finds the right angle because Eric’s hand tightens in his hair and yanks his head up. “Don’t stop. Right there, baby.”

There are tears in Jack’s eyes. The shocking pain of his hair being pulled narrows his focus to Bitty’s face. They lock eyes and Jack pumps his hips, speeding up until Bitty starts moaning, mouth open.

“Fuck, Jack,” he says again, and Jack shudders. He loves the sweet little pet names that Eric uses with him, especially in bed, but there’s something about his name said just like that. It makes Jack’s dick twitch even while it’s deep inside Bitty’s body. “You’re so good. So perfect for me, honey.”

Sweat drips off of Jack’s hairline and creeps into his eyes. He closes them for a moment and lets himself get lost in the sensation. Bitty has one hand on his shoulder, fingernails digging into his back. The other hand is still clenched in Jack’s hair, fingers pulling every time Jack rubs past his prostate. His thigh muscles are quivering against Jack’s hips, the ankles crossed behind him so he can never get too far away. Everything about it is excruciatingly perfect, tight in all the right places.

Jack watches a bead of sweat trail down Bitty’s throat. He leans down to follow it with his tongue, only to be pulled back hard by the hair. “Don’t you dare move,” Bitty says, squeezing down hard on his dick.

He bites back a moan, but does as Bitty says, keeping his head up and his eyes open, watching Eric’s eyes intently.

“There you are,” Bitty rasps, stroking his hair now. “Stay with me. Are you close?” he asks, breath hitching in his throat when Jack rams back inside.

“Non,” he whimpers, not knowing what he’s doing wrong. Jack’s trying to be present in the moment, to feel every inch of Bitty, but somehow it’s still not enough. The friction is starting to grate on him and his arms are tired even though he should be able to hold this position for much longer than a few minutes. Tears prickle in the corners of his eyes as he starts to doubt every movement.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” Bitty says, petting his hair. “I’m not upset. Everything is fine.”

Jack shakes his head. He feels like he’s falling apart. His hips stutter and then stop as his arms give out. He collapses on top of Bitty, still buried deep inside his body. “I’m sorry,” he mutters into Bitty’s throat. “I’m squishing you.”

“I don’t mind being squished by you, sweetpea,” Bitty says, voice soft in Jack’s ear. “I’m just going to hold you until you stop shaking and then we’re going to try something else, alright?”
Jack didn’t realize he had been shaking, but now that Bitty’s mentioned it, he can’t make himself stop. “I’m sorry,” he says again, the deep heat of shame spreading through him. “I’m sorry I can’t do this for you.”

“It’s alright,” Bitty says, pressing kisses to Jack’s hairline. “It’s all fine. I love you. Every bit of you, even this. Okay?”

“Okay,” Jack says, trying not to sniffle. He feels overwrought, like he’s just run an emotional marathon. Snot is dripping out of his nose and he must be soft by now, but he’s still inside Bitty.

“How about you roll over with me,” Bitty suggests, smiling softly when Jack lifts his head. “Now that I’ve got you in me, I don’t really want to let you go, alright?”

“Really?” Jack asks, attempting to wipe at his face with numb fingers. “It’s still good for you?”

“Lord, you have no idea, sugar,” Bitty says, combing a hand through his sweaty hair. “I think we’ll probably stick to you on the bottom in the future, but there is no denying this,” he lowers his voice until Jack is hanging on his every breath. “You have a perfect cock.”

Jack can’t help but laugh. His chest heaves with it and Bitty joins in.

“I’m serious,” he says, cupping Jack’s cheek. “It takes some working up to, but your dick is completely unbelievable. How about you let me ride it, huh?”

“Oh fuck,” Bitty says when he lands on top of Jack. “That’s a sensation I’ll never get used to.”

“I’m just glad I didn’t break you,” Jack replies, painfully aware of how sweaty he is now that his back is pressed to the sheets.

“I don’t break that easy, honey,” Bitty says, smirking as he lowers his hips and starts pressing into Jack’s body.

The change is immediate. Letting Eric take the more active role takes some of the pressure off Jack and lets him focus on the sensations. His hands clench around Bitty’s hips as they rock together, slow and easy.

Bitty looks amazing like this. His stomach is flat and tight and Jack swears he can almost see himself moving inside as the muscles there flutter.

“Is that better?” Bitty asks after a few minutes.

Jack can’t do much more than nod. He’s breathing through his nose, trying to focus on the heat coiling inside his stomach. It’s a subtle sensation, but at this point, Jack will take whatever he can get. He’s still just hoping that Bitty is having a good time.

Once he’s got his bearings, Bitty starts bouncing harder on Jack’s dick, one hand wrapping around his own cock. “Fuck, you feel so good,” he says, balancing himself on Jack’s stomach with one hand. His nails dig in again, sinking into the crevice of Jack’s abdominals. The sharp bite of pain is electric and Jack can feel himself twitch with interest.

Jack looks up to find that Bitty has his eyes closed. He’s bouncing in Jack’s lap, back arched, nails digging into Jack’s skin as he strokes his cock with one hand. Thinking it can only help, Jack
reaches up and wraps his own hand around Bitty's, tightening his grip. Jack’s hand is so large it offers a bigger sleeve for Bitty to fuck into.

They find a rhythm and eventually Bitty starts moaning again, his eyes still squeezed shut. Jack redoubles his effort, getting his feet under him and pressing up off the bed. Bitty meets him on every upstroke, fucking down hard onto Jack’s cock.

“Fuck,” Bitty moans, eyes flashing open. “Keep doing that.”

Jack doesn’t need to be told twice. He squeezes his glutes and jerks upward again and again until his motions are so wild Bitty almost gets thrown off.

“Oh my God,” Bitty groans, tossing his head back. He releases his dick and scrambles for purchase on Jack’s stomach, digging in the nails of both hands now. “I think I’m going to come.”

“Ouais,” Jack pants, tightening his hold on the widest part of Bitty’s dick and jerking it quickly. “Please.”

“Are you okay?” Bitty asks, still bouncing wildly in Jack’s lap.

“Yeah,” Jack says softly, eyes focused on the pulse in Bitty’s throat. “I don’t need to come. I can’t like this.”

“Okay,” Bitty says, licking his lips. “Okay, we’ll work on that after.”

Jack nods and thrusts up hard, so hard he thinks he might be hurting Eric, but Eric just moans loudly, eyes fluttering closed. His entire body tightens, clenching painfully around Jack’s cock and then he erupts, coating Jack’s hand and stomach with thick ropes of come.

The heat of it is intense as it hits Jack’s skin and all he can think of is how he wishes they did this more, Bitty coming all over him, painting him with burning streaks of white. He takes a moment to imagine what it would feel like all over his face, dripping down his cheeks and tells himself he’ll ask Bitty for that next time. For now, he contents himself with licking Bitty’s release off his hand.

“Fuck,” Bitty says, muscles going limp as he collapses onto Jack’s chest. “That was intense. How do you skate after we do that?”

“It’s my job,” Jack says as Bitty giggles. “But it’s definitely hard sometimes.”

“Speaking of which,” Bitty says, raising his eyebrows. “You’re still hard.”

“I am?” Jack asks.

“Can you not feel it?” Bitty asks, eyebrows furrowing in confusion.

“I mean it kind of… burns? For lack of a better word. Almost like I need to pee, but not really? It feels really weird,” Jack says honestly. He knows it’s probably not what someone wants to hear, but it’s the truth.

“Huh,” Bitty says. “Maybe we should ask Blaire about it. Does it hurt?”

“Kind of? It hurts but it also feels good. Like you’re scratching an itch but not quite,” Jack adds, wondering if he sounds completely insane.

“Do you still want to come?” Bitty asks, slipping off of Jack with a wince.
“I’m sorry I couldn’t come in you,” Jack says. He’s purposefully not answering the question because he honestly doesn’t know the answer. He’s exhausted but still wound up tight. “I know that’s what you wanted.”

“That doesn’t matter, sweetheart,” Bitty says, leaning down to peck Jack’s lips. “I just want you to feel as good as I feel.”

“Can you come on my face next time?” Jack asks. He doesn’t mean to say it, but the words slip out in a rush.

“Whatever you want,” Bitty says, smiling down at him. “But let’s get you satisfied first. I am not getting it up for you again tonight.”

“Okay,” Jack says. He wonders if other couples talk about this in bed, or if it’s only him and Bitty that have so much trouble getting on the same page.

“I don’t think you can come without something in you,” Bitty says, tweaking one of Jack’s nipples. “Do you agree?”

“Umm, yes?” Jack says, heart racing as he watches Bitty move down his body.

“Maybe we should get you some toys later to help with that, but for now how about my fingers?”

“Please,” Jack says, immediately spreading his legs.

Bitty smiles up at him. “You really are the perfect little bottom, aren’t you?”

“Ouais,” Jack says, biting his lip. Maybe he’s supposed to feel embarrassed about it, but right now all he wants is for Bitty to open him up and own him.

“Nothing little about it, is there?” Bitty teases, cupping Jack’s ass. “You’re so fucking sexy, Jack. I can’t believe all this is for little ol’ me,” Bitty says, stroking down Jack’s chest to his abs and then over his still—remarkably—hard cock. “You are beautiful.”

“Please,” Jack says again, nearly vibrating now that all of the attention is back on him.

Bitty reaches for the lube and slicks up his fingers, rubbing them around Jack’s entrance. “I love you like this,” he says, slipping his first finger in. “So eager for me.”

“Câlisse,” Jack curses. Just one of Eric’s thin fingers feels so good inside him. He can’t believe that this is what he was missing all along. “More, please.”

“You just ask so nicely, sugar,” Bitty says, sliding in a second finger. “It drives me crazy.”

Jack accepts him readily, tossing his head back as he sinks into the sensation. He doesn’t know how, they haven’t done this in weeks, but he’s already dying for more. The stretch feels good, but not enough. Today, Jack feels insatiable.


Hearing his name makes Jack want to beg for more, so he does. “Please, Bits. More, please!”

“Already?” Bitty asks, but complies, adding a third finger and stretching them wide. “Wow, Jack,” he says, low and reverent. His eye are wide as he looks down at Jack’s hole and then up to his cock. “You’re so hard. Look at you.”
He does. Jack looks down and sees that he’s hard and leaking, his cock twitching and bobbing away from his body.

“Do you think you can take more?” Bitty asks, voice soft with wonder.

“Ouais,” Jack says, “s’il vous plaît.”

Nodding seriously, Bitty adds more lube and inches his fourth finger inside Jack. The stretch is intense, but nothing Jack feels he can’t handle. It makes the heat in his stomach grow, but this time it’s not painful, just pleasant.

“Tabarnak,” he mutters, arching his back and staring at the ceiling. “Tellement bon.”

“I’m sorry, darlin’, but I can’t understand you anymore,” Bitty says. “You’re going to have to speak English.”

“Quoi?” Jack asks, looking down at Eric who is still kneeling between his thighs, pumping his fingers in and out.

“You’re speaking French, sugar. I don’t know what you want,” Bitty says, shaking his head fondly.

Jack narrows his eyes, confused for a moment before Eric’s words sink in. “More, please,” he translates the words rushing through his mind. “I want more.”

“Jack,” Bitty says seriously, using his free hand to stroke Jack’s thigh. “That’s all four of my fingers. More is…. well… more is a whole lot more.”

“Ouais,” Jack says, nodding. He switches back to English when Bitty pinches his thigh. “Yes. That. Please.”

“Oh good Lord,” Bitty says, eyes going wide. “Are you sure about that? Don’t you have a game tomorrow?”

“I don’t care,” Jack says, staring back straight into Bitty’s eyes. “I want you.”

“Okay,” Bitty says. To his credit, his hands don’t shake when he reaches for the lube again, though Jack can see that he’s nervous. “Just let me know if you want me to stop.”

“Oh okay,” Jack agrees easily. He knows he might be biting off more than he can chew, but he can’t help himself. The desire is burning him like a river of liquid fire and all he wants is to feel every inch of Bitty’s hand slip inside him. He wants to feel it for days, to swallow it all and hold it tight, all the love that Eric can give, every last bit.

Testing the waters, Bitty uses the pads of his fingers to rub against his prostate. Jack’s dick twitches some more, leaking steadily onto his stomach.

Bitty stares at the pool of precome, licking his lips and then biting down. He reaches forward with his free hand and swipes through it, adding the fluid to the mess around Jack’s hole. When he squeezes some lube there as well, Jack jerks at the cold. “Sorry,” he says softly, coating his wrist. “I’m gonna push in now. Tell me if it hurts.”

“Ouais,” Jack says.

Bitty nods once and then tucks his thumb inside.
Jack tenses but it doesn’t hurt. He just feels so beautifully full. “Tabarnak!” he curses, breathing out hard as his body works to accept the intrusion.

“Is that okay?” Bitty asks, not understanding him. “Want me to stop?”

“Non,” Jack whimpers, pulling at his own hair with one hand. “No, it’s good. It’s so good.” Jack doesn’t know how he’s taking it, but Bitty’s patient with him, rocking his fingers and letting him breathe through the stretch. It goes on and on, the exquisite waves of pressure building inside him leaving him sweaty and breathless.

“Okay,” Bitty says, curving his fingers and rocking his hand until his knuckles are pressing inside. “This is the widest part, I think,” he says as his knuckles ease in and he reaches the fold of his thumb.

“Criss de câlisse de sacrament de tabarnak,” Jack rants as he’s stretched to his limit.

“Is that good?” Bitty asks, eyes wide as he struggles to keep his hand still. His bicep is flexed, arm practically shaking.

“Ouais,” Jack says, struggling with his English again. “Don’t stop.” The heat in his stomach is almost enough to hurt now, but it stays on just the right side of painful. His dick twitches again, still leaking steadily against his stomach.

It feels overwhelming and wonderful at the same time. Nothing has ever filled him the way Bitty is right now, not just his body but his entire being, all of his focus. In every possible sense of the word, Jack is full.

Bitty nods once more and pushes forward, eyes focused on Jack’s expression as his hand slips inside. “Okay?” he asks immediately, breathing out hard like he’s the one with a hand in his ass.

“Tabarnak,” Jack breathes, squeezing around Eric to test himself. “It’s okay,” he says when he doesn’t feel any pain. “It’s really good.”

“Wow, okay,” Bitty says, rocking his hand forward so his fingertips rub against Jack’s prostate again. “I can’t believe you just did that. You don’t do anything by halves, do you?”

“You’re supposed to give 110 percent all the time, Bits,” Jack says, groaning when Bitty presses down hard against that spot inside him. “It feels really good though. I’m not complaining.”

“I think that saying only applies to hockey,” Bitty protests.

“No,” Jack says, biting down hard on his bottom lip as Bitty rocks his hand. “I think it applies to everything.”

“Fuck, Jack,” Bitty says, staring down at where his wrist is stretching Jack’s hole. “You look amazing.”

“Yeah?” Jack asks, squeezing around his hand again.

“You have no idea,” Bitty says, curling his fingers in until he makes an actual fist. “Is that okay?” he asks Jack.

“Mmhmm,” Jack hums, letting his eyes fall closed as Bitty starts to work his arm.

“Do you think you can come like this?” Bitty asks.
“Umm, maybe?” Jack says again. It’s ridiculous. He has Bitty’s entire hand inside him and he still doesn’t feel the urgency of his erection. He’s sure he’s on his way to an orgasm, but it’s not pressing. It feels like it could be a leisurely journey, something he could take his time with.

“What if I do this?” Bitty asks, leaning forward to suck the tip of Jack’s dick into his mouth.

“Câlisse,” Jack shouts, arching his back. The dual sensation is startling. His hips rock up into Bitty’s mouth and his hand chases him, a relentless pressure inside, keeping him full.

Bitty sinks down lower and then bobs back up, swirling his tongue around the head of Jack’s dick. Jack’s hands fly into Eric’s hair, scrambling for purchase as his stomach drops like he’s on an elevator. The knuckles pound against his prostate as Bitty swallows him down, pulling back only when he starts to choke on Jack’s length.

“Ahh,” Jack shouts, his hips jerking up again. The pressure builds and his hands tighten in Eric’s hair. He can’t help it, he pushes Eric’s head down, chasing the sensation. The wet heat envelops him, Bitty’s throat constricting around his cock as he struggles for breath.

He’s about to apologize when Bitty draws his fist back, then presses in hard and twists. Jack actually screams this time when his orgasm takes him by surprise. His back arches off the bed as he floods Eric’s mouth. The release is so intense, Jack loses his breath and his vision whites out.

It’s only a second or two, but when he comes back to reality Eric is choking on his dick. “Oh, no! Bits!” he calls out, dropping his hips to the mattress. “Fuck, I’m sorry.”

Bitty gasps in air and then coughs to clear his throat. Come is bubbling up around the corners of his mouth and dripping down his chin. “I’m okay,” he says, voice like gravel. “It’s okay.”

Jack’s eyes are wide and frantic, roaming over Bitty’s face as he regulates his breathing. “I’m so sorry, Bits. I got lost there for a minute.”

“It’s really okay,” Bitty says, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “It was kind of hot, actually.”

“Really?” Jack asks, still worried for Bitty’s health and now his sanity.

“God, yeah,” Bitty says, licking the come from around his lips. “I like making you feel good.”

Jack’s stomach clenches again at the sight of Bitty covered in his come. His hole twitches and it becomes achingly apparent that Bitty’s hand is still inside him. “This is going to hurt, isn’t it?” Jack asks warily. He wishes he could keep Bitty inside him forever.

“Just squeeze down,” Bitty says, bracing Jack’s ass with his free hand as he wiggles his wrist free.

It slides out of Jack easily along with a trail of lube. Or at least that’s what Jack is hoping.

“It’s fine, honey,” Bitty says, patting Jack’s thigh with his clean hand as he wipes the other on the sheets. “We’ll clean up in a minute.” He presses a kiss to Jack’s stomach and trails them up over his chest and to his mouth, straddling his waist.

“Are you hard again?” Jack asks, feeling something nudging his stomach.

“Maybe?” Bitty says, blushing. “I told you it was hot. You can choke me with your dick any time.”
Jack licks his lips and Bitty grabs his cock, stroking slowly. “Can I blow you?” Jack asks, eyes trailing down to the dick that’s just an inch from his mouth. The buildup to his orgasm was so intense, he feels a little adrift without Eric’s hand in him. He wants to extend the intimacy, feel that fullness again in whatever capacity he can get it.

“I don’t think you need to,” Bitty says, speeding up his hand.

Rubbing his lips together, Jack reaches up and squeezes Bitty’s ass. He pulls Eric in until the head of his dick is resting against his bottom lip. “Come for me,” Jack says, lips brushing against Bitty. He wets his lips, chasing the precome as it smears around his mouth. “Please,” Jack begs, rubbing a finger around Bitty’s still-wet hole. He doesn’t even get to slip inside before Eric is tensing.

“Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck,” Bitty stutters, hips jerking hard as he comes over his fist. A few pulses make it to Jack’s face, painting his cheeks and dribbling over his lips. “Oh my God,” he says, attempting to wet his lips with a dry tongue. “You are unreal.”

Jack licks his bottom lip in a slow swipe, collecting what he can and swallowing it. It’s good, wonderful even, but he’s still hungry for more.

Bitty’s dick twitches one last time at the sight, a little bead of come leaking from the tip. Jack leans forward and licks it off, swallowing hard.

With a low moan, Bitty ducks his head and captures Jack’s mouth. Their tongues flick over each other, sharing the taste of Bitty’s release. It’s messy and sticky and a little funny when Bitty licks Jack’s cheeks in an attempt to clean him up.

“What are you, a cat?” Jack asks, chuckling when Bitty makes an affronted face.

“No,” Bitty says, settling his hands on his hips. “I’m your rabbit. I looked it up after you started saying it often enough that I could spell it right.”

“Mon lapin?” Jack asks, eyes twinkling as he stares at Eric.

“Yeah, that,” Bitty says, kissing him again. “I’m yours.”

“I love you,” Jack says against his lips, kissing him deeply once more.

“I love you, too,” Bitty agrees when they finally part. “Now let’s get in the shower. We are disgusting.”

“Okay,” Jack says, accepting the offer of Bitty’s hand as he leads him to the bathroom.

Once they step under the spray together, they’re quiet. Jack passes Bitty the shampoo and sits on the floor so Eric can wash his hair. They trade places and Jack massages the soap into Bitty’s grown out undercut, rubbing his fingers over his temples until Eric moans and leans his head back onto Jack’s shoulder.

Eric cleans Jack reverently, taking special care to wash all the sticky residue from Jack’s hole with careful fingers. Jack kisses Bitty slowly, pressing him against the shower wall, caging him in with his body. His dick gets half hard again, but he ignores it, knowing he’s more sated than he’s ever been. He can dream about Bitty filling him up some more when they get into bed. Right now, his boyfriend is worn out and deserves some rest.

It’s comfortable and romantic, even as Jack cleans the lube out of Bitty’s pubic hair and from under his fingernails. For a few minutes, there’s nothing in the world except the steam and Bitty’s heart
beating against Jack’s chest. They dry each other off slowly and change the sheets together like it’s happened a million times before.

Bitty hands him Señor Bun and wraps himself around Jack’s back. They fall asleep pressed together, clean and warm under the sheets, Bitty’s breath against Jack’s neck, one of Jack’s calves trapped between Bitty’s feet.

Chapter End Notes

Finally made good on those kinky tags, didn't I? Still a few left to cover though, don't you worry :P

Translation:
“Tabarnak,” he mutters, arching his back and staring at the ceiling. "Tellement bon."
"Fuck," "So good."

“Quoi?” Jack asks, looking down at Eric who is still kneeling between his thighs, pumping his fingers in and out.
"What?"
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Hi, everyone! I've decided to make this story into two pieces. This one is about 137k words right now. If you're keeping track that's 50k over what I anticipated, which should surprise no one, least of all me. I think this piece will end around chapter 35 if all goes to plan.

Short chapter today, but the next one is the one you've all been waiting for, so take heart!

Thank you so much for reading along and sticking with me through this journey. I can't tell you how overwhelmed I am by the response this story has gotten. It's certainly been a wonderful welcome into the fandom as an author!

Jack plays his home game against the Leafs and tries not to be disappointed that Bitty doesn’t show up. It’s been weeks and he still hasn’t found a good time to ask Bitty to nail down a timeline for coming out. He’s spoken to Georgia who assures him that they are ready and able to send out a press release whenever he gives the signal, but he just can’t do that without talking to Bitty. Jack knows what it feels like to lose control over your own story and he refuses to do that to Eric, no matter how it eats at him.

He leaves Providence on a Wednesday for a roadie and tells Eric that he’s welcome to stay, but he doesn’t. When Jack leaves the apartment, Bitty’s skates are gone and he knows his boyfriend won’t be back until he is. It’s hard, but Jack tries not to be frustrated. They haven’t been together that long and he knows it’s wrong to push, so he tries to learn to live with it. Just having Eric in private has to be enough.

It’s late Friday night. They’ve just won their game against the Devils and the Panthers are up next. Tater is out with the guys and Jack knows he should be sleeping but he just can’t stop thinking about Bitty and how desperately he wants to share him with the world.

It was Valentine’s Day last week and Jack knows Bitty was telling the truth when he said he didn’t care about celebrating, but Jack still feels bad about missing it for a roadie. Just once he wishes he could have been home and taken Bitty out for a nice dinner and played up the romance. Just once he wishes he could have given Bitty something he would actually keep and use. Even staying in with takeout and a movie would have been better than listening to Tater snore and wishing Bitty would just let Jack buy him an iPad so they could finally Skype before bed.

He’s just about to reach for his phone to write Eric an email when it starts to ring.

It’s Kent.

Jack freezes. He hasn’t spoken to Kent since the All-Stars game, hasn’t even gotten a text in the last month and a half. It seems Kenny actually listened to him for once and tried to give Jack his space. He hesitates, finger hovering over the screen before letting out a deep breath and accepting the call.
“Hello?” he asks.

“Hi,” Kent says, voice unusually soft. “I’m glad you picked up.”

“I didn’t really have a reason not to,” Jack replies, rolling onto his back to stare at the ceiling. “Is everything alright?”

“Yeah, I…” Kent trails off for a second. “Everything is okay. I just wanted to talk, I guess.”

“Okay,” Jack says. “What’s up?” He’s honestly curious. It’s been a long time since he and Kenny have had a normal conversation, one without sharp barbs or insults, one that didn’t end in Jack crying or gasping for breath.

“You um… you’re in love with that guy, right?” Kent asks.

Jack can feel his body tighten as he braces himself for impact. He’s nervous and doesn’t know where this is going, but he answers truthfully, trying to give Kenny the benefit of the doubt.

“You really am,” Jack says, hoping his voice doesn’t sound as transparent as he thinks it does. He knows he’s head over heels for Bitty, but he doesn’t need Kenny to know that.

“What’s it like?”

The words fall like pins, soft and quiet despite their weight. Jack swears he can hear Kenny holding his breath, expectant.

“Uhh…” Jack says when the silence grows uncomfortable. “I have no idea what to say to that.” He waits, but Kent doesn’t say anything else, just lets out a quiet little sigh. “It’s good, Kenny. It’s really good. He gets me and he’s got a huge heart. He’s sweet and kind and always wants to help people. He’s the best person I’ve ever met.”

“That sounds nice,” Kenny says. “I think he’s good for you.”

“He is,” Jack agrees. He’s dumbfounded. Kenny has never been this nice to him, even when they were dating. “We’re good for each other.”

“But he doesn’t want to come out?”

“No, not yet,” Jack says, wondering when he decided it was a good idea to confide in Kent like this. “He’s afraid of the press, I think. That they would bother him at work.”

“I think I might want to come out,” Kent says in a rush.

Jack freezes again. That was not what he was expecting when he answered Kenny’s call. “Okay,” he says.

“I want what you have,” Kent says after a long pause. “I don’t want to hide anymore.”

“That’s good, Kenny,” Jack says. He’s never heard Kenny sound so mature. “I think that could be good for you. I know I felt better when I wasn’t afraid of being found out.”

“I never apologized for that,” Kent says, voice low and somber. “I’m sorry. I never should have done that to you. I was so angry after you cut me out of your life. But I never should have said that. That was so wrong.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Jack says. “It wasn’t fair to blame you for everything that happened with me. It wasn’t your fault I overdosed. I’m sorry if you thought it was.”
“We really fucked that up, didn’t we?” Kent says, huffing out a dark laugh.

“Yeah,” Jack agrees, closing his eyes. “We really did. Can we be friends again?”

“I think I need a friend,” Kent says.

Jack can almost see the sad little smirk on his face when he says it. He wonders if Kent has anyone to talk to at all. Jack had therapy and his parents and then Shitty and Lardo, and now Bitty. By the sound of it, Kenny has been alone with his guilt for a long time.

“Bitty and I can be your friends,” Jack offers. He knows as soon as he says it that Eric will agree. Bitty would never let someone suffer. He’s sure once he explains the situation that Bitty will be baking Kent pies and calling him sugar.

“His name is Bitty?” Kent asks, laughing freely this time.

It sounds hoarse and disused. Jack hopes this isn’t the first time Kenny’s really laughed since they broke up, but he’s scared to think that it might be. Kent has always been good at hiding and putting on a brave face for the cameras. His bravado with the press is legendary, but Jack knows it’s all an act. There’s a sad, lonely boy hidden underneath, somewhere a mile down, still waiting for his father to come home and love him again. The thought makes Jack’s heart hurt.

“No,” he says, though there’s a smile on his face even as he issues his correction. “His name is Eric, but I call him Bitty. It’s his skating nickname.”

“He plays hockey?” Kent asks, tone brightening considerably. “He must be crazy fucking fast.”

“He was a championship figure skater,” Jack says, rolling onto his stomach and putting the phone on speaker. He’s relaxed and happy and spends a few minutes telling Kent about their adventures in couples skating, leaving out the sexy details, at least.

“Have you thought about when you want to come out?” Jack asks, turning the conversation back to Kent.

“No,” he says, voice echoing in the empty hotel room. “You’re the first person I’ve told. No one on my team knows.”

“Well, you should start with PR,” Jack says, knowing he wouldn’t have gotten through it at all without Georgia’s help. “Our assistant GM was great. She helped me organize everything and write up my statement. She talked it over with the owners and coaches and helped me when I wanted to tell the guys.”

“Okay,” Kent says, letting out a nervous breath. “This is really happening.”

“Only if you want it to,” Jack assures him. “Do it your way or not at all.”

“I won’t say anything about us,” Kent says quickly. “No one has to know.”

“I don’t mind,” Jack says, not even needing to think about it. “I’m sick of hiding too, and they all thought we were together anyway. I won’t deny anything if they ask. I’ve been thinking about telling the press about my overdose.”

“Shit, really?” Kent asks. “That’s a big difference from what you said last month.”

“Yeah,” Jack says, running a hand through his hair. “If they’re gonna talk about me, they should
probably have all the facts. I think it would help, you know... shed some light on the issue... the pressure the industry and the public put on athletes.”


Jack doesn’t say anything. He swallows down a few half-formed thoughts.

“It wasn’t just you,” Kent says eventually, filling the silence. “It wasn’t just you that overdosed, Jack. I mean, I know it was you, but I... I played a part in it. I know that now. So let me help you fix it. Please,” he adds when Jack still doesn’t say anything.

“Okay,” Jack answers finally. “Thanks, Kenny. That means a lot to me.”

“Maybe I’m not ready to go public yet, but I just... it feels good to tell someone, even if you already knew.”

“If you need a friend,” Jack says, calm for what may be the first time in his and Kenny’s relationship, “I’m here. I’ll be here for you.”

“I don’t like seeing you go it alone out there. Not when I know you’re not the only one. I could be taking the heat with you. I could try at least,” Kenny says, working up a stream of consciousness to rival Bitty’s nervous babble. “Maybe not yet, but soon. I know how bad your anxiety is and they’re hounding you so much. Soon... I’ll be able to help, I think.”

“Don’t make this about me, Kenny,” Jack says, though it feels like progress to know that Kent is thinking beyond himself. “Don’t rush yourself. When you’re ready, you’ll know.”

“You weren’t ready,” he says softly, remorse audible even a thousand miles apart. “You weren’t ready but I pushed you.”

“Don’t worry about that now. It’s over and done with. I don’t regret it,” Jack assures him.

“I’m sorry,” Kent says again, stronger this time. “I think I know what it feels like now.”

“I never wanted that for you,” Jack says, offering up the absolution that Kenny so desperately needs. “Even when I hated you, I still loved you. I never wanted to hurt you.”

“That’s what makes you the better man, Zimms. I have a lot to learn about loving people,” he says with a soft sigh. “Now enough with the heavy shit. Tell me more about your boy.”

“I’m not giving you deets,” Jack says, a small smile emerging.

“Tell me about his skating then. That’s a safe topic, right?”

“He’s fucking incredible, Kenny... You should see him someday...”

They talk for another hour until Tater finally stumbles into the room at midnight. Jack hangs up the phone and helps Tater get his shoes off and into bed. Then he opens an email and writes to Bitty.

Subject: Good News

Bitty,
Kent called me and it wasn’t a disaster. We talked for a long time and things are actually good now. He’s thinking about coming out and wanted to talk about it. Can you believe that? He promised not to say anything about our relationship, but I told him I didn’t want to lie anymore. I hope that’s okay with you. I know it’s out of my control, but I really don’t want you to be jealous. I don’t feel like that for him anymore, but I know a lot of people like to speculate about our friendship and I think it would feel good to be honest about it. Does that sound alright?

I told him all about you and he wants to meet up the next time he’s in town for a game. I think he really needs a friend. It sounded like he hadn’t talked about me to anyone. I know how messed up I would be right now if I didn’t have you or Shitty, so I told him we could all be friends together. I know that might be hard for you, but I really think it would be good for all of us. He needs to have someone in his corner, and I hope you’re okay doing that with me.

I love you and I am so grateful to have you in my life. I told him you’re the best person I ever met, and it’s true. I can’t wait to see you. Do you want to go skating again when I get back? How about we meet at the arena when I get home on Sunday? Does 8 p.m. work for you? I know that’s kind of late for me but I can’t wait to see you skate again, and maybe have a repeat of our night together. Well… maybe a little less this time. Tater teased me for skating funny for days the last time.

Have I told you lately how amazing you are? I love you so much,

Jack

Re: Good News

Jack,

Don’t be silly, of course, I’m not mad. Please ask that boy what his favorite type of pie is. I’ll see you at 8 on Sunday. I promise to be gentler with you next time, no matter what you ask me for. ;)

Love you too, sweetheart,

Bitty
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Okay. Deep breaths. Here we go.

Edit: This chapter is intense and I want to remind you all to check the tags if you're concerned about being caught off guard. If you think there's a tag that's missing, please let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack gets off the plane at the airport with a spring in his step. His figure skates are waiting for him in the back of his truck and it’s just a quick cab ride back to his apartment to shower and change before he’s driving to the arena.

It’s just past 8 when he makes it inside. Waving gleefully to Jerry, he rushes toward the ice expecting to see Bitty, but no one is there. Bitty is often late though, so Jack sits down to put on his skates and spends a few minutes warming up. He glides back over to the bench to check his phone. It’s 8:12 and there’s still no Bitty. There’s no email from him either.

He tries not to worry. Bitty often gets caught up at the shelter or misses the bus and has to wait for the next one. Jack skates slow circles around the rink and tries to clear his mind. He does thirty passes before allowing himself to look at his phone again. It’s 8:21 now.

By 8:30 he gets off the ice and hunts down Jerry to ask if he’s seen anyone. They check the bathrooms together but Bitty is nowhere. Heading outside, Jack stares at the street like if he looks hard enough Bitty will miraculously appear over the horizon. He checks the bus schedule on his phone and finds that even the later bus would get Bitty to the arena by 8:40.

It doesn’t.

When the clock reaches 8:46, Jack is fighting down panic. Bitty would have emailed him if he had to cancel. Something must be wrong. He leaves Jerry with his cell phone number and figure skates and jogs down the street in the direction of the shelter, looking around frantically. Maybe Bitty missed the bus entirely and started to walk?

It’s about six miles back to the shelter. That would take Bitty nearly two hours if he walked the whole way and it’s freezing out, bitterly cold even for late February. Even if he ran six-minute miles it would take Jack over a half hour to get there. He jogs back to the parking lot and gets in his truck, speeding down the street, keeping his eyes peeled for any sight of Bitty on the sidewalk.

A few minutes later he pulls into the shelter’s decrepit parking lot and runs inside, breathing hard. “Is Eric here?” he asks the woman sitting at the front desk.

“Who?” she asks, barely looking up from her magazine.


“Oh yeah, I know that kid,” she says, looking Jack up and down like he’s a crazy person. “He
“No, he’s not a…” Jack trails off. What’s the polite term for a person who sleeps at a homeless shelter? “He’s not homeless. He works here. Look, is there someone else I can talk to?”

“I’ll get the manager,” she says in an annoyed tone, “but I’m telling you, that boy does not work here.”

Jack waits for a minute, staring at his phone the entire time until the woman reappears with the manager. “Hi, I’m Jack Zimmermann,” he says, holding out his hand. “I think we met on Thanksgiving?”

“I know who you are,” the woman says, taking his hand. “What can I do for you, Mister Zimmermann?”

“I’m looking for Eric Bittle. He works here.”

“I know him,” the woman says, narrowing her eyes at Jack in confusion. “But he doesn’t work here. He stayed here with us on and off for most of the spring last year. Then he started to give up his spot when it got cold. I think some of the men his age congregate under the overpass near Pike Street. You might want to look there.”

“What?” Jack says. He hears the words, but they don’t seem to compute.

“I think your friend sleeps on Pike Street,” the woman repeats slowly, like Jack is an idiot.

“I…” Jack has a thousand questions. “Are you sure we’re talking about the same guy?”

“Little gay boy from Georgia? Been carrying around ice skates recently?” she says, holding her hand a little above her head. “About yay high? Freckles?”

“I…” Jack tries again. “There must be some kind of mistake.”

“I told that boy he was too sweet to be living out on the street. Especially not in the winter. But he insisted,” she says, shaking her head. “Ever since that big guy Dale knocked him around a few months ago he’s been sleeping somewhere else. He didn’t want any trouble.”

“Thank you,” Jack says, though he’s already moving toward the door.

“Hope you find him,” the manager calls back, waving goodbye. “That boy is too cute, must have gotten snatched up by someone a time or two,” Jack hears her mutter to the other woman. “Pretty face like that would have gotten put to work. Shame, isn’t it? We do what we can but we can’t save ‘em all.”

His blood runs cold.

Jacks gets back in the car, hands shaking, and drives to Pike Street. It’s across the river from the shelter, nearly two miles away and even further from Jack’s apartment and the rink. He parks on a side street and dives out of the car, rushing toward the overpass the women at the shelter mentioned.

A fire is lit underneath and there are a few tents pitched nearby along with several shopping carts and milk crates. When Jack gets closer he sees a couple of dirty faces and even more scowls. “Hi, I’m Jack,” he says, walking slowly forward, heart nearly pounding out of his chest. Some people look away, others stare. “Do any of you know a guy named Eric?”
“Yeah, I know him,” an elderly woman says from a few feet away. She’s sitting on an upturned bucket at the mouth of a tent. When Jack gets closer he sees that she’s wearing the gloves he gave Eric a month ago.

“Have you seen him today? He was supposed to meet me somewhere but he’s missing,” Jack says, trying to keep the panic out of his voice.

“He was here earlier,” she says, voice frail.

“How long ago did you see him?”

“Is he in trouble?” she asks, eyes narrowing. “That boy never did nothing wrong, I tell you. He’s sweet as pie.”

“No,” Jack says. “I’m just worried about him. I really need to find him. Can you tell me which way he went?”

“Left here a while ago,” she says. “Was already dark. Maybe about 5:30. We don’t really keep time around here.”

“Did he say where he was going?” Jack asks, panic rising in his throat. It’s past nine already.

“Was carrying that big bag. Probably going to the rink,” she says, shrugging her shoulders. “He’s real good at it, isn’t he? The skating?”

“Yeah,” Jack says, choking up. “He is really good.” Jack stares for a second too long and the woman curls in on herself under his gaze. “Thank you for your help. I’m going to find him now.”

She nods and ducks inside the tent before he turns and walks away.

Jack’s mind is reeling as he turns in the direction of the arena and starts running. He doesn’t want to believe it, but now that he has concrete evidence, all the little hints stack up into a huge pile of indisputable proof. It happens quicker than a flash, thoughts racing around his mind as they arrange themselves into a picture of what must be the truth.

Bitty never dresses appropriately for the weather. He always carries the same backpack with just a few items in it, one of which is his most prized possession. Bitty only has one or two changes of clothes and sometimes his hair is dirty like he hasn’t had the opportunity to bathe. He barely mentions his family and doesn’t seem to have any friends.

Jack runs harder, eyes scanning the street for any sign of his boyfriend. His breath comes in short gasps but he keeps pace, taking the most direct route to the arena and hoping that Bitty favors speed over safety, even though it breaks his heart. He’s not in the best neighborhood and Jack is terrified that something has happened to him.

To keep his focus, Jack goes back to his mental list. Bitty doesn’t accept anything from Jack that he knows he would want to give away. He never leaves his backpack at Jack’s apartment like he’s afraid he won’t be welcome back. His hair grows wild until he cuts it himself.

The more Jack thinks about it, the stupider he feels. He’s been so blind to it, seeing only what he wanted to see. Jack looks at every interaction he’s ever had with Bitty through a different lens. Shitty would be ashamed of him, how unaware Jack has been of his own privilege.

He’s furious with himself that he didn’t figure it out sooner. As he runs, he continues to list everything that could have pointed him to the right conclusion if he had been paying proper
attention.

Eric is too proud to take charity. He doesn’t want Jack to shower him with gifts but never offers to pay because if, God forbid, Jack actually accepted he wouldn’t be able to do it. He couldn’t afford to get a passport for Christmas and felt awkward around Jack’s parents because they inadvertently flaunted their wealth. Bitty has odd eating habits, sometimes stuffing his face and sometimes forcing himself to put down his fork and pick at his plate when other people are looking.

The next realization hits him like a ton of bricks.

Bitty doesn’t want to go public with him because the paparazzi would follow him back to Pike Street, to a fire and a group of dirty strangers under a highway overpass.

It makes Jack want to cry, the thought that every time Bitty left his apartment he was forcing himself to go hungry and sleep outside. All the while there was heat and a fridge full of food and a cozy bed waiting for him back at Jack’s place.

It’s infuriating.

Jack gave him a key, said he wanted him there all the time, and still Bitty was too proud to let Jack help him, too stubborn to tell him the truth.

He’s torn between sad and angry. Why couldn’t Bitty just tell him? Why would Eric rather freeze and starve than let Jack help him? Jack had been honest with Bitty about everything, even the horrible, devastating, embarrassing things and Bitty had never once reciprocated.

More so than that, he hid the truth. Bitty lied to him, let Jack’s limited view lead him down the wrong path and then kept him there with half-truths and avoidance. Eric played with his blind spots. He did it deliberately.

The betrayal stings. Jack would really like to get in a fight about it right now, but he can’t do that until he finds his stupid, talented, frustrating, beautiful, lying idiot of a boyfriend.

Jack makes a turn and keeps running. He doesn’t know what to do. Bitty could be anywhere. He pounds the pavement for twenty minutes, zigzagging through back roads and alleyways, hunting for any sign that Bitty has been there.

Out of breath and near tears, Jack pauses for a second and pulls out his phone. “Shitty?” he says as soon as the call connects. “I need you. Can you get to Providence?”

“What’s wrong?” Shitty says. “I can be there in an hour. 45 minutes if I break some laws. How bad is it?”

“Shitty?” Jack sobs, breath catching in his throat. “Break the laws.”

“Lardo and I will be right there. Do you want me to stay on the phone?”

“No,” Jack says, wiping his eyes. “No, I need to keep looking.”

“For Bitty?” Shitty asks instinctively, a jingling of keys telling Jack he’s already on his way out the door.

“Yeah,” Jack says, sniffing.

“Okay, you keep looking. We’ll be there soon,” Shitty says.
Jack hangs up without any further explanation. He shoves his phone in his pocket and starts running again. Another twenty minutes go by and Jack still can’t find anything. Growing weary, he slows to a walk, yellow sneakers squeaking on the damp pavement.

He presses his back to a brick wall and cries. His breath comes in short pants and he counts, trying to slow it down. Jack can’t afford to have a panic attack right now. Bitty needs him. He doesn’t know how he knows, he just does.

Somewhere… Bitty needs him.

The chill of the damp bricks seeps into his shirt and he pulls away, shivering. Taking a deep breath, Jack starts running again, serpentining through a few more blocks until he finds a dark alley. There’s a dumpster at the end and something sticking out behind it. He runs forward, terrified of what he thinks he’s about to find.

The sole of a familiar shoe catches his eye and when he passes the dumpster he finds Bitty in a heap on the ground, unmoving.

“Eric?” Jack cries, falling to the ground. “Oh my God, Eric!” There’s blood everywhere, splattered all over the pavement. Bitty is pale and still and balled up in a pool of dark red blood.

Jack falls to his knees in the sticky puddle and reaches out a hand to check Bitty’s throat. Hands trembling, he can’t feel anything. He curses and takes a deep breath, trying again. His fingers are shaking hard and all he can feel is the blood rushing in his own ears. Abandoning Bitty’s neck, Jack carefully turns him on his back and presses his ear to his chest instead. He holds his own breath and tries to listen, but he can’t be sure of what he’s hearing.

What good is he if he can’t even hear his own boyfriend’s damn heart beating? Bitty’s face is stark white and littered with wounds including a particularly bad looking split lip and gash on his forehead. Desperate, Jack puts a finger under Bitty’s nose and waits. Finally, he feels a little breath on his skin and laughs wildly.

Bitty’s breathing. If he’s breathing that means his heart is beating and he’s alive. Bitty’s alive.

Jack tries to think methodically, but his mind is racing. Bitty’s alive but there’s so much blood. It’s dark so Jack tries to use his sense of touch to find the source. He puts his hands on Bitty’s cheeks. They’re clammy and cold to the touch. He rolls Bitty’s head to check the back, but there’s no wound there so he trails his hands down Bitty’s body until he finds it.

Bitty’s worn checkered shirt is sticky and cold. Jack scrambles to unbutton it and wipes at the blood with his bare hands until he can see a puncture in Bitty’s skin, high on his abdomen.

It’s still bleeding freely and soon Jack’s hands are slippery with it. The scent of it fills his nose as it seeps through his fingers. He tries to apply pressure with his left hand while reaching for his phone with his right, but he can’t unlock the screen.

Hands still shaking, Jack wipes his right hand off on his pants and clears the screen on his chest before trying again. “Please, please, please,” he mutters as he unlocks it. “Stay with me, Bits.”

“911, what’s your emergency?” Jack hears in his ear.

“M-my boyfriend, he’s bleeding and unc-conscious. I think he’s d-dying,” he stutters, breath shallow.

“Where are you?” the voice asks.
Jack looks around. He can’t see a street sign but the dumpster has a restaurant name on it. “Behind Delmo’s,” he says, hoping that’s true. “There’s an alley and it’s dark and there’s a dumpster that says Delmo’s on it.”

“Oh, the voice says. “That matches your phone’s location. I’m sending an ambulance. Can you tell me what happened?”

“I don’t know,” Jack says, switching to speakerphone so he can get his other hand back on Bitty’s wound. “He was supposed to meet me but he was late and I went looking and I found him here. I think he’s been stabbed,” Jack rambles.

“Is there an assailant there? Are you safe?”

“It’s just me. He was alone when I got here.”

“Okay, can you tell me your name?”

“Jack,” he says softly. “I’m… just Jack.”

“Okay, Jack. The ambulance is on the way, we’re going to walk you through this. Is there an object still in the wound?”

“No,” Jack says. “It looks like it was a knife, though.”

“So a suspected mugging then,” the voice says, keys clacking on a keyboard in the background. “Do you have anything to pack the wound with?”

Jack looks around. There’s nothing. Bitty’s backpack is tossed to the side, but when he reaches for it he sees that it’s torn open and empty. Señor Bun is partway under the dumpster, one floppy ear visible but too far to reach without leaving Bitty.

“No,” he says, cold dread pooling in his stomach. “I don’t have anything. I can take my shirt off,” he offers unthinkingly.

“Oh, the voice says. “Fold it into a pad and press it against the wound. Is your boyfriend still breathing?”

Jack does as he’s told and then holds his free hand under Bitty’s nose again to check for breath. “Yes,” he says. “But it’s quick and kind of shallow, I think. Is the ambulance almost here?”

“Just a few more minutes, Jack,” the voice says gently. “I’m going to talk to you until they get there. What’s your boyfriend’s name?”

“Eric,” Jack says, choking back a sob. “His name is Eric.”

“Good, that’s good. Do you know what blood type he is?”

“No,” Jack says. “We haven’t been together that long.” He hates the words as soon as he says them. It’s true, they haven’t been together that long and Jack apparently doesn’t know the most basic details about Eric’s life. Not his blood type or his mother’s name or the fact that he sleeps in a tent under an overpass at night.

“That’s okay. The ambulance will have O neg. Don’t worry about that.”

“Oh, the voice says. “The shirt is soaked already. Is that bad?” he asks, swallowing through the tears. He doesn’t understand how someone can be so cold and their blood so hot at the same time.
It’s going to be okay. Do you hear the sirens yet?”

“No,” Jack sobs. “No one is coming.”

“They’re coming, Jack,” the voice assures him. “One more minute. Can you hang on for one more minute? Eric needs you.”

“Yeah,” he whimpers, sniffing. He can’t pull his hands away from Eric to wipe away his tears. They fall freely, trailing down his bare chest. It must be freezing, but Jack doesn’t feel the cold. The only thing he can focus on is the life escaping Bitty’s body in the form of liquid heat. It squelches through his fingers up over his palms, slowly killing the love of his life.

“Okay, the ambulance should be there in just a second. When the EMTs arrive I want you to do what they say and try not to worry. They’re professionals, okay?”

“Okay,” Jack echoes, head jerking when he finally hears the sirens. “They’re coming. I hear them.”

“Good, that’s good, Jack. Let the EMTs take care of Eric and everything will be fine.”

“Thank you,” he manages, though his mouth is going numb.

“You’re welcome, Jack,” is the last thing he hears before he sees the ambulance pull into the alley, lights blinding him. The EMTs are on him immediately, pulling him away from Eric and strapping him to a stretcher. Before he’s even aware of what’s happening they’ve bundled Eric into the back of the ambulance and are starting to close the doors.

“Wait!” he screams, scrambling up from the ground. “I’m coming with you!”

“You can meet us at the hospital,” someone says. “We have to get moving.”

“No! You can’t take him without me!” Jack shouts, quickly reaching under the dumpster to grab Señor Bunny before stumbling forward.

“He’ll be at Miriam. You can follow us.”

Jack can’t do that. He left his truck miles away and doesn’t even know what direction to look for it in. He can’t let Bitty out of his sight. If he does, he’s sure it will be the last time he sees him. “I will give your hospital a million dollars if you let me on this ambulance,” Jack grits out.

The EMTs laugh. “Yeah, right.”

He doesn’t want to say it, but he knows there’s no other way.

“My name is Jack Zimmermann and the NHL pays me 9 million dollars a year to put a stupid little biscuit in a net. Let me on the fucking ambulance. Right now.”

“Holy shit,” one man says, smacking the other one in the chest. “That really is Jack Zimmermann.”

Not giving them time to discuss it, Jack pushes past them into the back of the ambulance and rushes to Bitty’s side. He sits down on the bench and grabs Eric’s hand, pulling it to his mouth. It’s so cold. Jack thinks that must be a bad sign. He has no idea how long Bitty’s been lying in that cold, damp alley, lifeblood soaking into the pavement.

“Drive the fucking car!” he shouts when no one moves.
The EMTs pile inside after him and radio to the driver that they’re all set. Finally, they start moving.

Jack sways on the bench, eyes never leaving Bitty’s pale face. The ride seems to take forever, but in just a few minutes they’re outside the ER and Jack is left behind as they wheel Bitty through the automatic doors.

An intake nurse comes over to him and leads him to the desk, handing him a few forms. Jack stares at them, dirty hand still clutched around a torn and bloody Señor Bun. “Uhh…” he says, looking up to the woman’s bland face. “His name is Eric Bittle but he doesn’t have an address or insurance. Just put mine down and I’ll pay for everything later.”

“Are you family?” she asks, taking the clipboard back with a sigh.

“I’m his partner,” he says firmly, hoping the word holds as much weight as it should. “He doesn’t have anyone else.”

“Alright,” she says, shaking her head. She starts saying something else, but the words blend together like a badly tuned radio. It must be a question, but Jack has no idea what was said so he just shakes his head and hopes it will suffice. The nurse’s mouth is moving again, but he still doesn’t hear anything but blurred noise. There are phones ringing and alarms going off. All of the hospital sounds combine with the crowd in the waiting room to create a cacophony that makes Jack’s head pound. Feeling light-headed and nauseated, he shakes his head again, more emphatically this time until she holds up her hands in defeat.

“Okay, okay, that’s fine,” she says, eyeing him with trepidation. “I’m going to have you sit over here and I’ll call you when we know something.” She points at a row of chairs that are already full. Jack paces around the waiting room trying to block out the noise until someone gets up and he can take their seat.

He’s covered in blood and holding a ratty toy to his chest and his knee is bouncing incessantly. People start staring at him, but he barely notices. He doesn’t have time to worry about stupid hockey fans right now.

Twenty minutes go by and then his phone starts vibrating in his pocket. He reaches for it and as he holds it to his ear the nurse catches his eye and points at a “no cell phones” sign. Nodding brusquely, Jack walks out the automatic doors and into the cold. It’s only then that he remembers he’s not wearing a shirt.

“Jack?” Shitty asks. “We’re at your building but Leonard says you’re not here.”

“I’m at the hospital,” Jack says, voice flat. “Bitty’s…” he trails off. He doesn’t know what Bitty is. He barely knows who Bitty is. The man he loves has been lying to him for months. “Bitty’s been in an accident. He lost a lot of blood. I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“Which hospital?” Lardo’s voice asks.

“Miriam,” Jack replies, shivering in the cold.

“We’ll be right there.”

Jack heads back inside and again, can’t find a seat. He paces in front of the nurses’ stand until someone hands him a scrub top and tells him to cover up. Jack nods dumbly and pulls the mint green shirt over his head. It only seems to draw more attention to him. People are openly staring and whispering behind their hands. Others are pointing at him and lifting their cell phones for
pictures. He’ll be all over the Internet in seconds.

He slips down to the floor, his a back against the wall and his head in his hands. A few people come up to him, but he just shakes his head and hugs his knees until they stop asking questions and get bored with him.

Eventually, Lardo and Shitty arrive and hug him until he starts to sob. It takes ten minutes for him to stop. His friends wrap around him, sinking back to the floor, one on either side. Jack buries his face in Lardo’s neck until a nurse calls his name.

“Yes?” he says, jumping to his feet.

“Your partner has been taken into surgery. He has severe internal bleeding from a laceration to the liver. He’s in critical condition, but the surgical team is doing everything they can to repair it.”

“Will he need a transplant?” Lardo asks when Jack doesn’t say anything.

“It’s too soon to tell how much of the organ will need to be resected. Surgery could take hours and he’s already lost a lot of blood. You should prepare yourselves.”

“Look,” Shitty says, stepping forward. “This is my best friend and he happens to be a very famous hockey player, and I’m not trying to brag or anything, but there’s going to be press here any minute. Is there somewhere private we could wait until Bitty’s out of surgery?”

The nurse looks Jack over and then looks back to Shitty before nodding. “Follow me,” she says, leading them through a set of double doors. “This isn’t exactly proper, but you can wait in the nurses’ lounge and I’ll come look for you here.”

She opens another door to a small break room with a few couches and a mini kitchen and gestures for them to enter. Jack collapses onto the couch and cries. Lardo takes his sticky hand and squeezes it tight while Shitty plasters himself to Jack’s back and pulls the man into his chest.

“You let it all out, Jack,” Shitty says, tears in his eyes. “We’re right here. You just cry.”

Chapter End Notes

Please don't kill me. I love you all.
Jack must cry himself into a fitful sleep because he wakes with a jerk some time later to find that his head is in Lardo’s lap. Shitty is staring at his phone, pacing the small break room while nurses eat their dinner in the kitchen. “It’s all over the Internet,” he says as soon as Jack sits up. “Did you really offer a million dollars to the EMT if he let you in the ambulance?”

“Maybe?” Jack says, rubbing at his eyes. “Is that bad?”

“It’s fucking epic, brah. Legendary.”

“It’s okay, Jack,” Lardo says, slipping her small hand into his again, ignoring the dried blood. “You did right by him. You did everything right. It’s just idiots looking for their brush with fame.”

“I didn’t know he was homeless,” Jack says quietly, staring at the coffee table where Señor Bun sits lifeless.

“What?” Shitty says, looking up from his phone.

“Bitty’s homeless,” Jack says, taking a few minutes to go over everything that he’s pieced together from the shelter and the old woman and his own observations.

“That’s… wow,” Shitty says, sitting back down next to Jack on the couch. “How did we miss that?”

“I’ve been dating him for three months and I had no idea,” Jack says, eyes falling closed as he replays their conversation in the car on the way to the rink. He had tried to talk Bitty into quitting his job at the shelter. Bitty must have felt so horrible. Jack had actually told him he could do better, not realizing how badly Eric had been struggling. “I’m such an idiot.”

“This is not your fault,” Lardo says, rubbing his back. “He hid it from you. You weren’t supposed to know.”

Jack sighs heavily and leans his head on Lardo’s shoulder. A half hour goes by and Jack can’t stop staring at the clock.

“Do you want to call your parents?” Shitty asks.

Jack groans. “No.”

“Do you want me to call them?” Shitty asks instead.
“No,” Jack says, rubbing at his face. “I’ll do it. I’m going to have to tell them eventually. It might as well be now.”

He stands and pulls his phone out of his pocket again. His sweatpants are stiff with dried blood and when he looks down at his hands, they’re red as well. There’s a bathroom in the corner so Jack ducks inside to scrub at his palms, doing his best to get the dried blood out from under his fingernails. His pants are a lost cause, so he just throws some water on his face without looking in the mirror and calls his mom.

The conversation goes better than Jack expects it to. His mother is sympathetic and shushes his father when he starts to ask too many questions. They assure him they’ll get to Providence as soon as they can and tell Jack they love him before hanging up.

He pockets his phone and goes back to the couch. Lardo has gone for coffee, so he and Shitty just sit there side by side, staring at the wall. What feels like a year later, the same nurse as before enters the room. Jack lunges off the couch nearly overturning his cold and untouched cup of coffee.

“Your friend is out of surgery and in the ICU. He’s still intubated but you can sit with him if you’d like.”

“Is he going to be okay?” Jack asks, blinking the weariness out of his eyes. It sounds like Bitty’s on a ventilator. That’s bad. Very bad.

“He lost a lot of blood because his liver was severely damaged by the knife wound. He coded in the operating room. His heart stopped but they were able to resuscitate him. The next few days are critical. We’re hopeful he’ll pull through but we won’t know more about his prognosis until he wakes up.”

“He-he died?” Jack asks immediately, ready to follow her out of the room. That makes two of them. Actually, Jack feels like his heart stopped beating for the second time in his life the minute the doctors took Bitty out of his sight.

“We’ll go get something to eat. Give you some time alone,” Shitty says, patting him on the back. “Call us if you need us.”

Jack takes a moment to hug each of them fiercely before letting the nurse—her name tag reads Janet—lead him to Bitty’s bed.

He notices the beeping first. Beeping, he knows, is a good thing. The steady beep of the machine means that Bitty is alive and his heart is still beating, but there’s also a tube coming out of Bitty’s mouth secured by plastic and tape.

The crunch and woosh of the ventilator is terrifying compared to the comforting beep of the heart monitor. There are several IV lines piercing Bitty’s pale skin, along with a drain in his chest and a catheter, the tubes peeking out from under his gown. Jack collapses into the chair, clutching tight to Señor Bun as he takes it all in.

“The surgeon will be in shortly to give you more details, but Eric made it through surgery. His coma is medically induced so he won’t move and damage himself. The drugs are keeping him comfortable.”

“How long until he wakes up?” Jack asks. He barely recognizes his own voice. It’s thin and high, a far cry from the deepness Bitty prefers.
We have to wait and see how he heals first. He won’t be able to wake until we take him off the medication. Do you understand?”

“Yes. Thank you,” Jack says, not looking up. He can’t look away from Bitty’s pale lips, wrenched open by the plastic mouthguard. Visible beneath the tube there are three stitches holding his bottom lip closed where it split. There are even more stitches through his right eyebrow as well as a shallow cut across his cheek. These are all things Jack skimmed over when he was searching for the source of Bitty’s heavy bleeding, but now they hold his attention.

Jack knows they’re superficial, that the damaged liver is what he should really be concerned about, but he can’t help worrying that Bitty will hate having scars when he wakes up. If all goes well, the liver injury will become invisible to the public eye, but facial scars are forever, as Jack well knows from hockey.

Bitty’s chest is rising and falling very slightly as the machine whirs beside him. Jack tries to concentrate on the rhythm and stop thinking about the worst, how Bitty nearly bled out under his hands, how they won’t know more until he wakes up. How many blood transfusions Bitty must have needed to still be alive right now. How many feet of plastic tubing is keeping him that way.

“I know this is a lot to process right now, but do you have any questions?”

“Uhh… what?” Jack asks, pulling his gaze away from Bitty’s still form. “No,” he adds when his mind catches up to what was said. “I’m fine.”

He’s not fine at all. Jack has never been less fine in his entire life.

“You should talk to him,” the nurse says, giving Jack a gentle pat on the arm.

“Does that help?” Jack asks, turning back toward Bitty and running a finger over his pale arm. His skin is just as cool to the touch as ever, but this time it’s not an endearing quirk, it’s terrifying.

“It’ll help you, if not him,” she says with a small smile. “But for the record, I think he can hear you.”

“Thanks,” Jack says, swallowing around the lump in his throat. He lays his palm on Bitty’s blanket-covered thigh and squeezes it lightly. “Stay with me, Bits,” he says quietly, lip quivering as he fights back the tears that threaten to overwhelm him.

A few minutes later Dr. Williams arrives and explains that Bitty had a grade three liver laceration which compromised over half of his organ. If his vitals stay stable, they’ll take him off the ventilator tomorrow and let him out of the coma. The liver regenerates and should heal on its own but the most common complications are re-bleeding, infection, and issues with scar tissue in the future. They need to keep Eric on antibiotics and check his kidney output to make sure he doesn’t develop an infection. As long as his drain is dry, it can come out tomorrow as well.

The most damning bit is when the doctor tells him that because Bitty’s heart stopped he might be difficult to wake. Or that he might have deficits when he does wake up. Jack swallows hard. This must be what his parents felt like when he was unconscious. The risk is low because Bitty wasn’t out for nearly as long as Jack had been, but the possibility is still there. It’s possible Bitty won’t be the same when he wakes.

Jack wants to protest, to ask for a second opinion. Jack wants someone else to walk in and tell him that none of it is true, that Bitty’s just sleeping and he’ll be up any moment.

He wants to rant and rave and stomp his feet, to tell the doctor that Bitty’s an athlete, that he’s the
fastest skater Jack’s ever seen and so beautiful on the ice. That he’s the light of Jack’s life, the best thing that’s ever happened to him, the only person who’s ever made him feel alive. That he can’t be hurt because there are gold medals in his future and a dog and maybe even a few kids. Jack wants to ask if this will stop Bitty from skating, from living, from reaching his dreams. If it will stop Bitty from loving him… but the words die on his lips. Maybe it’s better not to know.

“Can I get you anything?” another nurse asks when she comes in to check Bitty’s vitals.

“No,” Jack says, staring blankly as he clutches Señor Bun. “Thank you.”

It’s over an hour before he remembers to text Shitty and Lardo about what’s happening. They’re by his side quickly, pulling two more chairs into the room from the hall.

“He’s going to be out until tomorrow at least,” Lardo says eventually, patting Jack on the hand to get his attention. “Maybe we should get you home so you can get some sleep.”

“No,” Jack says, not even turning to look at her. “You guys go. I’m going to stay here.”

“Jack, no offense, but you look like crap and you’re not doing him any good like this,” Shitty says as softly as Jack’s ever heard him. “You need to take care of yourself so you can be there for him when he needs you. He’s just drugged. Nothing is going to happen to him now.”

“I can’t leave him,” Jack says again. “I won’t.”

“Okay,” Shitty says, running his hands through his hair. “Okay.”

They sit there with him for another hour until the nurse insists they go home. Jack readies himself to protest, but the nurse just takes one look at his sunken face and brings him a pillow and blanket, helping him move the chairs around until he can prop up his feet and attempt to get comfortable.

Shitty and Lardo head back to Jack’s apartment for a few hours’ rest and return in the morning with a change of clothes for him and a thermos of coffee. Jack takes the clothes but doesn’t change into them. He doesn’t even eat the breakfast they bring him, only going so far as to warm his hands with the thermos as he stares at Bitty’s pale face.

After twelve hours of stable vitals, the nurse takes Bitty off the ventilator. Jack waits with bated breath, staring at Bitty’s chest until he finally sees it start to rise and fall on its own. He wants to cry with relief but feels numb, like his emotions are locked inside Bitty’s unmoving body.

“The monitors will show us if anything changes,” the nurse assures him. “His sedation will take a few hours to wear off, so try not to worry about him waking up just yet.”

“Thank you,” Jack croaks, his clasped hands shaking in front of his mouth. He’s too tired to cry. All he can do is sit and wait. Shitty and Lardo come and go, bringing him food and magazines to take his mind off the fact that his boyfriend is still practically in a coma. He refuses them all.

He’s alone in the room an hour later when Janet comes back on shift. She speaks softly as she tells Jack that Bitty’s drain is clean and dry and how that’s a good sign. “Can I get you anything?” she asks after she’s done removing it, eying Jack warily. To her, he hasn’t moved an inch since she last left.

He must look like a deranged animal at this point and probably smells even worse. Clutching Señor Bun, Jack is barely keeping it together. It’s shocking to him that he’s not crying. He cries over everything with Bitty, but now, when he’s desperate for the faintest signal from the love of his life, his eyes are worryingly dry.
“Will he be out for a while still?” Jack asks, quickly checking Bitty’s face for any sign of motion. It didn’t seem odd for him to be motionless when he was hooked up to the ventilator, but now that he’s breathing on his own, Bitty’s stillness is unnerving. Jack’s eyes keep flicking over to him, waiting for that sweet smile to spread slowly across his face the way it does when Bitty wakes up to find Jack still in bed with him.

“Another hour at least, based on his weight and the meds he was given,” she says, consulting Bitty’s chart.

“Okay,” he says, standing up. “Can you help me with something?” he asks, checking Bitty’s face one more time before following Janet out the door.

Still nothing.

Jack takes a deep breath and tells himself that it’s fine, it’s just the meds wearing off. Bitty is going to be fine.

“I can try,” she says, leading Jack to the nurses’ station.

“Do you have a needle and thread?” he asks. “And maybe some cotton balls?”

It’s not pretty, but it’s something.

Jack props Señor Bun up against Eric’s side and sits down in the chair again, hands clasped in front of him.

“I don’t really know what to say here, but you’re the only thing I know Eric cares about besides me, so we’re just going to have to work together on this,” he tells the bunny.

The stitching is crude and the stuffing uneven, but Jack did his best to put Señor Bun back together again. He’d used several wet wipes to try to get the blood off his fur, but it just spread. Now the once brown rabbit is more of a muddy maroon.

“I love Eric and he loves me and yeah, he lied, but I don’t care about that right now. I just want him to wake up and still love me,” Jack says, staring into the lifeless black eyes of Señor Bun. They always seemed so warm in the past, but now the little black Xs seem to mock Jack’s pain.

“So I’m asking you to do me a favor here, Señor Bunny,” Jack says, putting extra emphasis on the eñe. “I’m asking you to do what you always do and help Eric. He needs you and he trusts you… at least he used to. He said he used to take you to all his skating competitions. And if you worked then, you can work now. So I need you to work your magic and help Eric heal and wake up, okay?”

Jack takes a deep breath, ignoring the tears that start to leak from his bloodshot eyes. “He can’t die because I haven’t asked him to marry me yet. I haven’t gotten to love him enough yet… not nearly enough. So please,” he adds, letting his head fall to his clasped hands.

“In the name of stuffed bunnies everywhere. Please… hear this prayer,” Jack says softly, shaking his head.
How stupid can he be? Señor Bun isn’t real. Sure, he’s got huge ears, but one of them ripped clean off and he had to sew it back on with a suture kit, so even if Bun was able to hear before, he certainly isn’t listening now.

“Amen,” a small voice says.

Jack’s head jerks up and he finds Bitty awake, beautiful brown eyes droopy, but open.

“Eric,” Jack breathes, reaching for his hand. “You’re okay?”

“Were you prayin’ t-to Señor Bun?” he asks, hoarse voice cracking on every word.

“I didn’t have Beyoncé’s number,” Jack says with a small smile, tears streaming freely down his cheeks.

Bitty laughs but it turns into a cough and the beeping on the machines starts to go haywire. Janet rushes in and checks Bitty’s vitals, asking him a few questions. “The doctor will be in to check on you soon, but I’ll give you a little more time to rest,” she says. “And the police have been here and will need to speak to you, just tell me when you’re ready and I’ll call them back.”

Jack nods and helps Bitty to drink some water before taking his seat again. He pulls the chair in as close as he can and takes Eric’s hand. “You have some serious explaining to do,” he says gravely. “But first you need to rest.”

“I’m sorry…” Bitty slurs, eyes drooping closed again as his IV pumps more drugs into his veins.

“Don’t worry about it right now,” Jack says softly, squeezing his hand. “Just rest. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“They stole my skates,” Bitty mumbles, blinking slowly up at Jack as he attempts to keep his focus. “I just broke ’em in.”

“The skates aren’t important, bud,” Jack assures him, reaching out to stroke his pale cheek. “You’re going to be alright and I’m going to be right here waiting for you, okay?”

“You promise?” Bitty whispers, brown eyes alight with tears.

“Yeah,” Jack says quietly. “You’re not getting rid of me that easy.”

He waits for an answer but doesn’t get one. Bitty falls asleep with a small smile on his broken lips.

Chapter End Notes

That wasn't so bad, right? Only one chapter of sad Jack!
Also, I can't believe I didn't put this in at the beginning, but the title of this fic is from the song Amen by Hunter Hayes. It's on the "Wind Down" playlist Bitty makes Jack earlier in this fic. That scene of Jack speaking to Bun after Bitty's mugging was the first idea I had for this fic and it took me 27 chapters/95k words to get there, but we finally made it!
Huge shout out to Hunter Hayes who I love beyond measure! His music inspires me so
much!
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Okay, so I went back and added in translations to the Quebecois in the end notes of the chapters where it appears. I'll try to do that from now on. Extra special thanks to my good friend OceanAndSpace for very patiently walking me through all of the translations. I'm not saying they're Quebecois, but they're at least correct French now!

And now: Bitty's truth.

“Were you ever going to tell me?” Jack asks a few hours later when Bitty’s awake again. He’s due for another dose of pain medication soon so he’s alert in the worst possible way. Jack knows he must be hurting, but he can’t stop himself from asking the question that’s been on the tip of his tongue for the last 16 hours.

“I’m so sorry,” Bitty says, tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. “I should have told you.”

“Yes,” Jack says seriously. He forgives Bitty already, but he also wants him to know how upset he is about the entire thing. “You should have.”

“I wanted to,” Bitty says quickly. “I wanted to a hundred times but we were so happy and then it had been so long I had been lying and it got harder and harder to admit. I didn’t want you to be mad.”

“I’m not mad,” Jack says.

Bitty raises his eyebrows.

“Okay, I’m really mad,” Jack admits, squeezing Bitty’s hand with a small smile. “But I’m mostly mad that you’ve been suffering. You could have been living with me. All you had to do was say yes. I would have given you everything, right from the start.”

“I know,” Bitty says, squeezing back. “I know you would have, and that’s why I couldn’t. I didn’t want to use you like that.”

“You wouldn’t have been using me,” Jack says. “We love each other. We’re partners. Partners support each other.”

“I couldn’t give anything back to you,” Bitty says. “You would have been supporting me entirely and what if you wanted to break up? You would have felt too bad to make me leave and I couldn’t live like that, knowing I was only there because I had nowhere else to go. I’ve been on my own a long time now. I could cope. I was doing fine.”

“Will you tell me what happened?” Jack asks.

Bitty’s eyes widen in fear, but he doesn’t say anything.

“Will you tell me what happened to make you leave Georgia?” he asks again. “I need you to trust me. I won’t tell anyone if you don’t want me to, but I need to know now. Please.”
Bitty takes a deep breath and closes his eyes.

“You can sleep first if you need to,” Jack says, worrying he’s been putting too much stress on Eric so soon after surgery.

Bitty’s left side is bruised from where he took a few blows to the face. The cut on his cheek has been taped shut but the treatment only serves to give him a pinched sort of expression where his skin is pulled taut. Between that and the stitches, Bitty looks awful and that’s not even counting the stab wound and surgical pain.

“No,” Bitty says, licking his chapped lips, tongue catching on the sutures. He’ll have to break that habit if he wants it to heal properly. “Let me just get this out and then we can both get some rest.”

Jack nods and gives Bitty a small, encouraging smile.

“I always knew I was gay,” Eric begins with a sigh. “I thought it was obvious with the baking and the figure skating and all the boys at school teasing me and throwing me into lockers, but I guess my parents didn’t know. I was always getting bullied and once I started competing well… there were a lot of pictures of me in sequins and the boys at school weren’t too keen on that.

“They locked me in the janitor’s closet one night and took my phone and I had to wait until the next day for the school to open for someone to find me. It was bad. Real bad,” he pauses for a moment and Jack squeezes his hand again in reassurance.

He doesn’t want to push, wants to give Eric the time to tell his own story. Jack thinks back to how Eric had laid his hand on the table that night at Hemingway’s and waited silently for Jack to tell him about the worst day of his life. Jack had laid himself bare, telling Eric every insecurity, every failure that he had been afraid to admit, and Eric never wavered. He wants to show Eric that same support and hopes that their joined hands will be enough.

Jack hopes that he will be enough.

“My daddy was the football coach at school and he didn’t want to believe that his boys would do something like that, so I had no one on my side. It was just my word versus theirs. I kept my head down and tried to be quiet about my skating. Tried to change what made me different so the boys wouldn’t come down too hard on me, but it never worked. No matter what I did, I was always just a little too meek, a little too afraid, a little too obvious. I was an easy target.

“After years of pretending to like football and hiding the bruises… I couldn’t take the lying anymore. I was desperate to get out, to quit being ashamed of who I was. I was getting better and better at skating, winning all these trophies, but it was so expensive and I wasn’t sure my parents were going to be able to keep it up. I told myself I didn’t really need it anymore. I didn’t want to live at home and keep lying, even if that meant giving up skating.

“I applied to college and I figured if I could just get out of Georgia it would all be fine. I could go away and find my courage and come out to my parents. I kept this video blog all through school. It was kind of my diary. I talked about skating and baking and personal things like my sexuality. I needed it… to be able to tell someone, anyone about me, even if it was just shouting into the void. It didn’t have many followers and I thought no one knew about it, but one of the ladies at church must have come across it looking for recipes and she told my Mama and the cat was out of the bag,” Bitty says with a dark chuckle.

“They said I could go to conversion camp or I could get out.”
“No,” Jack breathes. He can’t even imagine it. He’s heard of that sort of thing but never understood how parents could be so hateful. Maman and Papa had been supportive every step of the way. He told them about Kenny right after his overdose and at that point, all that mattered was that Jack was alive. It’s crazy to think about what would have happened if they’d tried to disown him instead of taking him to rehab.

“No more skating, no more sequins, no more baking, no more dancing, no more music,” Bitty huffs out, shaking his head. “No more of anything that I loved. No more me. It was like they wanted a robot. They wanted a different son. They would have taken anyone, even those disgusting fucking bullies over me, as long as their son could throw a football and drink beer and chase girls.

“I could have sucked it up,” Bitty says, letting the words spill out of him. “I thought about it long and hard. I could have played straight and married some girl from church and had a couple of kids and hated my life forever, but I wouldn’t. I couldn’t. Not when it came down to it.

“They told me to go, so I went. I packed a duffel bag, took my laptop and my skates and hopped a bus from Madison to Atlanta. Someone took me in right away. This guy named Brett. He thought I was cute and saw me at the bus stop and I went home with him.

“It was so easy for a while. I thought I could do it. I didn’t need my parents, I could be gay and it would be alright. I worked at a coffee shop and stayed with Brett and eventually we started fooling around and things were going good. We were sleeping together and I lived there with him so I thought he was my boyfriend. Then one day he decided he wanted me to start working for him. I had no idea. No fucking idea…”

Jack holds his breath. He knows how quickly this story is about to go downhill and he knows he has to hear it, but his heart breaks for Bitty and for every other person it’s ever happened to.

“He was a fucking pimp,” Bitty says, voice cold. “Of course he was a fucking pimp. He picked up a cute homeless teenager from a bus stop, trained him up for a few months, and when he was a good enough lay, decided to get some money out of his new skills. I don’t know why I thought he really liked me. I was such a fool.”

“That’s not your fault,” Jack says, unable to hold his tongue any longer. “He’s the one that used you.”

“I was so mad but I was also embarrassed. I cried and ran and as soon as I had enough money, I left town,” Bitty says. He tries to bite down on his lip but winces when pain lances through him. “From there it was a few months here, a few months there, always moving north, looking for somewhere a little more tolerant of people like me.

“I did a lot of things I’m not proud of, Jack, especially at first. I was so afraid to sleep out on my own that I went home with a few men I met in bars. I used protection and I never took money but I would have done a lot for a hot shower and a place to lay my head. It wasn’t bad but it wasn’t good either. I was so ashamed, using people like that, but I was desperate. After a while, I just couldn’t anymore. I pawned my laptop and my skates and took a bus to New York, but it was way too scary for me there so I tried Boston next and finally, I landed here.

“It wasn’t that bad here at first,” Bitty says, giving Jack a half smile. “I was determined to make it on my own, to not take advantage of anyone’s kindness. I got a job at a bakery and another one bartending and eventually I made enough for a room at the Y. I stayed there for almost a year trying to save up enough for an apartment. But then the bar got shut down for selling to minors and I couldn’t afford the room at the Y anymore. I got caught sleeping in the back room at the
bakery and they fired me too, and that was that.

“I tried to take odd jobs but they’re few and far between and they never pay much. Once you start looking like you sleep outside people don’t want to give you a chance. They assume you’re on drugs or that you’ll steal from them or stop showing up. The shelter couldn’t offer me a job baking even if they wanted to, it wouldn’t have been fair to everyone else and they didn’t have the funding. So I just help out for free and sleep there when I can but there are so many people worse off than me… I didn’t want to take a warm bed away from a kid or someone who was old or sick, so I’d been staying at the tent town for a few months already when I met you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Jack asks again even though he knows the answer.

“I wanted you to like me,” Bitty says softly, staring at their intertwined hands. “You were so handsome and sweet and you thought I worked there and it was easier to just let you believe it. I figured if I didn’t take anything from you it wouldn’t be that bad. If I didn’t take a damn thing I wouldn’t be using you. I just… didn’t know it would turn into this. I didn’t know I would love you.”

“I did,” Jack says, reaching up a hand to comb through Bitty’s dirty hair. “I heard your voice at the shelter that night and I wanted to know you. I think I wanted to love you as soon as I met you. You are so strong and so kind and you drive me completely crazy,” he says, shaking his head.

“You think you don’t need anyone, but you’re wrong. We all need help sometimes and that doesn’t make us weak or stupid or inferior. I know that better than anyone. I had to go to a lot of therapy for it to sink in, but I know it now for sure so please believe me when I tell you that there’s nothing wrong with accepting help.”

“I know, I’m so sorry,” Bitty says again. “I’m sorry for lying and I’m sorry I never gave as much of myself as you did. I’m sorry I wasn’t as brave as you. Do you still want me?” he asks, eyes wide with fear.

“Of course I still want you, Bits,” Jack says immediately, leaning forward to press a kiss to Bitty’s wound-free cheek. “You’ve been so, so brave. I’m so proud of you,” Jack whispers against his skin.

Eric tries to chase him for a real kiss, but he cries out when he finally remembers that he lost half of his liver and barely lived to tell the tale.

“You need to heal, bud,” Jack says, pressing him back into the pillows. “You need to heal and get better so you can move in with me and marry me one day. Okay?” he asks, looking deep into Bitty’s eyes.

“You’re serious,” Bitty says, eyes sharp as he searches Jack’s face.

“Of course I’m serious,” Jack replies easily. “It’s all or nothing with me. I’ve got all of you now, and I’m not letting you go. Not now, not ever.”

“Okay,” Eric nods as he grimaces, hand hovering over his injured side.

“I’m going to get the nurse. You need some more pain meds and some sleep.”

“I love you,” Bitty says, catching Jack by the hand before he pulls away. “I’m so sorry,” he says seriously, earnestly. “I won’t lie to you again. I promise you.”

“I know you won’t,” Jack says with a smile. “I love you, too.”
A few hours later when Bitty is awake again, the cops arrive. They take Eric’s statement, glancing over at Jack every few minutes like they can’t believe their eyes. Jack keeps his head down but never lets go of Bitty’s hand.

Eric recounts how a group of guys commented on his skate bag and followed him from the shelter where he had been eating lunch. They waited until he was alone and jumped him. When Eric tried to fight back, they beat him bloody and caught him with a knife.

It’s a simple story, one the cops have heard countless times before. The only difference now is that Eric has a famous boyfriend. The press will be watching their every move to make sure they find whoever put Jack Zimmermann’s adorable partner in the hospital. They leave Eric and Jack with platitudes, saying they’ll do everything they can, but the words feel hollow.

“Well, that didn’t fill me with confidence,” Bitty says darkly once they’re gone. “I don’t think they understand what those skates cost me. Three months of practice, down the drain,” he sighs, waving his hand at his wound.

“Give it some time, Bits,” Jack says, lips twitching upward.

He likes seeing this drive from Bitty. It strikes a familiar chord with Jack and reminds him that Eric has always had the attitude and determination of a champion buried under the polite sheepishness he showed the world. The weight of hiding himself must have been so heavy, Jack can almost see Bitty’s personality grow before his eyes. “If the cops don’t find them, Tater probably will,” he jokes.

“Well, that didn’t fill me with confidence,” Bitty says darkly once they’re gone. “I don’t think they understand what those skates cost me. Three months of practice, down the drain,” he sighs, waving his hand at his wound.

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“Why does it sound like you mean the guys that jumped me and not the skates?” Bitty asks, eyes narrowing.

“Try not to worry. You need to heal before anything else,” Jack says firmly. “We can buy you new skates, but we can’t make another you. You could have died,” he says, mood swinging wildly. His eyes sting with tears as he shakes his head, trying desperately to push the thought away.

“I know I should have let them go,” Bitty says with a sigh when he catches Jack’s pained expression. “But I just couldn’t. After what happened to me…” he trails off, squeezing his eyes shut tight for a few seconds before releasing a breath and trying again. “I’ve always shied away from physical confrontation but you’ve been trying to teach me to stand up for myself and—” He shakes his head, pressing his lips together even though it must be painful. “I’ve been working so hard to get back in shape, to land my jumps, to get my life back together. I couldn’t let someone take that away from me. Not this time. Not without a fight.”

“I understand,” Jack says. He does understand. Jack can’t fault Bitty for wanting to hold on to the progress he’s made. He just wishes it didn’t have to happen like this. They came so close to losing everything. “I get that you need to feel like you can protect yourself, but I also need you to be careful. I need you off the street and safe in our bed.”

“Cheeky,” Bitty says, trying to lighten the mood.
“To rest, Bits,” Jack says, wiping his eyes and fighting down a smile. He feels like he’s on an emotional roller coaster. “Get your mind out of the gutter.”

Eric laughs and Jack sighs fondly. “If this is what happens when you try to protect your skates,” he says, waving a hand at Bitty’s body, “I don’t want to know what will happen if it’s your wedding ring.”

“If it were my wedding ring, I’d have put them in the hospital, not the other way around,” Bitty says fiercely.

“I believe you,” Jack says with a smile even as he mentally plans to enroll Eric in self-defense classes as soon as he’s well. Maybe he’ll buy Bitty some mace while he’s at it. “Now lie back and sleep. No more talking.”

“Fine,” Bitty says with a sigh, rolling his eyes as Jack fusses with his pillows.

Shitty and Lardo go back to Jack’s place to sleep again but Jack stays in the chair by Bitty’s bed and falls asleep sitting up.

He wakes in the middle of the night when his phone starts buzzing.

“Allo?” he answers, wiping drool from his mouth.

“Jack? Are you alright?”

It’s Kenny.

Jack checks that Bitty is still sleeping soundly and exits the room. The lights in the hallway are dimmed but a few nurses and support staff are still bustling to and fro, completing their rounds.

“I’ve been better,” Jack says, rubbing at his eyes.

“I saw the pictures on Twitter. What’s going on? Is Eric alright?”

Jack can’t believe his ears. Kenny is worried. For Eric. He called to check on them. Jack and Kenny are friends. This is something a friend would do, and Kenny is doing it. Jack smiles through his exhaustion and says, “Yeah. He’s going to be okay. It wasn’t as bad as it looked, I guess.”

“It looked pretty bad. You were covered in blood.”

“Shit,” Jack says, wondering if it’s worth it to google himself right now. “It was horrible, Kent. I was so scared. I thought he was going to die.”

“I’m glad he’s okay,” Kent says, letting out a tense breath.

“Thank you for calling, Kenny,” Jack says, feeling a little bit of tension ease. “Really.”

“I know the press has got you surrounded and I was calling to tell you that if you wanted me to take some of the heat off you, I could.”

“What are you talking about?” Jack asks. He’s running on small bouts of sleep and can’t keep up with the conversation.

“I could come out,” Kent says. “Now. I mean. If you thought it would help. Kind of divide their attention a bit.”
“Oh,” Jack says, forehead wrinkling. “Oh, wow,” he’s shocked and also entirely unsurprised. Kenny sounds really sincere but he also loves being the center of attention. “That’s nice of you, but I don’t know if it would really help. They’re just going to ask me about you on top of everything else that’s already going on. I’d rather not get into that now.”

“That’s what I figured,” Kenny says, chuckling softly. “I just wanted to offer. I want to help but I don’t know what to do. This friendship thing is hard.”

Jack laughs. “Yeah, it is sometimes,” he agrees, smiling as he paces down the hallway. “But you’re doing good.”

“That’s good,” Kent says.

Jack can hear the smile in his voice. It feels good knowing Kent is really trying. He promises himself that he’s going to spend some time listening to Kenny and helping him with his own troubles when all of this blows over.

“You’re going to be okay,” Kent says after a minute of dead air.

“Yeah,” Jack says quietly, heading back to Bitty’s room. “I think we are.”

His parents arrive early the next day and fuss over Jack until he consents to taking a shower and changing his clothes. They’re cautious and gentle with Bitty, asking him if he’s okay and if they can bring him anything, carefully avoiding the fact that he’s been lying to their son for months. To their credit, it’s not as awkward as it could be. They treat Bitty as if nothing has changed, smiling and hugging him gingerly, offering any help they can.

Once Bitty is asleep again, they take Jack aside and break the news he’s been dreading since Bitty landed in the hospital. “There’s press outside. They’re everywhere,” his father tells him in the hall outside Bitty’s room, the muttered Quebecois putting him at ease. It’s nice to know no one can listen in and to Jack, it feels a bit like the comforts of home. “Cameras and news teams. There are fans out there waiting for a glimpse of you.”

“What do they know already?” Jack asks, knowing he’s going to be in hot water with George and the Falconers’ PR team.

"Tout, mon ange," his mother says, squeezing his arm. “They’ve got dozens of pictures and tweets about you bringing Eric into the hospital. They’ve compared his description to fans’ accounts of seeing you around Providence together and matched him to Eric being on film at your games and the All-Stars weekend. They know you’re together.”

“What about everything else?” Jack asks. It’s one thing for them to have been outing, Jack had been expecting that. There’s no way he was going to be able to hide their relationship after an event like this. He needs to talk to Bitty about the specifics, but if the only reason he was afraid of coming out was keeping his homelessness a secret, then there’s no point in hiding anymore even if they could.

"Ils savent," his father says, face tight. “They’ve googled him and found all his figure skating videos. They have tape of him cheering for you at games and photos of you at the shelter together. They even have his video diary. They’ve interviewed everyone at the shelter already. It’s all
Jack buries his face in his hands. He doesn’t know what to say. All of Bitty’s deepest fears have just been realized. Their dirty laundry aired all over Providence and probably the national news. They’re going to need to make a statement, to shed a little light on all the lies and fantastical theories, which are probably all true.

“I need to call George. I should have done it already but I’ve barely slept and Bitty needed me.”

“You’re doing the best you can, Jack,” his mother assures him with a soft hug. “And I bet Georgia’s already here. She probably just can’t make it past the press. Why don’t you let us go find her for you? Talk things over with Bitty so you know what you want to do by the time she gets to you.”

“Merci, Maman,” Jack mutters into her hair. “You too, Papa. I’m glad you’re here.”

“You just take care of yourself and that beautiful boy,” she says in English, cupping his cheek.

“I have a game tonight,” Jack says, finally remembering what day it is.

“No, you don’t,” his father says, shaking his head gravely. Papa always seems to sound more serious when he speaks in English, like he’s slowing his thoughts down and choosing his words carefully. “You’re not going out on that ice tonight. Not until we can get this situation under control. They don’t need you right now. Bitty needs you.”

Jack stares, dumbfounded. Bad Bob Zimmermann just told him to take the night off from the NHL. He never thought he’d live to see the day. His father would have played with one arm if he had to. Jack’s thoughts return to Kenny and what he said on the ice after he won the All-Stars game.

_Some things are more important than hockey._

“Okay,” Jack says, falling into his father’s warm embrace. “I think I really needed to hear you say that.”

“I love you, Jack, and if you never played another game of hockey I would still be very proud of the man you have become,” Papa says, holding him by the shoulders so he can look Jack in the eye. “You are my son, first and foremost. Hockey is just your job. That boy is your life.”

Jack nods, swallowing down emotion. “He’s going to move in with me,” Jack says. “I’m going to take care of him and we’re going to be fine.”

"Of course you are, mon coeur," his mother says, kissing his forehead. “We’ll stay as long as you need us.”

“The press already know we’re in here, so we’re trapped anyway,” his father jokes, patting his hair.

“I need to get back inside,” Jack says, though he doesn’t even know if Bitty is awake yet. He needs some time to gather his thoughts.

“Calls us if you need us. We’ll text when we get a hold of George.”

“Thank you,” Jack says again before slipping back into Eric’s room.
Eric is awake when he enters, not quite sitting up but straight enough that he can sip some water out of a straw.

“You heard that, didn’t you?” Jack asks, a smile growing on his face.

“The bits that were in English, at least. Your mama called me beautiful,” Bitty says, winking at him.

“We need to talk,” Jack says, perching on the edge of Bitty’s bed near his feet. He doesn’t want to jostle Eric while he’s healing but he needs to be close.

“We definitely do,” Bitty says, a wry smirk crossing his face. “I know you don’t want to hear this, but…”

Jack waits, licking his lips nervously.

“Now that they’re covered in bloodstains I think it’s finally time to retire those hideous bananas you call sneakers,” Bitty finishes with a laugh.

Jack shakes his head but can’t help the warmth that blooms in his chest, relieved Eric is feeling well enough to laugh. “Later,” he says, though he knows he’ll just buy another pair of the same neon shoes to keep the joke alive. “We have real problems right now.”

“I know,” Bitty says, smiling sadly as he takes both of Jack’s hands in his lap. “It’s going to get bad, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Jack says. Bad doesn’t begin to cover it. “We need to talk about what happens next. What we want to do, what we want to tell people. I’m sorry, but your life is never going to be the same.”

“It’s okay, Jack,” Bitty says. “I’m dating a celebrity. I knew it wasn’t going to be just us for long.”

“It never really got to be just us at all, did it?” he says sadly. “I didn’t know everything about you until yesterday.”

“I’m sorry,” Bitty says back. “That was my fault. I didn’t let you see the real me.”

“I knew what was important,” Jack tells him, shaking his head. He doesn’t want to fight with Eric. Not now, not ever. “I knew your heart. That’s all that really matters. I shouldn’t be throwing it in your face like that. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, I think I deserve a little bit of sass from you, sugar.”

“Maybe just a little,” Jack says smugly. “But let’s think about how you can make it up to me later.”

“Okay, what do we have to do?” Bitty asks, patting Jack’s hands.

“There’s going to be cameras. They’re going to want to know everything about you and me. We need to talk about what we want to say. What we’re willing to tell them.”

“I’m scared,” Bitty says, looking down at their intertwined fingers. “Everyone is going to think that I’m some lying gold digger.”

“The people that matter will know that you’re not,” Jack says. “I know that you’re not. You’ve
never taken a dime from me. I’ll make sure they know that.”

“My parents will have seen the news,” Bitty whispers, a tear falling to his cheek.

It’s yet another thing that Jack hasn’t considered. “Are you afraid that they’ll come looking for you? Or afraid that they won’t?” Jack asks.

“I don’t know,” Bitty says, sniffling. “I was only seventeen when I left. I knew they could bring me back if they wanted. They could have made me go to that camp, Jack. They could have…”

“You’re safe here,” Jack says, reaching up to wipe Bitty’s cheek. “You’re an adult. They don’t have any power over you anymore. Their hate can’t touch you here. Okay?”

“Is it bad that I miss them?” Bitty cries, honey brown eyes shining with tears.

“Of course not,” Jack says softly.

“My mama was my best friend,” Eric says. “She was my only friend, really. We would bake and sing in the kitchen, go shopping together. Coach, he was always serious and strict. But my mama… I thought she would still love me.

“She saw my videos and you know what she said? She said ‘I thought I raised a good Christian boy,’ like the two things couldn’t both be true at the same time,” Bitty huffs, rolling his eyes though he’s nearly crying. “She said I couldn’t stay in the house if I didn’t love Jesus. But that if we prayed enough and I tried my hardest, I could get ‘fixed.’”

“Do you want to call her?” Jack asks. He doesn’t know if it’s the right thing to say, but it feels like something he needs to ask. “Maybe things are different now.”

“You didn’t see them,” Bitty says, angry now as he furiously wipes the tears from his face. “They were so cold. Looking at me like I was a stranger in their house. Like I was something dirty and wrong. My mama and I were two peas in a pod one day and the next it was like a switch got flipped and she couldn’t look at me without crying about how her baby was going to hell.”

“I’m sorry,” Jack says. He’s lost and suddenly wishes Shitty were here. Shitty would know the right thing to say, how to be righteously indignant and supportive all at the same time. “We don’t have to talk about them if you don’t want to.”

“We should tell the truth,” Bitty says suddenly, snapping Jack back to the problem at hand. “People should know what happened to me. How bad it can be for gay kids. What they could do to help.”

“Okay, bud,” Jack says, giving Eric a weak smile. “We’ll tell them the truth. Whatever you want to say. We’ll work it out with Georgia. You don’t have to go in front of the cameras if you don’t want to.”

“No,” Bitty says, fierceness growing in his damp eyes. “I’m not letting you speak for me. I’m not letting anyone do this but me. We’re in this together, right?”

“Of course we are,” Jack says, bringing Bitty’s hand to his lips.

“How long until I can go home?” Bitty asks.

“You’re going to come home with me, right?” Jack asks, suddenly aware that he still hasn’t made solid plans with Bitty yet. “My parents said they would stick around for a while, make sure you’re
okay if I have to go out of town.”

“If you’re sure,” Bitty says, a weak smile on his face. “Moving in is a big step.”

“I’m sure,” Jack says firmly. “I always want you with me. Forever.”

“I’m not sure I deserve all this,” Bitty says.

“You gave me the world,” Jack replies, cupping Eric’s cheek. “Let me repay the favor.”

“If you insist, Mister Zimmermann,” Bitty says, nodding against Jack’s palm.

“How do you like the sound of Bittle-Zimmermann?” Jack asks, leaning in to gently kiss the shocked expression off Eric’s face. The stitches scrape at Jack’s mouth, but it doesn’t stop him.

“I don’t think that’s going to fit on your jersey, sweetheart,” he mumbles between pecks to Jack’s lips.

“I don’t think I care,” Jack replies.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
“Tout, mon ange,” his mother says, squeezing his arm.
"Everything, my angel," his mother says, squeezing his arm.

"Ils savent," his father says, face tight.
“They know,” his father says, face tight.

"Of course you are, mon coeur," his mother says, kissing his forehead.
"Of course you are, my heart," his mother says, kissing his forehead.
Chapter Notes

Okay so this chapter took forever because I just *had* to let the boys use Twitter. Special thanks to literally everyone on the Steter Network for helping me figure out how to do multimedia fic. Seriously, like 12 different people held my hand through this process. It's not perfect, but I think it's pretty damn good for a first attempt.

You’re probably going to want to read this chapter on a desktop, just FYI.

Super huge thanks to @seokin on tumblr for allowing me to use their images for the profile pictures. They can be found here.

Bitty, it turns out, is much better suited to celebrity than Jack has ever been. After just an hour with Georgia, he has their entire media campaign sorted out. Even Bad Bob Zimmermann is impressed with how Bitty seems to command the room from his hospital bed while doped up on pain medication. Jack sends Shitty and Lardo out for a new cell phone for Bitty and with Georgia’s help they set up new social media accounts for the both of them.

“You have no idea how much I’ve missed this,” Bitty says, fingers flying on the screen of his new iPhone as he gets Jack’s Twitter account validated. “YouTube used to be my life.”

“Your skating videos are on BuzzFeed,” George says, tapping away on her laptop. “You’re incredible.”

“I know I should have deleted them,” Bitty says, scrolling through his old vlog, “but I always hoped I’d be back one day. I was already kicked out of the house, I didn’t think it could get that much worse. These comments aren’t sayin’ anything I haven’t heard before. Plus it kind of felt like a good ‘ol middle finger to the church ladies back home, leavin’ my Twitter and vlog up for posterity.”

“Do you want to go back to training?” Maman asks him, looking up from her book to peer at the video pulled up on George’s laptop. “We could set you up at the arena here, I’m sure.”

Jack can’t help himself. He crosses the room to watch as well. He’s had the pleasure of seeing Bitty skate a few times now, but it’s nothing compared to a full crowd with the costumes and music booming.

The difference is startling.

This Bitty is healthy. He’s tan and his skin glows with the flush of exertion. There’s a roundness to his cheeks and his hair is perfectly styled. He smiles the smug satisfaction of someone who is at the top of his game. Jack can see his thighs bulge in his shimmery skating pants and the flex of his biceps as he catches his skate. It only serves to remind Jack that Bitty’s been starving, slowly deteriorating before his eyes.

His mother’s eyes go wide when Bitty lands a triple axel. “Can you still do that?” she asks, pointing at the screen.
“Yeah, he can,” Jack says, crossing back to Bitty and kissing him full on the mouth before he remembers that it must hurt. “It’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen, Maman.”

“Not in front of the ladies, sugar,” Bitty says, blushing furiously. “Your mama thinks I’m a gentleman.”

“I love you,” Jack says quietly. “I want to help you get healthy so you can skate like that again. I didn’t realize how badly you were suffering. I’m so sorry.”

“Oh, honey,” Bitty says, leaning their foreheads together. “We’ve been through this. It is not your fault that I didn’t tell you. And we’re going to be just fine. I’m already feeling better.”

“You were amazing. You’re still amazing,” Jack amends quickly. “But you need coaching, don’t you? Tell me what you need and we’ll get it. I want you to look happy like that again.”

“I am happy, sweetpea. You make me happy,” Bitty says, ignoring the other people in the room as he speaks sweetly to Jack. “But maybe we can track down Katya when I’m all healed up. I don’t know if she’s got other skaters now, but if she’s free maybe she’d come up.”

“You tell me her name and I’ll do the rest,” Papa cuts in, already on his phone.

“I can’t let you all pay for this,” Bitty says, staring wide-eyed at the Zimmermanns and Georgia as they all work for his benefit. “I’ll get a job first. The manager at the rink said he could pay me to teach beginner lessons once the summer hits and kids are out of school. That’s what I was planning to do before all this happened.”

“I don’t want you to waste any more time if you don’t want to,” Jack says, taking Bitty’s hand. The Winter Olympics only come along every four years and he knows next to nothing about the competitive circuit. All he does know is that Bitty isn’t getting any younger and he’s not the only one who’s had a few things get in the way of his grueling physical profession. “And you’re not going to have to worry about money anymore. You’re going to have people fighting over you for endorsements and public appearances.”

“Oh gosh, do you really think so?” Bitty says, covering his mouth with his hand.

“Only like a third of the money I make comes from hockey,” Jack says, hoping it doesn’t come across as pretentious as it sounds. “The rest is commercials and interviews and other stuff.”

“You think someone’s going to put me on a commercial?” Bitty asks, mouth falling open in shock. “I’m not anybody.”

“Eric,” Georgia says, pointing at her laptop. “You already have 50,000 Twitter followers and you haven’t even tweeted anything yet. Trust me. You’re someone.”

“50,000?” he cries, eyes going wide. “Last time I looked at it I had like 2,000 tops.”

“I only have 190,000,” Papa says, frowning down at his own phone.

“This video of you at your last championship has 260,000 views,” Maman adds, still watching Bitty’s performance.

“Let’s get down to business, gentlemen,” Georgia says, taking Jack’s phone off the bedside table and handing it to Jack. “We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

Instead of going on the defensive, they swing for the fences.
Georgia goes over the statement she’s made on the Falconers’ behalf and as soon as they’ve signed off on it, it’s all over the news. Jack Zimmermann and Eric Bittle are officially in a relationship, their matching Twitter profiles say so.

Instead of holding a press conference, they live tweet their story as they tell it to George.
Hi, Twitter. This is Jack Zimmermann.

First, I’d like to thank the @Provider and the @NHL for supporting me through this rough time.
Jack Zimmermann
@JackLZimmermann

As most of you probably know by now, my boyfriend @EricBittyBittle was in an accident yesterday.

6:49 PM - 1 March 2018

Jack Zimmermann
@JackLZimmermann

He needed surgery after being stabbed during a mugging right here in Providence, but thankfully make a full recovery.

6:50 PM - 1 March 2018
I didn’t know it until recently, but Bitty has been homeless since he left his childhood home in Georgia fiv
He’d like to tell you his story, and I hope you’ll listen.

Thank you for understanding that I needed to be with Eric tonight and not playing hockey. #LetsGoFalcs
Hi, y’all. My name is Eric but @JackLZimmermann calls me Bitty. Sometimes he shortens it to Bits.

He may be a moose of a man, but he’s really just a huge softie.
He just found out that I’ve been living on the street and boy, was he ticked off.

Eric Bittle
@EricBittyBittle

I’ve been hiding for a long time, but ready to be my true self. #BittyTells

6:53 PM - 1 March 2018
Wow. This is harder than I thought it would be. I'm glad Jack is here.
I used to be a junior figure skating champion back in Georgia but I left my home after I was threatened with conversion therapy.

This is not an uncommon story, and I want everyone to know that 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ+. #TrueFacts
Half of all LGBTQ+ teens get a negative response when they come out and 1 in 4 are thrown out of their homes. #TrueFacts

LGBTQ+ teens are at higher risk for drug use, sexual exploitation, and health issues. #TrueFacts

6:54 PM - 1 March 2018
I’ve been hungry and cold and hop so many others. I’ve felt lonely an invisible. I’ve felt dirty and unloval
I was lucky to meet @JackLZimme and fall in love, but most homeless spend their entire lives struggling.
But the current homeless need our help, too
Please educate yourselves, become advocates, and work within your community to fight intolerance.

Together we can create diverse, inclusive, accepting, welcoming, safe spaces for everyone. #TrueColorsFund
Now who wants to hear about what adorable dork @JackLZimmerman

6:57 PM - 1 March 2018

He's glaring at me right now.
#HeThinksHesSoCute #HeReallyis

6:57 PM - 1 March 2018
@EricBittyBittle and I will now take some polite questions. Ask away. #JackandBittyAUA

@hockeyfan392 Yes, Bitty is the one that taught me how to do that jump at the Stars.
@hockeyfan392 He can land quads, and I fumble through little loops. I think I’m getting better though.

@EMSliver52 I know I’ve gone back and forth recently, but I actually identify as grey asexual. I don’t ex
@EMSilver52 It’s on the asexual spectrum along with demisexual and asexual.

@EMSilver52 I think it’s important to be honest about these things.
@EMSilver52 I guess I’d say I’m homoromantic.
@EMSilver52 I’ve been in two serious relationships and they’ve both been with men, but again, the actual

@biscuit134 I’m man enough to admit Bitty is usually the big spoon. We sleep with a stuffed rabbit, for the rest of our lives...
@yourgo8316 @EricBittyBittle says I can’t take another photo until he has a chance to shower and get hi:
@yourgo8316 He’s a little bruised and has some stitches on his face that need to heal.

@FalcsFan570 I brought him a crate of apples and he showed me how to make pie. But our first official date was dinner at a pizza place.
@FalcsFan570 I don’t think coffee really counts as a date.

Jack Zimmermann
@JackLZimmermann

@BakerJoy98 My favorite is his mario cake. I can only eat his baking on cheat day though.

7:10 PM - 1 March 2018
If he wasn’t such an amazing skater I would tell him to open a bakery. Maybe one day after we’ve both retired.
@piesandlove  I’ve never been so scared in my life. It was hard for me to be myself when I was afraid he was going to...

7:14 PM - 1 March 2018

@piesandlove  He got off easy, you say.

7:15 PM - 1 March 2018
@LutzLutz76 I’m going to make a full recovery, thank you for asking.

@LutzLutz76 I’m bruised and sore and lost half of my liver, but that won’t keep me down for long. #BeyoncéGiveMeStrength
@JackLZimmermann has been fantastic. He’s been through so much and he’s so strong.

Having him believe in me makes me feel like I can do anything. #JLZimmsNo1BF
@flutterby148 I’m looking into getting my old coach back. If anyone can put me in contact with Katya Mikhailov, please @BadBobZ.

If anyone can put me in contact with Katya Mikhailov, please @BadBobZ.
He seems to think he’s taking over as my agent. #BadBobFutureFatherInLaw #LordHelpMe #AndByLordIMeanMamanZimmermann

@homechef731 Working within his meal plan is a little challenging.
@homechef731 Sometimes I just need to let loose and enjoy himself. #StopJackfromDoingCrunchesInThe2k18

Eric Bittle @EricBittyBittle

@hockeyshipperfan957 Yes, I know there’s fanfic is out there, but no, I haven’t read it and I’m sure Jack hasn’t either.

7:20 PM - 1 March 2018
@hockeyshipperfan957 I like the sound of it! It’s almost like a cookie name, or a donut hole! #Zimbits #TheNewC

7:20 PM - 1 March 2018

@rainbowsandsprinkles It was very hard to find someone to confide in.

7:21 PM - 1 March 2018
@rainbowsandsprinkles That makes it difficult to trust people.

7:21 PM - 1 March 2018

@rainbowsandsprinkles Staying cool and warm is the hardest part.

7:22 PM - 1 March 2018
@rainbowsandsprinkles It’s really easy to get sick or contract infections if you don’t have resources to ke

@homeiceadvantage Being hungry means eating what you can, when you can. It’s hard to get proper nutri
@speaknow324 I’m not going to comment on our sex life, but I will say that not all asexual people are sex repulsed.

Eric Bittle @EricBittyBittle

@homeiceadvantage I walked every day and did as many exercises as I could with my own body weight.

7:23 PM - 1 March 2018
@Falcs3410 @BadBobZ and @AliciaZimmermann are kind and loving parents.

@EricBittyBittle

@speaknow324 You can read up on the asexual spectrum here: asexuality. #EducateYourself

7:24 PM - 1 March 2018
@Falcs3410 I hope @JackLZimmermann and I end up half as happy as they are after 30 years. #LifeGoal

Eric Bittle
@EricBittyBittle

I think that’s it for now. Thanks for well wishes y’all! #LuckiestBoyAlive #CusI Ain’t Dead #PraiseQueenBey

7:26 PM - 1 March 2018
They cut it off after an hour when it becomes difficult to sift through all the homophobia and invasive questions to find answerable ones. By the end of the night, Bitty is exhausted, though he’s trying to hide it. George leaves with his parents to give them some time alone. They insist on staying at a hotel so Jack can have some quiet time to really get some sleep and Jack doesn’t have the heart to tell them he’ll probably be awake no matter what.

“You’re pushing too hard already,” Jack says, sitting down heavily in the chair by his bedside.

“I’m fine,” Bitty says, stifling a yawn.

“I see you wincing. Why haven’t you been pushing your pain button?”

“I don’t need it,” Bitty insists.

Jack is not convinced. Every time Bitty tries to turn or change position, he grits his teeth and pretends it’s a smile.

“I don’t understand why you’re being stubborn about this. If you’re in pain you’re putting unnecessary stress on your body,” Jack says. “I know what it’s like to want to get back to work immediately, but I really need you to take care of yourself. I’m not going to be here all the time and I need to know that you’re going to be alright when I walk out that door.”

“It doesn’t hurt all that much, honestly,” Bitty says, voice high. He’s bordering on hysterical and Jack doesn’t understand why.

“I thought you said you were going to stop lying to me,” Jack says seriously, hurt in his eyes.

“I’m not—”

“—Please stop.” Jack cuts him off. “I heard what you said, about it being hard to trust people, but if we’re going to start off on the right foot I need to know that you’re not going to hide things from me anymore. I want to be able to trust you, too.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry,” Eric says, holding out his hand until Jack leans forward to take it. “It’s probably stupid but I just…”
“Whatever it is, you can tell me,” Jack says. “I’m never going to think any less of you.”

“I don’t want you to see me taking drugs,” Bitty says so softly Jack has to strain to hear it.

“What? Why?” he asks, eyes searching Bitty’s face for some explanation.

“I know you said that alcohol wasn’t really your problem, so I have a drink sometimes so you know that I trust you. But this…?” he says, holding up his left arm where his IV is embedded. “You can’t tell me this is okay.”

“Eric,” Jack says, eyes wide. “I would never want you to suffer on my account. It never even crossed my mind, I swear.”

“Promise me you’re telling me the truth,” Bitty says, biting down on his lower lip. “I can’t do this if it’s going to put your sobriety at risk.”

“I swear to you,” Jack says, squeezing his hand. “I am not tempted by your pain meds and I’m not going to be upset with you if you need to take them. If you’re really worried about it we could talk to Blaire and get some assurances.”

“You’re sure you’re okay?” Bitty asks, leveling his eyes at Jack seriously.

“I promise you, Bits,” Jack says, kissing his knuckles. It’s just like Bitty to worry about Jack’s comfort over his own. That selflessness, at least, Jack has always been sure of. “Now press that button so you can get some sleep, please.”

“Alright, sugar,” Eric says, rolling his shoulders and attempting to find a comfortable position while Jack reclines the back of his bed. “You take Señor Bun though,” he says, holding out the dirty rabbit. “If we can’t be together at least I’ll know someone else is watching over you.”

“No, you keep him,” Jack says, holding his hand out to stop him. “I don’t want you to be lonely.”

“I’m going to pass out in about three seconds from all this happy juice in my arm, you take him,” Bitty insists, shaking Señor Bun at him. “I’m not taking no for an answer.”

“Okay,” Jack says, smiling exasperatedly. “I’ll keep him safe for you.”

“You do that, honey,” Bitty says, eyes already slipping closed. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Jack says, pressing a kiss to Eric’s forehead before shutting off the lights and slipping out of the room.

He heads toward the exit clutching Señor Bun in his hand. It’s just a few more steps to the doors when he hears it, the click of a hundred cameras ready to catch a glimpse of him. Jack fiddles with the keys in his pocket. He just has to get from the door to his truck in the parking garage. Shitty and Lardo had dropped it off for him before heading back to Boston for work.

Taking a deep breath, Jack forces a blank expression onto his face and prepares himself for battle. He’s been dealing with the press since he was old enough to form complete sentences, but he’s never been less prepared for it. Jack is exhausted, physically and emotionally. The last thing he wants to do is answer questions.

He’s just going to duck his head and walk straight to the car. He won’t answer anything, won’t give them the satisfaction of seeing him sweat. What kind of people wait outside a hospital to ambush someone who’s just been through a tragedy? Clenching his jaw, Jack pushes the door
open and steps into complete pandemonium.

“Jack, is your boyfriend still alive? Did he get stabbed during a drug deal? We hear he’s been working as a prostitute, would you care to comment?”

“Who tops? Do you like to get fucked, Jack? How do you know he’s not a golddigger? Do you think this is going to lead to another mental breakdown? Do you do cocaine together?”

“Have you been having a threesome? What about Kent Parson? What about Martin West? Did you let him fuck you, too? How do you think this is going to affect your hockey game? Does being asexual make you a better hockey player? Is that where all your focus comes from? Are you sure you’re ace?”

“Sources say you called for a hooker and that’s how you met this boyfriend, would you care to comment? How long have you been a sex addict? Did your breakup with Kent Parson lead you to drugs and sex addiction?”

Jack doesn’t engage. He keeps his jaw set tight and his hat pulled low over his face and attempts to walk past the police barricade and toward the short-term parking where Shitty said he left his truck. He’s almost out of the crowd when he hears a small voice ring through the din.

”Mister Zimmermann?” someone asks, and it’s the accent that makes him stop. It’s a soft southern lilt that sounds achingly familiar. “Is that Dicky’s rabbit? Please… is he alive?”

The nickname makes him stop short. “Who said that?” he calls, eyes searching the crowd. The lights are so bright he has a hard time making anything out. Covering his eyes with his hand, he stares into the sea of faces and tries to find where the voice is coming from.

”I think you’re dating my son. His name is Eric! Eric Richard Bittle!” the voice calls again, soft and breathy.

Finally, a few people move out of the way and Jack sees her. The resemblance is uncanny. Jack instantly recognizes the swoop of blonde hair and the small mouth, the flush on high cheekbones. When he takes a step closer he sees that the woman is short and clutching the handle of an old-fashioned suitcase, a handbag slung over one arm.

“Mrs. Bittle? Is that you?” he asks. He still doesn’t know her first name. Eric only ever called her Mama.

“Oh goodness, yes, I’m Suzanne. Is Dicky alright? They wouldn’t let me inside,” she stutters, tears in her eyes.

“Would you like to come with me?” Jack asks, holding out his arm to try to separate her from the rest of the crowd and pull her through the barricade. Flashes go off in their eyes and the noise makes Jack’s head pound dully. He can only imagine what it must be like for a small town woman who must have just come all the way from Georgia.

“Yes,” she says immediately. “Please.”

Jack manages to get an arm around her shoulders and steer her away from the press toward his truck. “Let me take that,” he says, reaching for her suitcase as the paps chase after them. He curls an arm around her instinctually, doing his best to shield her from the crowd that swarms around them like vultures. “My apartment is on the other side of town. Do you have somewhere to stay tonight? It’s getting late,” he says into her ear, just loud enough to be heard over the din.
The police finally step in, herding the press back behind the barricade with outstretched arms so they can make their escape. A few dodge past, but Jack just keeps walking, pulling Mrs. Bittle along and to the safety of his car. By the time he has her suitcase in the bed of his truck, a police officer has blocked the photographers with his body, giving Jack the room he needs to pull out.

“Oh, just listen to that accent. And you’re so tall! I’ve seen you on TV and now I’m here and I just can’t believe it,” Mrs. Bittle rambles, climbing into the truck as soon as he opens the passenger door for her. “I don’t know where I’m staying or what I’m doing, I just got here as soon as I could. I heard Dicky’s name on the news and they said the name of the hospital and I just got the first flight out of Atlanta.”

Jack’s mind is reeling. This woman sounds flustered and overwhelmed but so sincerely worried about Bitty. It just doesn’t match up to what Jack’s heard about her from Eric. He thought she would be cruel and angry, but all he can hear in Mrs. Bittle’s voice is compassion and motherly fretting.

“Mrs. Bittle,” Jack beings, wondering if he’s missing something. “Eric said you tried to get him to turn straight and then kicked him out of the house. Is that true?”

“I—” she hesitates, mouth open as she searches for the words. It’s an expression Jack has seen on Bitty’s face countless times. “I did do that, I’m sorry to say,” she admits reluctantly. “I’d heard all these horror stories at church about homosexuals being deviant and preying on children. I’d heard it all my life from my parents and from Richard and I…I thought I was doing the right thing, helping Dicky be better. No one wants their child to be damned,” she says, staring straight ahead as Jack steers them to his apartment.

“But you don’t think that now?” he asks.

Jack isn’t sure someone can change their ways so completely, but he’s willing to give Eric’s mother the benefit of the doubt. If there’s even the slightest chance that Bitty can have his mother back, Jack wants to help make that happen. But he also wants to protect him. There’s no way Jack is going to let Suzanne Bittle get near her son unless he’s convinced she’s not going to abandon him again.

“I did for a long time,” she admits. “I was so angry with Dicky for leaving that I didn’t look for him right away. I found chat rooms on the internet, other parents that abandoned their children for their beliefs. Everything was so hateful and I just…I missed Dicky so much and I couldn’t believe all those horrible things were true about him. He was my best friend. Things like that don’t just go away overnight. People don’t change like that out of the blue.

“I couldn’t understand how the people who were supposed to believe in loving your fellow man could be so wrong about so many things. The heinous things they would say and do in the name of the Lord, it just wasn’t what Jesus would have wanted.

“It wasn’t until I started reading up on it that I thought maybe it wasn’t the horrible thing I’d been taught about. Not after I found the right people to talk to. There was this LGBT Christian group that used to hand out pamphlets at the supermarket. Richard was always snubbing his nose at them but they were so nice and they talked to me for a long time until I thought maybe it didn’t have to be so black and white.

“I tried to talk to Richard about it, that I wanted to find Dicky and see if we couldn’t work something out, but he refused. I was afraid to do it behind his back, but I started looking. It had just been so long and I didn’t know where he could have gone and every time I thought I’d found someone who’d seen him the trail would go cold. I had no idea he’d have gotten this far all by
himself. He’s such a long way from home.”

“It’s been five years,” Jack says, finding that he’s angry with this woman that he’s just met. “When did you start looking for him?”

“About a year ago,” she says, tears spilling out of her eyes. “I was afraid. Richard said he’d made his choice and there was nothing we could do about it. He said he wouldn’t let Dicky back in the house even if he straightened up. That I wasn’t to go looking for someone who was… dirty like that. That it would just make me dirty too. He said people at church and around town would talk and they’d shun us and he’d lose his job and we’d be needing charity from those people who just told us to get out of town. He said no one would help us and we’d be tossed out of the family.

“I knew it wasn’t right, but I was so scared. I thought that if he found out I was looking he would leave me and I don’t really make any money myself, not enough to live on. All our family is his side, all our friends believe what he believes. I wouldn’t have had anywhere to go.”

“But you came up here anyway,” Jack says. It’s not a question. If what Eric’s mom is saying is true she’s put her whole life and everything she knows on the line in the hopes that she would be reunited with her son.

“I’m ready to leave him now,” she says, turning to meet Jack’s eyes as they wait at a red light. She looks fierce and determined, her expression hard. “If that’s what it takes to get my son back…” she trails off, shaking her head at herself. “I’m ready to do it. I can find a job up here and do whatever it takes. My baby needs me and I am not going to let him down again.”

Jack pulls into the parking lot under his building and kills the engine. He has no words. For a few minutes, he just stares at his hands as they grip the steering wheel.

Bitty’s mother is in his car. She came here against her husband’s wishes all the way from Georgia to take care of her son who she abandoned and made to live on the street five years ago. Jack wants to hate her, but when he turns to look, she’s staring at him, tears streaming down her face. She looks so much like Bitty. All Jack wants to do is wrap her up in his arms and tell her that he’ll fix everything, but he doesn’t know if he can or if Bitty even wants things to be fixed in the first place.

“Eric is going to be alright, but he’s very upset and angry with you,” he says quietly, flexing his fingers on the steering wheel. “I don’t know if he’s going to want to talk to you and I’m not going to take that choice away from him. We’ve had a lot of issues learning how to trust each other and I’m not going to take this decision from him.”

Jack takes a deep breath and reaches for the door handle. “It’s late and Eric will be sleeping for a while. So I’m going to have you come inside and stay with me and in the morning I’ll go check on him and see if he’ll take your visit. Does that sound alright?”

She nods, face set in what can only be fearful determination. “I know I don’t deserve it,” she says, laying a hand on his arm, “but I’m not above begging for a chance to make it right.”

“It’s his decision,” Jack says with a sad smile. “I don’t know you, but I believe you want what’s best for him. If that’s to not see you anymore, you’re going to need to respect that he knows what he needs.”

“I promise to try,” she says. “That’s the most you’re going to get out of a southern mother.”

“Okay,” Jack says, getting out of the car. He takes her bag again and leads her inside, waving to
Leonard as he passes through the lobby.

“Dicky lives here with you?” she asks, high voice echoing off the metal walls of the elevator.

“I wanted him to,” Jack says, unlocking the door when they reach his floor. “I asked him to, but he was too stubborn to stay long. He was sleeping in a tent on Pike Street when he wasn’t here.” Jack doesn’t know how much he should give away, but part of him wants to make Suzanne Bittle hurt, just a little bit. He wants her to know what she’s done.

“You must have been very upset with him,” she says, following inside and waiting awkwardly by the door, still clutching her purse.

“Just for a little bit,” he says, taking her coat and showing her to the guest room. “It was hard to be mad when I thought he might die.” Every time he says it, it hits home a little harder. He almost lost Eric, but he didn’t. Bitty’s alive and healing. They’re going to be alright.

Suzanne watches as he pulls Señor Bun out of his pocket and fiddles with his dirty ears. “May I?” she asks, holding out a hesitant hand.

Jack allows her to take the bunny and watches as she clutches it to her chest and collapses to the couch. Unsure of what to say, he goes to the kitchen and fixes a pot of tea. When it’s ready, she seems to be cried out and hands Señor Bun back to Jack before accepting a warm cup.

“Thank you for being so understanding,” she says, wiping at her eyes. “I know it’s more than I deserve.”

“I’ll never understand what could make a parent do what you did,” Jack says, wanting to make his feelings known. “But it’s clear that you’re trying to make up for it and I know how hard it can be to want to fix something so badly you think you’d die to do it. Some days the guilt eats at you and makes you hurt so much you’d do anything to make it stop. I wouldn’t wish that kind of pain on anyone.”

“You’ve lived a lot in your years, haven’t you?” she asks, peering up at him like she’s trying to suss something out.

“I’ll talk to Bitty for you, but I can’t promise anything. Only that I’ll be honest about what we talked about. I won’t lie to him for you,” he says seriously. He’s exhausted but he can’t go to bed without saying his piece.

“You love him, don’t you?” she asks, clutching the edge of the couch with her thin fingers.

“More than anything,” Jack says, the corner of his lips twitching into a small smile.

“Promise me you’ll take care of him… if he sends me away,” she says, blinking up at him with bloodshot eyes.

“That I can promise,” Jack says, leaving her to her thoughts.
Adding the "religion" tag up top, just FYI. It probably goes without saying since Suzanne showed up, but it will be more of a theme from here on out.

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

Jack wakes up to the smell of onions cooking. He drags himself into the shower and forces his body to bend and fold into clean clothes. If he has any hope of playing tonight, he’s going to need a nap. As it is, he only has an hour or so to make a stop at the hospital before morning skate and he’s dead on his feet.

Taking a deep breath, Jack leans his forehead against his bedroom door for a few seconds before finding his strength. He collects Señor Bun from his pillow and heads to the kitchen.

Suzanne Bittle is making him an omelette.

The sight is so startling it doesn’t register for a few seconds. Bitty’s estranged mother is in his kitchen cooking him breakfast and he has no idea what to do about it.

“Do you drink coffee?” she asks brightly as soon as she sees him. “I made a pot just in case.”

“Umm,” Jack struggles to form his thoughts. Her mere presence in his house is overwhelming, especially because he doesn’t know what kind of news he’s going to have to break to her after he talks to Bitty. “I just need a shake this morning, actually,” he says, avoiding her eyes. Jack can’t accept food from this woman, can’t let her be nice to him until he knows how Bitty feels about her.

“If you’re sure,” she says, frowning at the eggs in her frying pan.

Jack ducks into the fridge for a protein shake and heads for the door. “I’ll, um…” he hesitates. No matter what he has to tell her, he doesn’t want to do it over the phone. “I’ll be back after practice. We can talk then.”

“Alright,” she says, clutching a dishcloth. “I’ll wait here.”

Nodding silently, Jack grabs his keys and closes the door. He sits in his car and calls his parents, explaining that they’ll need to keep their hotel room until further notice. They promise to be at his game later and make sure he knows they’ll stay out of the way until things are settled with Bitty’s mother. It takes some convincing, but after a few minutes back and forth, they agree to fly out that night in the hopes that things will go well and Bitty’s mother will be staying with Jack in his spare room.

In what seems like seconds, he’s at the hospital and following his feet to Bitty’s room. Nurse Janet is inside when he gets there. She smiles kindly at Jack and assures him that Bitty is healing well before leaving them alone.

“What’s wrong?” Eric asks immediately after she’s gone. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost. I don’t look that bad, do I?” he jokes, running a hand through his filthy hair.

“I think I kind of did,” Jack says, falling into the chair by Bitty’s beside. A ghost from Bitty’s past
appeared in Jack’s life last night and it’s both shocking and amazing.

“What are you talking about?” he asks, tilting his head to the side.

He has no idea how to say it so he just blurs it out. “Your mom is here.”

“What?” Bitty says practically choking. He winces hard when the sudden coughing motion pulls at his stitches.

Jack licks his lips and takes a second to let Bitty calm down before saying it again. “Your mom… I found her outside last night and let her sleep at our place. She wants to see you.”

“My m-mama?” Eric asks, stuttering in disbelief. “Suzanne Marie Phelps Bittle is here? In your apartment?”

“I wanted to talk to you in person and let you decide if you wanted to see her,” Jack says, swallowing as he takes Eric’s hand. “She’s… well terrified, first of all. The same way I was when I didn’t know what happened to you. She’s also very sorry. And I know it’s not my place to say, but I think it sounds genuine. She came up here by herself. I think she might have left your father to do it.”

“She left Coach?” Bitty asks, eyes tearing up.

“I don’t know for sure, but I think he was against looking for you and she said she was prepared to leave him if that was what it took,” Jack says. He tries to relay the information without emotion. There is no way he’s going to coerce Bitty into anything he doesn’t want to do. Eric is still healing and doesn’t need this kind of stress.

“I just… I can’t believe it,” he whispers, squeezing Jack’s hand. “After all these years she just hops a flight up to Providence without a second thought? Why didn’t she do that five years ago when I was sleeping on the street in Georgia?”

“She had some reasons, and I’m not saying they’re good ones, but she did tell me why. It’s for you to decide if you think the reasons are good enough,” Jack says softly. “I told her I’d let her know what you said after practice today, but I can stay if you want. I can call Marty and tell him you need me.”

“No, honey,” Bitty says, wiping at his eyes. “You’re right. If I’m going to talk to her, it should be alone.”

“Do you want to see her, then?” Jack asks. He tries to keep his tone light, but it’s hard to fight down the hope that rises in his chest. Looking at Suzanne this morning and Eric now, it’s clear to him that they’re both dying to reconcile, but he’s not going to force it.

“I…” Bitty trails off, staring at their intertwined hands. There’s dirt and dried blood imbedded around his fingernails. The nursing staff had tried to clean him up but there’s only so much wet wipes can do. “Is it wrong that I do? Because I really do.”

“It’s not wrong,” Jack says, a sad smile on his face. “You don’t have to forgive her if you don’t want to, but there’s nothing wrong with wanting a little closure.”

“She said she would leave Coach just to get me back?” he asks quietly.

Jack nods.
“They’ve been married for over thirty years. They were high school sweethearts.”

“You’re her son,” Jack says, smiling through the lump in his throat. “You’re her flesh and blood. She loves you.”

“You really think she still loves me?” Bitty asks, a sob escaping him. He tries to stifle it with his hand but it’s impossible. It all comes spilling out of him the moment it’s free from his lips.

“I know she does,” Jack says, because that, at least, is something he can say. “She wouldn’t be here if she didn’t. I don’t think she ever stopped loving you. She just got a little lost along the way.”

Bitty chuckles darkly between gasps. “A little lost,” he huffs out. “That’s the understatement of the century. She kicked me out, Jack. She told me I was going to hell.”

“I’m so sorry,” Jack says, rising from the chair and settling himself on the edge of Bitty’s bed. He wraps his arms around him as gently as he can and lets Eric rest his forehead against his throat. “I want to say that people can change, but it’s hard to believe, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know that anyone could change that much,” Eric mutters against his skin.

“You didn’t believe it of her at first, right?” Jack says, attempting to soothe him, or at least hoping he’s not making it worse. “Maybe things are different now. Maybe she can be your mama again. But only you get to decide that, no one else, and especially not her.”

“I—” Bitty tries again, pulling back to look Jack in the eye. “I can’t see my mama looking like this,” he says, eyes going wide. “Can you ask Nurse Janet if I’m allowed to shower?”

“Of course,” Jack says, brushing Bitty’s hair out of his eye. “I’ll help you yourself. And I meant what I said, if you need me here, just say the word and I’ll skip my game tonight. They can do without me for one more day.”

“You are not missing that game, Mister Zimmermann,” Bitty says, pushing Jack in the chest with a frown. “I am not going to be the thing that keeps you from the playoffs. I don’t want all of Providence calling for my head if their lead scorer isn’t on the ice.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Jack says, smiling internally at the way those words come out so easily. It’s hard to believe that they’re true. For once in his life, he’s not even thinking about letting his team down or failing his city. All he cares about is making sure Bitty gets what he needs.

"It does matter," Eric tells him. “It’s your career. You can’t hang all your hope and happiness on me. You need hockey to be there when all this blows over. I’m going to have skating and you’re going to have hockey and one day we’ll have Stanley Cups and Gold Medals next to your Art Ross trophies and only when we’re so broken that we can’t stay up on the ice anymore… only then are we going to stop. Alright, mister?”

“Alright,” Jack says with a smile. He can’t believe Bitty is thinking the same things as him about their future. It’s a complete 180 from the cagey Bitty that was hiding his true feelings and struggles just a few days ago, never giving Jack hope for the future. Now Jack knows he’s being honest. And the real Bitty? That’s something Jack can get used to.

“Now make sure to ask for some hair clippers, too,” Bitty says, pushing at him again until he gets off the bed. “I can’t have my mama seeing me looking like a ragamuffin. How am I going to shame her unless I look like I deserve a famous NHL player boyfriend?”
“This isn’t about me, it’s about you,” Jack says, shaking his head on the way to the door.

“It is about me,” Bitty insists. “It’s like dressing up for an ex. I want her to know what she missed out on, having me as her son. I’m the hottest peach ever to roll out of Georgia.”

“You got that right,” Jack says, winking as he heads to the nurses’ stand.

Bitty suffers through the painful and embarrassing experience of letting Jack bathe him as he sits on a toilet seat looking contraption in the shower. He even lets Jack trim his hair, under explicit instruction about how to buzz his undercut. Once he’s satisfied, Jack helps him back into bed and rushes off to practice leaving Señor Bun tucked safely under the covers.

Practice is horrible. Jack is beyond exhausted and his mind is racing. Thoughts of Bitty and his mother’s meeting are chasing themselves around his head and he can’t think straight enough to make a pass connect. He takes shot after shot and sinks maybe one in four.

Finally, Thirdy calls it and they head back to the locker room. Jack sits with his shoulders hunched as the team whispers around him. Tater, a notable exception, sits closely by his side with his arm wrapped around Jack’s bare shoulders.

“Alright,” Marty says, standing up at the front of the room. “This shouldn’t have to be said, but I’m going to say it anyway. We are with Jack. He is our captain and even if he wasn’t we would love him anyway because he’s Jack. He’s not a hockey robot, he’s got feelings and he struggles and right now he needs our support. We are with him and Eric 110% and if anyone in this room isn’t, they can come up here and tell me right now.”

He waits. No one says anything. Even the rookies who just got called up from the farm team keep their heads down.

“Good, now that that’s settled,” Marty continues on, cracking a smile. “When are we going to meet him?” he asks, raising his eyebrows in Jack’s direction. “You’ve been dating someone for months and you didn’t give us any gossip? For shame. You know how we old timers need to live vicariously through you young kids.”

“It’s really more of a surprise that Tater’s kept his mouth shut,” Jack says with a small smile. “He’s known almost from the start.”

“I best secret keeper on Falcons!” Tater crows, standing on the bench next to Jack and raising his arms like a champion boxer. “I meeting the little baker and eating his desserts for months and no one is knowing!”

The guys cheer and boo at him, throwing rolls of tape and dirty socks in his direction as Tater continues to talk, his loud voice booming. “I see them kissing once, even! He is good looking kisser, Eric!”

“Tater!” Jack shouts, yanking at his arm in an effort to pull him back down to the ground. “Cut it out!”

“No,” Erikson shouts back, clapping his hands. “I want to hear more about the kissing! Can you act it out, Tater? Poots can stand in as Jack.”

“Fuck, no,” Poots says, shaking his head. “No offense, Cap, but I’m not kissing Tater.”

“Why is no one wanting to kiss Tater?” he asks, putting on a full pout. “I am only one on team not dating! Where are the kisses for Tater?”

“I get kiss from Zimmboni in locker room! Someone call presses!” Tater shouts, faking a swoon. The guys all hoot and holler as a blush rushes to Jack’s face.

“You better hope TMZ doesn’t have secret cameras in here,” Guy says, nudging Jack with his toe.

“If they did I think they would have posted all of our nudes already,” Jack says, raising his eyebrows. For just a few minutes he’s able to forget about Bitty and his mother. The jibes become even more playful and after a while it devolves into Willis and Poots wrestling on the floor in their underwear as the rest of the guys shout and place bets.

“You ready to go?” Tater asks him. “I can go see Bitty at hospital?” he asks. “I want to see little face with own eyes.”

”Uhh,” Jack says, pulling on his shirt. “That might be a little complicated.”

“You need friend now, yes?”

“Yes,” Jack says, letting out a sigh.

“Whatever is, we do together,” Tater says, clapping Jack hard on the back.

“Alright, just remember to be gentle,” Jack says, rubbing at his back where it’s tingly from Tater’s slap. “You’re too strong for most people and Bitty’s healing.”

“Yes, Captain,” Tater says, pulling on his shoes and grabbing his bag. “I be gentle as lamb.”

This is how Jack finds himself introducing Alexei Mashkov to Suzanne Bittle.

“Oh my goodness,” she practically shrieks when Tater lifts her off the ground in a hug. “What do they feed you boys? He’s even bigger than you, Jack!”

“Bitty is feeding us delicious things,” Tater says happily, setting her down on the floor. “Jack’s butt has grown two sizes since they meet.”

“He’s exaggerating,” Jack says. It’s been a few inches, and he’s sure it’s the hockey season and not Bitty’s cooking.

“You have nothing to worry about,” she tells him, a blush rising to her cheeks. “You’re both very handsome.”

“Jack is model, yes? Take after famous mother,” Tater booms, clapping Jack on the cheek with his giant hand. “He make very pretty babies with Itty Bitty.”

“That’s really not how it works—” Jack protests, prying Tater’s fingers from his face.

“—Are you talking grandbabies already?” Suzanne cuts in, a little breathless.

“Definitely not,” Jack says quickly. They haven’t had the chance to discuss it yet, and even if they had, he’s still not sure it’s a good idea to give Suzanne any details about their relationship in case things don’t work out between her and Bitty.

He can see the moment her expression crumples before she throws a smile on her face instead. It
reminds Jack so much of Bitty hiding his pain that it makes his own heart lurch unpleasantly in his chest.

“Well that’s none of my business anyway,” Suzanne blurts out, a hand rubbing at her throat.

“Eric wants to see you,” Jack tells her again. “Tater and I will just say hi and then leave you two alone for a bit to talk. No matter what happens I’ll bring you back here after, okay? I gave you my number so you just text me if you need me to pick you up or bring you somewhere.”

“O-okay,” she says, blinking the tears away from her eyes by sheer force of will. “Thank you, Jack.”

Jack gives her a small smile and then leads them all back to the car. Tater talks incessantly on the way and Jack is thankful for the buffer. It’s eerily like he’s leading someone to the gallows, but Tater’s voice fills the car and makes the ride feel a little less ominous.

“Just one second,” he says to Suzanne once they’re outside Bitty’s room. She nods and waits, clutching the handle of her purse like a lifeline. Jack gives her what he hopes is a reassuring look and then brings Tater inside with him.

He waits a few minutes while Tater fawns over Bitty, threatening his attackers and offering to serve as his personal bodyguard. Once it looks like they’re done, he asks Tater to wait outside as well and leans in to take Bitty’s hand.

“Are you ready?” he asks, searching Eric’s face for any hidden discomfort. “You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.”

“I’m ready,” Bitty says, face set in determination.

“Okay,” Jack says, pressing a kiss to his cheek. “I’m going to take Tater to the cafeteria. You call or text if you need me. I don’t have to get to the arena until 6, so you have plenty of time, alright?”

“I’ll be fine, Jack,” Eric says, straightening his back and putting on what Jack can only describe as a battle face. He’s trying to prove to his mother that he doesn’t need her, and Jack isn’t sure whether that’s good or not. Either way, it looks like something Bitty has to do, to put her on the defensive.

He doesn’t wince with the movement, which Jack takes as a good sign. After one more kiss for luck, he leaves the room and gestures for Suzanne to enter. He makes sure the door is shut behind her so he won’t be tempted to listen in and does a few laps around the hospital with Tater to take his mind off of things.

They settle down in the cafeteria and Jack watches blearily as Tater eats a half dozen pudding cups. Jack can feel his eyes drooping even as his mind races with a thousand thoughts. It’s been twenty minutes and he hasn’t heard from Bitty. Deep down Jack knows that Eric will be fine. His mother only wants his love and forgiveness. He only fears that Suzanne will upset Bitty by leaving again. Jack doesn’t want anything to hinder Bitty’s healing.

“You worry,” Tater says around a mouthful of pudding. “No need worry, Zimmboni. Bitty stronger than all of us put together, yes? He back on ice in no time, you see.”

Jack nods solemnly and stares at the scratched tabletop as Tater goes back to his pudding. It must be terrible for Bitty to have to do this from a hospital bed. He can’t even get up and walk away if he needs to. He must feel so trapped and vulnerable. Jack wants to be there with him desperately.
Now that he understands what Bitty’s been struggling with, all Jack wants to do is protect him. Beyond that, Jack is plotting murder. He’s thinking about hunting down everyone who has ever hurt Eric, starting with those bullies from middle school and ending with whoever stabbed him and left him to die. If his parents are on that list, so be it.

At long last, Jack’s phone buzzes in his pocket. He reaches for it with sweaty fingers, fumbling as he tries to pry it out of his jeans. It’s only been twenty minutes, but Jack feels like he’s been waiting forever for news.
Jack is relieved that Bitty seems okay with his mother, even though he hasn’t been given any details. It feels like he should be there, holding Bitty’s hand and supporting him while he works things out with his mother and not forcing himself to play hockey. He and Tater head home to squeeze in pre-game naps but Jack can’t sleep. It’s not lost on him that he’s missing both Bitty and Señor Bun.

Realistically, he knows that shouldn’t make a difference. He’s been sleeping alone on roadies for months and half the time he was at home, Eric was slipping out to God knows where. The thoughts all come rushing back to him, not only the lies, but the overwhelming sadness and guilt he feels for not noticing sooner. Every time Bitty walked out the door he was putting himself at risk.

Jack doesn’t even think he’s overreacting. Bitty really was in danger. And not just the obvious danger of violence like his mugging or that black eye he came to Hemingway’s with, but the silent dangers of malnourishment, illness, and even loneliness. So many times, Bitty could have been killed or kidnapped or taken advantage of. He could have been trafficked or arrested or caught
something worse than pneumonia.

He could have felt so scared and alone and hopeless he wanted to hurt himself.

He could have given up altogether.

Jack knows that all too well.

The what-ifs race themselves around Jack’s mind until he’s reeling. He gets out of bed feeling worse than when he laid down and forces himself back into his truck to go to the arena. When he gets there, Marty, Thirdy, and Snowy all ask after Bitty. Their concern is heartfelt and genuine, more intimate even than Marty’s speech to the team. They really do care for him and now for Bitty by extension.

It should make Jack happy, but all he feels is exhaustion. It’s deep in his bones, the debilitating emotional and physical fatigue. Two days ago, he was holding Bitty’s body together with both hands and now he’s shaking as he laces up his skates and puts a stick in those hands instead. It all feels pointless and juvenile. Jack struggles to put one foot in front of the other, to remember why he loves this game and why it matters at all.

He tells himself that he’s the captain and no matter what is going on with him personally, he owes it to the team—to the guys who just pledged to support him through anything—to do his best. It’s just the feeling that his best isn’t even going to come close to cutting it that has Jack nervous.

Before he even steps foot on the ice, he knows his head isn’t in the game, and unfortunately, it shows.

No matter how many shots he takes, nothing seems to work. The slurs the D men toss at him don’t even register, he’s too focused on making his damn passes connect. Whenever he nears the boards, he hears angry shouts and unhelpful commentary from frustrated fans.

Yes, he should get off his knees, he is blowing the game.

He gets one goal in the third period, but it’s a lucky shot and what’s worse is that everyone knows it. Marty and Poots are carrying him and Tater keeps tossing him concerned looks whenever one of his passes goes long. He’s thrown into the boards by gigantic homophobes more times than he can count and when he does get to sit down on the bench between plays, he’s near tears and in no position to be giving anyone a pep talk.

He’s playing so badly, they should really take him out. It’s probably only some misguided sense of loyalty that has the coaches letting him play at all. Just a few weeks ago he stood up and made a speech about inclusion and equality and now his boyfriend is lying in a hospital bed. The Falcs’ management is probably too worried about the inevitable backlash to bench him. The whole thing makes Jack sick to his stomach.

By the grace of God and Snowy’s glove, they don’t lose, but it’s a close call. The worst part is that Jack knows they would have done better without him. He stays in the shower until he’s sure he’s cried out. There’s no way he can hide the tears when he’s not under the scalding spray and he just can’t bear one more pat on the back or reassurance from his teammates. His parents kiss him goodbye, insisting they can stay if he needs them, but he brushes them off. He can’t stand for them to look at him with those pitying eyes anymore.

He wants to beg off the presser, but not only did he promise Bitty he would do his job, he knows he needs to show his face and prove he’s not a complete headcase. Jack is prepared to have to answer a few questions about Bitty’s accident and how it might be affecting his gameplay.
What he’s not expecting is, “Any comment about the lawsuit Martin West has filed against you?”
There is a buzzing in Jack’s ears. He can’t have heard correctly. “What?” he says inelegantly.

“Earlier today, Martin West alleged that you sexually assaulted him and had him wrongfully terminated from the Blues. Is that true?”

Jack opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. He’s not only shocked, but appalled. Thankfully, he’s saved by his teammates who cut through the din to speak on his behalf.

“West and his teammates harassed Jack about his sexuality on the ice and went after him physically,” Marty says. He sounds cool and calm, a testament to how many years he’s had on the ice and in front of the press. “There is no excuse for homophobia or targeting players like that on the ice or anywhere else, not for who they are or who they love. It’s unacceptable behavior and West got what he deserved.”

“Captain was saying nothing to Westie than necessary. He hit on Captain, not other way,” Tater says, frowning at the injustice of it all.

“He hit on you? Can you tell us what he said? Is West gay? Are you having an affair?”

“It doesn’t matter what he said,” Jack says, trying to reel the guys in. “I don’t know anything about West or his sexuality. That’s not my business.”

“Is not Captain’s fault he hung like horse,” Tater says, clapping him on the back. “West very small. He just jealous of Zimmermann charm.”

Jack’s mouth falls open and the cameras start going off double time. He’s going to be on the front page of ESPN under the headline “Biggest Dick in the NHL Wasted on Queer Headcase.”

“Is wrong expression?” Tater asks, confused. “I thought is expression in America.”

“It’s the right expression,” Thirdy mutters, shaking his head. “Just the worst possible time, Tater.”

Jack buries his face in his hands and fights down a laugh. It’s so ridiculous and he’s so tired he thinks he might be slipping into hysteria.

“Jack! Jack! Is it true? How big are we talking? Who else has seen you naked? Is that why you and West broke up?”

He can’t handle it anymore. Finally, Jack takes a deep breath and looks into the camera. “I am not dating West. I have never dated West. Nor will I ever date West. I’ve been in a committed relationship for months and I’ve never looked at West like that, or anyone else for that matter. I’m grey-a. Unless you’re my boyfriend, I don’t find you attractive. I don’t know how I can be more clear than that.”

The shouts and baiting questions just keep on coming and soon Jack can’t even hear himself think. They all blend together into white noise and that coupled with the flashes of the cameras and the hot lights overhead make him feel like he’s about to hyperventilate. He’s said too much. He’s used too many words to describe his sexuality. He needs to set the record straight, but everything he says just makes it worse.

“He called me a fag!” Jack practically shouts over the noise. “Is that what you want to hear? He said he didn’t shower with faggots and I told him to get off my fucking team. If you have a problem with that, take it up with my manager or the league, but don’t tell me that I got him fired.
He got himself fired the minute he decided to bring my sexuality onto the ice. Seriously. I get called a fag and I’m the one who gets sued? Fuck all of this,” he says, nearly knocking over his chair and storming out of the room.

“I’m going to the hospital,” Jack says to Tater when he feels the man fall into step behind him. “Tabarnak,” he mutters, turning around with his head in his hands. “I need to go back in there. I can’t just leave the other guys to clean up my mess.”

“Thirdy and Marty can handle,” Tater says, laying a protective arm across his shoulders as he steers them toward Jack’s truck. “They fathers. They deal with screaming babies all the time. We get you back to Itty Bitty. He make you feel better.”

Jack lets Tater drive. His hands are shaking and he wonders if it’s worth it to take a pill or if he should just try to let it pass. Taking deep breaths doesn’t seem to help, so Jack rolls down the window even though it’s freezing outside and lets the cold air blow directly into his face.

“I take Mother Bittle home,” Tater says once they’re inside the hospital. “You need time with small baker.”

“Thanks, Alexei,” Jack says, jaw clenched so tight it hurts.

“You do good work tonight, Jack,” Tater says, a sad smile on his face. “You keep head down and skate hard and you even score goal we need to win. You do good. I very proud of you,” he says, wrapping Jack up in his giant arms and squeezing the life out of him for a while before Jack has to tap out with a gentle touch to Tater’s shoulder.

Jack can’t even get the words out to thank him. He just smiles through the lump in his throat and nods. When they walk in the room, Jack sees a mostly-clean Señor Bun laying out to dry, spread-eagled on the overbed table next to a half-eaten Jello cup. Suzanne is sitting in the chair by Bitty’s bedside furiously knitting what looks like a hat while Bitty stares at the TV with his hand over his mouth. It’s showing recaps of Jack’s interview.

“Oh my goodness,” Bitty whispers, clicking the TV off. “Come here, sugar.”

“I be taking you home now,” Tater says, holding out a hand to Suzanne who blushes furiously and follows him out the door. She says something, but Jack doesn’t hear it. He’s already got his face buried in Bitty’s neck, silent tears escaping his eyes.

“It’s okay,” Bitty mutters, petting his hair. “It’s all going to be okay.”

“I think I fucked up,” Jack mutters, trying not to completely squash Eric.

“You did fine, honey,” Bitty says, pressing his lips to Jack’s temple. “What are you even supposed to say to that, anyway? ‘Yeah, it’s true, my dick is huge and my boyfriend loves it?’ Who even asks those kinds of questions? So rude.”

Jack huffs out a laugh and pulls back, trying to wipe his eyes. “Can I stay here with you tonight?” he asks, chest heaving. “I can’t sleep at home. I miss you too much.”

“Oh my goodness,” Bitty whispers, clicking the TV off. “Come here, sugar.”

“Of course you can, sweetpea. Though it’s going to be a tight fit,” he says, doing his best to shift over without pulling his stitches. “You hit the light and get your shoes off. There’s no space for those boats in here.”

Jack does as he’s told and folds himself into the scant space beside Eric. He’s sure he’s going to wake up sore, but when Bitty passes over Señor Bun—still slightly damp from the wash—he
knows there’s no place in the world he’d rather be than by Eric’s side.

“How were things with your mom?” he asks softly, knowing today was emotional for the both of them. He shouldn’t be asking for so much, taking so much support from Bitty when he should be giving it instead, but he just can’t help it.

Jack needs this, to share this space with Eric. He wants to feel the press of Bitty’s entire body against his and know that Eric is still here, still breathing, still alive. He hopes Bitty is getting what he needs as well.

“I don’t know,” Bitty says, sighing. “It’s hard to wrap my head around.”

“Want to tell me about it?” Jack asks, hoping that Eric will finally let him in.

“I want to be so mad at her. I want to hate her. You have no idea how much I hated her and Coach after I left home,” Bitty says, pressing their foreheads together and closing his eyes. “To have all that love and trust ripped away, to feel like trash… to be made to feel like you were the one that did something wrong, just by being alive…”

Jack slides his fingers through Bitty’s and squeezes, making sure Bun is tucked tight between their chests.

“I hated them for what they did to me, but I also missed them, especially Mama. You have no idea how many times I was cold and hungry and alone and just praying that someone would come help me. I was so young at first… so scared,” he says, voice thickening as his throat constricts.

“I would cry at night because I missed my mama so much…” Eric admits, tears seeping out of his tightly shut eyes. “I would cry and imagine her arms around me, her telling me it was okay, that I was going to be fine, that she was there and would protect me. But she didn’t.”

Jack wants to speak, to offer support, but he doesn’t know what to say. He wants to hate Suzanne as well, wants to hurt everyone who has ever made Eric cry, but now that he’s met her, he feels so conflicted. “No,” Jack says eventually, swallowing hard. “She didn’t.”

“She didn’t come for me. She didn’t look until last year,” Bitty cries, eyes flashing open as his frustration grows. He worries Señor Bun’s ear with his free hand and licks his upper lip, catching the salty tears before they reach his stitches.

Sympathetic tears collect in Jack’s eyes as he releases Bitty’s hand to rub soothing circles over his hip bone.

“I want to hate her,” Eric says, “but I don’t.”

Jack inhales and nods. He understands perfectly.

“I wish I could. It would be so much easier… but I just can’t do it and I don’t know why. Anyone else would.”

“You’re not anyone else,” Jack says, a small smile tugging at his lips as he combs through Bitty’s hair. “You’re kind-hearted and compassionate and so full of light and love. There’s no one quite like you.”

“It’s the Jesus. He does that to a body,” Bitty says, wiping under his eyes and leaning into Jack’s touch.
He starts to chuckle and Jack joins in, smiling broadly now. “It’s not just Jesus, it’s you,” Jack says, nudging Eric’s nose with his own. “You have such a big heart. I’m not surprised there’s still space left in it for your mother.”

“She’s so thin, Jack,” Bitty whispers, tilting their heads together again so he can pet Jack’s hair. “It’s like she hasn’t eaten a proper meal since I left. I’m sure she hasn’t been baking. The guilt was eating her alive.”

Jack nods again. Not even a week after he nearly bled to death Eric is still thinking of others, still trying to feed everyone but himself. Jack tells himself he will keep better watch after this, make sure Bitty puts himself first for a change.

“I still nearly had a conniption when I woke up from my nap and Bun was gone. She was just washing him, but good Lord I was afraid she might have run off with my heart. It’s going to take some time but I think I can learn to trust her again.”

“She got most of the blood out,” Jack comments, looking down at the rabbit. The scent is a little off from what he’s used to—less like home and more like chemicals—but anything is better than a bloody reminder of Eric’s accident.

“Mothers have their ways, don’t they?” Eric says, fiddling with Bun’s ear again.

“Do you think she’s going to stay?” Jack asks, heart caught in his throat. He knows that even if Bitty decides to forgive his mother, it’s not going to happen overnight. The trust he had in her is gone and needs to be rebuilt.

“She was serious about leaving Coach,” Bitty says. “I could hardly believe it, but she looked so fierce when she said it. I think we’re going to need a lawyer. You think Shitty could help us find someone in Georgia?”

“Yeah,” Jack says, making a mental note to call him in the morning. “I think he could.”

“I know there’s so much happening with you right now, but do you think she could stay with us for a spell? Just until we both find jobs.”

“She doesn’t need to work,” Jack says, though he almost instantly regrets it. “I mean… I can take care of you both. For as long as you need.”

“That’s real sweet of you, darlin’, but I think we both need to learn a little independence,” he says softly, shrinking the entire world down to the size of his hospital bed, pulling Jack in, close and intimate. “I do think I’m going to take your daddy up on his offer, though. I want to get back on the ice. I think I need to… maybe I just want to prove it to Coach, that I’m not a quitter, but I just—I missed it so much and seeing those videos of my old routines… I think I could do better now. With a bit of training.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” Jack says, letting out a breath. It feels good to know where they stand, to have a gameplan. Jack was shaking apart not knowing where they were going from here. “She’ll stay with us until we get things settled. Shitty will help with the legal stuff and we’ll find her an apartment when she’s ready. You’re going to need her help when I’m not home anyway. You do remember you have to regrow an organ before you do any skating, right?”

He’s worried Bitty is going to rush through his recovery and hurt himself further. Jack read the postoperative notes. He knows how perilous Bitty’s health had been to begin with. Spending time with Jack had been a positive influence, but Eric was still eating irregularly and dealing with a
weakened immune system.

Bitty is going to meet with a nutritionist to discuss getting him back to a healthy weight and figure out how to deal with his body’s reaction to his limited liver function. He has to stay in the hospital a few more days and get his stitches removed on day ten, then it’s at least three more weeks until he’s ready for light exercise like long walks. It could be at least two months before he’s ready to skate again, maybe more if he pushes too hard.

Jack knows that there are certain injuries that can take an athlete out of the game for good. It’s usually a torn ligament or shattered bone, but losing half an organ sounds nearly as bad. He doesn’t know how frustrated Eric will get, but if it were him that had to stay off the ice for two months, he knows he’d be impossible.

Eric seems to be in good spirits for now, but Jack’s not sure how long it will last or how he should help Bitty cope. Bitty had just decided to devote his life to skating again when a few desperate men had derailed his dream yet again.

“Yeah, I know, sugar,” Bitty says wistfully, answering a question Jack feels like he asked a week ago. “I just wish I had my skates back. I was just getting them how I wanted.”

“The police will find them,” Jack tells him for what must be the tenth time. He has no idea if it’s true or not but the last thing they need is Bitty going on a manhunt through Providence with the press hot on his tail. “They’ll have given all the pawn shop owners a heads up already. Speaking of which,” he says, remembering Suzanne had only arrived with a small bag. “Do we need to get your mother’s things from Georgia? Or yours? Or should we just go shopping when you’re feeling better?”

“I—” Bitty hesitates. “I’d like to get my things. If no one has burned them yet,” he says sadly. “There’s all sorts of family heirlooms my mama would like to have, I’m sure.”

“Then we’ll go to Georgia,” Jack says firmly.

“You do not have time to do that, Mister Zimmermann. We can just take her shopping for a few things. It’s just stuff. I haven’t had stuff in years. We’ll be fine without it.”

“No,” Jack says. “It might just be stuff but it’s still memories, and more than that, it’s about proving a point. Your father doesn’t get to burn all your trophies and outfits and recipes. Those things belong to you and your mother. We’ll go to Georgia.”

“Jack—” Bitty tries again, but Jack won’t hear of it.

“—Are you saying no because you’re afraid of your father, or are you saying no because you really don’t want to go? We don’t have to if you don’t want to. This is your decision.”

It takes a minute, but eventually Bitty says, “I’m not afraid anymore. I don’t care what he thinks. I want to go. For me and for Mama.”

“I have a game in Florida in two weeks. We’ll rent a truck and we’ll pick up your things.”

“You’re too busy. You don’t have to—”

“—I’m not letting you go there alone. It’s not up for discussion,” Jack insists, reaching for his phone.

Bitty protests about the cost and effort for a few more minutes, but knows it’s no use.
“There,” Jack says, putting his phone back down on the bedside table. “I’ve booked you tickets to Florida. We’ll all go together.”

“I—” Bitty stares, mouth open. “Okay,” he says eventually, seeing the stern expression on Jack’s face. “Okay. You’re right. I want my trophies and my photo albums and everything. If we’re going to make a life up here, we’re going to do it with some Southern flair.”

“That’s the spirit,” Jack says, pressing a kiss to Bitty’s cheek before settling down, his head resting gently on Bitty’s shoulder. “I won’t let him hurt you or your mother. I promise you,” he says, softly yet fiercely serious.

“I know you won’t,” Bitty says, kissing Jack’s temple. “I won’t let him either. I love you, Jack,” he says, stroking Jack’s hair again.

“I love you, too, Bits,” Jack says, finally letting exhaustion overwhelm him.
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Just a gentle reminder to review the tags since they’re not really in order. I think I have all of the kink covered in what is listed, but if not, let me know!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jack wakes up sore but well rested. Bitty is lying across at least 90% of his body, practically flattening him to the thin hospital mattress. It should be suffocating, but Jack just feels comforted by the weight of him.

"I have to get up, bud,” he mutters into the scratchy sheet under his face.

“Noooo,” Bitty moans against his back. “I’m too comfy.”

“I’m sorry, but I have a skate,” Jack says, attempting to sneak out from under him.

“I miss you,” Eric says softly, peeling himself off Jack’s back.

“I miss you, too,” Jack says with a small smirk as he heaves himself over the safety bar and out of the bed. “I just have practice today then a game tomorrow.”

“Then you’re on the road again?” Bitty asks, a frown flashing across his face.

“I know,” Jack says hanging his head. “I know it sucks. I want to be here for you. But at least you’ll have your mom here to get you settled at home. You’re okay with her, right? Or do you want me to call my parents back?”

“We’re doing fine, Jack. Don’t worry,” Bitty says. “I don’t have it in me to be mad right now. It’s going to take some getting used to, but being mothered is kind of like riding a bike. You remember pretty quick once the wheels start spinning.”

Jack isn’t sure he believes that. It can’t be that simple. Nothing ever is. He wishes he had the time to really talk to Bitty about his mother… maybe get him into therapy if he wants it.

“I can let her love on me a little bit,” Bitty says, still talking over Jack’s thoughts. “She’s got some making up for lost time to do, don’t you think? I’m still seventeen to her. It’ll just take a little while to get her to understand that I’m an adult who has been taking care of himself for a long time.”

“I’ll be back before you know it,” Jack says, frowning. “It’s just a few days, then I’ll be right back.”

“You sound like you’re trying to convince yourself more than me,” Bitty says, sitting himself up in bed.

“I might be,” Jack admits, reaching under the bed for his shoes. “I just don’t want to let you out of my sight. I’m feeling… adrift, I guess. Clingy.”
“You should talk to Blaire if you’re feeling off, sugar,” Bitty says, reaching out a hand until Jack abandons his shoes and takes it. “I don’t want you focusing so much on me that you forget to take care of yourself. Not that I mind you clinging to me much. Lord knows I’d like to keep you here with me forever.”

“I know,” Jack says. “It’s probably natural to feel this way after I almost lost you. But you’re right. I’ll call Blaire after practice.”

“Are you going to send my mama back over here?”

“If that’s what you want,” Jack says. He hasn’t seen them interact yet and isn’t quite sure how they’re doing. It’s hard to trust that Bitty isn’t just saying he’s fine with his mother so Jack won’t worry. Jack wants to worry. Or to at least know that he’s worrying about the right things. He wants to really take care of Bitty like he didn’t get to before. Suzanne Bittle isn’t the only one who has time to make up for.

“The police are coming by with some headshots for me this afternoon. I’d like to have someone around for that,” he says, fiddling with the blanket in his lap.

“I can—”

“—Don’t even think about it, Jack,” Bitty says. “You have enough to handle. I can do it just as well with Mama.”

“If you’re sure,” Jack says, searching Bitty’s face for any sign of discomfort.

“I’m sure,” he says with a smile. “The nurses say I’m healing up nicely and I’ll be able to go home in a few days, so you don’t have to worry about me. Just get your head back in the game, sugar. You have a playoff spot to earn.”

“You’re right,” Jack says, squeezing his hand before going back to tie his shoes. “I know you’re right but I just can’t stop thinking about the press and all this gossip they keep throwing in my face. They’re saying such awful things about you and me and I just want to get back to hockey, you know?”

“I know,” Eric says, eyes sparkling. “And you’re going to do great.”

Jack tries to live up to Bitty’s words, but it’s impossible. The media hounds him, camped outside the arena and his apartment, but Jack keeps his head down and doesn’t engage. He visits Bitty every day and spends hours at the hospital until his back starts twinging and he needs to go home to sleep in a real bed.

He speaks to Blaire several times, going over coping techniques and his breathing exercises. They spend several hours discussing Bitty’s accident and history and how it makes Jack feel, exploring his guilt and self-esteem issues and his ever-developing protective urges. Jack tells Blaire everything, even how he thinks things are moving forward with Kent and his father, even how he is struggling to find the energy to play hockey, the only other thing he has ever really loved as much as he loves Eric.

Jack tells her how it terrifies him, that he has Bitty ahead of hockey on his mental list and worries
what would happen to him if Bitty ever decided to leave. She listens patiently and walks Jack through it, how these feelings are natural and reasonable but able to be argued against, that letting himself love Bitty so quickly and deeply can be a good thing, even the best thing, but not the only thing that defines him. With time, the fear of losing Eric will subside and he will be able to do both. He can have Bitty and a Stanley Cup. He can have friends and his family and his career and love.

There is no one more capable than Jack.

They discuss his medication again and make sure Jack knows he can take his Hydroxyzine before he has a panic attack and not only during, but Jack still has trouble trusting himself to know how often is too often. Even though he has the tools he needs—between the medication and the coping techniques—putting them into practice is always easier said than done. Blaire insists that she is only a phone call away and leaves Jack with the names of a few colleagues to give to Bitty and his mother if either of them decides they’d like to talk to someone as well.

He Skypes Shitty and Lardo and even leaves Kent a few messages, playing phone tag, but appreciating the support nonetheless. His parents call every day just to make sure he’s doing alright and tell him they love him. They start calling Bitty, too, and for once, Jack doesn’t find himself begrudging their affection.

His team also has his back, but it’s clear he’s still not 100%. They lose the first away game he plays after Bitty’s accident and the coverage on ESPN is scathing.

Then they lose the next two.

The media drags out every mistake Jack has made in the past five years and replays them over and over again. Reporters say he’s unstable and can’t keep his personal life together long enough to do his job. The rookies on the team start to question his leadership and when he lets Marty take over his captain pep talks, they gossip about him behind their hands. Commentators spend more time talking about his mental health status than his game statistics.

Not only is Jack the anxiety-riddled drug addict, now he’s the star of the professional sports world’s one and only gay scandal. Martin West’s lawyers get in touch and Jack can do nothing but pass the calls off to Georgia and his legal team and pray they go away. Falcons’ management sits him down and asks what they can do to help. The problem is, there’s nothing to do. They can’t control the press and they can’t help Jack get the puck in the fucking net. It’s Jack that needs to buckle down and focus.

The only saving grace is the fact that Bitty has a phone now and can be reached easily. They talk daily about Bitty’s recovery and what they’d like to do when they see each other. It helps ease the tension when it’s happening, but then Jack opens Twitter and the entire world comes crashing down around his ears again. He tries to answer the encouraging questions when they come up, but they’re almost impossible to find among the homophobic explosion that is his mentions list.

Hockey fans don’t want to hear about his sexuality or his new boyfriend. They tell him to get his head in the game and to stop seeking attention by throwing his deviance in their faces. Jack isn’t trying to make a scene. He’s just being who he is, but he’s not even allowed to do that anymore, not now that he’s the poster child for gay promiscuity, drug use, and pedophilia, if the public is to be believed.

None of the other guys catch flak when they post pictures of themselves with girls or talk about their families, but as soon as Jack does it, he’s pushing the gay agenda down the throats of homophobes everywhere. It’s infuriating. He’s just as gay as he was when he first came out, but
now that he has a boyfriend all hell has broken loose. Jack starts to understand how Bitty must have felt hearing about his own damnation every day back in Georgia.

By the time he gets back to Providence, he’s ready to throw in the towel. Jack’s bag is heavy on his shoulder and he drops it immediately upon opening the door. There’s music playing and the scent of caramel in the air. His shoulders sag, but he tries his hardest to smile as he enters the kitchen.

“Oh my Lord, are you a sight for sore eyes,” Bitty says, drying his hands on a dish towel before wrapping Jack up in his arms.

Ever since his mother came to town, Bitty’s accent has thickened into slow dripping syrup. It sounds like love in Jack’s ears, like a soothing melody that speaks to his heart. It loses something over the phone, but now that he’s hearing it in person, it makes him melt just like the first time he heard it back at the shelter on Thanksgiving.

Jack sighs into the top of his hair, taking in the smell of his store brand shampoo. That alone is enough to make tears form in the corners of his eyes.

Bitty drags him over to the couch and sits him down gently. Then he climbs into Jack’s lap and settles down further, mindful of his stitches that are due to come out tomorrow. “It’s alright, sugar,” he murmurs into Jack’s ear. “You’re home now and everything’s going to be alright.

“I just…” Jack trails off, fighting against the inevitable. He cries anyway.

“Oh, honey,” Bitty says, combing his fingers through Jack’s hair. “You have to stop reading those Tweets. They’re just a bunch of hateful nonsense. They don’t know you or me from Adam.”

“I know,” Jack sniffles, clutching the back of the old SMH shirt that Bitty’s wearing. His mother used her joint account with Coach to get them a few new outfits each, and Bitty has some clothes Jack bought and left on his side of the closet weeks ago, but Jack is itching to take them on a shopping spree when he gets the time. Still, it warms Jack to know that Eric is wearing his clothes anyway, even now that he has other options.

And Bitty does look better, really. The stitches are gone from his mouth and the pale red scar there just looks like a tempting divot. “I just missed you so much.,” Jack says. “It hurts…”

’I’m not going anywhere, Jack,” Bitty says, kissing his forehead and then each of his cheeks.

The sound of his name breaks down some wall in Jack’s body and all of the sudden he’s sobbing violently. “I’m just s-s-so tired,” he cries.

“You just cry,” Bitty says, wrapping his arms around Jack’s neck and tucking his face into his shoulder. “I’m not going anywhere.”

It takes several minutes, but eventually Jack slumps like his strings are cut. “I’m sorry,” he says, resting his forehead on Bitty’s shoulder. “You’re still hurt and I’m just… falling apart.”

“We’re partners, aren’t we?” Bitty says, brushing Jack’s cheeks with his thumbs.

Jack nods, biting his lip. Bitty’s shirt is soaked from his crying, but he doesn’t look bothered by it.

“Well, as long as only one of us falls apart at a time, I think we’re doing just fine. Don’t you, sweetheart?”
“I guess,” Jack says, playing with the hem of Bitty’s shirt. It doesn’t feel equal. It feels like someone has a scale somewhere weighing all the times Eric has comforted him against all that Jack has done for Bitty and if it tips too far in one direction eventually the marbles will scatter and Jack will ruin everything.

“And I’m all healed up now, so it’s your turn to break a little, and that’s alright. Do you hear me?” Eric asks, still playing with the short hair at the back of Jack’s head.

“I hear you,” Jack agrees with a half smile. “Thanks, Bits.”

It’s hard, but Jack tries to remember Blaire’s words and accept what’s being given at face value. He has to remember to trust Bitty to know what he can handle and let him decide how he reacts to Jack’s anxiety.

“You don’t have to thank me, Jack,” he says, pecking him on the lips. “I’m in this with you. I’m exactly where I want to be.”

Jack takes a deep breath and replays Bitty’s words in his mind. He deserves this. Jack deserves to be happy and so does Eric. They can make each other happy, he just has to breathe and let it happen.

“I love you,” Jack says, leaning in. They kiss for a few minutes, Jack licking into Bitty’s mouth when it opens to him.

It’s not long before Eric is moaning against his lips, rocking into Jack’s lap. He’s not hard, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t feel good. The oven beeps, but they ignore it, just enjoying each other’s bodies for a few minutes, reacquainting themselves after a week and a half apart.

“Oh goodness,” a soft voice says, startling Jack’s mouth away from Bitty. He’d almost forgotten Suzanne was living with them temporarily. “I’ll just check the oven. You boys carry on like I’m not here. There’s nothing like seeing your only son in the arms of his handsome beau.”

“Good lord, Mama,” Bitty whines, lips still wet from Jack’s spit. He wipes his mouth and unseats himself from Jack’s lap. “You’re not cute!” he shouts toward the kitchen. “We’re consenting adults and this is Jack’s apartment! He’s had a long day!”

“That’s why I’m not lecturing Jack about making an honest man out of you first,” Suzanne calls from the stove. “Consider yourselves lucky.”

“Mother!” Bitty calls, lifting himself from the couch and heading toward the kitchen.

“I don’t know what you expected, Dicky,” she says, stirring a pot on the stove. “I don’t mind that you’re both men, but that doesn’t mean I want you to give the milk away for free. It’s about self-respect and commitment.”

“Speaking of commitment,” Jack says, joining them around the stove. “Since Bitty’s father is proving irrelevant, I suppose it’s you I should be asking for your blessing.”

“Sweet Jesus, Jack,” Bitty groans, rubbing his face with both hands. “Now is not the time.”

“I’m not proposing just yet,” he says, grinning widely. “It’s a far cry from the expression on his face when he first walked through the door and it feels fantastic. “I just want your mother’s blessing before I do. It doesn’t hurt to be prepared.”

“He’s right, Dicky,” Suzanne says, dropping her spoon and stepping closer to Jack. “I’d be happy
to welcome you to the family, Jack, such as it is. Just give my boy a little time to heal before you go scaring the life out of him again. I don’t think his heart could take it just yet.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jack says, reaching for Suzanne’s hand and kissing her cheek. “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me, honey,” Suzanne says, a hot flush rushing to her cheeks. “Dicky is the one you have to actually pop the question to.”

“Not yet!” Eric calls, beet red like his mother. “It’s not even been half a year, Jack. Give a boy some time!”

“I’m not rushing,” Jack says, leveling Bitty with a serious look. “I just like to have plenty of time to plan ahead. Do you like big romantic gestures? Or would something quiet be more your speed?” he asks, only half joking.

“I’m not going to do your research for you, Jack,” Bitty says, staring at the pot of meat sauce on the stove. “You’re just going to have to wait and watch and come to some conclusion on your own.”

“I will,” Jack says. It’s an assignment he’s more than willing to take on.

Jack plays a few more home games, slowly building his confidence back up. It takes several days and several calls to Blaire, but by the time the Falcs are ready to fly to Florida, the press buzz has died down to a dull roar and it’s easier to tune out. They do, however, have to put out a few fires about Bitty’s mother after word gets out that she’s resurfaced. Hundreds of people tweet at Bitty calling for her head, but he just pleads for privacy while they work toward reconciliation. Bitty and Jack do another night of AUA on Twitter, and while the reaction isn’t quite as positive as the last time, they still get enough decent questions to spend a few hours catering to their fans.

Instead of continuing to weed through his Twitter mentions, Georgia and Bitty help Jack start an Instagram account where he can post photos from his phone but not have to interact directly with fans or come up with witty comebacks. As long as he doesn’t look through the comments on his photos, Jack finds it relaxing.

He starts to remember why he loved photography in the first place.

Every time Bitty makes him something to eat, Jack takes the time to frame it up and find the right lighting settings before posting it. Whenever he gets on a plane, he takes a photo out the window. He posts embarrassing photos of Tater sleeping against his shoulder and the Falcs tweet them, causing Twitter to explode with fanfic of Zimbits + Tater, which is apparently called “Potato Salad.”

In the airport, Jack introduces Bitty and his mother to the rest of the Falconers. They shake hands and ask after his recovery, pat him on the back and ask about his baking and skating. Thirdy, Marty, and Snowy all give him the gentlest of hugs, welcoming him to the family. Marty gives Bitty his wife Gabby’s number and insists he start attending all of their team events.

Jack looks on, thrilled by the shy smile that crosses Eric’s face. For someone who had been repeatedly bullied by jocks just like them, he takes the attention with a great deal of grace. By the time Thirdy asks Bitty’s mother if she’d be interested in babysitting, Eric’s eyes are wet with what
look like tears of joy.

They’re out and it’s okay. It’s not just hollow words spoken to the press, it’s reality. There are 30 big brothers ready to have their backs. It’s overwhelming and wonderful in equal measure. Bitty insists he’ll make them each a pie to say thank you and starts making a list of flavors and food allergies.

Seated together in first class on the way to Tampa yet again, Jack and Bitty take their first selfie since Bitty’s accident and post it on Jack’s Instagram. Bitty tweets about it and by the time they land, it’s been liked 300,000 times.

“I swear I’ll take you somewhere else one day,” Jack says as they deplane. “Somewhere for something other than hockey.”

“Are you under the impression that I’m upset about this?” Bitty teases, smiling warmly as they exit the jetway with Suzanne and the rest of the team close behind.

“It can be a little bit much sometimes,” Jack says as they step in front of a few paps that made it through security. They don’t shout much, so Bitty and Jack smile for them and hurry along. “One day I’ll take you somewhere private. Somewhere with a beach where we can relax and I can see you finally stop shivering. Maybe you’ll even get a tan.”

“I’d like that, honey,” Bitty says, waving politely at the cameras when they make it to baggage claim. “Sometimes it feels like my skin hasn’t felt the sun in years.”

“I hate that you have to bundle up so much in Providence,” Jack says, steering Bitty to the bus that’s picking them up. “It’s warm here though,” he says, feeling the hot, humid air stick to his skin the second they step out of the air conditioning.

“Oh sugar, you have no idea,” Bitty says, rambling on as they pile into the Falconers’ bus. “It’s just barely March. That’s still chilly in Florida. Back in Georgia in the summers, I used to wear these tiny little short shorts. You would have died.”

Jack’s mouth goes dry at the thought. “R-really?” he asks, coughing.

“If Coach didn’t get rid of them, they should still be in my bedroom back home. You’ll see,” Bitty says with a wink, climbing up the steep steps into the bus. He moves slowly, but for only two and a half weeks post surgery, Bitty’s doing really well. He’s not allowed to lift anything or do any exercising for another three weeks at least, but he’s been eating regular meals and only taking one dose of pain meds a day.

She’s reluctant at first, but Suzanne accepts a hotel room to herself for the night and Jack and Eric finally get a little time alone. Bitty nearly throws himself at Jack as soon as their door is closed.

“Easy,” Jack says, a laugh escaping his chest at Bitty’s enthusiasm. “You’re not supposed to exert yourself.”

“I don’t care much right now,” Bitty says, pressing Jack up against the door. “I want to climb you like a tree, you big moose.”

“I think you’re mixing metaphors,” Jack says, breathless as he ducks down to give Bitty the kiss he’s been chasing.

“Don’t expect me to make sense right now,” Bitty groans against Jack’s mouth. “I’ve been wanting you for weeks.”
Jack melts into Eric, taking all that he’s given and only pushing the tiniest bit back. He doesn’t want to hurt Eric, but he does want to slow him down a little so they can get to the bed.

Bitty, of course, notices immediately and misinterprets Jack’s movement. “I’m sorry,” he says quickly pulling away. “You don’t want this right now, do you?”

“It’s not that—” Jack says, shaking his head. He tries to get the words out before Eric gets upset, but it’s no use.

“—I never want to push you, Jack. You can always tell me no. I know your drive isn’t that high and—”

“—Eric, it’s fine. I want you. I just want you on the bed where I know you’re not stretching too hard to reach my mouth.”

Bitty can’t keep the laughter inside even though he tries to cover his mouth with his hand. “Oh, OH!” he says, eyes sparkling with mirth. “You are just the sweetest man!” He walks backward, leading Jack by the hands until he can sit down on the edge of the bed.

Licking his lips, Jack drops immediately to his knees and ducks his head, blushing. “Is this okay?” he asks, raising his eyes just high enough so that he can see Bitty’s expression.

His mouth is dropped open, wet tongue moving slightly with his breath. “If that’s what you want,” Bitty answers, reaching out to touch Jack’s cheek.

Jack’s focus narrows down to the ridges of Bitty’s thumb as they graze against his cheek. The touch is light, but to Jack, it feels like fire on his skin. “Yes?” he says, startled by the tone of his own voice.

“I need you to be a little bit more sure than that, honey,” Bitty says, trailing his thumb over Jack’s bottom lip as he speaks.

Without giving it conscious thought, Jack takes the finger into his mouth and sucks it down dragging his bottom teeth along Bitty’s thumbprint before releasing it. “How about that?” Jack asks, voice deep and raspy with want.

“O-okay,” Bitty says, eyes going wide. His pupils are blown and his hands start to tremble against Jack’s face.

“Good,” Jack says simply, and then reaches for Bitty’s belt. He undoes it quickly, frowning when he sees that it’s still the same old worn leather that he’s been wearing since they met. It’s adjusted to a larger hole, but the leather is still soft and worn, stained from his accident.

Jack gulps, touching the darkened leather. It makes him shiver, the gravity of it. Bitty’s belt is discolored, tainted by the blood that spilled out of him in that cold, dark alley as Jack watched, helpless, impotent like so many times before. Eric nearly died that night, and yet here he is, quivering under Jack’s touch. If nothing else, it humbles Jack, making him slow his movements until they’re gentle and reverent.

He slides the leather free of the clasp and flicks open the button of Bitty’s jeans.

Bitty inhales so sharply his stomach goes concave, pulling away from the fabric.

“You’re so beautiful,” Jack mutters, tracing his palm along the outside ridges of Bitty’s stomach. His hip bones are more pronounced, the curve of his waist dipping deep, just a few workouts away
from prominent cuts. Jack pushes his shirt up further until he exposes the bright pink line of his still-fresh incision and the circular puncture wound where his drain used to be.

““You look pretty good yourself,” Bitty gasps, eyes wide as he watches Jack undo his zipper and pull his jeans off.

Jack hums deep in his throat as he buries his nose in the crease of Bitty’s thigh, taking in the clean, fresh scent of the fabric. The difference is startling. Jack never noticed it before, but it’s obvious now that Bitty had been sleeping in his clothes and going without washing. His scent used to be so potent, sharp in Jack’s nose. Now it’s covered up by the chemicals of Jack’s laundry detergent. He’s surprised to find that he dislikes it.

Bitty used to smell more like himself; honest in a way. Now it feels like he’s a completely different person. Jack shakes off the thought, slipping his thumbs into the fabric of Bitty’s underwear and pulling them up and over his cock. It’s just one more thing he’ll have to get used to. Eric is the same man Jack fell in love with. Just because he’s clean and warm doesn’t mean he’s changed. If Jack wants to smell his sweat, he’s sure all he’d have to do is ask.

When he refocuses, Jack finds Eric is hard and growing even harder as Jack breathes against him. It’s been long enough since Jack’s had Bitty inside him that he’s almost startled by the size as Bitty chubs up. “Wow,” he breathes, blowing heat over the head as he inches closer.

Bitty whines, his head falling back hard against the crisp hotel sheets. “Fuck,” he mutters, clenching his fists to his sides. “I can’t look at you when your face is like that.”

“Like what?” Jack asks, pointing his tongue and trailing it from Bitty’s blonde thigh hair all the way up to the tip of his cock.

“Like a wet dream. You’re a fucking millionaire celebrity panting over a homeless kid’s dick. It’s unreal.”

“You’re not homeless anymore,” Jack points out, trailing the same path with his tongue over and over again as Bitty whines.

“No,” Bitty says, staring down at his lap. “But you’re still a celebrity.”

“If I am, so are you,” Jack says with a smirk, teasing Bitty’s inner thighs with his fingertips. “The half of Twitter that doesn’t want to burn us at the stake is calling us a fairytale romance.”

“That is kind of nice to hear though, isn’t it?” Bitty breathes in sharply as Jack wraps his lips around his cock. “I kinda like being the pauper to your prince.”

Jack hums in agreement, sinking down with his palms gripping Bitty’s thighs gently. He massages the muscles there, breathing through his nose as he gets used to the clean scent of the new Bitty.

“Good Lord, Jack,” Bitty gasps, hands reaching down to pat Jack’s hair. “This is going to be embarrassingly quick.”

Jack smiles to himself and hums again. That’s fine by him. It’s been so long since he’s had Bitty in his mouth, he’s a little desperate for it. He’s missed the heat and the scent, the feeling of Bitty’s come painting his face, marking him. It makes him feel owned and wanted like nothing else in the world. It fills every crack in him, making him whole.

He sinks down even lower, taking measured breaths through his nose, losing himself in the feeling of Bitty’s fat cock stretching his throat. It’s difficult, but Jack tries to take things slow. Eric is still
hurt and shouldn’t be exerting himself.

Settling his thumbs in the creases of Bitty’s thighs, Jack works his tongue around Bitty’s ridge and sucks on his head. He laps at the smooth skin and then bobs his head, sinking a little further this time, letting Bitty reach deep into his throat.

“Oh fuck,” Bitty moans, fingers tangling into Jack’s dark hair. “You’re getting too good at this, honey.”

Jack knows Bitty’s getting close, his accent is thick like maple syrup in Jack’s ears and his fingers keep tightening in Jack’s hair. When Jack drops down as low as he can go and works his throat, he can feel Eric’s dick grow harder, tensing as it prepares for orgasm.

Slipping off quickly, Jack sucks hard on the head, letting Bitty’s ridge fit tight against the roof of his mouth. His hand flies up Eric’s shaft, stroking hard and fast.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Bitty mutters above him, pulling sharply on Jack’s hair.

Jack looks up just in time to see his mouth fall open in a silent moan as he stiffens and falls over the edge. Releasing Bitty’s dick, Jack’s eyes droop in pleasure as the heat hits his lips, pulsing into his open mouth and onto his tongue.

“Fuck, baby,” Bitty moans, watching Jack lick the come from his chin. “You look obscene.”

Closing his eyes, Jack breathes in the scent of Bitty’s release, that salty musk that he’d been missing. He rubs his tongue around his mouth before swallowing, finally satisfied he’s caught it all. Opening his eyes, Jack sees wetness pooling at the tip of Bitty’s dick and leans down to lap it up, unwilling to let any of it go to waste.

“You really like that, don’t you, sugar?” Eric moans, shying away from the overstimulation as Jack cleans him up.

“Is that weird?” Jack asks, feeling shy all of the sudden. “I can stop,” he adds, sitting back on his heels.

“Never stop,” Bitty says, sitting up and cupping Jack’s cheek. “You’re just so eager and gorgeous. Sometimes I can’t believe I get to have you.”

Jack smiles, cheeks burning under the praise. He looks up to see Bitty smiling back at him, the scar on his lip calling to him like a siren song. Unable to contain himself, Jack lunges forward, straddling Bitty’s hips and licking into his mouth, biting down on that plump new crease with his teeth.

“You feel hard,” Bitty mutters between kisses. “Want me to fuck you, sweetheart?”

“You’re not fucking me,” Jack protests, sitting back and looking at Eric with a stern expression. “That’s way too much. You just got your stitches out.”

“At least take your pants off. I want to touch you,” Bitty says, wiping the wetness from his mouth.

Jack’s eyes follow the movement. If he’d been able to resist Bitty’s kisses before, he’s completely incapable of it now. His teeth itch to sink into that dimple in his lower lip. He doesn’t know why, but he finds it unbearably sexy. The scar on Eric’s forehead cuts through his eyebrow giving it a rugged looking quirk. It’s often covered by the blond swoop of Eric’s bangs, but when his hair
gets pushed back like it is now, it just makes Jack want to jump him.

After speaking to Blaire, they’d decided that if Jack was satisfied with his sex life, they could keep him on his 20mg of Cymbalta and put off any further changes to his meds until after the season was over. He can’t say he hasn’t been feeling anxious and stressed after Bitty’s accident and the resulting media storm, but at the same time, he’s getting really attached to his erection and isn’t willing to give it up so easily. It’s a delicate balancing act, but Jack thinks they’re making it work.

Now that he knows what it’s like to feel real arousal, he wants to cling to the sensation. It’s still really difficult for him to orgasm, but at least now he feels like he can, that every sexual encounter doesn’t have to end in frustration and tears. Bitty has always been patient with him, and now that Jack is confident in his body’s ability to follow through, it’s easier to believe that sex can and will most likely end in orgasm.

“What can I do for you, honey?” Bitty asks, pulling Jack out of his thoughts. “Want to fuck my mouth?”

Jack’s brain short-circuits momentarily at the words, but he catches himself quickly and shakes his head. “You’re not going to do anything,” Jack says, pulling off his pants and underwear and straddling Bitty’s hips without putting any weight on him. “You’re going to lie there and be my sexy boyfriend and let me look at you.”

“If you think you’re in charge here, you’re wrong,” Bitty says, propping his head up on a pillow and then grabbing Jack’s ass with both hands.

“Eric,” Jack whines, head dropping back as he arches his neck.

“Yeah, baby?” Eric answers, voice low and husky as he kneads Jack’s cheeks. “You were saying?”

Jack wants to protest, but as soon as he opens his mouth, Bitty pinches his thigh. It doesn’t hurt, but the sensation is so shocking Jack’s dick jerks and his eyes widen. Smirking smugly, Bitty brings three fingers to his mouth and sucks. He wets them, opening his mouth far enough that Jack can see how he drags them down his tongue, coating them with saliva.

“I know what you need,” Bitty says, removing his fingers. “So why don’t you let me give it to you, hmm?”

Jack nods dumbly, mouth falling open in an audible gasp as Bitty traces a wet finger around his hole, holding him steady with his other hand. There’s the slightest bit of pressure and then Bitty’s finger is sliding home and crooking forward.

“Tabarnak!” Jack curses, tilting his head back to stare at the ceiling.

“Touch yourself for me,” Bitty orders, sweet but stern.

Nodding again, Jack reaches for his cock, somewhat relieved to find that it’s hard. Even now, as desperate and turned on as he feels, he can never be sure of himself. He sucks in a breath and strokes himself dry. It doesn’t do much for him until Bitty starts talking again, muttering encouragements as he removes his hand to collect some saliva, going back inside with two fingers this time.

“Your ass is perfect, baby,” he says, scissoring his fingers to make room for a third. “I love the way you feel around me. I just need to heal up a little more and then I’m going to fuck you so hard and fast you’ll come without touching that beautiful dick. Would you like that, Jack? You think
you can come for me untouched one day?"

Jack can’t even form a response, he’s already picturing it, how full he felt with Eric’s dick in him, how overstuffed he was when Eric pushed his entire hand inside.

A sharp pain hits him and he startles, dropping his dick.

Bitty must have pinched him again, harder this time.

“I asked you a question, sugar,” Bitty says, still rubbing inside Jack’s body, stretching his arm until he can brush against Jack’s prostate.


“In English, Jack,” Bitty demands, the short clip of his words shooting a shiver through Jack’s body.

“I want that,” he says, licking his lips. “I want you in me all the time.”

“Tell me more,” Bitty says, slipping his fingers out to wet them again and rub around Jack’s hole before thrusting back in with all three.

“I like being full,” Jack says softly, eyes falling closed as the heat rushes to his face, burning his cheeks. “I love being full of you.”

“That’s good,” Bitty says, grabbing Jack’s free hand and bringing it back to his dick, prompting him to keep going. “Because I love filling you, baby. You just swallow me up, so soft and hot all around me. You’re incredible, so good at doing exactly what I tell you.”

Jack moans, eyelashes fluttering as he squeezes his cock. Seeking balance, he reaches for the headboard and grips it tight. With more leverage, he can thrust his hips down, grinding against Bitty’s hand just right.

“God, you’re fucking gorgeous,” Bitty says, crooking his fingers until there’s a blunt pressure against Jack’s most sensitive place. “That big cock looks so good in your hand, Jack. So perfect.”

Jack melts at the words. He knows it’s stupid to love the compliments he hears so often from others, but Jack will never tire of hearing them in Bitty’s sweet southern drawl. From Bitty, they feel real. They carry the weight of every time they’ve ever kissed or fallen asleep together. When Eric says the words—they feel like love.

“I can’t reach your throat from down here without stretching, sugar,” he says, petting down Jack’s side as he fucks deep in his hole with his other hand. “So you just tell me when you’re close and we’ll think of something, okay?”

“Okay,” Jack says, squeezing tight around his dick as he strokes faster. He tries to imagine what Bitty will do, but that just distracts him from concentrating on his orgasm.

“That’s so good, baby,” Bitty purs, still stroking his side. “Keep that grip tight. I want to feel you come on me, whenever you’re ready, sweetpea.”

Jack arches his back and sinks down, chasing after Bitty’s fingers. They’re getting dry, but that just makes the sensation sharper and more deliberate. His dick, however, that’s starting to chafe. It’s edging toward painful and Jack isn’t sure he’ll be able to hold onto the pleasure long enough to come like Bitty wants.
“Give me your hand, Jack,” Eric says, drawing Jack’s attention back down.

He drops his dick and holds his palm out, not sure what Bitty’s going to do. A second later, he gets a palmful of spit. It’s inelegant, but the convenience can’t be denied. Jack actually thinks he likes how filthy it feels, how possessive and carnal that kind of action is coming from Bitty. He can feel his hole twitch when he brings the wet hand back to his cock and starts to stroke again.

“There you go,” Bitty says, smiling when he hears Jack start to moan. “That was just what you needed, wasn’t it, sugar? A nice wet hand on your dick. I’d get my mouth on you if I could. Next time I’ll swallow that big cock and let you choke me with it again. It felt so good in my mouth, baby. So hot and hard for me.”

Jack whimpers as he remembers how it felt having Bitty’s throat spasming around him. “I’m close,” he stutters, breath leaving him as Eric’s fingers pound against his prostate.

“You can come for me, Jack,” Bitty says, working his fingers faster. “Come all over me. I want you to.”

“Ouais,” Jack moans, chasing that high. He tenses, squeezing down around Bitty’s fingers, but he just can’t get there. Desperate, he tries for another few minutes, but it’s no use. Every time he thinks he’s about to come, the sensation slips away like the tide. It’s frustrating because Jack can feel it happening, can recognize the way each intrusive thought pulls him further from his goal. Sighing, Jack hangs his head, hand slowing down.

“Don’t stop,” Bitty orders, making little circles with the pads of his fingers, rubbing hard and rough inside him.

“I can’t,” Jack whines, but he starts to stroke again anyway.

“You can,” Bitty says, looking up at him with fierce brown eyes. “I know you can come for me. Just a little more.”

Jack holds out his hand, letting Bitty fill it with spit before trying again. He squeezes as tight as he can, right under the head and rubs upward, praying for release. A minute goes by and he’s just about to cry when Bitty’s hand comes down hard on his ass.

His eyes widen in shock and his hole clenches down tight as he cries out. The pain catches him by surprise, sharper than when Bitty pinched him, but more exciting somehow. A startling sensation shoots through Jack’s body all the way down to the tip of his cock which twitches in his now-slack grip.

“Oh, sweetpea?” Eric asks, licking his lower lip in a slow drag. He massages the sting out of Jack’s ass with deft fingers, touch soothing but still firm.

The burn spreads across Jack’s ass in a pleasing swell, heat radiating across his skin as the shock settles into a dull throb. He can feel the blood pulsing just beneath the surface in a slow dance, nerves ready to be lit up again.

Jack has no words but he nods quickly several times, swallowing hard.

“I’m going to keep going and you’re going to come for me,” Bitty says, bringing his hand back again.

“I don’t think that’s going to work,” Jack says, shaking his head. He’s interested in trying this again some other time but doesn’t think it will be enough right now. Overwrought and exhausted,
Jack doesn’t think he has an orgasm in him today.

Eric is already working too hard, straining his arms and his stomach with the effort to get Jack off. Jack can’t stop thinking about how Bitty should stop and rest so he says, “I don’t know why, but I just can’t today. I’m sorry.”

“What did I tell you about me being in charge?” That’s all Bitty has to say to get Jack’s hand moving again. “That’s it. Just like that, sugar. So good for me.”

Jack whines, nails cutting into the wood of the headboard as he tenses, digging deep, trying for a final push toward the goal.

“There we go,” Bitty says, bringing his hand down for a second time.

The jolt rocks Jack’s body, but Bitty’s fingers are relentless, chasing him, teasing around his hole in shallow little thrusts. Then he pushes in deep, pummeling Jack’s prostate with three fingertips.

“Come on, honey,” Jack hears from what seems like very far away.

Then Eric smacks him again and the burn starts to spread, heating his entire body. The wave rushes through him, making his skin tingle and his dick harden. He doesn’t understand it, can barely believe it, but he actually thinks it’s going to w—

“—One more, I think,” Bitty says, smacking his ass harder than ever. For a moment, everything feels frozen, hanging in suspended motion until Jack’s brain catches up to his pain receptors.

Then it hits him like an avalanche.

It’s sharp and it burns and Jack screams as he’s buried by the sensation. His whole body spasms violently. Gasping in complete shock, Jack stiffens and spills over his hand. “Ah! Sacrament!” he curses, hips hitching forward as he comes in harsh little pulses all over Bitty’s chest.

“There you go,” Bitty says, sliding his fingers back in deep and rubbing hard against Jack’s prostate, prolonging the pleasure until the last of Jack’s come dribbles out of him. “So perfect for me. So beautiful, baby.”

Jack’s chest heaves and he lets out a broken noise, jerking and shaking in Bitty’s hands. “Enough,” he manages to say, choking on his breath. “Enough.”

Bitty slips his fingers out and rubs both hands down Jack’s sides until he calms down. “You’re okay. You’re okay,” he mutters softly. “You did so well.”

“How—what—” Jack tries, but can’t find the words.

“Your face is really expressive, honey,” Bitty says sheepishly, eyelashes fluttering. “I think I just know how to read your body.”

That’s not quite it. Jack knows it’s much more than that, how Bitty knows exactly what he needs and coaxes the pleasure out of him, forces it when he can’t get there himself. “Thank you,” he manages, shoulders slumping as he releases the headboard.

“You don’t have to thank me,” Bitty says. “I love watching you come.”

A lopsided smile crosses Jack’s lips as he sighs happily.

“Now how about you clean me up before this come dries on my scar, okay?” Bitty says, smiling
back at Jack and petting his hair when he leans in close.

Scooting back down Bitty’s legs, Jack lowers his head and starts licking up Bitty’s stomach.

“I meant a washcloth, sweetpea,” Bitty says, giggling when Jack’s tongue dips into his belly button.

“I like this better,” Jack says, lips brushing against Bitty’s skin.

“Whatever makes you happy, sugar,” Bitty says, folding his arms behind his head as Jack takes his time trailing his tongue over every inch of his chest.

Chapter End Notes

Translation


"Yeah, I want that," he adds.
Something is different about changing in the locker room this time around. The atmosphere feels electric. Jack actually smiles when the boys tease him about bringing Bitty and his mother along on the same flight as the rest of team.

“Don’t want to let him out of your sight, do you Cap?” Snowy says, pulling on his socks.

Jack huffs and shakes his head. “You wouldn’t either if Sarah got stabbed.”

“If Sarah got stabbed, I’d quit hockey and become her personal bodyguard,” Snow says.

“Tater already tried,” Jack says, laughing even louder.

“I think Zimms just didn’t want to miss out on his first chance at roadie sex,” Thirdy chimes in, pulling his jersey over his head.

“If I was only after the sex, I wouldn’t have brought his mother along too, eh?” Jack says. He can’t believe he’s actually talking about his boyfriend and their sex life in the middle of an NHL locker room right now. The two spheres of his life have finally collided and Jack’s surprised to find that it’s not the catastrophe he’d always feared it would be.

“What are they doing here, then?” Marty asks, leaning against the frame of his locker. “Not that we don’t love having him, but is he still hurting enough that he needs his mom around? Maybe it would have been better to let him rest at home.”

Jack is touched by the concern and says so. “He’s doing okay, actually. His mom is here because we’re driving to Georgia tomorrow to pick up their stuff. She’s moving to Providence.”

“Wow,” Poots says, strolling in from the bathroom. “That’s going to be one hell of a drive. You going to make it back up in time for our game Friday?”

“I’ll be there,” Jack says with a small smile, ducking back into his locker to find his missing elbow pad.

Tater stomps over and crosses his arms, leaning against Jack’s locker until he looks up.

“What is it, Alexei?” he asks, doing a double take at the angry look on Tater’s face.

“You go face down homophobic father without me? I thought we best friends, Zimmboni,” he says with a pout.

“We are best friends,” Jack says, though they both know Shitty crawled inside his heart long before Tater ever did. “I didn’t want to make a big deal out of it.”


“No, Tater,” Jack says exasperatedly. “We’ll be fine.”

“I coming with you,” he says again. “Bitty is needing you for hugs and kisses and needing me for punching father’s face and he be needing Snowy and Poots for carrying boxes.”

“Leave me out of this,” Poots says, still in a towel. If Jack didn’t know any better, he’d say the kid looked hung over.
“I’m in,” Snowy says, a smirk flashing across his face. “Sarah’s with her parents this week anyway.”

“You know I want to, but I need to spend the week with the kids,” Thirdy says with an apologetic smile. “We’ll have a BBQ at my place when Eric’s feeling up to making pie again, alright?”

“I’ll come,” Marty says, coming over to lay a supportive hand on Jack’s shoulder. “Gabby would kill me if I missed out on an opportunity to save the legendary jam recipes.”

Jack laughs. Bitty made one off-handed comment on Twitter about how there was no decent jam in Rhode Island and Gabby has been trying to get him to do a jam making tutorial on YouTube ever since. It’s only been a few weeks and while Bitty’s been recovering well, Jack still doesn’t think he’s ready to exert himself so much in the kitchen, especially not stirring thick jam and lifting jars out of boiling water.

“Fine,” he relents when Tater starts giving him sad puppy dog eyes. “You guys can come to carry things, but you don’t get in the way of Bitty and his parents and you rent your own car because I’m not having you flirt with Bitty’s mom the whole way to Georgia, Tater.”

“I not flirting,” Tater says, grin growing wide as he shakes Jack’s hand. “I raising self-esteem. Mother Bittle will need new male companion after divorce.”

Jack shakes his head and rolls his eyes. “Whatever you say, Tater.”

“Enough with the team bonding,” Thirdy says, hopping off his bench. “Let’s give them a good game. One you guys can ride all the way to Madison.”

Jack’s pretty sure no one in Georgia cares about hockey in the slightest, but he smiles anyway and stands to finish dressing. He lets the coaches call out the starting line up and gives a few quick words of encouragement that have the boys thumping their sticks on the padded floor as they huddle up. It’s been a while since Jack has felt so good leaving the locker room, but there’s a determined smile on his face that only grows when they get onto the ice.

They do a few quick laps and wave to the crowd before Jack catches Bitty and Suzanne waving from the VIP section. Bitty is wearing his jersey and the hat Jack gave him back when they first met. He’s cheering through mitten-covered hands and beaming, the blond swoop of his bangs bouncing as he hops in place.

The face-off doesn’t go in Jack’s favor but before too long he’s checking Bancroft into the boards and taking possession of the puck. He passes it off to Thirdy who sends it back smoothly when he’s to the right of the goal. Jack deekes once, twice, then sinks it in between the goalie’s legs. The crowd goes wild and Jack is buried under Tater and the rest of the guys for a few moments. When he looks up, Bitty is jumping and cheering. Someone is shaking a rainbow flag a few rows above him. A small smile flits across Jack’s face at the sight of it.

Bitty really shouldn’t be jumping, but that doesn’t make it any less of a thrill to see his boyfriend in the stands cheering him on. A ball of white catches his eye and when he does a double take he finds that standing right next to Bitty is none other than Kent Parson holding—is that a kitten?

Jack skates back to center ice and looks up to the stands one more time. Kent is there, waving the tiny paw of the kitten in Jack’s direction, looking fondly between the cat and Jack. Mouth falling open, Jack shakes his head and blinks the sight away. He stares down at the ice and waits for the puck to drop.
It’s difficult, but Jack makes it a priority to keep his eyes on the ice and not straying off to the stands to see what other ridiculousness Kenny is getting up to. He keeps his head down long enough to score a second goal in the first period but when he looks up from the celly, he finds Suzanne taking photos of Bitty and Kent together, the kitten tucked between them.

He’s not jealous per say. Jack knows nothing is going on between Kent and Eric, but this is the first game his boyfriend has attended since they came out as a couple and he can’t help being a little upset that all of Bitty’s attention isn’t on him. The press is already having a field day, theorizing about Jack’s sexual history and his inadequacy on the ice. The last thing he needs is for the rumor mill to start buzzing about Kent and Bitty having an affair or God, even a threesome with Jack. The clickbait articles would write themselves, especially with all the photos that have been taken already.

Jack skates off the ice after the buzzer sounds and does his best to shake it off. He speaks to the guys, who hang on his every word like his mind isn’t miles away, and praises Snowy on his last save. Clapping Willis and Tater on the shoulders, he thanks them for having his back and then lets the coaches speak for a few minutes.

They get back on the ice and fight hard, but the Lightning ties it up by the time the second period is over, slipping a goal in under Snowy’s leg while he’s split on the ice.

“We've got this,” Jack tells them when they’re back on the bench. The clock is ticking down, about to signal the start of the third period, but Jack takes his time choosing his words. “Snowy’s doing his best but it’s down to us now. Tater? Willis? Stick to Vlaminik like glue. I can’t afford another hit like that last one. Thirdy? If I don’t have a clear shot, take it yourself, alright? We’re not losing this one.”

They cheer their agreement and smack their gloves on Jack’s helmet. He wants to put his game face on because they’re tied and they might actually lose if they can’t pull their shit together, but Jack can’t rub the smile off his face. Even though they’re not winning, they’re playing damn good hockey and they’re acting like a team. These guys have his back 100%, on and off the ice, and it’s something that Jack can’t bring himself to be angry about. If they have to lose, losing like this wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.

Looking up at the stands one last time, Jack sees Suzanne clutching Bitty’s arm as they watch. One of Bitty’s mittens is pressed against the glass, a look of tearful encouragement on his face while Kenny looks on with a knowing smirk.

It’s on.

Jack schools his features and snags the puck, whipping it out of reach. He doesn’t need to look to know that Thirdy is there and Poots is right behind him. When he gets the puck again, he slips it back to Poots just before he’s rammed into the boards. He pushes hard and skates through just in time to see Thirdy sink the puck in the net. The scoreboard lights up again and they’re back in it.

He piles on top of Thirdy, screaming, “Beautiful goal!” into his ear. “One more, just like that!”

The energy seems to swell around them like a net, pulling each person Jack touches into the glowing halo. He shoots a smile at Tater who pats Willis on the arm who makes a complicated hand gesture at Snowy who nods, a small smirk just barely visible beneath his mask. Suddenly everyone is skating faster and hitting harder and by the time the buzzer sounds, Jack’s gotten himself another assist and Thirdy’s completed his hat-trick.

They shake hands with the Lightning and when Jack pulls his helmet off, the crowd goes crazy.
He grins and waves and pushes Thirdy in front of him, letting everyone know he’s the man of the hour. As subtle as he can, Jack skates over to the side door and motions at the security guard to open it for him.

In an instant, Bitty’s throwing himself into Jack’s arms, nearly taking him off balance.

“Jack, honey,” Bitty whispers against his chest. “That was so amazing! I’m so proud of you!”

Above Bitty’s head, Jack pulls off his right glove and runs his hand through the back of Eric’s hair. Bitty looks up at him, heart-shaped face glowing with a faint blush, upturned nose red from the cold. He looks like a dream to Jack, who feels like it’s been hours since they’ve touched.

“I love knowing you’re watching,” Jack mutters, ducking his head slightly for a kiss.

Bitty presses into it, rising up onto his tiptoes. “I love you,” he says softly, just an inch from Jack’s lips.

“I love you,” Jack says back, brushing his nose against Eric’s.

“You guys are disgusting,” Kenny says, strolling up behind Bitty. “I mean, seriously. Get a room.”

“We have a room,” Jack says, raising his eyebrows suggestively.

Kent laughs out loud, brushing his hand over the small head that’s sticking out of his hoodie’s kangaroo pouch. “You do, don’t you?” he says, that smug little smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“What are you doing here?” Jack asks, releasing Bitty’s waist only to take his hand instead. He’s smiling at Kent, and it doesn’t hurt to do it. It’s new and a little bit fragile, but he’s actually happy to see his friend.

“Saw your photo on Twitter,” he says, shrugging his shoulders. “You’ve got the most retweeted selfie of the year. Just knocked that Zayn Malik kid off the throne. Thought I’d come see what all the fuss was about.”

“I’m glad you’re here,” Jack says, dropping Bitty’s hand with a small smile before pulling Kent into a hug. “I don’t know when we would have seen you otherwise and I wanted you to meet Bitty.”

“We’re totally besties now, aren’t we Bits?” Kent jokes, waggling his eyebrows at Eric behind Jack’s back.

“Well, it’s hard not to like someone who lets you pet their kitten,” Bitty huffs out, shaking his head.

“Is that what the kids are calling it these days?” Jack says, deadpan.

“You think you’re so funny, Zimms,” Kent says, reaching into his pocket and carefully retrieving the kitten. “Meet Kit Purrson!” he crows, cradling the little kitten to his chest with its face pointing out.

“You didn’t really name it that, did you?” Jack asks, reaching out to pet the soft fur.

“Of course I did. She’s going to be the most famous cat of Instagram overnight! Just you wait.
I’m going to get so many more likes than you. Isn’t that right Kit?” he coos. “Who’s the cutest kitten in the world? You are, yes you are!”

“Sacrament, you’re embarrassing,” Jack says, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“I think it’s sweet,” Bitty says, stepping forward to take Jack’s hand again. “He’s getting lonely out there in Vegas all by himself, honey. We should plan a visit after we get back from Georgia.”

“Oh,” Jack says, turning toward Bitty. “Some of the guys are insisting on coming with us. To help carry things and intimidate your father, I think.”

“Oh Lord,” Bitty says, face heating. “We don’t need all of them making a scene.”

“Well, I couldn’t really say no. Tater was adamant. Snowy and Marty want to come along, too. Is that alright?” Jack asks. He doesn’t want to make this trip any more painful than it has to be, but they really could use the help.

“I suppose it’s fine,” Bitty says, squeezing Jack’s hand. “As long as they mind their manners and let Mama say her piece. I don’t want Coach calling the cops on us before we get what we need.”

“I promise, Bits,” Jack says, pressing a kiss to the top of Bitty’s hair. “It’s all going to be fine.”

“Did I just hear something about a road trip?” Kenny chimes in, rubbing his face against the furry head of Kit Purrson. “When do we leave?”
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

Just a general reminder that you're going to be hit in the face with homophobia and homophobic language in this chapter. I’m sure you all knew that, but you’re getting an extra warning anyway.

The next day, Jack takes the first shift driving. They’ve rented a Chevy pickup and plan to get a U-Haul trailer when they get into Georgia. Bitty sits beside him with Suzanne knitting away in the backseat. Behind them, Tater, Snowy, Marty, and Kent follow in a Suburban.

Bitty takes control of the music immediately and for a few hours there’s no need to talk. Jack hums under his breath and keeps his eyes on the road, taking in the scenery. They stop for lunch at a Waffle House and load up on carbs as Kent surreptitiously feeds bacon to his hoodie.

The boys are in high spirits, enjoying the sense of adventure that comes with a few days off work that aren’t spent in a gym or an airport. Their exuberance makes the next three hours in the car fly by as Bitty and Suzanne gossip about what kind of girl Tater might like and if they think Marty and Gabby are going to have another kid soon.

They stop in Madison to pick up a trailer and Bitty goes quiet as Jack fills out the paperwork. He’s just about to climb back into the driver’s seat when Eric holds out his hand. Jack takes it and links their fingers together.

“No, Jack,” Bitty says, frowning. “Give me the keys.”

“Are you sure?” Jack asks, lips twisting thoughtfully. He knows it’s not safe for him to drive when he’s feeling anxious or overly emotional and Jack knows it hasn’t been an easy journey for Bitty, no matter how well he’s been hiding it.

“You don’t know the back roads like I do,” Bitty says, voice steady.

“Okay…” Jack says, tilting his head to the side. If that were the case, Suzanne could drive or Bitty could give Jack directions.

“And I feel like I need to do this on my own,” Bitty adds, taking the keys from Jack’s other hand.

They scrape against Jack’s palm like Bitty’s nails cut into his shoulder blade when they make love—sharp and bright. Jack stares at his skin, surprised the action hasn’t left a mark. It feels like something that should linger, but when Jack looks up into Bitty’s face, all he sees is the fierce look of determination.

“Okay,” Jack says again, firmer this time. “You know I’m right here if you need me,” he says, pulling Bitty in by the shoulders to kiss his temple. “Just pull over if you have to.”

“I…” Bitty stops, squeezing the keys hard in his fist. “I’ll be okay,” he says, jaw set hard. “I need to be okay.”

“Okay,” Jack says one last time, nodding sharply before he circles the car to the passenger side.
“You’ve got this, Bits.”

Bitty nods back and ducks into the driver's seat, taking a few minutes to adjust the mirrors and wheel to his liking.

Suzanne sits in the back staring straight ahead, knitting forgotten on the seat beside her.

They pull out of the parking lot and head back to the highway, Bitty’s hands clutched tight on the wheel. His back is ramrod straight, shoulders tense as he takes them just a few more exits down the road before turning off and weaving through back roads.

Jack tries to keep his breathing even, but Bitty’s anger is palpable. It hangs in the air like a dense cloud even though the sun is shining through orchards and farmland as they pass. Jack fiddles with his iPhone until he finds the Amp Up playlist Bitty made for him months ago. He shuffles through it until he finds a Bruno Mars song that gets Bitty’s fingers drumming against the steering wheel.

The lyrics repeat, run run run away, run away baby, and seem to steel Bitty’s resolve. With each mile they travel, Bitty’s face seems to harden as he prepares himself for battle. He drives the pickup like a tank through enemy territory, taking turns at breakneck speed and racing up hills and down valleys without so much as a tap to the breaks.

Jack hears the twang of a guitar from the stereo and recognizes it as the intro to *Boondocks*. He reaches for his phone to change the song, but Bitty shoots him a look and says, “Leave it.”

Jack leaves it.

Little Big Town sings about how they have no shame, they’re proud of where they came from, and Jack can see Bitty’s small mouth singing along. His eyes flick up to the rearview mirror to find that Suzanne is also mouthing the words.

*It’s where I learned about Jesus and knowing where I stand. You can take it or leave it. This is me, this is who I am.*

They take a turn off the main road and end up somewhere that looks more residential. The houses are further apart than Providence, but not quite as far as they are up by the lake in Nova Scotia where there might be acres between cabins. When they pass by a sign welcoming them to Newton Ridge, Bitty leans forward and hunches his shoulders like the enemy will present itself at any moment.

*Shake It Off* starts to play and Jack watches as Bitty’s spine relaxes one vertebra at a time. He’s not happy by any means, but he’s taken on an air of detached indifference that looks a little bit like courage. Jack holds out his hand, elbow leaning against the center console and Bitty stares at it for a few seconds before taking it. They make a few more turns, Eric steering with just his left hand, squeezing tight with his right.

Jack can tell the moment they turn onto the right block. Suzanne sits up straighter in her seat and takes a deep breath, staring out the window intently, searching for something. Maybe she’s looking for the tiny differences that come when you haven’t been home in a while, but she’s only been gone a few weeks, so maybe it’s something entirely different. Maybe she’s searching for a friend or neighbor, someone to help her make this terrible decision without backing down. Maybe she’s taking in the sights of her home for the last time, trying to memorize every detail.

Dropping Jack’s hand, Bitty puts both hands on the wheel and tightens his grip, chewing hard on his bottom lip as he slows the truck down to a crawl. They must arrive, because Bitty pulls over to
the curb, a stern look of determination on his face.

“Is this it?” Jack asks, for lack of anything better to say. They’re stopped in front of a grey house with maroon shutters, flowering bushes overgrown in the front yard. The rest of Bitty’s entourage stops just across the street but no one makes a move to get out of the car. Jack appreciates this. They’re letting Eric take the lead.

“This is it,” Suzanne says, hand frozen on the door handle. “Want me to go on ahead, Dicky?” she asks, voice small.

Jack swears he can see her shaking with anticipation, but when he looks over to Bitty, he sees no fear. There’s nothing there but resolve.

“No,” Eric says, squeezing Jack’s hand once before releasing it. “I’m doing this.” He takes a very deep breath, chest high, and exits the car.

Moving quickly, Jack follows him up the front path and then steps to the side allowing Eric to stand in front of the door, his mother right behind. Tater, Marty, Snowy, and Kent file silently out of the Suburban and crowd around the bottom of the front steps like sentinels, armed with cardboard boxes and packing tape. Jack nods at them and turns back to the door to wait for further instruction.

It takes three full minutes for Eric to raise his hand and ring the bell.

The cheery chime sounds completely out of place for the situation. Jack can see Bitty startle as the familiar tone hits his ears for the first time in five years. He holds his breath for what seems like an age until the door swings open and a man appears.

Richard Bittle isn’t a tall man, but he is imposing.

Jack spends his life being hounded by men three times his size, but he’s never feared any of them the way he fears Richard Bittle. This man has hurt Eric, can hurt him again in ways that Jack can’t predict or defend against. Bitty’s namesake holds the power in this situation, and Jack doesn’t know what the play is. He’s got his team behind him, ready to jump into the fray at a moment’s notice, but Jack doesn’t know how to win this fight.

“Junior,” the man says, tone clipped. His mustache twitches, but it isn’t like Shitty’s. It isn’t endearing, it’s aggressive. His eyes glide down Bitty’s body, cataloging the changes five years on the streets have wrought. Richard Bittle’s face is appraising at first, taking in Eric’s height and build, but then it hardens abruptly. Jack can see the instant the conclusion forms in his mind.

“Still gay, it says.

“Coach,” Bitty says firmly, expression cold. He doesn’t offer his hand, doesn’t make a move of any kind. His back is straight, shoulders down, hips squared forward. Eric is ready for a fight. He’s ready to land a blow if it comes down to it.

Jack has never been more proud in his life.

“Mama and I are here for our things,” he says lightly, completely in control. “Please let us in, now.”

That’s all he says.

It’s so quiet Jack swears he can hear his own heart beating in his chest. Richard Bittle’s hand is
still clenched hard on the doorknob like he’s considering whether or not to slam it in his own son’s face. Jack shouldn’t be surprised by the display, but he is. He’s never seen a family act like this, never would have suspected that Bitty could have been fathered by such a hateful man.

“Suzanne?” he asks, tilting his head to the side to see around Eric. “Where have you been? I’ve been worried sick.”

“I went to visit our son,” she says sharply, stepping forward. “He almost died, you know.”

“I told you not to go looking for him,” Richard says, jaw set tight. “He made his choice. He’s no son of mine.”

“It’s not a choice, Rick,” she says, huffing out a breath. “Now let’s get inside before the Hendersons start callin’ the neighborhood watch,” she adds, pushing forward and through the door so fast Richard has to step backward to avoid being bowled over.

“Now see here,” Richard says, eyes going wide as Jack and the rest of the boys press into the small entryway. “I’m not havin’ some crazy pack of homos traipsing through my home. I’m callin’ the cops right now.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Suzanne says, heading toward the kitchen. “This is my house and these are my guests and they’re not doing anything I haven’t asked them to do. Now get in here this instant, Rick.”

“My room is upstairs,” Bitty says, ignoring his father entirely and motioning for the boys to follow him down the hall. “Come on.”

Jack hesitates, eyes flicking between Eric and the kitchen where his mother just disappeared to. “I’m going to keep an eye out down here,” he says, stepping away from Eric’s outstretched hand. “Will you be okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” Bitty says quickly, lips twitching upward in a reassuring way. “Just… don’t do anything that’ll get you arrested, alright? You can’t win a Stanley Cup from jail.”

“Yeah,” Jack says, nodding. “Go on ahead before Tater breaks something.”

Eric nods back and heads up the stairs. Jack watches him leave before following the sound of raised voices and clanging dishware toward the kitchen.

“Everything alright, Mrs. Bittle?” he asks, ducking his head under the low doorway as he steps into the room. It’s tidy and bright, a blue checkered valance over the window and a porcelain farm sink set just below. There’s a large crucifix on the wall next to the refrigerator and a cross-stitch that says, “Eat Well, Pray Often, Love Always” hanging next to a calendar of holy days and a sign proclaiming, “Raised on Sweet Tea and Jesus!”

“Just fine, Jack,” she says brusquely, barely looking away from the cabinet. She’s on a stepstool reaching above her head for something, a pile of crockery on the counter in front of her. ”Why don’t you help me with these?” she asks, holding out a serving dish for him to take. “It sure is nice having someone tall around to do the reachin’.”

Taking a cue from Suzanne, Jack ignores the scoffing noises coming from Richard and takes the dish. He steps back into the entryway for a box and starts carefully arranging Suzanne’s pile inside. The pieces are old, razor thin cracks visible in the pottery. He wishes they had the time to pack things in bubble wrap, but it’s clear they won’t be staying long.
“Get down from there and talk to me,” Richard says, looking up at his wife as she starts rifling through another cabinet. “I mean it, Suzanne,” he says when she makes no move to comply.

“Jack, honey,” she says, holding out an ancient-looking box of cookie cutters. “Careful with these, please. They were my mama’s.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says quietly, palms outstretched. He sets the cutters gently on top of the dishes and closes the box, taking a minute to assemble a second one as Suzanne’s pile grows.

“Such a polite, boy, isn’t he, Rick?” she says, shooting a pointed look at her husband. “Someone’s mama raised him right.”

“Why is he even here?” Richard asks, rolling his eyes. “I thought you were comin’ home, not leaving with everything but the kitchen sink.”

“Jack and his friends are here helpin’ because Dicky’s still healing from a stab wound and can’t barely lift a sack of flour;” she says, slamming a casserole dish down on the counter with a clang. “And I was never comin’ home. Didn’t you get those divorce papers I sent you? Oh no matter,” she says, stepping down from the stool. “I’ve got extra copies right here,” she says, pulling a yellow envelope out of her handbag.

“I’m not signing those,” Richard says, crossing his arms. “No way, no how. You are my wife and you are staying right here where you belong, not galavanting off with a bunch of deviants.”

“They’re not deviants, they’re people,” she says, setting her mouth in a firm line. “Just like you an’ me. Now sign the damn papers, Rick.” she says, slapping them to his chest before climbing back on the stepstool.

Richard puts the envelope down on the table and stares at it like force of will alone will make it disappear.

Jack keeps quiet and continues taking things from Suzanne’s hands. He can feel Richard Bittle’s eyes on the back of his head, but doesn’t turn around. This isn’t his fight. He knows that, but hot anger bubbles in his stomach just standing in the man’s presence.

A few minutes later, there are footsteps on the stairs and Eric appears in the doorway. “I’m all finished in my room,” he says coolly. “Why don’t you go pick out your clothes, Mama? I’ll finish up in here.”

He’s speaking to his mother, but his eyes are on his father, honey brown dark and menacing.


Kent’s eyes catch Jack’s and go wide. He’s both impressed and deeply concerned. Jack nods reminding them that Bitty’s in charge and his orders should be followed. They disappear as quickly as they arrived leaving Jack and Eric alone with Richard Bittle.

“Where are my manners?” Bitty trills, striding over to Jack’s side and facing his father. “Jack, this is Coach, my estranged homophobe of a father. Coach, this is Jack Zimmermann, Captain of the Providence Falconers. He’s my boyfriend.”
“I know who he is, Junior,” Richard practically growls. “His perversion’s all over ESPN.”

“Oh, is that what we’re calling the record for most goals scored in a single NHL game? Perversion? Golly, Jack. I had no idea ESPN was so into gay sex! We’re gonna have to get you on the cover of Sports Illustrated now. How about you in a rainbow flag and nothin’ else?”

“Do not use that kind of language in my house, young man,” Richard snaps, hands clenching into fists at his sides. “You and your sick little friends can get out right now.”

“No,” Eric says, hands on his hips. “We ain’t done getting what we came for yet.”

Jack bites his lip. He’s never heard Bitty’s accent so thick and never seen him show even the slightest bit of disrespect for anyone. Though the words are carefully chosen, they’re dripping with disdain. This is a Bitty who just can’t be bothered to be polite anymore, and it’s beautiful.

“Give me a hand, sugar,” he says, moving the stepstool in front of the refrigerator and climbing up to reach the cabinet above. His shirt rides up, revealing the bright turquoise waistband of a new set of underwear, and Jack stifles a laugh at the groan he hears coming from Richard.

Catching his balance on Jack’s shoulder, Bitty grits his teeth and pulls out one rolling pin, and then another. And then three more rolling pins, handing them down to Jack one at a time.

“You shouldn’t be reaching,” Jack reminds him, clutching the collection of wood in his arms. “Let me do the rest.”

“Oh alright, sweetpea. Quit fussin’,” he says, squeezing Jack’s shoulder as he lowers himself back to the floor. He takes the pins from Jack and dumps them into an empty box with a loud clatter. Pausing there, Bitty presses his palms down hard against the countertop, arms spread, back to his father.

“What else do you need?” Jack asks softly, leaning into Bitty’s body.

“Just the recipes,” he says, letting out a breath.

Jack can feel the way he slumps against him, just a brief moment of weakness before he straightens up and continues with the charade. Later, he’ll let Bitty fall apart, pet his hair, kiss his cheeks, give him every opportunity to grieve for the family and the home he’s leaving behind, but right now, Jack swallows down his reassurances and puts on his best face-off face.

Pulling away, Eric walks to the end of the kitchen island and points at a bookshelf that’s set into the cabinetry. Jack nods and starts removing the books and boxes of note cards, stacking them neatly in a new box, titles facing out. When he’s finished, he folds up the top of the box and stacks it with the others in the entryway for Tater to pick up.

Bitty’s shadow appears on the wall and Jack turns to face him. “There’s just one more thing,” he says, holding out his hand.

Jack takes it without hesitation and is led back through the kitchen and out the back door. Eric snags a key from underneath a rock on the porch and uses it to open an old shed a few yards away. He steps inside behind Bitty and promptly sneezes the scent of old grass and mold out of his nose.

“Take this,” Bitty says, holding out a rickety old basket, “and follow me.”

The yard is bigger than Jack expects it to be compared to the size of the house. They walk straight
back for a minute until a large tree comes into view, set just in front of an old log fence that separates the Bittle’s property from the woods beyond.

Bitty is a silent presence beside him, but he walks with purpose, only stopping when he’s directly in front of the tree trunk. He raises a hand and traces the grooves of the bark, fingertips fluttering over a heart someone carved there. Jack is about to say something when Bitty breaks down in great heaving sobs.

“Bud,” Jack says, startling when Bitty drops to his knees in the grass. “What is it?” Jack crouches down next to him, reaching out an arm to pull him in by the shoulders. It’s an awkward position. All Jack wants to do is wrap Eric up in his arms, to pull him to his feet and take him far away from this place, but he doesn’t budge.

“It’s okay,” Jack says, resting his cheek on the top of Bitty’s head. “We can leave whenever you’re ready. We have all your things now and we never have to come back.”

He can tell that Bitty is trying to speak, but the words keep getting lost along the way. Bitty’s sniffling and sobbing, trying to clear his throat but unable to swallow around the pain. “It’s okay,” Jack whispers, plopping himself down in the dirt around the tree roots so he can look at Eric. “It’s all going to be fine.”

Bitty’s head is bowed low, hands clasped tightly in his lap, shoulders shaking.

“Are you hurt?” Jack asks. The crying was so abrupt he’s worried Bitty has re-injured himself. “Is it your chest?”

“The p-peaches,” Bitty cries, finally lifting his head.

“What?” Jack asks, searching Eric’s bloodshot eyes for something he understands. His face is red and blotchy, cheeks wet as tears continue to stream down his face and drip off his chin.

“The tree. My tree!” Bitty calls, still incoherent as far as Jack is concerned.

Jack’s brow furrows. He looks up to the tree above him and finds that yes, it must be a peach tree they’re sitting under, but there isn’t any fruit. Not really. There are some odd green bulbs that look like furry kiwis sticking out.

“The tree?” Jack asks, still confused. He wants desperately to understand what has Bitty so upset, but he doesn’t have enough to go on. “What about the tree?”

“I can’t—” Bitty sobs, collapsing forward into Jack’s chest.

“Hey,” Jack says, pulling Bitty in and rubbing his back. “It’s okay, bud. Just take your time.”

It’s a few minutes before Bitty’s breathing evens out and his tears dry up. Jack nuzzles into his temple and kisses his hair, muttering reassurances into his skin, hands moving in light little circles over Bitty’s shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” he says eventually, pulling away to wipe at his face. “I just—”

“It’s fine, Bits,” Jack says, taking his hand and pressing a kiss to his knuckles. “Don’t be sorry. It’s all fine.”

“I don’t know why I’m so upset,” Eric says, squeezing his eyes closed and tipping his chin up toward the sky.
“It’s okay to be upset. We knew coming back here would be painful. You don’t have to be okay with it. It’s okay to be angry. I’m angry for you.”

“It’s not that,” Bitty says and then quickly adds, “well, it’s not just that.”

“Okay,” Jack says, brushing Eric’s bangs back and running his fingers down his cheek.

“I know it’s March. I knew that when we came here, and still... I don’t know why I thought—”

“You thought...?” Jack prompts, still not quite sure what they’re talking about.

“I thought I’d get one last batch of peaches off the tree,” Bitty finishes with a huff, shoulders slumping.

“Oh!” Jack says, eyes widening. “But they’re not ripe,” he says, talking himself through it out loud.

“Not even close, sugar,” Bitty says, a sad smile on his face. “I’m sure Mama has some of last year’s in the pantry but I just thought maybe we would be able to make some jam together. One last time, you know?”

“Yeah,” Jack says, though he has absolutely no idea how Bitty must be feeling. Maybe if his parents moved and he could never skate out back with his father again, but that wouldn’t even begin to compare. Jack’s familial history, however painful and stilted, is nowhere near the same as what Bitty has experienced.

“Maybe we could—” he begins, unsure how he’s going to end the sentence.

They could try to come back? They could buy peaches up in Providence? They could afford to buy a whole orchard full of peach trees in Georgia if that’s what Bitty wanted. Even without saying the words, Jack knows that it will never be enough. Nothing money can buy will ever be able to heal the scar that this tree will leave on Bitty’s heart.

“—It’s fine,” Bitty says, wiping his nose on his sleeve. “It was a long shot. I knew that but I just had to check. It’s fine.”

“I’m so sorry, bud,” Jack says, releasing Bitty’s hand so he can cup his cheeks instead. “I know that doesn’t keep it from hurting, but I’m so sorry all of this had to happen to you. You didn’t deserve any of this.”

“I know,” Bitty says, turning his head to kiss Jack’s palm. “Well, I know that now. No one deserves this.” He gives Jack a sad, little smile and dries underneath his eyes with his pointer fingers. “Now,” he says, huffing out a breath, “how do I look?”

“Gorgeous,” Jack laughs, leaning forward to kiss the divot on his bottom lip. “Always so gorgeous.”

“You sure do know how to charm a boy,” Bitty says against his lips, the tip of his upturned nose bumping against Jack’s.

“I love you,” Jack says, peppering kisses all over Bitty’s cheeks and trailing down his neck. He’d rather them look like they’ve been necking like a couple of teenagers than crying, right?

“Lord,” Bitty breathes, pulse fluttering just under Jack’s mouth. “Do not start something you can’t finish, Mister Zimmermann.”
“Right,” Jack says, taking a second to bite down on the crook of Bitty’s throat and worry the skin between his teeth. “Stopping now.”

Bitty groans as he pulls away, sighing with his face tilted upward as he usually does when begging God for strength. “Later,” he says with a sly smirk when he opens his eyes.

“Did you find your shorts?” Jack asks, hoping to lighten the mood.

“You bet your big hockey butt, I did,” Bitty says with a grin, pushing his hands to his thighs to get off the ground.

“Let me help you,” Jack says quickly, scrambling out of the dirt and offering his outstretched hands. “No more strenuous activity,” he chides, shaking his head.

“I’m really getting sick of letting you do all the work,” Eric says, winking. “I liked it better when I was in charge.”

“You’re always in charge,” Jack says, blushing furiously.

“Well, yeah,” Bitty says, taking Jack’s hand and leading him back toward the house. “But I’d like to be a more active participant, if you know what I mean.”

Jack’s mouth goes dry. “I know what you mean,” he says, coughing. “I’d like that too. I miss—”

There’s shouting coming from the kitchen. They rush back inside to find Tater standing toe to toe with Richard Bittle.

Tater’s arms are crossed in front of him, Richard’s finger pointing at his chest. Jack can see the tension there, that Alexei is five seconds away from knocking the man’s teeth out. The only thing stopping him is Jack’s order not to make a scene, to let Bitty handle things his own way. Tater is fighting every one of his instincts to give this battle to Bitty. Jack’s heart swells at the thought.

Marty and Snowy stand behind him with matching glowers on their faces, looking all too much like cartoon sidekicks, and Kent is shouting abuse right over Richard’s vitriol. Suzanne has a hand over her mouth and tears in her eyes.

“What is going on in here?” Jack shouts through the din, though it’s obvious what happened. Jack’s eye is immediately drawn to a small glint of light in the center of the room. Suzanne’s wedding ring is sitting on the counter on top of the yellow envelope.

“We do nothing,” Tater says, keeping his eyes leveled on Richard. “He one using bad words about Itty Bitty.”

“Do you have everything you need?” Jack asks, turning toward Suzanne.

She nods quickly, a single tear escaping her eye to trail down her cheek.

“What about you?” he asks Bitty. “Is everything in the truck?”

“Yeah,” Eric says with a sigh. “I think we’re done here.”

“Then let’s go,” Jack says, nodding his head at his teammates. “Start the engine,” he says to Kent, tossing him the keys to the pickup.

“Now wait just a cotton pickin’ minute,” Richard shouts as the men file out. “You can’t just let them run off with all our stuff! Where are they even goin’ anyway? You’re staying here with
I’m going,” Suzanne says with a sniff. “Goodbye, Rick. Mail those papers back to my lawyer and we’ll be finished.”

“You’re not goin’ anywhere!” he booms, grabbing her by the arm and yanking.

Eric shouts and Jack takes a step forward but before he can even think about raising his fists, Suzanne slaps her husband right across the face.

“You get your hand off me right this second or you will never hear from me again,” she says, voice cold as ice.

“Sweetpea,” he says, releasing her to rub his cheek. “You can’t go. You’re my wife. Your family is here.”

“We stopped being a family five years ago when you told Dicky to leave,” she says, swallowing hard. “You did this. You broke us. My family is Dicky and soon enough it’ll be Jack. I’m moving to Providence to be with my family,” she finishes, snatching her purse off the counter and storming toward the entryway.

“If you leave here, don’t you even think about coming back!” he shouts after her.

The door opens and slams shut behind Suzanne, leaving just Eric and Jack alone in a ransacked kitchen with Richard. “This is all your fault,” he grinds out through clenched teeth, dark and ominous.

Jack immediately steps in front of Eric, but a cool hand on his wrist pulls him back.

“I never did anything wrong. I never did anything but love you, Mama, and Jesus. If that wasn’t enough, then fuck you, Coach,” he says, practically shaking with rage. “Fuck you and fuck this house and fuck this town.”

“You’re going to hell,” Richard says, jaw set tight. “Both of you,” he adds to Jack.

Jack wants to protest, but he has no idea what to say. What can you say to someone whose ignorant beliefs run so deep and strong? What is there left to say to someone who is willing to turn his back on his own flesh and blood and let his entire life walk out the door before admitting that they might be wrong?

“You’re pathetic,” Bitty says. “I almost feel sorry for you, but I don’t. You brought this upon yourself.”

“Get out of this house,” Richard says, stomping forward like he’s going to chase them right out the door.

“Gladly,” Bitty says, taking Jack’s hand and pulling. “Just one more thing,” he says, turning back when they’re nearly out of the kitchen. “If you ever lay a hand on Mama again, I’ll kill you.”

“You wouldn’t dare. You couldn’t,” Richard says, cheeks red, mustache twitching with rage.

“Maybe I couldn’t. I’m a good Christian boy, after all,” Bitty says cooly. “But Jack could. Couldn’t you, sugar?”

“I could,” Jack says evenly, not a shred of doubt in his mind. “I could and I would.”
“Or maybe we could just let Tater do it,” Bitty says conversationally, turning toward the door. “I know it’s a stereotype, but I just feel like he probably knows how to hide a body, you know?”

“Yeah,” Jack says, reaching out a hand to slip the cross stitch off the wall. After hesitating a second, he grabs the little sign beside it as well. “If not, I think my dad might have a guy for that.”

Jack shoots one last look over his shoulder at Richard. He doesn’t know what he’s searching the man’s face for, but he can’t stop looking. If anything, he hopes this is the last time he’ll lay eyes on him, but there’s still something simmering under Jack’s skin telling him to keep a careful watch. The hair on the back of his neck is standing up under the man’s gaze. Somehow, Jack just knows it isn’t over. It will never be over.

The ghost of Richard Bittle is going to follow them all the way back to Providence.

“Jack?” Bitty asks, eyebrows high. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” Jack says. “It’s nothing.” They step out of the house hand in hand and find the rest of their group across the street waiting for them, like they needed the extra bit of distance to feel safe. “I’m so proud of you, bud,” Jack says, dropping his items into the bed of the pickup on the way.

“That didn’t go like I thought it would,” Bitty admits, stepping up to his mother’s side and pulling her in with his free arm.

“Did you get to say everything you wanted to say?” Jack asks. If nothing else, he wants Eric to leave Georgia with no regrets.

“I—” Bitty hesitates. “I think I said everything I needed to say. If I said everything I wanted to say, I don’t think we’d ever get out of here. Mama?” he asks, turning toward her.

“I’m ready to go home,” she says, burying her face in Eric’s neck.

“You heard the lady,” Kent says, tossing the keys he’s holding to Jack. “Let’s go home.”
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

Here we are... finally. The last chapter.

I'd like to thank you all for being the kindest group of commenters I've ever had the pleasure of writing for. You've really made this a wonderful experience for me. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The minute they cross state lines, Jack swears he can feel the difference. Bitty’s shoulders relax slowly as Jack drives and Suzanne suggests they all stop for milkshakes. They call Tater through the car’s speakerphone and laugh as the guys all talk over each other, overjoyed that they’re going to be stopping. Apparently, Tater and Parse have been singing horrible 80s duets for hours and Snowy and Marty are ready to kill them.

They pull off the highway and ask Siri to take them to the best ice cream place the middle of nowhere South Carolina has to offer, weaving through farmland and sprawling old houses until they land at the right shopping center. When they all pile out of the cars in the parking lot, it’s like magnets. The entire group comes together in a group hug, unprovoked, squeezing Bitty and Suzanne to within an inch of their lives.

“Come on,” Snowy says, ruffling Bitty’s hair when they break apart. “Parse is buying.”

“Like hell I am,” Kent says, setting Kit down on the grass beside him for a potty break.

“You’re like richer than all of us combined, you can spring for milkshakes,” Marty says, punching him in the arm.

“No way,” Kent says, scooping up Kit once she’s done doing her business. “Zimms was always loaded. He’s got to be richer than God by now.”

Jack blushes. He can hear Suzanne laughing behind him but is afraid to look at Bitty’s face. They haven’t talked about money yet, and knowing what he knows now about Bitty’s past, Jack is sure it’s going to be unbearably uncomfortable when it finally comes up. Really, he’s just hoping to avoid a fight. All of his instincts are screaming at him to provide for Eric and his mother, to make sure they never want for anything ever again, but he knows that’s not going to go over well, especially not with Bitty.

“Marty has the most years in the NHL by a wide margin,” he jokes, doing his best to shake off the intrusive thoughts. “Maybe he should pay.”

“Is that supposed to be a crack about my age, Zimmermann?” Marty asks, unimpressed. “Because if so, you really need to work on your chirps.”

The rest of the group laughs, Tater patting Jack on the back hard enough to steal his breath right out of his lungs.

“Plus, I’ve got kids to put through college. My vote is still for Zimmermann. He’s got the deepest pockets, for sure.”
Alright, get in line, children,” Jack says, shaking his head as he pulls out his wallet.

He pays for everyone’s ice cream and they all crowd around one picnic table to eat. Jack wishes they had the time to stop for the night so he could get some time alone with Eric, but he has a game tomorrow night and they’re already cutting it close. Meeting Bitty’s eye, Jack tries to tell him all this and more. He feels like there hasn’t been enough time for them to settle, to relearn each other after Bitty’s accident, to reconnect and talk about the future.

“I love you,” Jack says softly, leaning into Bitty’s body. He whispers the words right in Eric’s ear, hoping no one else will hear. “I can’t wait to get home. I miss you.” Jack knows that doesn’t make any sense. Bitty is right here. He’s been right here all along.

“I miss you, too,” Bitty says, understanding him perfectly. “I’m itching for some alone time.”

“I bet you are,” Jack says, pressing a kiss to the skin right below Eric’s ear, ice cream cone forgotten in his hand.

“Not for that,” Bitty mutters, smacking him lightly on the arm. “Well, not just for that,” he amends, shoulders shaking slightly with laughter. “We have a lot to talk about, don’t we?”

“We do,” Jack agrees. There’s ice cream melting down Bitty’s arm so he reaches for it, licking the sticky chocolate from the curve of his wrist. “But we can do a little bit of both, can’t we?”

“Don’t you dare make me get hard in front of my mama,” Bitty tells him sternly, lips just a hair away from his ear.

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Jack teases. He’s not hard, but he can feel the slightest bit of heat stir in his stomach when Bitty lunges toward him, trapping his earlobe between his teeth and worrying it.

“Get a room, you two,” Kent groans around a mouthful of strawberry milkshake. “Tater over here has got virgin eyes!”

“I no virgin anymore,” Tater argues. “Not since I leave Russia,” he adds, bringing a blush to Suzanne’s face.

“Not in front of the lady,” Marty says, smacking the back of Tater’s head. “Sorry,” he says, turning to Suzanne. “I tried to raise them right, but they’re still a bunch of heathens.”

“It’s alright,” Suzanne says, smiling through the awkwardness. “I can’t say I’m not interested in hearin’ about all you handsome boys. Even if you’re all eatin’ supper before sayin’ grace.”

“Mother!” Bitty gasps. “What has gotten into you?”

“Nothin’ lately,” she says, sighing heavily.

“I am not hearing this,” Bitty says, pressing his ear against Jack’s chest and covering the other one with his free hand. “La la la la la la!” he sings, eyes squeezed shut.

“So you’re allowed to neck like it’s goin’ outta style but your mama can’t even mention it at all?”

“La la la la la la!” Bitty continues to sing, shaking his head against Jack’s chest, ice cream dripping off his elbow.

“We find Mother Bittle new boyfriend!” Tater crows. “Coach Tingle single, yes?”
“You are not setting up my mama with anybody named Tingle!” Bitty shouts, snapping upright.

“Let the boy speak, Dicky,” Suzanne says, frowning at her son.

“That’s it! I’m waiting in the car!” Bitty calls, dumping his cone and wiping off his arms before stomping back to the truck.

“I think she was just joking,” Jack offers when he catches up. “And Coach Tingle is really nice, for the record. Handsome.”

“I’m not actually mad,” Bitty says, taking the keys from Jack and setting himself up to drive the next shift. “It’s just a little bit of whiplash. Going from hating the thought of her to worrying about her happiness all in the span of a few weeks. She’s not even officially divorced from Coach and she’s already joking about getting hooked up? It’s all a lot to wrap my little head around.”

“I’m sorry,” Jack says, pushing the passenger seat back so he can fit. “I have no idea what that’s like. But if it makes you feel any better, I’m worried about her already and we just met. She already feels like family.”

“You’re sweet, honey,” Bitty says, leaning over the center console to kiss Jack’s cheek. “It sure is nice having her back in my life. I guess it’s just going to take some time for it to feel normal.”

“We’ve got plenty of time for that,” Jack says, smiling softly. “Well, for some value of normal. My life has never been normal, and now yours won’t be either.”

“I’m fine with being the new sports power couple, sugar,” Bitty says, adjusting the mirror and fixing his hair in the reflection. “You think if we get big enough Beyoncé will know who I am?”

“I’m sure she will,” Jack says, though he has no idea if it’s true or not. He can’t imagine anyone not wanting to hear what Bitty has to say. “She’s going to love you. Maybe she’s already following you on Twitter.”

“Jack, you sweet summer child,” Bitty says, hand over his chest. “Beyoncé only follows 10 people on Twitter. It’s a known fact. A follow from her is like a follow from God.”

“So you don’t think she’s following me then?” Jack teases, putting a bemused look on his face as he pretends to check his app.

“No, Jack,” Bitty sighs. “Queen Bey is not following you on Twitter.”

“What about Instapic or whatever?” Jack says, frowning as he pulls up the other app.

“Don’t make me hit you,” Bitty says, looking up to the sky. “You know very well it’s called Instagram.”

“Maybe I just need to post more pictures of you,” Jack says, holding up his phone and framing Bitty up. “Those always seem to get the most little hearts.”

“You are too much, Mister Zimmermann,” Bitty says, ducking his head as a blush rises to his cheeks.

“I like seeing you in the sun,” Jack says, fiddling with the buttons on the ceiling until he can open the sunroof. “It makes your freckles come out.”

“It’s not even summer,” Bitty says, tilting his head to the side. “You haven’t seen freckles yet.
When summer hits they explode. I look like I’ve got dirt all over my face.”

“I can’t wait to see it,” Jack says, fiddling with the settings on his phone. “Now hold still.” He takes a few shots, smiling when Bitty throws caution into the wind and starts to pose for him.

“Take one with me,” he insists, making Jack lean in and flip to the forward facing camera.

“There’s not enough room,” Jack says, frowning as his arm hits the ceiling of the cab.

“It doesn’t have to be perfect, sweetpea,” Bitty says, giggling as Jack squeezes in next to him and maneuvers them to his liking, mindful not to press too hard on Eric’s healing side.

“There,” Jack says, turning his face into Bitty’s and smiling softly. “That one’s good.”

“Jack,” Bitty sighs, staring at the photo. “Are you sure?”

Jack looks down at the photo and doesn’t see anything wrong with it. He adjusts the lighting and crops one corner out, but other than that, it looks perfect to him. “Yeah, why?”

“It’s just so…” Bitty trails off, searching for the right word. “Honest. It looks…” he pauses again, biting his lower lip. “It looks really intimate.”

“Is that a problem?” Jack asks, tilting his head in question.

“Well… no. I guess not,” he says, watching closely as Jack sets up the Instagram post. “I just never expected this.”

“I told you I never wanted to hide you,” Jack says, clicking post. “Why would I start now? I love you, you love me. I’m not ashamed of looking like it.”

“You really aren’t, are you?” Bitty says, voice full of wonder.

“I’ve been dealing with unpopular opinions of me for years, Bits,” Jack says with a soft sigh. “Ever since I was a kid everyone has wanted a piece of me. After my overdose and after coming out, every time it built and built until I curled in on myself. I never made a scene, just kept my head down and tried to play my best game for myself and my team. But now? I can’t help it if I want to show off how happy we are. I finally have something to share and I want to share it. Is that okay?”

“Yes,” Bitty says, throwing his arms around Jack’s neck and leaning in for a kiss. “It’s wonderful. I want you to tell people whatever makes you happy.”

“You’re sure?” Jack asks. “Because I can always tone it down.”

“No,” Bitty says quickly. “Don’t tone it down. I think maybe I should turn it up,” he says, a little breathless. “Start my vlog up again. Quit hiding, start living. I need something to keep me occupied until I’m allowed to start training again.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” Jack says, pressing their foreheads together. “We’re in first place in the division and I’ll have a week or so off before the playoffs. Would you maybe want to go somewhere? Maybe without your mom this time.”

“What did you have in mind, handsome?” Bitty says, combing his fingers through Jack’s hair.

“What are you thoughts on remote tropical islands?”
“Positive,” Bitty says, capturing Jack’s mouth in a searing kiss. “My thoughts are definitely positive.”

“I want to see your tan, freckles and all,” Jack says, voice pitched low. “I want to see them everywhere.”

“Fuck, Jack,” Bitty practically moans.

The back door of the truck clicks open and Bitty and Jack jump apart as if they’ve been electrocuted.

“Am I interruptin’ something?” Suzanne asks, peeking her head in the car.

“No!” Bitty yelps loudly. “Just fixin’a get goin’. You ready?”

“Sure thing,” Suzanne says, settling herself in the back seat and picking up her knitting. “You look like you might need a minute though, Dicky. You’re redder than a Radio Flyer.”

“I’m fine!” Bitty calls again, checking the mirrors and putting the car in drive. “Just ready to get home.”

“I’m sure you are,” Suzanne says, a smile playing around her lips. She meets Jack’s eye in the rearview mirror and gives him a wink.

The rest of the drive is uneventful, though it takes an hour for Bitty’s blush to subside. They stop for dinner in North Carolina and Suzanne and Marty switch cars. Apparently, there’s so much NHL gossip flying around the Suburban, Suzanne wants to get in on the action. Marty is just looking for a quiet place to take a nap. They trade places again in Southern Virginia and Jack drives until he can barely keep his eyes open. Bitty insists they pull over and drives through the night, Marty keeping him awake while Jack sleeps across the entire back seat.

Jack’s bladder wakes him and he finds that they’re already in New Jersey.

"Bien dormi, princesse?" Marty asks as soon as he sits up.

Jack grumbles back in Quebecois which just causes Marty to break out laughing at Bitty’s confused expression.

“He told me to fuck off,” Marty translates with glee.

“Rude!” Bitty chirps from behind the wheel. “See if I make you breakfast when we get home, Mister Zimmermann!”

“We’re not stopping for breakfast?” Jack asks, blinking the sleep out of his eyes until he can read the clock. It’s nearly four a.m. and he’s sure they still have several hours of driving to go.

“Fine,” Bitty says, using Siri to call someone in the other car. “We’ll stop for breakfast. But see if I make you second breakfast with that attitude.”

Jack just smiles and listens to his teammates and Bitty decide where they’ll be stopping for pancakes. He spends the next hour in the backseat sifting through travel blogs and deciding where to take Bitty on their first vacation. By the time they pull into an IHOP, he’s narrowed it down to about 15 different places that don’t take over 20 hours to travel to.

“I think you’re forgetting one thing,” Bitty says when Jack shows him the spreadsheet he’s started.
“What?” Jack asks, scrolling through his headers. He’s only been at it an hour but he’s pretty sure his research is solid.

“I still don’t have a passport,” Bitty reminds him. “I’ll fill out the paperwork when we get home so we can see your parents over the summer, but for now, why don’t you keep it to the U.S., alright?”

Jack nods, abandoning his phone to focus on his pile of egg whites and turkey bacon. Hawaiʻi it is then.

Tater’s car makes a short detour to drop Kenny off at Newark airport, but Jack drives Bitty, Marty, and Suzanne back home directly. After dropping Marty off, he finally pulls into a spot in his underground garage and kills the engine.

“Home, sweet home,” Bitty says, hopping out of the cab and reaching down to the asphalt to stretch his back out. “Want to get a nap in before we unload?” he asks Jack, who is just barely hiding the fact that he’s checking out Bitty’s ass.

“I don’t think that’s going to be possible,” Jack says, pointing to the car behind him. It’s a beat-up Volvo with Massachusetts plates. “Are you ready to meet some friends?” he asks, turning to Suzanne.

“The more, the merrier,” she says with a fond sigh. It’s been an exhausting weekend for all of them, possibly more so for Suzanne than even Bitty.

“I don’t think she’s prepared,” Bitty whispers to Jack once they’re out of the elevator.

“No, I suppose not,” Bitty agrees.

“For what?” Suzanne asks, but it’s already too late.

“Bitty Bits!” Shitty crows, already in front of the door. He’s wearing a vest over his bare chest and a pair of American flag boxer shorts. “The pride of Providence returns!”

“Hey, Shits,” Jack says, stepping in the door to wrap him up in a hug. “Where’s Lardo?”

“Rest of the gang is on the patio,” Shitty says as he escapes Jack’s embrace to hug Bitty and then Suzanne. “I’m Shitty!” he crows, patting Suzanne on the top of her head. “Pleasure to meet the woman who gave birth to this beautiful ray of sunshine! You did some good work there!” he says, ruffling Bitty’s hair and smacking a sloppy kiss on his cheek.

”Thank you?” Suzanne says, fighting a smile. “What am I supposed to call you? I’m not using that word.”

“No one uses his first name,” Jack says softly to Bitty. “Half the guys don’t even know what it is. Best kept secret at Samwell.”

“How about you just call me B?” Shitty suggests, puffing out his chest, hands on his hips. “It stands for bullshit,” he mutters conspiratorially to Bitty.

“It does not!” Suzanne cries, covering her eyes. “I’m going to need a real name, Mister…”
“Knight. The name is B. Knight,” Shitty says as Jack and Bitty escape toward the patio.

It’s warmer than it has been, but nowhere close to what it was down South. Jack can already see Bitty starting to shiver. When he reaches the glass door he finds Lardo, Ransom, and Holster sharing a round of drinks with his parents.

“Why don’t you go put on one of my hoodies before you come out?” Jack suggests, a smile forming on his face when he sees that his friends have come up to help move Bitty’s things. “I don’t want you getting a cold.”

“You are such a dweeb,” Bitty laughs, shaking his head. “But I am a little chilled. I’ll never get used to this hellscape you people call weather.”

“Regular season is almost over. I’ll take you somewhere warm in a few weeks;” Jack assures him, smiling. “How does Hawai’i sound?”

“Sounds like heaven, sweetpea,” Bitty says, heading toward the bedroom.

Jack puts his hand on the sliding door handle and waves when every head snaps up in his direction. “Allo,” he says, cheeks heating when Bitty slides up behind him to wrap flannel-clad arms around his waist. He loves it, the casual intimacy, not having to hide anymore. Jack didn’t realize how much he’d been craving the contact until now.

“What are y’all doin’ here?” Bitty asks, peeking out from behind Jack’s back.

“Damn, that accent is thick,” Ransom says through a broad smile. “It’s like you brought all of Georgia with you.”

“We thought you might want some help settling the Bittles in,” Holster booms, jumping up from his perch on Ransom’s lap for a hug. Pretty soon they all join in and Jack finds himself being squeezed from all sides.

“Boxes are in the truck,” Jack says from somewhere under Ransom’s armpit. “Here,” he adds when he’s released, handing him the keys to the truck and the lock on the trailer.

“On it!” Holster shouts, racing Ransom back inside. “Put some pants on Shits, we’ve got work to do!”

“Lord, but your boys are exuberant,” Suzanne says, sliding the patio door closed behind her.

“I’m Alicia and this is my husband, Bob,” Maman says, leaving her seat to offer Suzanne her hand. “It’s so nice to meet you. Wine?” she adds, motioning toward the small patio table where a bottle of white sits beside an array of glasses and beer bottles.

“That’d be lovely,” she says, smiling as she shakes Bob’s hand as well. “I heard all about you from Dicky. Thank you for welcoming him. Y’all are just so kind.”

“We’re so happy to have Eric join our family,” Papa says.

Maman elbows him in the stomach. “Too soon, Bobby.”

“Ah, of course,” he says sheepishly, raising his eyebrows up at Jack and Bitty. “Won’t be too long though, we hope.”

"Arrête de lui mettre la pression,” Maman mutters, smiling through the scolding.
“Not pressuring, helping along,” he says in English, burying his face in his wine glass.

“He does not need any help,” Bitty says, stifling a giggle. “I half expect him to drop to his knees every time he goes to tie his awful yellow sneakers.”

“I’d never,” Jack says, mock offended. “I’m going to do it right. You’ll see.”

“Maybe I should just do it first. Really steal your thunder,” Bitty teases, sliding easily under Jack’s arm to tuck into his side.

“Don’t you dare, mon lapin,” Jack says fondly.

“Aren’t they just adorable?” Maman asks, smiling at Suzanne.

“Sure are,” she agrees, sipping delicately on her wine. “We were ever so thankful to have Jack’s help down in Georgia. You raised a wonderful son,” she tells Maman happily.

“Oh he did most of the raising himself,” Maman says, breaking into a sprawling story about Jack’s time in elementary school.

The parents chat while Bitty and Jack fight not to blush. Maman is just about to break out the baby pictures when Shitty bursts back outside to tell them they’re finished unloading. They spend a few hours unpacking, cooing over Bitty’s figure skating trophies and Suzanne’s heirloom baking dishes, finding places for everything of importance.

“Maybe don’t unpack too much just yet,” Bob says when they get to Suzanne’s clothes. “A Miss Katya Mikhailov will be coming up to Providence next week and I have on good authority that she’ll be looking for a roommate. What do you say, Suzanne? Want to do some apartment hunting tomorrow?”

“Y’all are too kind. I can’t just take charity from you like that. I’ll find a job and then we can go look together, right Dicky?”

“It’s not charity,” Maman says softly, placing a hand on Suzanne’s arm. “It’s family. You’d do the same for us if we were in need, wouldn’t you?”

“Well, of course I would, but that’s not the point,” she says, shaking her head.

“Think of it as a loan if you really have to, but we’d prefer you didn’t,” Bob says. “We can help. Let us help.”

“I don’t know… “ Suzanne says, frowning. She looks up at Bitty whose eyes are wide and pleading.

Jack knows how much this must be costing them, to see all the excess that Jack and his family possess and not hate them for it, to have this moment in front of them. He’s holding his breath, waiting, hoping that they’ll accept what his parents are offering and not feel like they’re burdens. Bitty’s mother will never be a burden to Jack. He’s already finding himself making the mental switch to calling her Mama.

Bitty is the love of his life and his mother has already sacrificed so much to put their relationship back to rights. Bitty lost his home, had it ripped from him and made to feel like literal garbage for years, but Suzanne walked away from her life willingly. She made the conscious choice to abandon her old, backward beliefs and start over fresh. She shouldn’t be punished for that any more than Bitty should have been punished for daring to be born gay in the South. They’ve
already been through so much and Jack is desperate for them to finally get all the good things they
deserve and not hurt themselves out of pride or shame.

“Mama,” Bitty calls, voice breaking on the word. “It’s alright.”

“It can’t be alright, Dicky. None of this is alright,” she nearly sobs, hand coming up to cover her
mouth. “You survived all those years by yourself, never getting nothin’ from nobody. I can’t just
get a pass. I don’t deserve to get a pass. Not after the way I treated you and everyone else like you
and Jack.”

“You’re my mama,” Bitty says, shaking his head. “I can’t let you do this to yourself. Just because
I had to live with nothin’ don’t mean I want you to. I know you want to do your penance, but
maybe we can figure out another way. Something that doesn’t make you hurt so much. Something
positive.”

“Dickey, I—”

“—I know you’re sorry,” he cuts her off. “I know. Trust me, I know. But that doesn’t mean you
have to spend your whole life tryin’a be some kind of martyr. Jesus didn’t die on the cross for all
that, Mama.”

“Maybe we should—”

“We should and we will,” Bitty says, giving her a smile. “We’ll go this Sunday. I’ll find
somewhere and we’ll go. I’m sure I’ve got my old rosaries tucked away in one of these boxes
here.”

“Okay,” Mama says, giving Eric a watery smile. “We’ll do that then.”

“I know a place,” Jack says, coming up to join them. “It’s on Broad Street. The sign says all are
welcome. I run by it every morning.”

“Okay,” Suzanne says, wiping the stray tears from under her eyes. “Okay,” she repeats, like she’s
trying to convince herself.

“She’s gonna take you up on that offer,” Bitty says, smiling up at Papa.

“I did not say that, Dicky,” Suzanne protests immediately.

“No, but I just did,” he says, squeezing her arm. “No offense, Mama, but Jack and I could use
some time to ourselves. I finally get the chance to live here with him full time and in you come
like a flying nun to make sure we’re leaving room for the holy ghost. Consider this your notice.”

Bob and Alicia break out laughing and Jack can’t help but join in.

“I think you got your marching orders, Suzanne,” Bob says, mustache twitching.

“Jack?” she asks, craning her neck up to look at him. “It’s your place. You wouldn’t kick a poor
unemployed woman out like that, would you?”

“Eric’s in charge,” Jack says, smiling. “What he says goes.”

“Thank you, sugar,” Bitty says, pushing up on his toes to kiss Jack’s cheek. “Now why don’t you
go take your nap while we finish up in here. And when you wake up maybe I’ll show you my
shorts collection,” he adds in a whisper into Jack’s ear.
“O-okay,” Jack answers dumbly, ducking his head when his parents catch his blush. He turns tail and practically runs to the bedroom.

When Jack steps out onto the ice that night he has an entire entourage in the Family Section. Even Suzanne is wearing his jersey and waving a tiny Falconers flag. The boys are so loud when he sinks the first goal of the game that Jack swears he can hear the plexiglass strain to contain the noise.

The first period seems to whiz by and when he finally gets a chance to look up again, Papa is pointing to the ice and explaining something to Suzanne while Bitty snaps pictures left and right. He’ll probably have a thousand new Twitter followers by the time the game is over.

It’s an easy game for the Falconers. With his friends and family supporting him, Jack practically flies over the ice. He’s grinning by the end of the second period, initiating a celly just for the sheer joy of it. In the end, Jack scores three goals himself and assists Marty’s, giving them a solid 4-1 win over the Rangers. If the Aces lose their game, the Falconers will have the best record in the whole league.

“You were amazing, Jack!” Suzanne calls, hopping up and down and waving her tiny flag at him when he finally gets out of the locker room.

It feels right, so he says it, the Quebecois just bubbling out of him without a thought. “Merci, Mama,” he says sweetly, bending down to kiss her cheek.

“Don’t start that now or you’ll make me cry,” she blubbers into his shoulder when he pulls her in for a hug.

“No crying, Mama,” he says again, enjoying the way the word rolls of his tongue, even in English. “It’s a celebration.”

“Fuck yeah it is, Jacques!” Shitty crows, pushing his way past Ransom and Holster to get a hug of his own. “Drinks on you, right?”

“Yeah,” Jack agrees with a smile. “Drinks on me. We’ll go to Gracie’s.”

He accepts hugs and murmured words of praise from his parents and a fist bump from Lardo. Then there are matching sets of bone-crushing hugs from Ransom and Holster. Shitty tries to jump in his arms, but Jack ducks out of the way and wraps himself around Bitty instead.

“I love you,” is all Bitty says.

It’s all Jack needs to hear.

“I love you so much, Bits,” Jack says back. “I just—it’s so nice having you here with me. I know you’ll have your own schedule for training soon. But maybe you’ll still be able to come to more games?”

“I’ll make sure of it, sugar,” Bitty says, pecking him on the lips. “No more hiding.”

“No more hiding,” Jack repeats, leaning in for a deeper kiss. The rest of the group whoops and
whistles, but Jack ignores them in favor of sticking his tongue in Bitty’s mouth.

“Wow,” Bitty says when they finally break apart. “That was something.”

“Yeah,” Jack says, fighting the urge to look down and check if he has an erection. “Maybe I’m a bit worked up. And I didn’t even get to see those shorts you keep teasing me with.”

“It’s not my fault you slept straight till ice time,” Eric says with a smirk. “You’ll just have to wait till tomorrow.”

“Promise?” Jack asks. He can’t help but imagine every day of the rest of their lives being like this. Of course, he’ll have away games. He’ll be on the road the day after next, but tomorrow…

Tomorrow Jack and Bitty will wake up in their apartment together and he won’t have to worry that Eric will leave. Jack is through with worrying about where Bitty goes every time he walks out the door. If he has his way, Bitty will be calling his apartment home for the rest of forever.

Until Jack buys them a house, that is.

Too soon, Jack reminds himself. Ring shopping first, then maybe house shopping.

Now that Bitty is safe and living with him, Jack can’t stop his thoughts from running wild.

Everything blew up, but then the dust settled and all the little pieces finally seem to be falling into place. In a week or two, Mama will be living somewhere with Katya, giving Jack and Bitty all the privacy they need to rekindle their romance. Then Jack just has a few more weeks of playing before Easter and the trip he’s planning for them.

Then it’s playoffs. Then the finals and maybe…

Jack stomps down on that train of thought before it turns into a spiral of anxiety. One game at a time. One goal at a time and soon enough he’ll have everything he needs, everything he needs to get everything he’s ever wanted, and it all starts with Bitty’s thin fingers slipping into the spaces between his.

They walk like that, hand in hand toward the press room, kissing thoroughly before Jack takes his place at the fold-out table in front of the microphone. The cameras go wild.

Jack clears his throat, trying to school his face, but it’s impossible to hide his complete and utter joy. “That was a good game, eh?” he says, shooting for casual.

Then he winks at Eric in full view of everyone.

The press core goes berserk, waving their arms and practically leaping over chairs to be the first one called on. Jack raises his eyebrows but otherwise ignores them for a few seconds in favor of surveying his family’s reactions.

Maman and Papa beam. Lardo makes an obscene hand gesture and raises her eyebrows back at him. Eric holds a hand over his mouth to cover his gasp. Shitty fist pumps as Holster and Ransom cackle madly and then share a quick kiss. Mama’s eyes twinkle like she knows exactly what Jack’s thinking.

Jack thinks she probably does.
So, like I've mentioned to some of you, it's really more of a beginning than an ending. I could have gone on for another 100k words, which is why I'm ending this part of the story here. I fully intend to write a second piece and make this a series but I have a few other projects in the Teen Wolf fandom that I need to finish first. I don't have a definite timeline for that, but you can follow my tumblr if you'd like to see updates/know what I'm up to. (It's listed on my author page.) And hey, if you like my writing and you have a passing interest in werewolves, give some of my other work a try in the meantime.

Thank you for the feedback! It's been absolutely wonderful!

<3 Julibean

Translations:
"Bien dormi, princesse?" Marty asks as soon as he sits up.
"Good sleep, princess?"

"Arrête de lui mettre la pression," Maman mutters, smiling through the scolding.
"Stop pressuring him," Maman mutters...

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