fake happy

by SummerFrost

Summary

It's probably a little weird, how much Jeff looks at Parse—but he's got bigger things to worry about.

Notes

First and foremost, this fic was written for the 2018 Fandom Trumps Hate auction! Thank
you so much to my amazing auction winner, familiar/SekritOMG, who made this labor of love possible <3

Also making this possible are my incredible friends and beta readers! blithelybonny and soundslikepenance were with me every step of the way, betaing as I went and helping me develop my plot and characterizations. Agrossunderstatement patiently cheered me on while I forcibly withheld this fic from her and so she could beta it for me sight-unseen. She also very specifically requested that I tell all of you that she is responsible for the "face-sitting" tag on this fic and that you are all welcome on her behalf <3

TRIGGER WARNING: I want to re-emphasize that this fic contains the explicit aftermath of a suicide attempt, including blood and injury. Please see my endnote for details about how to skip this scene, including a brief summary of relevant details so you can continue to follow the story. Do not hesitate to message me if you have questions.

Nothing in this fic is a how-to manual. It is a story about people who are trying their best to love each other, whatever their best is at the time.

Finally, fic titled after Fake Happy by Paramore, which is highly recommended listening <3

See the end of the work for more notes.

Jeff is pretty sure that he’s getting traded.

Like, sure, he just got to Vegas two weeks ago, but why else would the GM be dragging him into a meeting on a Sunday? The Aces are a new team and it’s not like Jeff’s that valuable of a guy; something changed in their development plans and they’re probably shipping him off to chip teeth with the Bruins or something.

Shani hates Boston.

It’s fine. They’ll make it work. It’s fine.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Rami says as he strides into the room, even though they both know he isn’t.

Jeff stands to shake Rami’s hand and clears his throat. “Uh, no problem.”

Rami sits.

Jeff sits.

No one says anything. Jeff stares at a pen sitting on Rami’s desk. It’s off center.

“Right,” Rami says. “We need you to board Parson.”

Jeff looks up. “Sorry, what?”

“We need you to—”

“That makes him sound like a horse,” Jeff blurts. Fuck. What the fuck is he talking about?

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Rami asks.
Jeff feels weird and panicky. Kind of like when Shani had that pregnancy scare, except they both knew she’d get an abortion. There’s no equivalent response for a nineteen year-old hockey player showing up at your apartment. Unless you flee the country. Jeff could flee the country.


Rami squints at him. “Are you okay?”

“I just moved in with my girlfriend,” Jeff tells him. “I don’t want a roommate. Greg is single.”

Rami sighs. He does one of those weird half-stand things so he can look around Jeff’s head—Jeff turns around to look too; the hallway is empty. “Look, Jeff, can I ask for your discretion?”

That’s a lot of favors for one day, Jeff thinks, but he doesn’t actually have a death wish, so he says, “Uh, sure?”

Rami sinks back down in his chair. “I think you understand, generally speaking, why we traded for you.”

“You needed an enforcer. Someone to protect the talent.” Jeff says. That’s the obvious part; it’s not like he’s got anything else to offer. He’s never been a playmaker. “I don’t see what that has to do with living with him.”

“A kid like Parson,” Rami explains slowly, “has a target on his back on the ice, sure. But I’m more worried about the chip on his shoulder. So to speak.”

Jeff’s stomach hurts. He stares at Rami’s hands and asks, “Does he know you wanted Zimmermann?”

“I hope not,” Rami says. He sounds tired.

Jeff is tired, too. He wonders which of the rumors were true. “I’m not a shrink. You could get him one of those if you’re that worried.”

“I’m not concerned with all that.” Rami waves a hand dismissively. “Just keep him out of trouble.”

Jeff sighs. “This isn’t, like, a negotiation, is it?”

“When is anything, around here?” Rami’s smile is bland, sort of self-deprecating except smugger at the same time. Like, the kind of expression that gets guys punched on the ice.

It’s uncomfortably warm in the office. Maybe that’s why Jeff still feels a little sick. He wonders if the vending machines have ginger ale.

“Fine,” he says. “But one thing?”

Rami raises an eyebrow and spreads his hands, like, go ahead.

Jeff stares at the pen on the table again and breathes, just for a second. He looks up. “Tell him it was my idea. Tell him—like, I volunteered, or whatever.”

Rami’s smile is different this time. “Didn’t you?”

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Kent Parson’s flight lands at three AM on a Thursday, and he insists on taking a cab from the airport, so the first time Jeff ever sees him is through the front window of their little house just outside the city.

The doorbell rings six times in quick succession, startling Jeff awake from where he fell asleep on the couch waiting, and prompting Shani to yell, “Is that him?” from somewhere upstairs where she’s getting ready for work.

Jeff rubs at his face and thinks, Christ, I hope not, because what kind of asshole rings the doorbell six—Jesus, now eight—times literally ever, but especially at five in the fucking morning, and then Shani comes down the stairs in her scrubs with her hair still wrapped up from sleeping and flicks him on the back of the head, and he still hasn’t answered the door.

He gets up and cranes his head around the living room doorway to get a view outside and, yep, there’s Kent Parson, bouncing on his feet and staring straight ahead, not through the window, a bag slung over his shoulders. He’s wearing some kind of jersey, which is a weird as fuck choice to travel across the country in, but who is Jeff to judge?

“Babe,” Shani says. “I will kill you.”

Jeff kisses her on the cheek and bounds over to the door and yanks it open before Parson can start up another round of doorbell ringing. “Hey, sorry man, fell asleep for a sec there.”

Parson wasn’t smiling a second ago but he is now. It looks like he has been for days, the way his eyes are too-wide with it. He blows past Jeff into the house and says, “No worries. Thanks for having me—hi, you must be Shani—wow, this place looks great. Are the walls thin? I’ll probably have people over a lot. Cool kitchen, do you cook? I’ve been living on pizza for like, three months. I can make, like, mac and cheese and shit though.”

Jesus Christ, that’s more words than Jeff’s ever said at one time in his entire life, maybe, and also Parson is already halfway up the stairs with a suitcase ditched in the living room and his bag bouncing against his shoulder.

Jeff looks at Shani helplessly. She mouths, ‘High,’ and follows Parson up the stairs.

Fucking hell. Jeff shuts and locks the door and rushes to catch up with them, snagging Parson’s abandoned suitcase along the way. He follows the sound of Parson’s voice—still talking—into the spare bedroom they set up last week. It shares a wall with the master, a design choice that Jeff is pretty sure they’ll regret.

“—cool that you’re a nurse, my sister wants to be one maybe,” Parse is telling Shani, starfished on the bed. “How long does school take?”

“It depends,” Shani answers slowly. Jeff comes up next to her and rests a hand on her waist. “There’s more than one kind of nursing degree.”

“Oh, cool! What kinda nurse are you?” Parson asks, smiling again—still? Jeff isn’t sure.

Shani checks her watch pointedly. “The kind that’s late for work. You get settled in, okay? Make yourself at home.”

Probably won’t be a problem, Jeff thinks. He kisses her as she heads back towards the bathroom and asks, “Need anything, babe?”
“I’d sell our firstborn for a coffee.”

Jeff laughs. “On it,” he promises, turning to watch her take off her silk wrap and swap it for a stocking cap. “Also, hey.”

Shani’s lip curls up into a smirk. “Hey.”

“I love you.”

“Love you too, babe,” she tells him, smiling wider as she adjusts her wig.

“I can make your coffee!” Parson offers suddenly, very loud and very close.

Jeff jumps and stumbles against the doorframe. “Jesus!” Parson is right behind him, hands shoved in his pockets and bouncing on his feet, more subtly than before. “Uh, that’s cool, man. You should chill, though. Or did you, uh—you slept on the plane, I guess?”

“Nah,” Parse says. There are bags under his eyes, Jeff realizes then, but Parson doesn’t seem to care. “Don’t need to, though. I’m like, super awake.”

Shani mutters something under her breath that Jeff doesn’t catch, but he doesn’t really need to. *I’m sure, probably, or something like it.*

“Oh.” Parson sounds weirdly disappointed about it. “Cool.”

Jeff dumps the rest of the pot into Shani’s travel mug and pours in a splash of her favorite creamer. “Do you, uh, drink? Coffee?”

“No every morning. I usually don’t need it, and then sometimes it makes me, like—” Parson does a spiral with his finger, “— whoooo, you know?”

Jeff clears his throat. “Uh. Sure.”

No one says anything. Jeff gets a spoon to stir with.

“…Hey, man, I—” Parse starts, but then Shani calls from upstairs.

“Babe? Almost ready?”

Jeff gives the coffee another stir and the screw the lid on. “Yup! One sec.” He looks back over at Parson. “What’s up, man?”

Parson isn’t smiling anymore. He’s staring somewhere not-at-Jeff and his eyes are clear. “Sorry you’re stuck with me,” he says.

Something twitches in Jeff’s chest. He reaches out and ruffles Parson’s hair as he walks past him towards the stairs and says, “I’m not. You’re gonna clean my pool.”

Jeff isn’t looking, but he can feel Parson smile again. “There’s a pool?”

Jeff smiles too.
It turns out the walls are thin.

Jeff doesn’t find that out because Parse has people over, though. He’s actually…pretty much always alone, it seems like, unless he’s throwing himself on the armchair while Shani and Jeff trawl HBO for movie nights. But he’s also always on the fucking phone, and not in the “Jeff is old and complaining about the youths” kind of way.

“I should pound on the wall,” Jeff suggests one night. It’s two in the morning and they’re both exhausted and trying, unsuccessfully, to tune out the sound of Parse’s voice. “That’s a thing people do in real life, right?”

She signs and flops over dramatically. “Or we could have really loud sex.”

Jeff’s dick twitches. “I mean…”

“I revise,” Shani says. “You can have really loud sex—with yourself—and I’ll cheer you on.”

“Maybe in a minute.” Jeff thunks back against the headboard. “Jesus, who the fuck is he talking to? You think he’s got a girlfriend?”

Shani hums noncommittally.

Jeff squints and leans harder against the wall, trying to make out Parse’s half of the conversation. All he can hear is a muffled voice, kind of high-pitched for how Parse normally sounds.

“I should just tell him to be quiet,” Jeff decides. “It’s our fucking house.”

Shani doesn’t say anything.

Jeff looks over at her. She’s asleep, the lucky jerk. He sighs and slides down in bed to spoon up behind her, nuzzling his nose against the back of her neck. She stirs slightly but doesn’t wake up, so Jeff closes his eyes and tries to match the slow rhythm of her breathing. He can still hear Parse if he concentrates, but it’s fainter now. Maybe he’s falling asleep too, with whoever he’s talking to.

Jeff hopes it’s someone who loves him.

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There’s a week until training starts. It’s technically only mandatory for the rookies until August, but Jeff figures he might as well go too. The house is starting to feel weird when Parse isn’t in it.

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Jeff bolts upright to the sound of something smashing and the half-memory of yelling, like it happened in a dream or he’s in one now. The clock says 3:12 AM. Shani is at work. Are they being robbed? Jeff doesn’t—

“Fuck!” Parse shouts. “God dammit.”

So probably not a robbery. Jeff presses his hands to his face and sucks in a mangled breath through his nose, then climbs out of bed. He fumbles into a pair of boxers he finds on the ground and opens his door slowly, just in case, but the light is on in Parse’s room and his door is shut.

A wounded noise comes from the other side, like someone’s crying. Fuck.

Jeff knocks once and opens the door, stepping inside slowly. He sees the phone—or, what’s left of it—first, shattered against the far wall. Parse is fully dressed on his bed, head between his knees.

He doesn’t look up when Jeff walks in, just snarls, “Get the fuck out!” with his nails dug into his bare shins so hard Jeff can see the white in his knuckles from here.

Jeff throws his hands up even though Parse can’t see and backs away wordlessly. He shuts the door and presses his forehead against it and squeezes his eyes shut tight enough that he can feel his eyelids trembling. He feels…weird. Like he’s angry, but he doesn’t know at what. The phone looked like a carcass. He wishes Shani were home.

“Uh. Hey, man,” Jeff says gruffly, hoping he’s loud enough to make it through the door. “I’ll, uh. Be downstairs. If you’re not…sleeping.”

If you’re not sleeping? Jeff echoes silently. What the fuck is wrong with me? He taps his knuckles against the door once and then pushes away from it all at once. He’s not sure why it feels like he needs the force to separate.

He snags his phone from his room and heads downstairs like he promised. Christ, it’s so fucking early. Their curtains are tightly drawn and the house is silent down here, like its own world. Jeff switches on a lamp in the living room, pours himself a glass of water, and sprawls on the couch.

He’s pretty sure that Parse won’t come down. He’s also pretty sure that’s not the part that matters.

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Jeff wakes up to the sound of the refrigerator door shutting. His phone has like ten percent battery left and a text from Shani that says she picked up a double and won’t be home. Which is weird, because Jeff kind of figured she was the one responsible for the cup of coffee sitting in front of him.

“Um, hey,” Parse says, sinking down into his armchair with a glass of milk. “Morning.”

“Uh. Morning.” Jeff cracks his neck and presses at the sore spot where it joins his shoulder.

Parse stares at Jeff’s mysterious cup of coffee. “I’m, um. Going shopping later. If you wanna come.”

The coffee has too much creamer in it. Jeff makes a show of chugging half of it anyway, then points out, “You don’t have a car.”

Parse cracks a smile. “So you’ll drive?”
“Sure,” Jeff says, then looks down. “Uh. After I put on pants.”

Shani comes home bone tired that afternoon and kisses Jeff on the top of his head on her way up the stairs. She glances over at Parse and says, “Oh, hey, Kent. New phone?”

“Yeah,” Parse answers cheerfully. “Got bored of the old one.”

Jeff keeps his eyes on the TV.

Jeff drives to their first day of practice with the radio blaring Top 40 hits and Parse singing along under his breath, like he thinks he isn’t supposed to be or something. He’s got a pretty nice voice. He’s also got a coffee in one hand that Jeff is doing his best not to ask about, but he’s pretty sure Parse hasn’t been high since that first day they met so maybe the caffeine was specifically a no-go then.

Jeff wants to ask about the drugs, too, but he’s got no fucking clue how he would ever bring that up. ‘Hey, man, do you do coke?’ doesn’t seem like a free-pass kind of question. Neither does, ‘Hey, your best friend who’s in rehab? What was he on?’ even though Jeff’s pretty sure the answer is whatever Parse is on too. It doesn’t matter, really, because Jeff’s not some tight-ass who gives a shit about stuff like that.

Except maybe he should be.

They’re stopped at a red light. Jeff has the windows rolled down because Parse likes them that way even though their shirts are already sticking to their skin, and they’re not near the actual desert but Jeff swears he can fucking taste sand on the roof of his mouth when he swallows.

The light turns green. Jeff clears his throat and says, “I thought you didn’t do coffee.”

A car honks at them. Jeff moves his foot over to the gas and stares at the next street sign.

“Huh?” Parse asks. He looks down at his lap like maybe he forgot he had hands. “Oh. I mean, sometimes. But I’m pretty beat today so it’s prob’ly fine.”

“Cool,” Jeff says. Christ, this is so awkward. He reaches for the dial and then changes his mind. “So you, uh. Like pop, huh?”

Parse curls his legs up on the seat with him. “I guess.”

Jeff turns into the arena parking deck and starts circling the levels for a spot. He glances over at Parse’s expressionless face. “I didn’t mean it in a judgey way, dude. Like whatever music you want.”

Parse leans his head against the window frame and stares at Jeff with a sudden intensity, the kind that
makes Jeff feel sticky somehow. His eyes are flat and—Jeff looks away and looks back—green, maybe, or kind of hazel, and Jeff realizes for the first time that Parse has freckles. He wonders what he looks like to Parse.

“What music do you like?” Parse asks. It feels like a long time since anyone spoke—or maybe Jeff just wasn’t paying attention.

“Uh, like punk rock,” Jeff answers, pulling into a parking space. “Sometimes country.”

Parse laughs with this tiny smile on his face. “Those are like, so unrelated, man.”

Jeff shuts off the car and rolls the windows up. “I’m eclectic, or whatever.”

“Fair.” Parse takes a deep swig of his coffee and then ditches it in a cup holder as they get out of the car. “Fave band?”

“Paramore,” Jeff says. He pops the trunk and grabs Parse’s gear bag for him. “Yours?”

Parse slings his bag over one shoulder and says, “What if we don’t go.”

Jeff stares at him. “To practice?”

“Just kidding.” Parse laughs. He takes off his snapback, runs a hand through his wild hair, and watches his reflection in the windows as he carefully replaces it on his head. “You should see your face, man.”

Jeff rubs his brow and slams the trunk shut. “I don’t get you.”

“No one does,” Parse answers flippantly. He’s already ten steps ahead, halfway to the stairwell. “Let’s go.”

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Jeff wakes up late on a Sunday, stretching out across the sheets and yawning happily. He’s taking Shani out to lunch later to celebrate a month at her new job, and he’s stoked to spend the day with her. With practice starting back up and her irregular shift schedule, it’s been hard to block out time for an actual date. He misses her.

She’s already downstairs somewhere, probably catching up on TV. Jeff figures that’s where Parse is. He kisses Shani’s cheek with a murmured good morning and then ambles into the kitchen and clears his throat.

Parse doesn’t hear him. His back is turned and he’s singing along to Britney Spears under his breath while he obsessively stirs Kraft mac and cheese in a pot. Which he’ll probably leave in the sink for
Jeff to clean later, along with the orange powder all over the stove top.

Yeah, fine, Jeff’s gonna be that guy. He puts a hand on Parse’s shoulder and says, “Dude.”

Parse jumps a little as he turns around; Jeff’s hand slides off his arm awkwardly. “‘Sup?”

There’s a nick on Parse’s cheek where he cut himself shaving. Jeff stares at that for some reason and says, “Could you, uh.” The kitchen timer goes off. Who the fuck uses a timer to make Kraft?

“You’ve gotta clean up after yourself, man.”

Parse slides the pot off the burner and then looks up at Jeff kind of wide-eyed.

“The sink?” Jeff prompts. “Like, don’t just leave hair in the sink or whatever. I’m not your maid.”


Christ, it’s like kicking a puppy. Jeff coughs lightly and pats Parse on the shoulder again, letting his touch linger a little bit.

“It’s cool, man,” he says, sorta stilted. “We’ve all gotta learn that, uh, stuff.”

“Yeah.” Parse grabs a bowl from the cabinet and dumps his mac and cheese into it. When he turns back to Jeff, he’s smiling. “Shani said you guys have a date. Have fun!”

So that’s conversation over, apparently. Whatever. Jeff says, “Thanks,” and grabs a protein bar from the pantry on his way out of the kitchen.

Shani tucks herself against his side when he sits next to her on the couch and asks him, “Everything okay?”

Jeff pulls her in closer, breathing in the faint smell of her body lotion. He’s not sure why he wants to touch her so badly all of a sudden, but she never minds when he’s clingy like this.

“Yes,” he answers, but that feels like a lie and he can’t figure that out either. “Maybe.”

She scratches her nails through his stubble. “You wanna go soon? I wanted to get some new clothes while we’re out.”

Jeff smiles all dopey-like into her neck. “I love watching you model.”

Shani hums and moves her hand up to his head, massaging lightly at his scalp, then murmurs, “You wanna do a scene with it? We haven’t done one in a while.”

“Hell yes,” Jeff says. His chest feels lighter already, like she’s pulling something up out of him. He loves her so much. “We should get a hotel room, maybe.”

Shani points out, “We’ve got a house, baby.”

“With a roommate,” Jeff says. He closes his eyes. “I don’t want—”

“It’s okay,” she soothes quietly. “If you’re worried about it we’ll get a room.”

“Thanks,” he mumbles. Her fingers are still in his hair and he’s pretty sure he’ll fall asleep if they stay like this for much longer. “Should we go?”

Shani kisses the top of his head. “Go pick out my clothes for me. I wanna finish this episode.”
Jeff’s still too self-conscious to bolt for the stairs, but it’s kind of a close thing. He peppers kisses over her neck and the side of her face as they untangle, then leaves a lingering one on her lips. She kisses him back and pats him on the cheek to send him off.

It’s gonna be a good day.

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They get home late in the afternoon and Jeff stops short in his own house for the second time in eight hours.

“I feel like we’ve been reverse-robbed,” Shani says.

Jeff steps further inside and Shani closes the door behind him. The entire living room is spotless. Both throw blankets are freshly washed and folded neatly over the furniture and the couple of glasses that are normally laying around are nowhere in sight. Jeff’s pretty sure the fan is dusted.

“Did you…hire a cleaning service?” Shani asks. She wanders into the kitchen and Jeff follows her.

“Wasn’t me,” Jeff answers, and it…technically wasn’t. The kitchen’s been scrubbed until it shines—maybe better than it was when they moved in. There’re no pots in the sink. Jeff opens the pantry and finds the entire thing organized.

What the fuck.

“Why do you sound like you’re not sure?” She’s not being accusing, and it’s not like coming home to a clean house is supposed to be a bad thing, but Jeff still feels weirdly defensive, like the last of his sub space is burning off wrong.

“I—I don’t know,” he insists weakly. “I—Parse was being weird.”

Shani looks back at him and rubs his arm soothingly. “Where is he?” she mumbles to herself, then calls, “Kent?”

No one answers. Jeff walks back out of the kitchen and heads up the stairs. The bathroom looks as good as the kitchen and Parse’s door is open. He’s not inside.

Shani appears in the stairwell and jerks her thumb towards the backyard. “Pool.”

Something feels lighter in Jeff’s stomach. He sighs and bounds back downstairs. “I’ll go talk to him.”

“Okay,” she answers, reaching up on her tiptoes to kiss him. “I’ll be upstairs.”

“I love you,” Jeff reminds her. “So much.”

She turns from halfway up and smiles at him. It makes his heart flutter. “Me too, baby.”

The bedroom door closes behind her and Jeff shuts his eyes. It’ll be fine.

He walks into the backyard and finds Parse swimming laps in the pool, his back working with every stroke. The heat from the day is just starting to burn off; Jeff can already feel himself sweating. He wonders how long Parse’s been out here.
Parse does three more laps before he catches himself on the wall to take a break. He slicks his hair back with one hand and notices Jeff in the middle of the movement, arm lingering raised above his head as he greets, “Oh, hey.”

“Hey,” Jeff says. His voice feels weird. “You didn’t. Uh. You didn’t have to clean, like, the whole house, man. That’s not what I—”

“I was thinking I should pay rent,” Parse says, hauling himself out of the pool effortlessly. He uncaps a bottle of Gatorade and chugs half of it while Jeff watches, speechless. His throat quivers as he drinks. “Half? A third? Dunno how you guys split it.”

“Oh, I don’t…” Jeff trails off, distracted. Parse is stretching out his arms, twisting at the torso, and Jeff thinks, I’ve never looked like that in my life. All tan, lean muscle, like he was built for the cover of a fucking body issue. Parse has a fucking six pack and actual pecs, and sometimes if Jeff holds his breath he can make his stomach almost flat. It’s not like Jeff isn’t strong, but. I’ve never looked like that.

“What’s up, dude?” Parse asks.

Jeff wants to get out of the sun. He wipes at his forehead and finds it mostly dry. “Uh, sorry. Just. You don’t have to pay rent, man. It’s not like I need the money.”

“I make more than you,” Parse answers flippantly. He finishes off the bottle and sets it down by the side of the pool. “And I’m planning on bonuses.”

“I just wasn’t. We like having you here,” Jeff insists. “I didn’t mean to, like—before?”

Parse stares right through Jeff, eyes flat, and says, “I don’t like owing people. I’m not a charity case anymore.”

Anymore. Jeff remembers reading some interview about it, once. How Parse almost gave up hockey until his mom started working a second job. Jeff’s never actually thought about money in his life.

“We pay twenty five-hundred a month,” Jeff says roughly. “You can give me half, I guess.”


Jeff doesn’t understand any universe where what just happened was a favor. He looks away from the burning skin on Parse’s shoulders and says, “Uh. Sure.”

“You good, bro?” Parse comes closer and scrutinizes Jeff’s face. “You’re kinda red. You should hop in the pool.”

Because it’s fucking hot outside. Jeff rubs at his face again. “Uh, I’m good. I don’t really feel like getting a suit.”


“Oh, I don’t really—” Jeff starts, then shouts when Parse tackles into him and tries to throw him into the pool.

Jeff laughs, startled, and regains his balance enough to avoid falling in. He tries to shove Parse in the water instead, but Parse swipes at his leg and drags them both down together.

It’s so hot out that the water is barely still cool, but it does feel good on Jeff’s skin. He comes up
spluttering and laughing, shoving Parse away from him and shaking his head out. Water splatters everywhere and his shirt is heavy on his shoulders, completely water-logged.

“You’re gonna pay for that,” Jeff warns, smiling lopsidedly as he pulls his shirt over his head.

“Promise?” Parse taunts, all sing-song like he’s five years old, but he pauses when Jeff tosses his shirt onto the deck. “Woah, dude, you’re built like a tank, man.”

Jeff looks down. “Uh.”

Parse must see something on Jeff’s face, because he slaps Jeff’s shoulder and says, “Like, in a good way, dude. I’m glad you’re on my team, is what I’m saying.”

Jeff feels weird, like his skin itches. He wants to crawl under something, but he feels kind of good about it, too. He knows what his body is supposed to do and so does Parse, like maybe it makes Jeff special. It’s just stupid to care so much.

“Thanks,” he says. “But I’m still gonna drown you.”

Parse smirks, challenges, “Only if you catch me,” and dives under the water.

Jeff follows.

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Parse dumps another puck into the net, practically without looking, and skates away. Beaker gives him a fist bump while Norris, the backup goalie they just called up from the AHL this season, throws down his stick in frustration. Their scrimmage has been pathetically one-sided, like it pretty much always is. Jeff doesn’t really care. It’s weirdly satisfying to watch Parse kick ass.

“Let’s call it there, boys,” Coach says. “See you tomorrow.”

Parse heads over to the bench just in time to hear Hatty complain, “What’s the fucking point? It’s just gonna be the Parson show again. Might as well not be here.”

Jeff knocks shoulders with Parse and drags him towards the gate.

“Stop being so gay, dude,” Jordy says. “Man up and do your job.”

Jeff whips around and snaps, “That’s not an insult, dude. Grow up.”

Jordy barks out a laugh. “What the fuck do you care, Troy?”

“You didn’t hear?” Greg says. “Jeff’s girl is a homo.”

Parse tugs on Jeff’s sweater. “Jeff.”

Jeff’s mind goes blank. He shrugs Parses off and pushes up into Greg’s space, the momentum carrying them both into the boards. His blood feels hot, like it could burn right out of his veins.

“What the fuck did you just say?”

“That’s what Mel said.” Greg shrugs. “Says she follows your girl on Twitter and she never shuts up
about being ‘bisexual’ or whatever. Sounds like you should watch your back, man.”

“Nah, Troy’s cool with it ‘cause he gets to watch,” Jordy skates over and slaps Jeff on the back. Like they’re buddies sharing a joke. ‘“S’like free porn, man.”

Jeff drops his gloves as he grabs Jordy’s sweater to keep him from skating away and Growls, “You don’t talk about her that way.”

Jordy laughs in Jeff’s face. “You’re so pussy-whipped, dude. It’s sad.”

Jordy’s a big guy, like 6’2” and over two hundred pounds. Jeff is bigger.

He uses it. He shifts his weight and throws Jordy to the ground, and he makes it look easy.

Someone laughs. A couple of guys clap and cheer, like they stumbled into some kind of cage match and placed bets. It all sounds far away, though, like Jeff’s head is underwater, and he looks over at Parse but he’s not there anymore and Jeff can’t remember him leaving.

He turns back to Greg, staring him down while he tells the room, “My girlfriend is off limits. Her sexuality is off limits. See what happens if you try again.”


Jeff’s fingers feel numb. He can hear how quiet it is suddenly, realizes that half the team is staring at him. Jesus.

“Show’s over,” Ratchet says, speaking up for the first time. “Just go shower up, eh?”

Jeff pushes away from the boards and skates past the bench with his eyes locked on the gate. He ditches his gloves on the ice; someone from the equipment management will get them and he needs to get the fuck out of here. The sharpness is burning off and all he has left is the blunt part. He used to play baseball in the summer and try to swing the bat hard enough to make it snap.

He could never do it, but he can picture what it would feel like.

Parse is sitting in Jeff’s stall, showered and dressed in street clothes. Jeff’s gear bag is laid open for him at Parse’s feet. He looks up when Jeff walks in and nods at him, but doesn’t speak.

Jeff undresses quickly, ripping his pads off and tossing them away haphazardly, and doesn’t bother peeling off his UnderArmor. He’ll shower at home—anything to get out of here faster. The locker room chatter picks up like normal, but Jeff ignores all of it and stalks away as soon as his trainers are on.

Parse follows with both of their bags, one slung over his shoulders and the other in his hand.

They don’t talk on the walk to the car.

Jeff plugs in his MP3 player and cranks his music up.

He can feel Parse’s eyes on him the entire drive. It makes his fucking skin itch.

They hit a red light and Jeff turns the volume down in frustration and snaps, “Just say whatever it is.”

“Like hell I do,” Jeff hisses, hackles raising again. “No one talks about Shani that way. Or anyone, for that matter.”

Parse shrinks away and looks out the window, his temple presses against the glass. He watches the city going past and asks quietly, “Is she really bi?”

“Yeah,” Jeff says. “It’s not a secret. I’m surprised it hasn’t come up.”

“Oh.” Parse’s voice is strained. “Cool.”

Jeff narrows his eyes. “If that’s gonna be a problem—”

“No,” Parse answers quickly. “No, man, I’m not—it’s not that.”

He sounds like he means it. Jeff clears his throat and says, “Good. I’m, uh. Sorry if I freaked you out.”

Parse doesn’t say anything right away. Jeff is reaching for the volume dial again when he finally asks, “Are you gonna tell her? Um, about the team.”

“No,” Jeff answers firmly.

“Why not?”

Jeff takes a hand off the wheel to rub at his face. “She’s proud of who she is. She doesn’t need anything else making that harder.”

They’re almost home. Parse is still staring out the window. “Was your old team the same?”

“Yeah,” Jeff says.

Parse closes his eyes. “Seems…hard.”

“If hockey made it hard to be with Shani,” Jeff tells him, “I’d quit it.”

“Oh.” Parse undoes his seatbelt as Jeff pulls into the driveway. “I think I’d die.”

Jeff accidentally shifts into reverse instead of park and then slams on the breaks when the car starts to roll backwards. “What?”

“Without hockey,” Parse clarifies. His voice is steady and even and so devoid of emotion that it makes Jeff shiver. “I think I’d just die.”

Jeff’s stomach feels cold. He puts the car in park and waits for Parse’s face to change. It doesn’t.

“…Good thing you have it,” Jeff says eventually. It feels useless even as he says it.

“Yeah,” Parse answers. He opens his door and climbs out of the car. “Good thing.”

~*~

Parse loves parties.
The younger guys and most of the guys who are single go out clubbing or to house parties a couple of times a week, and Parse always drags Jeff along even though Jeff mostly hates it. He’s not into the music and he’s not trying to pick up, and Shani doesn’t want to come with and he misses her.

But Parse is the kind of persuasive that Jeff gets caught up in, so Jeff is sitting in the VIP booth of some club he’d never heard of, nursing his third beer, watching Parse make out with some blonde chick in a sequin dress.

She’s leaning up against the wall, her head cradled in one of Parse’s hands while the other feels up her tit. It looks less sleazy than Jeff used to feel when he pulled that shit back when he was single, and she’s clearly super into it. Parse seems like a good kisser. Which might be a weird thing to think. Jeff takes a swig of his beer.

“You jealous, Troy?” Hatty asks.

Jeff jumps, looking away, and snaps defensively, “No!”

“Dude, chill,” Ratchet tells him. “That chick’s hella hot. We won’t tell your girl you were lookin’.”

Right. Jealous of Parse. Jeff’s not sure why he’d think—

It doesn’t matter. Jeff isn’t either of those.

“Just hoping I don’t have to hear them go at it tonight,” Jeff says, which is true. Not that he ever has. He doesn’t hear Parse on the phone that much anymore, either.

“Yeah, good luck with that,” Hatty says. “Parser could get any girl in this place. Done deal.”

That’s probably true. Jeff’s not sure who would turn down a guy who looks like Parse. Especially when he’s the new face of a franchise.

“A guy can dream.” Jeff punches Hatty’s shoulder. “I need my beauty rest, eh?”

“Hate to break it to you, man, but I don’t think it’s working,” Hatty chirps.

Ratchet gestures at Jeff’s face. “How many times your nose been broken?”

Twice. Jeff doesn’t like talking about it.

They don’t mean anything by it, though. He shrugs it off and next thing he knows, someone’s ordering a round of shots.

Yeah, no. He’s tapping out. He waves away whatever glorified jet fuel Hatty is trying to shove in his face and asks the server to close out his tab instead.

Parse is still tongue-deep in that girl. They rode over together, so Jeff should probably let him know that he’s leaving.

He taps Parse on the shoulder, and Parse’s face lights up when he turns and sees who it is.

“Jeff, buddy, hey!” he slurs, grin stretched across his face. Jeff’s never noticed before, but his teeth are crooked.

Jeff gives a little wave to the girl and tells Parse, “I’m heading out. You’ve got your key, right?”

Parse ignores him. He’s too busy telling the girl, “This’s—this guy’s my best friend, man. He’s the
“Thanks,” Jeff says awkwardly. His face feels hot. “Your key?”

Parse’s face turns deeply serious. He fishes in his—really tight—jean pocket and tries to hand Jeff his house key.

“Uh, no, dude—you need that to get home?” Jeff looks between him and the girl, gently pushing Parse’s hand away. “Jesus, how much did you drink?”

“We bought a lotta shots,” the girl tells Jeff brightly. She leans in, like the next part’s a secret. “Kenny really likes tequila.”

“Don’t call me that,” Parse tells her. He cups her cheek and turns her to kiss her again, wet and sloppy.

She hums and pulls him in closer, hitching a leg around his waist to grind against him.

So Jeff’s not gonna fall asleep until this idiot gets home, but it’s fine. He takes a deep breath and says loudly, “Okay, bye,” then heads for the exit.

Parse says something that Jeff can’t really hear over the noise, but when he turns around, Parse is back at it with the girl again. So it probably wasn’t important.

Jeff catches a taxi home and lets himself inside. Shani’s car was in the driveway but she’s not on the couch, so she’s probably already asleep, curled up on her side of the bed and hogging all of the blankets.

Jeff kicks his shoes off and heads upstairs to join her. He leaves the door unlocked, just in case.

~*~

Parse hates parties.

They get the text saying that the team is going out tonight and Parse pulls a bottle of whiskey from his cabinet in the kitchen and chugs it for five seconds before he tells Jeff, “Okay, let’s do this.”

Sometimes it sounds like a challenge. Sometimes it sounds like going to war.

They’re at someone’s house tonight; Jeff doesn’t even know whose. He grabs a shitty American beer from the fridge and parks himself on the couch like he always does, fiddling with his phone and waiting for Shani to take a break from work to tell her they went out. Sometimes Hatty sits next to him, when he isn’t trying to get laid.

Parse walked in wearing a flannel and a backwards snapback. Jeff watches him do a shot, lose the flannel, and do two more. His hat ends up on some girl’s head, the brim falling down over her eyes and making it harder for him to kiss her. The flannel reappears on a second girl’s shoulders and he kisses her too.

Jeff doesn’t mean to stare, but he’s bored and he does, and he watches the way they touch him. It’s a little bit feral, a little bit like claws. Parse drank so much.
Jeff puts down his beer.

The girl wearing the flannel leans in close to say something and then mouths at Parse’s earlobe, but he gently pushes her away and takes a stumbling move backwards, not graceful like he usually is. He looks around the room and locks eyes with Jeff.

Jeff feels weird about it, like he should fuck off or something, but Parse walks over and braces himself on the back of the couch to lean in close enough to be heard over the music and people talking.

“Wanna get outta here?” he shouts into Jeff’s ear.

Jeff checks his phone and looks back up at Parse. “You sure? It’s not even eleven.”

“This place blows,” Parse says. “C’mon.”

Jeff doesn’t say anything else. He gets up and follows Parse out the door, realizing after the fact that Parse never got his stuff from those girls.

“Did you, uh.” Jeff hesitates, watching Parse run an absent-minded hand through his hair. “Did you forget your hat.”

“She can have it,” Parse says. He’s calling for a taxi on his phone. “Whatever.”

“Okay.” Jeff sits down on the curb.

Parse sits down next to him, a foot or so away. They don’t say anything else until the taxi comes and takes them home.

Jeff unlocks the door and switches on the lights, blinking at the sudden brightness. He kicks off his shoes and shrugs out of his jacket, then heads for the living room.

“You wanna watch a movie?” he asks, already reaching from the remote.

Parse answers from in the kitchen, “Yeah, sure. Whatever’s fine.”

Jeff turns around and sees Parse walk in with the whiskey bottle and two glasses in his hands.

“Uh, woah,” Jeff says. Parse stops short and stares at him blankly. Fuck, Jeff has to actually say more words. He puts down the remote and fumbles over it. “Uh, should you—uh. No offense, but. Should you really drink more, man?”

Parse holds eye contact for a long second. Then he looks down at the bottle and laughs. “Whatever, man. If you’re gonna freak out about it—”

Jeff insists, “That’s not what I—”

“I guess I’ll put it away,” Parse says. “Happy?”

He vanishes into the kitchen and Jeff looks down at his hands. He barely drank but he feels dumb-drunk, like something is making him stupid and incapable of shutting the fuck up.


“I’m not,” Parse says. He vaults over the back of the couch and flops down right next to Jeff. The whole length of their sides is pressed together and Jeff can feel Parse’s ribcage expand when he
breathes. Parse rests his cheek against Jeff’s shoulder. “Can we watch Transformers? I wanna watch shit get blown up.”

They’ve never touched like this. One of them is trembling and Jeff thinks it might be him. He shifts carefully, freeing his arm so that he can wrap it around Parse’s shoulders, and says, “No.” He picks the remote back up and scrolls through the TV channels until he finds Definitely, Maybe.

“Fuck you, dude,” Parse mutters. He sounds half-asleep already, which is good.

Jeff fumbles through getting his phone out of his pocket without disturbing Parse and pulls up his conversation with Shani.

**Me (10:47 pm):** Is it weird to cuddle with parse

**Shani (11:15 pm):** Do you feel weird?

Jeff looks down. Parse is watching the movie with half-lidded eyes, huffing out a laugh at Ryan Reynolds. If he notices Jeff looking at him, he doesn’t show it.

**Me (11:16 pm):** Not really

**Shani (11:16 pm):** I’m fine with it. Thank you for asking.

**Shani (11:17 pm):** I love you

Jeff closes his eyes and takes a deep breath.

**Me (11:17 pm):** I love you too

“I think I’m gonna get my hair done soon,” Shani says when Jeff plops down next to her on the couch. He’s holding a giant bowl of popcorn and waiting for Parse to bring in the six pack they bought so they can start movie night.

“Awesome, babe,” he tells her with a smile.

Parse walks in and sits on Jeff’s other side, close enough so their knees brush but not any closer. “What’re you gonna do?”

“I think braids,” she answers. “Maybe with purple in them. I miss having color.”

Jeff smiles wider. “You’d look so good, holy shit.”

“Thanks, baby.” Shani leans in for a kiss and Jeff happily indulges, brushing his fingers across her jaw. When they pull apart, she adds, “I’m kinda nervous, though.”

Parse asks, “How come?”

Shani sighs, leaning against Jeff’s side. “I might catch shit for not being ‘professional’ enough.”

She does air quotes over the word and everything. Jeff’s heart pangs for her.
“Which is some bullshit,” he points out bitterly. Shani’s dealt with racist supervisors before. He’s not optimistic that Vegas would be any better. “You’re an amazing nurse.”

“Of course it’s bullshit,” she says. “And if I can be myself…maybe it’s easier on the next person? But it’s just—still scary.”

Parse is fiddling with the bottle opener with his hands in his lap. His voice is strained when he tells her, “I’m really sorry. It’s fucking awful. Having to, like, wonder how much of yourself you can be.”

Jeff is quiet.

“Thanks, Kent,” Shani says softly. She snuggles closer to Jeff’s chest and he holds her tightly. “I came out to a few coworkers last week.”

“Babe, that’s huge!” Jeff tells her, rubbing her hip in comfort. “I’m proud of you.”

She smiles up at him. Her eyes are a little wet. “Thanks, baby. It went well, I think? Ish.”

Parse finally commits to cracking open a beer. “I, uh, thought you were out already?”

Shani reaches a hand out and he dutifully passes her the bottle. She takes a quick drink. “To family and friends and online, yeah. But I didn’t go in guns blazing at work, no.”

Parse opens up another beer and holds it out for Jeff, but Jeff waves him away so he keeps it for himself. “Oh, okay. My bad.”

“That’s okay, you wouldn’t know.” Shani plays with the hem of Jeff’s shirt, her manicured nails dragging lightly against the fabric. “It’s just a tough environment to put yourself in anyway, you know? I wanted to see how comfortable I was first.”

“I think that’s why there’s no gay guys in the league,” Jeff says suddenly. He’s not even sure why that’s what he was thinking of, but. Suddenly it’s out there.

“What d’you mean?” Shani sits up and squints at him. “Of course there are.”

Parse puts his beer bottle down on the table. It clanks loudly against the wood.

Jeff shrugs. He feels like maybe he shouldn’t have said anything, but he’s in it now. “I dunno. It doesn’t seem like there are.”

“They’re just closeted, Jeff,” Shani says. She sounds pissed at him now, fuck. “You think queer people can’t play hockey?”

“What? That’s not what I—” Jeff rubs at his face and pauses for a second. “I just meant like, I don’t get why you’d want to.”

He looks over at Parse for support, but Parse won’t take his eyes off the floor.

Jeff stares at Shani’s knees and continues, “Like, you were talking about the environment? The league is so shitty and homophobic, I just feel like—if I liked dudes, there’s no way I’d put myself in this sport. It’s not worth living like that.”

“Oh my God.” Shani throws her hands up. “You’re so straight sometimes. You have no idea what it’s like—”

“I’m gonna go,” Parse says suddenly. He’s practically already gone by the time he says it, tripping
over the armchair and bolting up the stairs.

What the fuck?

They both watch him leave in silence. He slams a door upstairs and Jeff winces.

“I don’t think I can have this conversation with you right now,” Shani tells him slowly. “I love you, and I know you’re not trying—I get it. What you’re trying to say. But this is one of those things you need to think about more, and then maybe we can talk.”

“I know.” Jeff takes her hand and traces a thumb over her knuckles gently. His throat feels numb and like he might cry for some reason. “I’m sorry I hurt you.”

Shani kisses his shoulder instead of answering, which means she doesn’t forgive him yet. That’s okay.

After a few moments, she pats his knee and says, “You wanna get out of here? I don’t want to just sit here and brood.”

Jeff manages a tiny smile and a nod, but he doesn’t move. “I should, uh. Talk to Parse, maybe?”

“Maybe, yeah,” she agrees, standing up and ruffling Jeff’s hair. “See if he wants ice cream. I either need sugar or a drink.”

Jeff gets up too and looks towards the stairs. “I need both.”

“One thing at a time, honey.”

Jeff laughs. He squeezes her hand and then backs away, brushing against the coffee table as he turns around. When he gets up the stairs, he realizes there’s water running in the bathroom and that Parse’s bedroom is open.

“Uh, hey, man.” Jeff knocks on the bathroom door, clearing his throat awkwardly. “I’m, uh. Sorry about fighting. We’re gonna get ice cream to cool off if you wanna come.”

“No.”

Parse’s voice is tight, like his teeth are clenched. Jeff sighs and rests his forehead against the door.

“Oh, okay,” he says. “You want me to bring you some back?”

“I’m good.”

Jeff’s fingers brush against the doorknob, almost subconsciously. “I could—”

“No thanks.”

Jeff pictures himself turning the knob. He’s sure it’d be locked, and not sure why he knows. “Right,” he says. “Be back in a bit.”

Parse doesn’t answer. Jeff heads back downstairs and shakes his head at Shani. She frowns and stares up at the ceiling, eyes fixed on where the bathroom is above them.

“Maybe we should get it to-go,” she suggests quietly.

“Yeah,” Jeff agrees. He snags his keys and wallet from the alcove. “I think so.”
Jeff is reading the paper on his phone a few days later when Shani and Parse breeze past him towards the front door.

“Bye, baby, love you,” she says, giving him a drive-by kiss on the head. “Be back later.”

Jeff turns around and watches the pair of them put their shoes on. He’s confused. “Where’re you going?”

“Coffee,” she answers. There’s a fresh pot in the kitchen. Jeff made it himself. “I’ll bring you one.”

Jeff feels like he’s missing something. Parse won’t look at him.

“Okay,” he says. “Have fun?”

“Thanks!” She steals his car keys and shepherds Parse out the door, and then they’re both gone.

Jeff turns back to his phone.

“What was that earlier?” he asks Shani that night while she changes into her pajamas. “With Parse.”

Shani pulls her freshly-braided hair out from under her collar. “We got coffee. We talked.”

Jeff is starting to feel like he’s in the Twilight Zone. “Right, yeah. About what?”

Shani climbs into bed and brushes his hair off his forehead. “Honey,” she says, “none of your damn business.”

Jeff rests his cheek on the top of Parse’s head while they cuddle watching TV after dinner. “Are you and my girlfriend plotting to kill me?”

Parse laughs so hard he snorts like a pig. It’s not technically a “no.”

Jeff walks all the way into the kitchen and picks up the phone before he realizes he has no idea what
he’s doing.

“Hey, babe?” he calls into the other room. “What’s the number for the pizza place we like?”

Shani shouts back, “I dunno! We ordered last week—check the call history.”

Jeff sighs. He starts clicking through the call log and doesn’t get very far before weird shit happens, because that’s his life now. Someone’s been calling the same number multiple times a day, every night, for over a week. At least the pizza place is easy to recognize in the middle of it.

Parse is upstairs, Jeff is pretty sure. He walks into the living room and taps Shani on the shoulder. When she raises an eyebrow at him, he hands her the phone.

“Do you know that number?” he asks, even though he kind of knows the answer.

“No,” Shani says. She sounds tired.

Jeff takes the phone from her and walks back into the kitchen. He stares at the screen for a long time, even though he knows what he’s going to do.

The phone rings three times before an angry French guy picks up and immediately starts saying, “Kenny, you can’t keep calling here. I can’t make—”

“It’s not him,” Jeff says. They have linoleum tiles and the edge is starting to peel near the doorway. He pokes at it with his foot. “I’m his—friend.”

French Guy doesn’t answer right away. Then he asks, “How’d you get this number?”

“It’s my phone.” Jeff rubs at his face.

“Are you his teammate?” the man asks.

Jeff feels dirty. He wants to take a shower. “Who are you?”

There’s the faint voice of a woman on the other end. The man says something to her that Jeff can’t hear and then, “I hope you mean it, that you’re his friend. Don’t contact me again.”

The line goes dead.

Jeff can’t decide if he’s in a bad spy movie or just in hell. He stares at the phone like maybe whoever the fuck that was will change his mind and call back.

No one calls. Maybe this is how Parse feels every night.

~*~

“Hey,” Shani says, leaning against the bedroom doorway.

Jeff pauses the hockey tape he’s watching and pulls an earbud out. “Yeah, babe?”

“I have a question for you. And I know it’s going to sound ridiculous,” she tells him. “And I need you to answer me seriously anyway.”
“O…kay?” Jeff says.

Shani asks, “Did you buy a fifth of vodka and drink the entire thing this weekend?”

Jeff glances down at his screen. It’s footage from last year’s Memorial Cup. Rimouski is up by two with four minutes left in the third. Parse and Zimmermann’s line isn’t up, but the camera has a good view of them on the bench. Parse is watching Zimmermann’s face. Zimmermann is watching the score.

“No,” Jeff says.

Shani leaves. Jeff presses play.

~*~

Jeff hands Shani her coffee and kisses her goodbye at the door. He waits until he hears her car pull out of the driveway, and then he heads upstairs and stands outside of Parse’s door for six minutes. The light is on, so Parse is definitely awake.

It’s not too late to move back to Ontario, Jeff thinks. He knocks on the door instead.

Parse calls, “’Sup?” from the other side, so Jeff figures he can come in.

Parse is chilling in his boxers on the bed, doing something on his laptop. He doesn’t look up when he asks, “Shani leave for work?”

“Uh, yeah,” Jeff says. He clears his throat and gestures awkwardly at the bed. “Can I, uh?”

“Sure?” Parse raises a chirpy eyebrow and scoots over, patting the space next to him. He’s looking at hockey stats, because of course he is.

Jeff sits down on the edge of the bed. He stares at the wall and not at Parse at all and says nothing.

It’s maybe the most awkward silence of Jeff’s entire life, and he’s quiet a lot. But it doesn’t seem to bug Parse at all. Maybe he can’t tell how much Jeff is actively dying.

“Is someone dying?” Parse asks suddenly, making Jeff jump. “Is that why you’re being so weird?”

“No,” Jeff says. He takes a deep breath. “Did you know, uh, I proposed to Shani once?”

Parse clicks at something on his computer. “She doesn’t wear a ring.”

“’Cause she said no,” Jeff tells the wall. “It was, uh, when I found out I got traded. And I thought, like—this is what people in movies do, right? I told her I wanted to marry her and asked her to move with me. And she didn’t want to get married yet.”

Parse closes his laptop. “That sucks, bro. I’m sorry.”

Jeff admits, “It, uh. It hurt. A lot. But I respected what she wanted, is the uh. The point. That’s why we work.”

“Why’re you telling me this?” Parse asks. “Is this supposed to be, like, a talk?”
“Maybe. I don’t know. I just.” Jeff sighs. He closes his eyes and hangs his head. “Whoever you’re holding onto, man…maybe you should think about if they can give you what you need. And if. If you’re doing the same for them.”

“Okay,” Parse says. He hesitates, then opens his computer up again. “I think I wanna be alone now.”

“Sure, yeah.” Jeff stands up and looks at him for the first time since he walked in. His expression is unreadable. Jeff wants to pat his shoulder, ruffle his hair—something to soften it—but he doesn’t. He taps his knuckles on the door on the way out and closes it behind him.

~*~

Jeff drives them to the arena for their preseason opener, Parse’s music playing, humming along to the words because he’s spent all summer learning them. Parse still has a nice voice. He sings louder now.

They warm up, pat Fish the goalie on the head, and go back into the locker room for the last minute line changes and pep talks.

Jeff’s still paired with Ratchet and Parse is on the first line, because of course he is, but there are some minor shake ups. Jeff is re-taping his stick like he does before every game when someone says, “Let’s hear a speech, Parser!”

Parse looks up from tightening his skates. “Uh, me?”

“C’mon, Golden Boy,” Hatty shouts. “Lead us into battle!”

Parse’s eyes look a little wide. He glances at Jeff, who taps his shin with his stick in encouragement.

Parse smiles at Jeff—so subtly that Jeff almost misses it—and then he stands up, shoulders back as he looks over the room, and clears his throat.


The room is quiet for one long moment, and then the cheering starts. People slap each other on the back with a chorus of fuck yeah and this’s our year, boys. Buckets go on heads and towels get tossed into stalls, and then everyone is streaming onto the ice.

Jeff slings an arm around Parse’s shoulders as they head down the corridor, looking down at his face through the glare of their visors. Parse is grinning, crooked teeth gnashing at his mouthguard, staring at the stadium rafters up ahead.

What’re you proving? Jeff wonders. Their skates hit ice at the same time and the crowd cheers even louder when Parse waves at a camera. For who?

His freckles bleach away under the stadium lights.

~*~
They win.
They keep winning.

Parse’s entire body changes when they drive past a billboard with his face plastered on it. Jeff learns the backroads.

Jeff walks into their Toronto hotel room after having dinner with his parents and finds Parse sprawled on Jeff’s bed, playing Call of Duty.

Something blows Parse up and he curses creatively, then says, “Hey, bro. How was dinner?”

“Still can’t believe you bring your fucking Xbox on the road,” Jeff says. He shoves Parse over so there’s room for him on the bed. “You know that’s ridiculous, right? Also, dinner was good. You could’ve come.”

“Being alone with your thoughts is for losers.” Parse’s lips twitch when he gets a headshot. “I don’t like meeting parents.”

Fair. Jeff’s parents are pretty chill, but they’re also weird and annoying. He loves them, though.

“You want in?” Parse offers. He kicks at a spare controller laying at the end of the bed with his foot. Jeff can feel the muscles in Parse’s arm twitch while he plays. “Nah, not right now. Thanks.”

“Sure,” Parse says. “Your siblings come?”

“Uh, nah. No one’s in town.” Jeff glances at Parse’s face and then back at the TV. They normally don’t talk this much, especially after a game, and it’s kind of freaking him out.

“Cool.” Parse finishes some kind of mission and starts the next level. “Hey, you know how you said there’s no gay guys in the NHL?”

Jeff grimaces. “Yeah, I was being a dick and I’m—”

“I’m one. A gay guy. Maybe. I don’t know, actually? Sometimes I like girls but maybe I don’t really,” Parse says all at once, the words spewing out in a frantic mess, and—god help him—Jeff panics because he has no fucking clue what he should say. What would Shani do? He’s not Shani. Parse is still talking. “But I was in love one time and he was a guy and it kinda fucked me up, haha, and I feel like I’ll never shut the fuck up unless you say something so if you could, like—”

Parse croaks, “Okay,” and then, when nothing else happens, “I’m gonna blow more shit up now.”
“I wanna watch TV,” Jeff says stubbornly. His eyes feel wet. “And I wanna cuddle.”
Parse puts the controller down. His fingers start twitching. He picks the controller up again. “You
don’t have to—”
“Shut up and come here,” Jeff says. “Don’t be weird about it.”
Parse does one of those sounds that’s sort of like a laugh but also not one. He turns the game off and
lowers his head onto Jeff’s shoulder gingerly. “You’re the one being weird, dude. This is weird.”
“Yeah, I guess.” Jeff grabs the remote and turns on HGTV. He’s not good with words. This is what
he has. Parse is shaking against him and he doesn’t know how to make it go away if there isn’t
something he can use his body for.
They watch House Hunters. Parse sinks lower and lower until his head is nestled against Jeff’s chest.
Jeff can feel his own heart beating against Parses cheek.
“Hey, Jeff?” Parse murmurs. His eyes are closed and he’s inched an arm around Jeff’s middle.
Jeff rubs Parse’s arm. “What’s up, bud?’
“You and hockey.”
Jeff closes his eyes too. His chest hurts.
“Good thing you have me,” he says.

~*~

“Dude,” Parse says, annoyed. He’s lying over on the benchpress, where Jeff is not. “Earth to Jeff?”
Jeff squirts his water bottle into his hair and runs a hand through it, cooling off the sweat. They’ve
been working out for almost an hour and he’s starting to feel it—like, red-faced and gross feel it—
and Parse looks bored. His form is perfect every time, every machine. He hums along to the radio on
the fucking treadmill. He lifts less weight, but maybe not as much less as you’d think.
“Sorry,” Jeff says. He stares at the sweat stain spreading down the front of Parse’s tank. “I was just.
Thinking.”
Parse smiles all lopsidedly. “Wanna share with the class?”
Not really. Jeff feels like a tool. But it’s Parse, so it’s probably fine.
“I was just thinking,” he repeats. “Your routine is brutal, man. Like. No wonder you look all…you.”
Parse laughs, but not in a mean way. Or, it’s not supposed to be mean. Jeff still feels a little bad about
it, maybe.
“I’ve got a trainer on retainer,” he says, kind of beckoning Jeff closer while he does it, like it’s a
secret. “And no offense or whatever—but she’s way better than the guys on staff. I can get you her
“Oh,” Jeff says. “Uh, sure. Thanks.”

“Duh.” Parse wipes at his forehead with the bottom of his shirt, flashing his abs. “But seriously, man, whatever you’re doing’s already working for you. Your deadlift? Hot.”

Jeff doesn’t say anything.

Parse lets go of his shirt and looks at Jeff. “What, is it weird to compliment your bod now or something?”

Not really. It’s actually almost…nicer. Like if Parse says something good about how Jeff looks, it’s probably true. But Jeff thinks that’d probably come out the wrong way.

“It’s weird you call it my ‘bod,’” he chirps instead. “What is this, the ‘80s?”

“I think I was born wearing leg warmers,” Parse says. “Get your hot bod over here and spot me so I don’t die an utterly uncool death.”

Jeff grins goofily. “Sure thing, Madonna.”

~*~

It turns out that Jeff likes soda a lot more than protein shakes, and potatoes are gross without butter on them. He’s thinking about that while he pinches at his stomach one night, looking in the mirror.

Shani wanders back in from the bathroom and wraps her arms around him from behind, reaching up onto her toes to rest her chin on his shoulder. “What’re you doing, babe?”

“Am I hot?” Jeff asks her reflection.

The reflection frowns. Shani trails a hand up through the hair on his chest, hugging her body closer to his. “Do you not think you are?”

“Don’t laugh,” Jeff tells her, even though she isn’t. He turns around, dislodging her hold, and sits down on the bed. “I guess I don’t. I know it’s dumb to care.”

“It isn’t dumb. But I’m sad you think that, baby,” she says, coming to sit next to him and resting her hand on his knee.

Jeff wishes he hadn’t brought it up. He says, “I guess I just. I don’t, uh. Don’t feel good enough.”

“Oh, Jeff—”

“I don’t look strong,” Jeff keeps going stubbornly. “I don’t look cool. Not like I belong here, like—like guys…like Parse do.”

Shani presses her face into his neck. He feels a tear roll down towards his collarbone. He didn’t want her to cry.

“You look like you,” she whispers fiercely. “I love everything about that.”
“Sorry I made you sad,” Jeff says. “I didn’t—I wasn’t trying—”

“Look at me, baby.” Shani lifts her head and turns his face towards her, and that’s even harder because he can see the tears in her eyes now. “Will you lay back for me?”

Jeff closes his eyes and nods, scooting up the bed so he can lay down, half-propped on his elbows, and feeling her shift between his legs.

“I said look,” she reminds him gently, not quite teasing. He opens his eyes. She’s kneeling over him with a soft smile on her face and her braids swaying gently with her movement. Then she reaches out and traces a hand along the curve of his shoulder and down towards his bicep.

“I love how broad your shoulders are,” she says, her voice syrupy. It feels like the words could drip out of her mouth, like Jeff could lap at them. He licks his lips. Swallows. “Watching you lean into doorways. When your shirts stretch too tight and I can see your tummy.”

Jeff squeezes his eyes shut and then remembers not to. His face is burning. He thinks he might be hard. He says her name.

“I know, baby,” she whispers. “It gets my cunt so wet just watching you move sometimes. I love it. Love getting wet for you. I feel so…delicate. You have to be careful with me.”

He does. He likes taking care of her and making it slow and gentle. He likes taking all of her weight because he can and because she deserves to feel easy to hold. Jeff’s body can do those things.

“And I like thinking about your tummy—how it’s soft like mine,” she says. Her hands rest on his stomach, thumbs stroking near his belly button in gentle arcs. She doesn’t touch his boxers; he doesn’t need her to. “How I can hide my face there and you laugh if I blow raspberries. Your laugh is sexy.”

Jeff swallows. He loves her laugh too. He wants to look at her all the time and love all the things she loves, and he wants to be crying like she is right now but it’s hard.

“You want me to touch you, baby?” she asks.

Jeff shakes his head.

She smiles. She knew, probably. “What can I do, baby?”

Jeff makes a sound that isn’t words. He traces his hand up her hip and tries again. “Will you, uh. Up here? So I can.”

“Kiss me?” she asks innocently. She loves teasing him. Her smile is so pretty.

Jeff licks his lips.

Shani bites her lip when her grin spreads. “You want me to sit on your face, sweet man? I’ll get you all messy.”

“Baby,” Jeff pleads. He can barely breathe.

“Okay,” she says, pulling her old Rangers jersey over her head. She’s only wearing panties underneath. “Okay, baby, hang on.”

Jeff’s fingers find her panties and he helps pull them off clumsily, nails catching lightly in her bush as he tugs them down her thighs. She lifts her hips and crawls forward once they’re past her knees,
brushing her nose up the side of his jaw and kissing up near his ear.

Then she braces on the headboard and locks her calves against his sides, her pussy streaking juice across his chin before she finds his mouth and he can lap at her with his tongue, closing his eyes with relief with the sharp tang of it hits him. She moans and sinks her weight down and his hands come up to help her move—not to guide her, just making it easier to hold herself up. Always easier.

She tastes amazing and all he breathes is her cunt, the soft folds of it and the pubic hair his nose is buried in, and he’s not pinned down but he can pretend he is. It doesn’t matter. Where would he want to go?

He’s not getting enough air. That doesn’t matter either. It’s not his job to fill up lungs, not when she’s fucking his face and his tongue is inside her and he can taste the way she’s shaking—like he’s good, like he can take care of this. Jeff is good. Good at this. He can cry now, his eyes shut and tears pricking at the corners, and she takes a hand off of the headboard and shushes him as she wipes them away.

She loves him. That’s an easy thing. He’s so hard that it might be starting to hurt, and he wonders if he could come just from eating her out and the juice and spit dribbling down his chin.

“Baby,” Shani pants. “Jeff, I’m—so—close.”

Good, good. Jeff presses his tongue up into her and she grinds down on him in little jerks that stutter the headboard against the wall. Tap, tap, and dead silent when she comes, shaking and holding her breath back with these little choking sobs, her thighs spasm
ing against his head.

She lowers down carefully, flopping to the side with an arm thrown over her eyes. Her chest is heaving with aftershocks and her cunt is glistening and he loves her.

“Fuck,” she wheezes, more air than word. “That was so good, baby. D’you wanna fuck me?”

Jeff sucks in a full breath. “Yeah.”

Shani smiles, a quick flash of teeth, and turns on the bed so her head is propped up on a pillow. “C’merе, then, handsome.”

Jeff does, grabbing their lube off the nightstand because she still felt a little dry, and slicking himself up while moves in for a kiss. She gives him one happily, then wrinkles her nose and pulls away a little—and plucks a pube off her tongue. They both laugh, Jeff nuzzling against her cheek, and everything about him feels good and easy when he laughs with her like that.

“I love you,” she whispers, running a hand through his hair while he lifts her leg to line himself up.

Words are still hard, but Jeff manages, “Me too,” as he pushes inside, his face tucked into her neck, arms shaking with how much he wants. She’s tight and hot and digging her ankles into the small of his back impatiently and he wants, wants.

He goes slow at first, barely working his hips and torturing himself with it. Not for him. Then Shani says, “C’mon, asshole, I wanna come again,” and he laughs breathlessly, teeth pressing into her neck, and puts his back into it.

She likes it when he lifts her hips. He can do that—hold her up so his cock drags across her g-spot and her hands pull at his hair so hard that it hurts but not so hard that he can’t take it—and he can feel her stretch marks under his palms and close his eyes and love how the uneven skin feels. Her breathing changes and she stuffs her fist in her mouth, face screwed up desperately.
“Close, baby?” he murmurs.

Her palm is a little shiny with spit when she frees it from between her teeth. “Yeah, harder,” she says, then, “Wanna come with me, baby?”

Always. Jeff grips her tighter and snaps his hips faster, mouthing at her knee because he can’t get at her lips from this angle and needs something to kiss, something to feel tender about it. She’s saying she loves him now, over and over and over, and it’s easy to feel like he deserves that here.

He comes right after she does and falls forward, burying his face in the pillow next to her. His back is dripping with sweat and he’s still half inside her, slipping out slowly as he softens. Not ready to give it up yet.

Eventually she kicks lightly at his hip and he pulls out, then fumbles with the tissue box on their nightstand. He hands one to her first and then cleans off his dick.

“Thank you,” he says, watching the way her smile turns a little sad.

“Of course, baby,” she tells him. Her hand rests on his knee. “I hope you know I meant it.”

Jeff looks down at the gentle rolls of his stomach, the soft dick resting against his thigh. “I do.”

“I’m glad.” She pats affectionately at his shin. “Okay, do you wanna pee first or should I?”

Jeff smiles. “You can.”

She hops off the bed and kisses his forehead, one hand still cupped between her thighs as his come leaks out. She ditches the tissue when she tugs a shirt back on and borrows his boxers, though, and creeps into the hallway.

Jeff flops back down on the bed. He should definitely pee for sex health reasons and whatever, but he also doesn’t want to move. Like something in him will shatter if he’s not in this room anymore.

“Oh, hey, Kent,” Shani says in the hallway. “Can’t sleep?”

“Not really,” Parse answers. Jeff can hear his shit-eating grin from here. “But hey, congrats on the sex.”

Shani laughs with one of those high-pitched, startled sounds and scolds, “Oh my god, you brat. Go to your room!”

Parse says something else that Jeff can’t make out over the sound of Shani laughing and shutting a door to somewhere, and then it’s quiet again.

Jeff feels weird. He’s pretty sure Parse doesn’t care about hearing Jeff have sex. Maybe he’d care if he could hear Parse. Maybe it’s not normal to wonder that kind of thing.

Jeff hopes Parse heard the laughing. He wonders if he’d hear that, if Parse brought someone home.

Shani comes back into the room and squeezes Jeff’s ankle. “You okay, babe?”

“Can I be little spoon?” Jeff asks her. He’s staring up at the ceiling.

“One course, but go brush your teeth,” she says. “Your breath smells like pussy.”

Jeff lifts his head to grin at her. “You like pussy.”
“Oh my god, go!” She laughs and swats playfully at his thigh. “Ridiculous.”

Jeff rolls to his feet and steals his boxers back from her; they’ll probably sleep naked, anyway. He takes a piss and then brushes his teeth, staring hard at his reflection in the mirror. He can’t see what she sees, but maybe he believes it’s there.

~*~

Winter holidays are fucked in the NHL. The Aces get extra shafted and have to play on New Year’s Day, too, which is annoying as fuck. Except, maybe Jeff is kind of relieved. Parse doesn’t drink the day before a game.

He’s curled up between Jeff and Shani on their couch instead, watching *Love Actually* for the second time in as many weeks. They’re trying to make it to midnight, but Jeff’s honestly not sure if he will. He might be getting old.

Parse takes a sip of his hot chocolate and then spills it all over himself when—for some god awful reason—his phone starts telling him that *shorty got low, low, low.*

“Fuck, shit!” Parse says, fumbling with the cup and ultimately dumping it on Jeff’s socks. He grabs his phone off the coffee table and fucking sprints outside faster than Jeff’s ever seen him move, without so much as a fucking sorry.

Shani pauses the movie. Jeff peels his damp socks off of his feet.

They stare at the upturned mug on the ground. Jeff sighs and grabs it off of the floor. He means to just put it in the sink and come back with some damp paper towels to mop up the mess on the carpet, but Parse went out the back and he didn’t close the sliding door all the way, so Jeff goes to shut it because it’s fucking freezing outside right now.

Except Jeff can kind of hear now, actually. And he wishes he couldn’t.

“…everything right,” Parse is insist. His voice is soft, but it carries. Like it’s reaching for something. “I don’t get—"

He breaks off.

Jeff holds his breath. He should close the door and walk away. He knows he won’t.

“Fuck that!” Parse snaps suddenly. “I don’t care what anyone—I *don’t care!*

The hair raises on the back of Jeff’s neck. He’s not sure who he’s afraid for.

“No. No no no no—you don’t—you don’t get to just walk away from this, Jack!” Parse shouts, or tries to. It sounds more like a sob. “You—you’re such a fucking coward, Zimms—you can’t leave me h— fuck!”

The suburb is so quiet. There aren’t even bugs. Jeff wishes there was something to listen to besides Parse hyperventilating.

The door yanks out of Jeff’s hand and Parse stumbles into his chest, then pushes away with a barked out laugh.
“Of course,” he sneers. “Of course, because you can’t get your fucking face out of my life.”

Jeff’s tongue feels glued down. Parse’s face is rubbed red-raw and his eyes are wet.

“What is it?” Parse asks. He shoves at Jeff’s chest and Jeff doesn’t move. “You get off on riding in and cleaning up messes? Just try, Jeff. Just try.”

“What the fuck is going on?” Shani demands, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders and her bare toes dug into the carpet, hiding from the draft coming through the still-open door. “Kent?”

Parse ignores her and shoves at Jeff again, harder. Like he means it. “Say something, fucker. You think you know everything, huh? What’s your fucking life story this time?”

Shani begs, “Kent, just take a sec—”

“Useless,” Parse hisses. “What fucking good is any of it? What’ve you ever done that—”

“You can do whatever you want to me,” Jeff says. He’s so tired. “None of it’ll make that phone ring again.”

Parse stops breathing and starts again with another sob. He sounds like people do when they need the Heimlich maneuver. Jeff doesn’t know what he can’t swallow.

“I can’t,” Parse wheezes. His face is in Jeff’s chest, somehow. He can’t remember when it happened.

Shani walks forward and half-reaches for Parse’s arm before she thinks better of it, and asks, “Can’t what, sweetheart?”

“He promised,” Parse says. “I can’t alone.”

Jeff feels like he’s underwater. Not drowning. Like he’s trying to get to something over and over and one day he won’t in time. What is it? He doesn’t know. He doesn’t know anything.

Shani locks eyes with Jeff over Parse’s head and says, “We’re here, though, sweetheart.”

“Everyone always says so,” Parse tells her, but he doesn’t push away when Jeff wraps his arms around his back. Like resignation, not comfort.

Shani slides the door closed and wraps her blanket tighter around herself.

Parse tugs out of Jeff’s hug and makes for the kitchen.

“Where’re you going, bud?” Jeff asks cautiously.

“Need a drink,” he mutters.

Shani steps in front of him before Jeff even thinks about it. Nurse reflexes.

“I’ll make you some tea,” she says pleasantly, except not that at all.

Parse stares at her.

She stares back.


“Go sit on the couch then,” she tells them. “Do you want honey?”
Parse looks down at the phone in his hand. “I guess.”

Jeff puts a hand on Parse’s back and steers him into the living room. He sits down on the couch and drapes his arm across the back of it.

Parse sits on the armchair and curls his legs up onto the seat, hugging his knees to his chest.

Jeff puts both his hands in his lap.

“Okay,” Shani says, coming in from the kitchen with a mug and their jar of honey. She puts both down on the end table next to Parse. “I figured you might wanna mix it yourself, sweetheart.”

Parse uncaps the honey, squeezes practically a quarter of the bottle in, and stirs it loudly with a spoon.

Shani says, “You’re welcome.”

Parse looks up at her. His eyes are glassy, like he’s not really seeing her.

They’ll probably make it to midnight.

Jeff brushes his fingers across the back of Shani’s hand. “You want a cup, babe?”

“I’m okay,” she answers. “Thank you, baby.”

That’s all the things left to say. Jeff just takes her hand as she sits back down, squeezing it probably a little too tightly. She squeezes back and her nails dig in.

Jeff thinks about turning the movie back on. They’re at that part where that one guy stands outside Keira Knightley’s house. So maybe not.

“He didn’t really wanna kill himself, you know,” Parse says.

Shani looks at Jeff, like, what the fuck? Which is fair. She asks, “…who didn’t, Kent?”

“He didn’t do it right,” Parse just continues. Maybe not to either of them. “Pills are too slow. He’d’ve used a knife or something, if he meant it.”

Jeff doesn’t like horror movies, but he thinks this is what it’d be like to watch one at half speed. Shani keeps looking at him like he’s supposed to be doing something.

“I think most people are afraid it’ll hurt, Kent,” she says slowly, and she would probably know. She sees suicide attempts all the time in the ER. Those are her worst days. “It…it can. Really badly.”

Parse takes a sip from his mug and then looks up at her again. He smiles wide. Crooked teeth.

Like at half speed.

Parse asks, “No pain, no gain—right?”

Jeff stands up. He doesn’t know where he’s going. He wants to sit back down, but now he can’t probably. He feels sick. That would be something to do.

Shani and Parse are staring at him, like standing up means you have something to say and not like there just isn’t anything else that could happen.
“I don’t know what to do,” Jeff tells Parse. “I don’t know what the fuck anyone is possibly supposed to say to that, Jesus Christ.”

Nothing happens, and then Parse laughs.

“I’m just fucking around, bro, chill,” he says.

Jeff takes a full step forward. “I don’t believe you.”

“But you want to,” Parse says softly.

Jeff stares him down, but his face doesn’t change.

“You know why no one gets you, Parse?” he asks. Shani says his name and he ignores her. “‘Cause you don’t want them to. I’m—we’re trying, and you just—you’ve gotta give us something, man.”

Parse is so young. Sometimes Jeff forgets that until he really looks. It’s in the eyes, when they’re green.

“I can’t,” Parse says. He sounds like he did on the phone—begging. “I don’t know what you want from me.”

Jeff fists a hand in his hair and walks back to the couch and sits down heavily, the pain in his scalp sharp. His stomach still hurts.

Eventually, Shani says, “We just want you to be here in the morning, honey. Can you do that for us?”

Parse takes a sip from his mug and stares into it, fiddling with the teabag. “Thanks for the tea.”

“Kent,” Shani says.

Parse swirls his teabag around, breathing visibly. He looks up at her—really looks—and his voice cracks over the words. “Yeah, okay. Okay.”

Jeff closes his eyes and shakes, or maybe he has been the whole time, and Shani holds onto him and says, “Thank you, thank you,” like Parse promised her the world.

In a way he did, Jeff figures. He opens his eyes and looks at the clock. It’s 12:03.

He doesn’t say anything about it. He doesn’t wanna kiss anyone, or talk about the New Year, or finish the movie.

He just wants it to be morning.

They go to bed around one AM, trudging upstairs with Parse leading the way. Jeff strips down to his boxers and Shani puts on her favorite pajamas and buries her face in Jeff’s chest and sobs.

He holds her as close as he can and cries too.
“Get your ass out of bed,” Jeff says, and yanks the comforter out of Parse’s grip. “We’re gonna go workout.”

Parse kicks at him half-heartedly, face still smashed into his pillow. “Fuck off. Sleeping.”

“You’re always sleeping,” Jeff shoots back. Parse hasn’t willingly gotten out of bed to do anything besides hockey in over a week. Sometimes Jeff drags him to that too.

“Leave me alone.”

“No,” Jeff says. “I like you too much.”

Parse doesn’t answer.

Jeff drags a hand over his face. “Fine. Guess I’ll go back to sleep too.”

“What’ev— dude!”

Jeff throws himself bodily on top of Parse and really sinks his weight into it. He makes a point of digging his knee into Parse’s ass too, just for good measure.

“Night, bud,” Jeff says.

Parse jams an elbow into Jeff’s ribs. “Get off! I hate you!”

“Too bad I don’t have anywhere to be,” Jeff says. “Like the gym.”

Parse wriggles around, trying to throw Jeff off. “I can’t breathe, fat-ass.”

That one stings. Jeff doubles down. “If you kept up with your lifts maybe you could.”

“Fine.” Parse frees an arm and pinches Jeff on the bicep. Hard. “Just get the fuck off.”

Jeff rolls to his feet, rubbing at the sore spot. “I wanna leave in five.”

Parse rubs at his eyes. “I said fine. Just lemme change, I’ll meet you downstairs.”

“I can wait,” Jeff says.

Parse glares at him and snarks, “Whaddaya think I’m gonna do, go out the window?”

Jeff leans against the wall.

Parse turns away and yanks open his closet door. “Jesus, nothing’s funny to you anymore, huh?”

“I think your bedhead’s pretty funny,” Jeff says. “Birds could nest in there, bro.”

Parse’s shoulders twitch like maybe he wants to laugh. He gets changed in silence instead, then marches past Jeff out the door.

He’s starting down the stairs when he complains, “I just don’t get why you can’t just let me be sad.”
Jeff stops short.

“You can be sad, bud,” he says. His chest hurts. “But that’s not—you can be sad without, like. You’re wasting away up there.”

Parse looks over his shoulder and smirks. “I’ve always been a waste.”

Jeff flicks him on the head and walks past him on the stairs.

“C’mon, man,” Parse whines. He jogs a few feet to fall back in step as they head to the door. “You’ve gotta admit that one was pretty good.”

“You’re really clever,” Jeff deadpans. But he ruffles Parse’s hair while they put their shoes on, thinking. His hand slides down to Parse’s neck instead of letting go. “You know, you can, like. You can ask.”

Parse leans back into Jeff’s touch. “What the fuck’re you talking about?”

“For what you need,” Jeff says. He feels stupid. It’s probably not the right thing to say. “Instead of, just. Hoping we’ll know.”

“Oh.” Parse rests his temple against Jeff’s shoulder and stares at their shoe rack. Uncharacteristically quietly, he asks, “Can we stop for Starbucks, maybe?”

Jeff blinks. That’s not really what he meant. “Uh. Of course, man. Let’s go.”

~*~

Parse comes back downstairs after changing out of his game day suit and stands at the foot of the stairs until Jeff and Shani look up at him.

“Can we watch Animal Planet?” he asks.

Jeff grabs the remote to flip channels and clears his throat. “Uh, yeah. Sure.”

Parse does an almost-smile. He shuffles over and flops down onto the couch, zapping Jeff with static electricity when they touch.

“Dude!” Jeff protests, laughing. He yanks Parse into a headlock and ruffles his hair in retaliation, wincing at how greasy it’s gotten.

“Sorry,” Parse says, but he doesn’t sound it. That’s okay. He burrows deeper against Jeff’s side instead of wriggling away like he normally does when Shani’s around.

She reaches over and pats Parse’s knee, smiling softly, then turns back to the TV.

~*~
“Can I make us dinner?” Parse asks.

Jeff looks down at the phone. He was halfway through dialing for a pizza. “Uh, sure. Thanks.”

It’s probably a little weird that tasting Kraft mac and cheese can put a lump in his throat.

~*~

Parse and Shani come back from a shopping trip with bags draped all up their arms. Jeff pauses the TV and asks, “Get anything cool?”

“A thong,” Parse says, almost perfectly straight-faced—and then he cracks a grin. “You wanna try it on?”

Jeff laughs so hard that he honks like a goose. He chucks a pillow at Parse’s head.

~*~

“I think we’re gonna win the Cup,” Parse says. His head is on Shani’s thigh and his feet are in Jeff’s lap, toes wiggling while Jeff rubs absentmindedly at one foot.

Jeff locks eyes with Shani across the couch. “We’ve, uh. We might, bud.”

They’re second in the division. Parse is still a shoe-in for the Calder and his stats are on the up-tic again.

“We will,” Parse insists matter-of-factly. “Then he’ll see.”

Jeff can’t even move. Shani tugs lightly at Parse’s hair and asks, “See what, sweetheart?”

Parse pushes his head up into her touch, like a cat.

“Where he belongs,” he says. He rolls off the couch and to his feet in a fluid motion. “Anyone else want popcorn?”

~*~

The thing is: they keep winning.

~*~
Jeff’s on the bench when it happens.

Anderson checks Parse into the boards—clean—and Parse is on him in the same breath, throwing sloppy, violent punches that don’t even all connect. Parse is shouting, too, but Jeff can’t hear, and he’s being shoved back down onto the bench by Coach before he can even make it to his feet.

“Sit down!” Coach barks. “What the fuck are you trying?”

Anderson has thirty pounds on Parse and his bucket is still on by the time Parse’s lip splits. It’s really not that much blood.

Jeff doesn’t care too much about fighting. It’s part of the game. He wants to shake Anderson like a rag doll and he wants to kill Parse. He can’t think. Everything feels hot and then it’s over, both of them in the sin bin and sticks tapping on the ice.

There’s two minutes of ice time in the second. They burn off gritty and Jeff doesn’t touch the ice. His throat is still itching by the time they make it back to the dressing room for intermission and he shoves Parse against the wall.

“What the fuck was that?” Jeff demands.

Parse looks up at Jeff flat-eyed, swollen lip jutted out and a trickle of blood drying under his nose. His mouth is right there, Jeff thinks. Recoils from it. He’s got that underwater feeling again, everything jumbled and far away.

“Let me go,” Parse says.

Jeff takes his hands off Parse’s shoulders and braces them above his head instead. He can feel them almost touching. Like vibrations.

“You gonna hit me?” Parse asks. He smirks, fresh blood pooling on his lip. “I might like it.”

I could kiss him, something says in Jeff’s brain. Why.

“You could’ve broken your fucking hand,” he says. Someone else is talking, maybe at him. He can barely hear his own voice. “You don’t. You don’t do that. You don’t fucking—you let me—”

“He called me a fucking fairy,” Parse hisses suddenly. All the needling is gone, all the bravado. Just anger. “You think you coming in and playing daddy is gonna help me?”

Jeff goes cold. He can’t remember what he was supposed to say.

“I said take a walk, Troy!” Coach hauls Jeff away, sending him stumbling against the bench. “Now. Or you’re not coming back.”

Jeff stalks off, pushing through teammates to get outside. It’s warm for March in the way that makes his teeth hurt. He doesn’t think heat does that. Maybe it’s just him.

He wants Shani. His phone is in his bag and she’s at work, anyway, and what would she say? His entire body is like that moment when ice starts cracking and the thing falls through. What thing?

Jeff doesn’t wanna sit here and think about any of it. He wants to do his job.

I might like it, Parse had said. Jeff wouldn’t. Not really. His sternum is buzzing and when he tries to
breathe slower it hurts more, like he can actually feel his body again after the whole thing fell asleep. His jock is tight.

The door opens and Hatty says, “Bro, let’s go.”

Jeff follows Hatty inside and grabs his helmet off the ground. He looks over at Parse long enough to realize that Parse won’t look back.

They play another period of hockey. Coach won’t let Jeff on the ice whenever Parse is there. That’s fine. Jeff doesn’t touch Anderson for the rest of the game. He hopes Parse notices.

~*~

They lose. They drive home and don’t talk. Jeff fills a Ziploc with ice and shoves it at Parse’s chest, then leans against the kitchen counter with his arms crossed and watches while Parse presses it to his fat lip.

He starts to think maybe they won’t ever talk to each other again, and then Shani gets home from work.

“Boys?” she calls. “You awa—”

She breaks off when she finds them in the kitchen, her eyes going between Jeff’s face and the bruises on Parse’s knuckles and the ice against his face.

She asks, “What happened?” so slowly that it almost sounds like a threat.

“Ask him,” Parse sneers, at the exact same time Jeff mutters, “Parse’s fault.”

Shani stares at them. “Right,” she says. “I’ll be upstairs.”

Jeff panics. “Babe!” he pleads, darting after her into the living room. He lowers his voice, a hand touching lightly at her shoulder. “Can’t you, uh. Can’t you stay, and—?”

“Baby, you’re both grown ass men,” she reminds him firmly. She strokes a thumb over his jaw. “You can be responsible for your own feelings.”

Jeff stares at her shoes. “I’m sorry.”

“I forgive you.” She pats his cheek and moves away again. “When you’re ready to talk after, I’ll be here.”

Jeff watches her go, then drags himself back into the kitchen where Parse is still sulking.

“So,” Jeff says. He waits for Parse to look at him and then gives up and keeps going anyway. “Guess we should talk.”

Parse snorts. “Tell your girlfriend we made nice or whatever the fuck you want. I don’t give a shit.”

Jeff’s nostrils flare. “It’s not about her. It’s about—”

“Poor Parse, the little fag, right?” Parse sneers. “Does it make you feel real big, Jeff? You gotta beat
up goons for me so you can feel important?"

“Jesus Christ. Is it on purpose, Kent?” Jeff throws his hands up. “Do you just look at anyone who—who loves you and think, ‘holy shit, better fuck that up?’”

Parse looks right at him. “Is it working?”

Jeff closes his eyes. “No.”

“You should probably let it,” Parse says.

“Shut up,” Jeff tells him. “Or say something you mean.”

“I hate feeling powerless.” Parse throws his melting icepack on the counter. “I hate—I hate that he just saw me and I’m—I’m just someone’s fucking mess to clean up.”

Jeff takes the bag and shoves it under the ice dispenser until it’s filled up again. “Sometimes.” He stops, frowning at his hands. Parse takes the bag away from him. “Sometimes I think, like. That people only see me if I’m...violent. Like. I have to be good for something.”

Parse has the icepack on his knuckles this time, the fingers on his other hand twitching. “I’ve just—never been scared of you before, man.”

*I’m always afraid of you,* Jeff thinks. He says, “I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” Parse says.

“You’re not a mess,” Jeff tells him. “You’re my friend.”

Parse shakes his head.

“I think you’re right about my hand,” he whispers. He sounds scared now, too. “Pretty sure it’s broken.”

Jeff’s stomach twists. “Let me, uh. Let me see?”

Parse takes off the ice pack and Jeff takes his hand gently, cupping it in his palm. His knuckles are bloody and the last two are swollen and already mottled with bruising, like someone splashed paint on them.

Jeff can feel his heart beating. He traces his thumb over Parse’s hand and presses lightly on the ring finger, holding his breath.

Parse hisses and jerks away, but Jeff instinctively catches him by the wrist. “Fuck. *Fuck.*”

His hand is still in Jeff’s. Jeff’s not sure why he did that. He lets go and clears his throat, watching how Parse’s fingers struggle to curl and twitch back against the pain.

“I’ll take you to the doctor tomorrow,” Jeff says belatedly. He can’t stop staring at the fucking bruises. “Or. You could, uh. Borrow the car. If you don’t want—”

“Don’t make me say it,” Parse begs.

Jeff looks up at the ceiling. He reaches out without looking and finds Parse’s hair, shoves his hand through it roughly. “Be up at seven, then. We’ll do leg day after.”
Parse snorts and quips, “Never skip leg day.”

Jeff laughs and leans his head back against the cabinets.


He runs his good hand through his hair in frustration and Jeff chirps, “Don’t pull something, man.”

“Fuck off.” Parse stomps on Jeff’s foot, but not like he means it. He drags a finger through the condensation on his icepack. “I…you’re not just, like—what you think you are. You’re—you’re fucking more than that. To me, anyway. Yeah.”

Jeff feels weird. His brain’s been weird all night—stuff that doesn’t make sense. He kind of wants to touch Parse again.

Jeff pushes away from the counter and shoves his hands in his pockets. “We should. Bed.”


“But thanks,” Jeff adds, too late. “Ice your, uh, your hand. Overnight.”

“Right,” Parse agrees.

Neither of them move.

“Night,” Jeff says.

“Oh my God,” Parse says. “Go.”

Jeff feels like maybe he should laugh it off, but he kind of just leaves. He hears Parse turn on the ice dispenser again and veers into the upstairs bathroom to brush his teeth. And maybe take another shower. It’s been a weird night.

~*~

Shani is still awake—just like she promised—when Jeff finally trudges into the bedroom and lays down on the bed, above the covers and staring at the ceiling.

“Hey, baby,” she says. “Everything okay?”

All Jeff can think about is what it’d be like to kiss someone with blood in their mouth. He asks, “Do you think Parse is in love with me?”

Shani doesn’t answer right away, taking the time to tug at the comforter so she can tuck them both under it. Then she says, “Yeah.”

“Okay,” Jeff says. He still hasn’t blinked. “Can we go to bed?”

Shani turns off her reading lamp. “Yeah.”

~*~
The thing is: it doesn’t matter.

Parse gets his splint off three weeks later, and Jeff walks into his room the next morning and tosses a pair of boxing gloves onto his bare chest.

“Get up,” Jeff tells him. “You’re gonna learn how to throw a punch.”

The thing is: it matters a little.

They win, and Jeff looks for Parse.

They win, and Parse looks for Jeff.

They get taken to seven by the Aeros and win that time too, just harder. Jeff throws his helmet up in the air and kisses Parse on the top of his, and it doesn’t feel weird until the after party when Parse’s tongue is in a girl’s mouth. It probably wouldn’t feel weird at all if Parse were straight.

Jeff tells himself to get the fuck over it.

He goes home early and puts his mouth over every inch of Shani until neither of them can breathe, and her hands are in his hair afterwards while they lay there watching TV coverage of the game, betting on Parse not getting home soon enough to walk in on them.

“We’ve never been to a final before,” Shani says, curling his hair into sweaty little corkscrews. “How’s it feel, baby?”

Jeff is staring at the TV, re-watching the clock wind down to zero. They’ve got footage of the exact moment Parse realizes that they clinched it. He looks directly into the camera and winks.

“What happens if we lose?” Jeff asks.

Shani shifts, turning to look at the screen too. She drags her thumb across his bottom lip and asks, so softly, “What happens if you win?”
Jeff wonders what it’s like for people who watch Parse play hockey from far away—the stands, up in a box, on a screen. It probably looks choreographed, the way he steals pucks and leaves shaved ice on the d-men he spins out of reach from. There’s none of the grittiness that Jeff gets—the clacking of a mouthguard, the hissing sound that escapes from between Parse’s teeth when he tries to rotate his left shoulder too far.

Jeff doesn’t want the other version. His is like opening the lid of a piano and watching the hammers hit the strings while you play. Raw, honest. Parse doesn’t think anyone wants him wholesale, but Jeff does.

That’s why they’re friends.

“Troy, Olsson, you’re up,” Coach says, and Jeff gets ready to hit the ice, eyes still on Parse. Jordy reaches the bench and that’s Jeff’s cue—he vaults over the boards right as Hatty takes a hit and loses the puck.

Jeff checks the winger who picked it up and knocks the puck down the ice, skating hard to keep the other guy off it, watching Ratchet take it back and shoot for goal. Traeger blocks the shot and looks for a man to shoot it to. Not Jeff’s man. He sends it left and Parse swipes it like it’s nothing—maybe it is, maybe for him—but he’s being closed in on and Jeff’s across the net.

Parse moves so fast it doesn’t matter. He’s a blur of jersey and then he’s free, and he could take the shot but he dekes and backhands right to Jeff.

Jeff panics and one-times it.

Parse crashes into Jeff’s chest. The goal horn goes off, *Shut up and put your money where your mouth is*. Those things probably happened in reverse.

“Holy shit!” Parse shouts over the crowd. Mouthguard gnashing through the grin. “You fuckin’ beaut.”

He looks like a sunflower. Jeff doesn’t know what that means. He spins Parse around, skates clear off the ground, and laughs.

There’s still more hockey to play, but they’re up by three now and Jeff doesn’t care. He puts his mouth up to Parse’s ear and shouts, “One more game, baby! One more!” and Parse whoops back wildly, blades digging into the ice when his feet land and the momentum carrying them both backwards.

*What does that look like?* Jeff wonders. He looks up to the Jumbotrons. They’re replaying the goal.

~*~

Jeff gets tapped for media interviews for the first time this playoff season. He tries to tousle his helmet hair so it...looks less like helmet hair, then gives up when the guys start to chirp him for it. He looks for Parse but he must be in the shower, so he goes to the media area where there are a fucking whole lot of cameras.
Jeff’s mouth goes a little dry.

“Hey, Jeff,” says a reporter.

“Um. H-hey,” says Jeff. “What’s…up?”

Another reporter gestures with his microphone. Jeff does a weird fucking little wave and the guy says, “That was a helluva first playoff goal for you. What was going through your head when you took the shot?”


A couple people laugh. One woman helpfully offers, “You can say ‘fuck.’”

“Cool,” Jeff says, then, “Sorry,” even though she said it was fine.

Another reporter makes eye contact. “For most of your career, you’ve been building a reputation as somewhat of a goon. With the way you played tonight, are you looking to change that image here in Vegas?”

It’s really hot in this room. Jeff might throw up in his mouth a little.

Someone rams into Jeff’s side and dumps an entire bottle of Gatorade over his head. Or, mostly his neck and shoulders, really, but it was probably supposed to be Jeff’s head.

“Parse!” Jeff yells. He laughs and hopes he doesn’t sound as relieved as he feels. “Fuck off, bro.” He shoves at Parse’s face, mostly for show.

The old question falls by the wayside as Parse comically tries to rest his elbow on Jeff’s shoulder and deflects the immediate interrogation from all the reporters.

“I’m not answering questions,” Parse says, flashing a media grin. “I’m just here to pester this guy.”

It’s kind of unlikely that Parse rescued Jeff on purpose. That still feels like the word for it. Jeff wipes his Gatorade-covered hand off in Parse’s freshly showered hair. Thank you.

“Jeff, with your goal clinching the lead this game, the Aces are up 3-1 in the series, but the Canes will come back hungry next game,” one reporter says. “What will you do next time to try and bring the Cup home?”

“Oh, probably not that again,” Jeff says honestly.

Some of the people chuckle. Another reporter comments, “The two of you seem to have built great chemistry this season. Do you think your off-ice bromance has helped your game?”

Parse moves his body away from Jeff’s body.

Jeff clears his throat, looking over at the sudden expressionlessness on Parse’s face. He turns back to the cameras and says, “I think, uh. There’s something special about, uh. You know, you love your team—they’re your buddies. But you don’t always—you don’t always get a friend.”

Things are weirdly quiet.

“That didn’t answer your question,” Jeff says.

“That’s okay,” the reporter tells him.
“Sorry,” Jeff says anyway. “No one gives the goon media training.”

Parse is the only one who laughs.

~*~

They get home after a celebration dinner with the team, and it’s weird because Jeff got practically bullied into champagne and Parse said he won’t drink again until it’s out of the Cup—so Jeff is tipsy and laughing when he stumbles inside and Parse is chirping the shit out of him for it, sober. He likes this feeling.

Shani is on the couch, still in her scrubs, watching game highlights. “Hey, boys.”

“Hi, baby,” Jeff says. He tries to kick out of his shoes and can’t because the laces are too tight.

Parse says, “Hey, pretty lady. How’s your night?”

“Got off work and found out half of Twitter wants to fuck my boyfriend,” Shani says. “So pretty good.”

Jeff trips over his feet and has to brace against the doorway. “Wait, seriously?”

Shani grins at him. “People are losing their shit over your interview, baby. You’re adorable.”

Jeff turns to Parse for confirmation. “Am I?”

“Trust the Internet, bro,” Parse says. He pats Jeff’s bicep. “People can’t lie on there.”

Maybe Parse doesn’t think Jeff is adorable. _That’s okay, I guess_, Jeff thinks. He finally gets his shoes off and then flops onto the couch, shifting so his head is in Shani’s lap and he’s looking up at her.

“Hi,” he says. “You’re so pretty.”

Shani laughs and pets at his hair. He closes his eyes and hums happily. “Thank you, sweet man.”

“Night, guys,” Parse says.

Jeff sits up and braces on his forearms to look at him. He’s already at the stairwell. “Hey, bud?”

“Yeah?” Parse takes off his snapback and runs a hand through his hair.

“I meant it,” Jeff says.

Parse smirks softly. “Yeah. Thanks.”

~*~

They win.
Jeff is drunker than he normally is and Shani is here like she never is and Parse is laughing. They’re at some club with the entire team and all the WAGs and some people Jeff’s never met that might just like that there’s a party. It’s a good party.

Jeff feels like a teenager again, head spinning with alcohol and hating the music in this place and he just wants to kiss someone until he can’t hear anything. It’s just a little weird, because they’re all crammed into a booth and Parse is in Jeff’s lap and that makes it harder to kiss Shani.

Not that Jeff won’t do it anyway. He slings an arm across Parse’s chest to keep him from getting shoved into the table and leans to the side to reach her mouth. She tastes like mojitos and smiling.

“I could live here,” Jeff tells her, his nose pressed against her cheek. Just like this. His hand is bunching in the fabric of Parse’s shirt and it feels good against the pads of his fingers. Expensive.

Shani laughs. “You’re really drunk, baby.”

“Same,” Parse says. Jeff isn’t sure to who. He holds a shot up to Jeff’s lips and Jeff tries to catch it between his teeth, but Parse tilts it back like he wants Jeff to drink for him and half of it spills down Jeff’s front. “Whoops.”

“Hey, they cleared the VIP for us,” Jordy says, leaning over the table to get their attention. “You morons wanna check it out?”

It’s just another room, Jeff thinks. Who cares? He likes this room. His favorite people are here.

“Hell yeah,” Parse says. He wiggles out of Jeff’s hold and squeezes his way out of the booth, yanking on Jeff’s wrist.

Jeff hesitates halfway out of his seat and looks to Shani, kind of wide-eyed like, What do I do? Shani shrugs. Whatever you want.

Parse is smiling really wide. Sometimes that means trouble. Parse shouldn’t be in trouble alone.

“Be back soon, baby,” he tells Shani, giving her a fly-by kiss as Parse whoops and drags him out of the booth and immediately leans against him. That’s fine. The room is spinning and everything feels fake and weird but Parse is real, even if he is short.


Parse looks up at him with a weird face. He laughs and shoves at Jeff’s side a little. “Fuck you, man.”

“No, it’s cute!” Jeff insists. Then he frowns. “Uh. I bet girls. Think it’s cute. Or guys who—”

“Shut up,” Parse hisses, pinching at Jeff’s nipple through his shirt and jerking his head towards Jordy. But Jordy is like, three whole steps ahead of them and Jeff can’t even hear his own brain. So probably Jordy can’t hear them either.

“Also,” Parse adds, “you’re just—you’re just…really tall.”
“Big pockets,” Jeff agrees. Christ, he’s really drunk. “We’re—”

Jordy pulls back an actual fucking curtain and waves them into the VIP area, which is basically just the same thing as the rest of the club maybe except people can’t see them. Jeff wants to see Shani.

Maybe only a quarter of the team is back here. A lot of the guys were hitting on girls out on the dancefloor. But Jordy looks like he’s setting up court or something. Bottles out, pouring their own shots, and there’s a couple girls Jeff’s never met. They’re all white, blonde, maybe new girlfriends or just people other people wanna fuck. Parse flops down onto the couch next to them and grins up at Jeff.

There’s a seat open on the other side of the couch, but Jeff doesn’t wanna be over there. He leans on the side of the couch, elbow near Parse’s head, trying to like ESP, *I wanna go outside*, to him but probably failing, because Parse is talking to one of the girls about med school.

It’s just. Jeff doesn’t like this part of the team. He likes Hatty and Ratchet and Fish, and some of the old guys sort of. And Parse, who doesn’t count, maybe. And Jeff doesn’t know why anyone wants him back here. It’s part of being Parse’s bro, he figures, because people don’t tell Parse he can’t have things.

Jeff needs to do three more shots or go to sleep. Or both.

“Hey, Troy, you’re not gonna narc on us to your girl, right?” Greg says, and Jeff blinks a few times.

“Uh, what?” he asks. “What would—”

But then Jeff gets it, because Jordy’s snorting a fucking line off the table as Greg asks, “Isn’t she, like, a nurse?”

She totally, like, is, and Jeff should definitely not be in this room.

One of the girls does a line too, her friend holding her hair back for her so it doesn’t get in all the fucking cocaine on the fucking table, and that’s when Jeff thinks, *Sure. Okay.*

There’s something else there, something that makes his fingers itch like his hand should be on the back of Parse’s neck or his collar and pulling, maybe, but Parse is wiping at his nose already and grinning—so wide—so then, maybe not. Maybe Jeff should pick the three more shots option and shut up. There’s a bottle on the table.

Jordy’s asking Jeff something but Jeff misses it while the vodka goes down. He says, “Sorry,” after, but he’s not even looking because Parse is also talking.

“—up, man, c’mon,” he says, still grinning. It’s good he’s smiling so much.

The alcohol’s catching up, maybe. They’ve been in here six, seven years and Jeff remembers being bored and rich and doing lines off his high school girlfriend’s stomach.

“I’m good,” he says. “Shani’d, uh. She’d tell. Be able to.”

Parse tries to get up and trips over one of the girls’ legs, banging his knee into the coffee table and laughing when Jeff catches him. His head lolls against Jeff’s arm as he says, “Wanna go dance. Sucks back here.”

Jeff likes doing things Parse wants. They leave the back room and make their way through the crowd towards the dance floor, Jeff’s arm around Parse’s shoulders so he doesn’t get lost and maybe it’s
nicer this way. He can tell when the coke really starts to hit because Parse’s hand is sliding up Jeff’s stomach, over his shirt, hopping on the balls of his feet to the music and grinning, grinning.

Parse says something Jeff can’t hear. They’re so far away and it’s just music all around them, and people.

Jeff leans closer and asks, “What?” and Parse bites his shoulder, spit-damp on Jeff’s shirt and laughs—when else does Parse laugh like that?—and Jeff says, “Dude!” but it’s fine, everything’s fine. Anything.

They won a fucking Stanley Cup and Parse is laughing.

“Said I’m gonna take a leak,” Parse repeats, mouth to Jeff’s ear like he might bite there, too. Breath hot and damp. “Brb.”

Oh. Jeff feels weird about that maybe. He likes being able to see Parse. But he says, “Okay, ‘m gonna find Shani,” because he misses her and he always finds Shani when he feels weird.

Parse ducks under Jeff’s arm and disappears into the crowd and Jeff finds Shani at the same table as before, talking to Fish and Fish’s girlfriend about save percentages or something. Jeff squeezes back into the booth and wraps himself around her, nuzzling at her neck.

“Hey, baby,” she says. “Everything okay?”

Like. Of course Jeff’s gonna narc. They don’t keep secrets.

“Some people had coke, but I didn’t,” Jeff tells her. “I was good.”

Shani’s hand is in his hair and her voice is straining over the music. “Oh? Did—did Kent?”

Jeff nods against her skin. “Yeah. But that’s good. He’s happier now.”

“Where is he, baby?” Shani asks.

“Bathroom,” Jeff reports. He likes being able to answer questions. “Then we’re gonna dance.”

“Okay. Why don’t you go find him, and you can dance a little bit, and then we can all go home?” Shani suggests, her nails soothing at Jeff’s scalp. “Kent too.”

Jeff looks up at her. “I’m sorry.”

She frowns and pets at his forehead. “What for, baby?”

It’s hard to figure out the words, but he knows what this feels like. He settles on, “I made you sad.”

“Oh, baby,” she tells him, “no you didn’t. I’m just worried about Kent.”

Jeff rests his cheek on her shoulder. “Oh.”

“I think you knew that when you told me,” she says gently. “Thank you for doing it.”

That makes Jeff feel good again. He did a good thing. “You’re welcome.”

“Go find Kent, okay?” She nudges at him. “I’m having fun with Liam and Abby.”

Jeff can do that. He gets himself out of the booth, giving Fish a goalie head-pat, and pushes back into
the crowd. He likes being tall right now, because he can see over pretty much everyone else and it makes it easier to look for Parse. But he can’t find him. Maybe he’s still in the bathroom.

Yes.

And so is the girl with her hand down his pants, grinding against his thigh. She might be one of the people from the VIP room. Jeff doesn’t know. Parse is panting into her hair and he’s got a hand slipped up under her dress.

He still looks happy.

Jeff walks back out of the bathroom and leans against the wall with his eyes closed and waits. The door opens and closes without Parse. The door opens again and someone flops against Jeff’s chest.

Jeff slides his hand up into Parse’s hair. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Parse says. His lips brush against Jeff’s throat. “I don’t think I like girls.”

“Okay,” Jeff says. He presses Parse’s face closer into the crook of his shoulder. “You still wanna go dance?”

~*~

They leave when the first wave of teammates starts to head out—mostly the older ones and the guys who somehow still have the energy to get laid and wanna do that. Jeff is still drunk as fuck but not the horny kind really, just like he wants to have a hand on Parse so no one floats away and they can go home. He thinks the sky looks like an ocean. He thinks Parse still looks like a sunflower, drowning.

Shani unlocks the door and drops the keys on the alcove. Parse flings himself onto the couch and asks, “You guys wanna watch TV?”

Jeff wants to sleep for thirty years. He says, “Uh, not—”

“I don’t wanna be alone,” Parse says. He’s hanging his head off the couch upside down while he clicks through the channel guide. “I hate that. I wonder what movies are on.”

Shani kisses Jeff’s cheek. “I’ll make popcorn.”

Jeff squeezes his eyes shut to clear his head. It doesn’t really work, but he touches at her wrist and quietly tells her, “You can go to bed, baby. I’ll stay with him.”

“Thank you,” she says. “I’ll stay.”

~*~

Nothing but shit movies and infomercials are on at four AM. Jeff is nowhere near sober enough to care and his head feels like static, messed up and buzzy and something urgent. Like there’s a thing he
should see. Parse’s head is in his lap and he runs his fingers through his hair slowly, and he really likes how that feels and he hopes it makes Parse feel safe or something. Good.

When he closes his eyes he can hear the music from that club. Parse put his mouth on Jeff’s neck and said, I don’t think I like girls, and maybe Jeff wonders how anyone could know something like that, and he can still feel Parse’s teeth. Maybe Jeff is too stupid. I don’t think I like girls. How do you know?

Parse has a lot of freckles. Jeff traces his pinky finger along some of them and asks, “What’s gay sex like?”

Shani shoots him a warning look and says, “Babe,” but Parse just laughs.

“How should I know?” he asks. He rolls over so he’s mostly looking at the floor. “I had, like, one boyfriend and he had whiskey dick like half the fuckin’ time.”

“Oh.” Jeff thinks maybe it’s weird to still be playing with Parse’s hair. He twirls a cowlick through his fingers and says, “But you watch porn, don’t you.”

Parse flops onto his back, then onto his side again. Still restless. “Porn’s like, weird and fake anyway, isn’t it? I never, like…”

“Oh, sweetie, you haven’t found the good queer stuff yet,” Shani tells him. “I’ll hook you up.”

Jeff stares at his lap. Something about that makes him jealous, like they’re leaving him out of a club.

“I, uh. Could I see?” he asks, and he feels stupid as soon as he says it because Parse laughs at him again.

“Bro,” he says. “Aren’t straight dudes supposed to be, like, obsessed with lesbo porn or whatever?”

Shani reaches over and flicks Parse on the head. “Never say ‘lesbo’ again.”

Parse mutters an apology and hides his face against Jeff’s hip.

Jeff looks at where his fingers are buried in Parse’s hair, cradling his head. “Was just curious,” he mumbles stubbornly. Something feels missing. The TV is suddenly so loud.

“Baby,” Shani says softly, “is there something you—”

Jeff stands up and hauls Parse into a sitting position. “Parse, man, it’s time for bed. C’mon, we’re exhausted.”

Parse sighs dramatically. “’M not tired. You guys’re so boring.”

“You’ve gotta sleep, bud,” Jeff begs. “Please.”

Parse leans his head back against the couch and stares up at him flatly. “Fine. Guess I’ll try, ‘f it makes you happy or whatever.”

Jeff closes his eyes with relief. “Thanks. Let’s go.”
They wait up until the light is off in Parse’s room, and then Jeff curls up in bed with his head resting on Shani’s chest, listening to her heartbeat.

“Sweet man,” she says, “you know how much I love you, right?”

Jeff’s chest feels tight. He manages, “Yeah.”

“How much?” she asks.

“So much,” Jeff answers dutifully. He closes his eyes and lets out a breath. “The most.”

“The most,” Shani agrees. Her arms are wrapped around him and her breathing is steady even though her voice sounds a little wet, like she might be crying if he could see better in the dark. “No matter what.”

Everything about her feels like home. Jeff goes to sleep.

~*~

Jeff wakes up with the worst hangover of his entire stupid life at 8:30 in the morning to Britney fucking Spears blasting from somewhere downstairs.

“I’m gonna kill him,” Jeff mutters to Shani, but she’s asleep. Like Jeff should be.

Like Parse should be.

Jeff’s hangover is the nauseous kind.

He rolls out of bed and wraps the comforter back around Shani’s shoulders, brushing affectionately at her cheek. The music is even louder out in the hallway. If Jeff doesn’t go downstairs, none of this can actually exist.

Parse is in the kitchen, singing along to his iPod while he simultaneously scrambles what looks like half a dozen eggs and builds a mountain of slightly-burnt pancakes on a serving plate. He’s smiling, and he smiles wider when he notices Jeff.

“Hey, man!” he says brightly. “You look like shit. Didn’t sleep well?”

Jeff says, “One sec,” and walks out of the kitchen into the downstairs bathroom, and vomits sixty dollars of lingering top-shelf vodka into the toilet.

*Hit me baby, one more time,* says Britney Spears.

Jeff splashes water on his face and stares at himself in the mirror. It doesn’t get easier.

He walks back into the kitchen anyway. Parse hands him a mug of coffee with the exact right amount of cream and sugar in it. What would make this easier?

Jeff takes Parse’s iPod and turns the volume down by half—which Parse doesn’t seem to notice—and asks, “Did you, uh. Did you sleep, like, at all, man?”
“I had, like, the best power nap,” Parse says. “And then I like, couldn’t really sleep but it’s fine ’cause I took care of some stuff and then I was like, I wanna do something nice for you guys before I leave, you know? So I went shopping and—”

“Wait.” Jeff puts his coffee down and some of it splashes out and burns his hand. “Where—leaving?”

Parse tries to flip a pancake. It lands half on the brim. He nudges it back into the pan with his spatula and says, “For Montreal,” like it’s obvious. Like, Duh, Jeff, keep up. “To see Zimms.”

“What’s happening, boys?” Shani asks. She makes it sound all casual, but her nails are digging into Jeff’s shoulder.

“I’m going to Montreal!” Parse tells her cheerfully.

“No you’re not,” says Jeff, and Parse turns to look at him like he’s gonna say something else so Jeff adds, “No, Jesus Christ—no?”

Parse pours a cup of coffee for Shani. “Well, I’ve got a ticket, so unless there’s a freak summer blizzard in the works—”

Jeff grabs the coffee pot out of Parse’s hands and snaps, “This is fucking crazy—”

“Jeff!” Shani hisses.

“—you can’t—how—you can’t just show up!” Jeff insists, ignoring her.

“I talked to him last night,” Parse says. He’s not really smiling at Jeff, but maybe he thinks he is. “And I could—he wouldn’t say it, but I could tell, you know? I know him. I won it for us and he can come home now. This is—it’s who we are.”

Jeff doesn’t say anything.


Jeff gets out of his way.

Shani says, “Kent, I think we’re just—this is really sudden, honey. Why don’t you wait a few days?”

“Do you guys want potatoes?” Parse asks. “I could make some potatoes.”

“I’m coming,” Jeff says flatly. “When are we leaving.”

Parse laughs. “Dude, you’re not gonna third-wheel—”

“C’mon, man, you hate flying alone,” Jeff insists. He manages a smile, nudges Parse with an elbow. “Besides, I’m your best bro, right? Don’t I get to meet this guy and—give, uh, give him the shovel talk or whatever?”

Parse actually pauses at that. He looks at Jeff’s face for a long, hellish moment, and then he nudges Jeff back. “Okay, sheesh. But don’t whine about it when you get ditched, man—we’re gonna wanna be alone, you know? I’ve got plans.”

“I’ll find something to do,” Jeff says. He can literally feel the adrenaline draining from his bloodstream, cold drop. Something hurts behind his eyes.
“Cool. I was gonna go right after breakfast,” Parse tells him. “See if you can get in first class with me.”

Jeff’s face is in his hands. He pulls them away before Parse can see. “Uh, yeah. Great. Email me the flight? Babe, can you—?”

He gestures towards the living room and Shani nods, following him out there and immediately pulling him into a hug.

Jeff asks, “He’s not still coked-out, is he,” but it’s not really a question.

“No,” Shani says. “I don’t know what the fuck this is.”

“I’m sorry,” Jeff tells her, closing his eyes tightly. “I shouldn’t have—”

“You’re just a person, baby.” She squeezes the back of his neck. “I’m glad you’re going with him.”

Jeff doesn’t say anything.

Shani puts a hand on his cheek and urges, “Baby, look at me. You’re just a person.”

Her eyes are so sad. Jeff wonders what his look like. He nods and swallows something down his throat and says, “Yeah. Yeah, I know.”

He hopes it’s enough.

~*~

Jeff gets the seat next to Parse and falls asleep before the plane even leaves the ground. He wakes up when the plane starts descending over the city, drooling on Parse’s shoulder and slouched down in the seat at the perfect angle to make everything hurt the next morning.

Parse is resting his cheek on the top of Jeff’s head, blowing through the last quarter of a brand new Sudoku puzzles book. He chews on his eraser absent-mindedly while he thinks and he doesn’t notice Jeff looking up at him.

Jeff closes his eyes again and lets him be.

~*~

“I might not be back tonight,” Parse warns, tossing his duffel onto one of the double beds. He’s got one of those drawstring bags on his shoulders with who-knows-what inside. “Like, probably not, actually.”

Jeff hefts his suitcase onto the other bed. “Just text me.”

“You can meet him tomorrow,” Parse offers. He’s playing with the zipper on his bag, yanking it back and forth repeatedly. “You’ll like him. You guys are a lot alike actually, I think, except Zimms
is kinda shy and sometimes he comes off like a dick ‘cause of it, so don’t be mean to him, okay? But he’s really funny and—"

“It’s okay to be nervous,” Jeff tells him. He wants to take that bag away or put something else in Parse’s hands. “You don’t have—"

“I’m not,” Parse snaps. “Jeez, man, if you were just gonna be a buzzkill—"

Jeff backtracks, “I just meant. Uh. Since you haven’t seen him. It’s, uh, a big deal.”

Parse stares at his hand on the zipper. “Yeah. I’m gonna go. Thanks. Bye.”

“Text me,” Jeff reminds him. Begs, maybe.

Parse flips him off on his way out of the door.

Jeff sits down on the bed and pulls out his phone. He’s got a couple buddies from the Rangers who spend their summers in the city who he knows would be good for a beer or two—it might be nice to pass the time.

He wonders how likely it is that Parse will actually text—imagines him coming back to an empty room.

Jeff pulls out his MP3 player, stretches out on the bed, and hits shuffle.

~*~

Jeff wakes up, disoriented, to the sound of a door slamming.

It’s dark outside and Parse is saying, “I got it all wrong, Jeff,” like he’s excited about it and his eyes are shiny in the low light.

Jeff yanks his earbuds out and turns on the bedside lamp. There are tear tracks spilling down into Parse’s smile. “Got—got what wrong, bud? Are you—"

“It wasn’t—it was never Jack, okay? That was all the—the prequel,” Parse insists. He tries to deadbolt the door, fumbles it, and stumbles away. Clearly drunk. “It’s us—it’s—you get it right? It’s you.”

Jeff stands up. “How much did you drink?” he asks, walking over and catching Parse by the arm. “Kent?”

“Jack couldn’t handle it, but you could—you can—you get it, right? You feel it too.” Parse is close enough to smell like whiskey and his freckles are catching in the lamp glow. Looking through Jeff, touching his shirt. “You and me.”

Jeff’s hands are both on Parse, shaking. “You’re not making any sense, bud. Just—”

Parse kisses him—hand in his hair, swaying on his toes to reach, and they’ll fall over if Jeff doesn’t steady him at the waist so he does.

*I might like it,* Parse had said. Jeff’s never wanted to hit Parse, but he would’ve wondered about the
rest. If he really looked.

Jeff puts Parse on the ground and holds him there by the hips and says, “I can’t.”

“You don’t—that’s okay,” Parse says, eyes wide. So fucking earnest, and he’s on his knees with his hands sliding up Jeff’s thighs. “That’s okay, I’ll—you can. You can just pretend.”

Everything hurts and Jeff feels sick and he gets it, now. There’s nothing about this that he wants.

“I can’t,” he says again. “I’ve got Shani, and—”

“She doesn’t have to know,” Parse says, and that’s what it takes for Jeff to back away.

“No, Parse! What the fuck?” he asks. He might be hyperventilating. Maybe this is how people know. “What the fuck.”

Parse’s chest is heaving but his eyes are flat. “I thought…you said you loved me?”

Jeff’s ribs crack. He reaches out and runs a hand through Parse’s hair. Grieving, maybe. And asks softly, “Why’s that mean I need to fuck you, bud?”

“I can’t do this,” Parse says quietly, but it picks up steam like he’s hurtling towards something, the words desperate grabs at branches on the way down. “I can’t—I can’t do this any of this, Jeff, I’m sorry—I’ll just go and you won’t have to worry about me anymore, okay? I’m so sorry, fuck—I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m—”

“Stop,” Jeff begs. He drops to his knees too and pulls Parse against his chest and chokes out, “No one’s—no one’s going anywhere, okay? Okay? I forgive you and we’re not going—”

“I should just kill myself,” Parse whispers into Jeff’s shoulder. “I should do it and you won’t have to worry about me anymore and it’ll be better.”

Jeff tightens his hand in Parse’s hair. “Don’t. Don’t say that, man. How…how could you do that?”

“What?” Parse asks.

Jeff can’t breathe. He thinks about wrestling in the pool, stupid pop songs blasting in his car. The way it looks when Kent really smiles.

“Leave me,” he says.

Parse presses his face into Jeff’s neck. “You’ll be fine.”

“No,” Jeff says. “No, fuck you. It’d kill me.”

Parse inhales shakily. He doesn’t say anything.

Jeff loosens his grip in Parse’s hair and strokes his hand through it instead, and keeps going, “You’re—you’re my best friend, and I…I’m sorry it’s not…what you want, or if it’s not enough—but I can’t, without you. Maybe that’s not what you’re supposed to live for. I hope it’s enough.”

Parse sobs once. He sounds like he’s breathing around a knife. He sobs again.

“Promise,” Jeff says.

Parse says, “I’m sorry.”
“Promise me,” Jeff says again. He’ll say it forever.

Parse lifts his head, sitting back on his haunches, a hand hovering between their faces like he can’t decide if he wants to wipe at Jeff’s tears or his own. How long has Jeff been crying?

“You’re not like him,” Parse says. “I was wrong, I guess.”

Jeff says, “Kent.”

Parse smiles, just a little. “Can we watch Animal Planet?”

“No,” Jeff says. “Promise me.”

“You’re a shitty best friend.” Parse finally touches his knuckles to Jeff’s cheek, brushing the dampness away. “You’re supposed to let me do what I want.”

“Yeah, well, I wanted to go to Cirque du Soleil today, so I guess we’re even.” Jeff grabs Parse’s wrist. “Promise me.”

Parse closes his eyes. Breathes, and opens them. “I’ll go to your stupid show with you tomorrow. Promise. How’s that work?”

Jeff can’t figure out what to do with his body besides laugh with relief. He fucks it up on the way out and maybe just cries a little harder. Then pulls it the fuck together and says, “Your gay ass is gonna love Zumanity and you know it.”

“I miss when you were nice to me,” Parse says. “That was a good five minutes.”

Jeff tells him, “I’ll be nice to you all the time if you want. I love you.”

Parse looks down at the shitty hotel carpet. “Are you gonna tell Shani? About—about what I—”

“Yeah,” Jeff says. “We don’t have secrets.”

“She’s gonna hate me,” Parse says.

Jeff stands up and helps Parse to his feet. “You’ll apologize when you see her. She’ll forgive you.”

“Sure.” Parse is still looking at the floor. “Can we actually watch Animal Planet?”

“Uh, yeah,” Jeff says. He takes a breath. “I’m gonna call her now, though. I promised, uh, before bed, and I wouldn’t—”

“I get it,” Parse interrupts. “I’ll, um—if you wanna head—”

Yeah, no way in hell Parse is going out of Jeff’s sight. Jeff jerks his thumb towards the balcony and says, “I’ll just be out there. Figure out the TV guide, okay?”

Parse nods, so Jeff opens the curtains all the way and steps outside, making sure he’s got a good view of Parse flopping onto the bed.

Shani picks up on the first ring. “How’s—”

“Really bad,” Jeff says. He can feel the choking feeling work its way back up his throat. “Really, really bad, baby.”
“Is—are you both safe?” she asks.


Shani presses cautiously, “Baby, what happened?”

“He kissed me.” Like a bandaid. Jeff is so overtired. Out of words. “I didn’t—I said I couldn’t.”

“You couldn’t?” Shani repeats.

Jeff watches Parse hug a pillow to his chest. “Because—because I’d never cheat on you, baby, ever. Please believe—”

“That’s not what I meant,” Shani says.

Jeff doesn’t know what to say to that. He leans against the railing. “I made him promise not to kill himself.”

“Do you believe him?” she asks.

“What can I do?” he begs. “I can’t—don’t wanna leave him alone, and I—wish you were here, or. I don’t. Is it—can I—”

“Sweet man,” Shani soothes. Her voice is so soft, gentle. “You have such a big heart. And I trust you.”

Jeff wants to cry again. He doesn’t want Parse to see. “I love you so much.”

She promises, “I know, baby. I love you too.”

“I don’t think—he shouldn’t. I don’t want him to sleep alone,” Jeff says. “Someone should—or maybe. I can’t.”

“Don’t do anything that makes you uncomfortable,” she tells him. “He doesn’t get to do that.”

Jeff traces his thumb over the smooth metal behind him. “It doesn’t.” Maybe it should.

“Then like I said—I trust you.”

Jeff says, “We’re heading back tomorrow. Could you find us tickets to Zumanity please?”

“Whatever you need, baby,” she says. “I can take an extra day off work.”

Jeff thinks about it. “I’d really like it if you came,” he admits. “But you love your job, and I don’t, uh. Wanna make you mess with that.”

“I love him more,” she answers easily. “And you.”

He believes her. “Okay. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’m gonna let you go now, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

Shani asks, “Did you book a flight yet?”

Jeff shakes his head, then realizes she can’t see. “Uh, no.”
“Want me to do that too?” she offers.

“I’m, uh. Not sure when we’ll get up,” he says. “Can’t tell how hard he’ll crash.”

“Okay, just call me in the morning then?”

Jeff says, “Okay,” and then, “I love you,” before they hang up the phone, and then it’s quiet. He pockets his phone, breathes, and walks back inside.

Parse looks up when Jeff slides the door shut, and asks, “Is, um, everything okay?”

Jeff undoes his jeans and grabs a pair of sweatpants out of his suitcase. “She loves you. What show is this?”

Parse clears his throat. “Um, Pitbulls and Parolees. It’s new.”

“Cool.” Jeff tightens the drawstring on his pants and then crawls into bed, tugging Parse against his side. “Looks good.”

Parse looks up at Jeff’s face, searching it for something. Maybe he finds it, because he ditches the pillow he was holding to wrap around Jeff instead, arms hugging around his middle.

“Yeah,” he says. “Pretty good.”

Jeff turns out the light.

~*~

Jeff wakes up in an empty bed and bolts upright, looking around—

Parse is out on the balcony, sitting on the railing. Jeff wills his body to stop sweating and climbs out of bed. He leaves the sliding door open behind him.

“Hey, bud,” he says cautiously, worried Parse might spook. “What…whatcha doing?”

Parse is looking down below them, watching birds flutter between the trees. He turns to Jeff, smiles, and says, “Just reminding myself that I could.”

~*~

They get back to Vegas in the early afternoon and Shani ignores Jeff entirely in favor of yanking Parse into a hug.

“Um, hi.” Parse hesitates before hugging her back. “You’re not…mad at me?”

Shani flicks him on the ear, hard. “Of course I’m mad at you.”

“This is confusing,” Parse says.
Jeff ruffles Parse’s hair and gives up on saying hi to his girlfriend. He takes both their bags and starts hauling them upstairs while Shani says, “You did a shitty thing. You only get to do better if you stick around, sweetie.”

Parse tells her, “Sounds gross,” and then Jeff is out of earshot, standing in Parse’s bedroom.

He’s never really looked around in here; he’s usually trying to drag Parse out of it. The closet and all of his dresser drawers are open and clothes are strewn over the floor. There’s no posters, no picture frames on the nightstand or the walls. Anyone could live here.

*You weren’t planning on staying,* Jeff thinks. *I’m sorry I couldn’t see.*

He will now.

~*~

The curtain goes down over *Zumanity* and Parse is giving it a standing ovation, eyes fixed on the stage. Jeff leans over and shouts, “Hey, promise you’ll come to Ikea with me tomorrow.”

Parse wrinkles up his face and says, “Super enticing, man.” He shuffles over and bumps his head into Jeff’s shoulder. “Yeah, promise.”

~*~

Jeff puts his hammer down and backs away from the giant collage picture frame, squinting to make sure it’s hanging level above Parse’s bed. There’s a single photo in it: Parse covered in glitter and lipstick smudges from the Cirque du Soleil performers they met backstage.

“It looks really stupid like that,” Parse tells him. He wipes his potato chip-covered fingers off on the bedspread.

Jeff steals the chip bag and shoves a handful into his mouth. “Guess you better come to the beach with us next week.”

Parse flops against the pillows with a dramatic sigh. “Promise.”

~*~

They claw their way through summer while Vegas tries to boil everything in it alive.

Jeff keeps collecting promises.
“Happy birthday, bud.” Jeff snaps a picture of Parse in the middle of a particularly unattractive bite of his burger. “Promise you’ll be there for mine.”

Parse wipes at a glob of ketchup on his face and then licks it off his wrist. “That one’s ballsy,” he says. “September’s pretty far away.”

Jeff waggles the camera threateningly.

“Promise,” Parse says, and wipes his spit-covered hand on Jeff’s favorite pants.

---

Jeff’s birthday is at a fancy steakhouse on the strip. There’s a picture of Parse, covered in icing and laughing, thirty seconds before they get banned for life.

---

“So I bought a condo,” Parse says over dinner one night.

Jeff pauses the TV. “What.”

“For next season?” Parse prompts, talking kind of slowly like Jeff is being stupid behind on the uptake. “Since I’m not gonna live here anymore.”

Shit. Jeff looks at Shani, who looks like her brain is just going, Shit shit shit, too.

“I…kinda thought you were, bud,” Jeff tells him. “We—we want you to?”

Parse shoves a bite of chicken into his mouth. “I’m not a rookie anymore. ‘Sides, you guys’ll get tired of me. Don’tcha wanna fuck on the counters and shit?”

“Who says we don’t?” Shani asks, her voice too light on purpose. “You’re a heavy sleeper.”

“And we’re not—we’d never get tired of you, man,” Jeff insists.

Parse puts his silverware down and looks up. “Oh, you guys totally think this is like, a flight-risk thing.”

Jeff glances at Shani again.

“Chill, guys.” Parse grins. “I’m only on the third floor.”

“I’ll miss you,” Jeff says.

Parse takes a sip of water. “The building’s got a sick gym. We can make it our new workout spot.”
Jeff turns the TV back on.

~*~

“Can we talk?” Shani asks.

Jeff pauses the basketball game he’s been kind of three-quarters watching and only starts panicking a little. “Uh. Sure?”


“Oh my God,” Jeff says. He stares at the condensation on his soda can. “Just, please.”

Shani sits down on the couch and asks, “Have you heard of polyamory?”

Jeff’s brain record-scratches. He looks at her, squints, and asks, “That thing Mormons do?”

He’s kind of expecting an eye roll, but she just shakes her head. “No, not…really. But it’s—related? I guess.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Jeff says. He grabs his soda to have something to do with his hands. He’s not really panicking but maybe he could be. He always forgets that soda has caffeine in it and he wants to google how much.

“Polyamory is where, instead of being monogamous, you can have relationships with multiple people,” Shani explains slowly. Her hand is on Jeff’s wrist. He watches a bead of condensation roll off the can and pool against her thumb. “And everyone knows about it and it’s consensual. So… someone might have a boyfriend and a girlfriend, for example. And their partners could also date other people.”

Sometimes Jeff feels like the clueless guy in a really thorough sex-ed video. He asks, “So you want that.”

Shani rubs her thumb across Jeff’s pulse point. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot, yeah.”

“Um,” says Jeff. He looks up at her. “Did I…do something? Are you—are we breaking up?”

“Baby, no,” she insists. She cups his face and strokes at his cheek, looking up at him with wide, earnest eyes. “I love you so much, sweetie. I don’t want to leave you at all.”

Jeff’s head hurts. He puts down the soda can and wipes his hand off on his knee. “But I’m…not enough anymore?”

Shani’s voice is soft and kind of sad. “I don’t see it that way. I’ve been thinking about how, like—there’s so many ways to love someone, and we have so much of it in us? And it seems like…if more people could just do that—if we could love without worrying if it was the way we should? Maybe we’d all be happier.”

Jeff looks down at his lap, pressing his cheek into her palm, and laces his fingers with hers on her other hand.

“I’ve been thinking about you and Kent,” she says gently. Like it’s a secret. “About how—how
special he is to you? And how awful it’d be if I was afraid to let you love him.”

“I don’t wanna date Parse,” Jeff tells her automatically, something churning in his stomach. “I’m not…uh.”

Shani says, “There’s more than one way for someone to be special.”

Jeff does a weird head jerk that’s supposed to be a nod. “Did you, uh. Is that the only reason you —?”

“No,” she says. “It got me thinking, and I had some friends in college who were poly, so I just… asked? And I guess, the more I talked to them about it, the more it…felt really right.”

“So it’s not just because.” Jeff pauses. “You think Parse and me…?”

“No,” Shani repeats.

“Because I don’t,” Jeff says. “Want that.”

“You mentioned.”

Jeff traces over her knuckles. “Do you still love me?”

“So much, baby,” she promises. She lets go of his hand so she can wrap her arms around him and hug him half from behind, her chin resting on his shoulder. “The most.”

“You just might wanna love other people too,” Jeff says. Her hands are on his stomach and he covers them with his own and closes his eyes. “Because…because there’s enough. Love? That you can, uh. You can love me and someone else?”

“I’d like to think so,” she agrees, pressing her face into his neck. “If you feel okay about it.”

Jeff doesn’t know how he feels. He opens his eyes and looks at the paused basketball game until his vision starts to blur and asks, “Can I…think about it?”

Shani kisses under his ear. “Yeah, baby, of course. There’s a really good website, if you want it.”

“That’d be good,” Jeff says. He clears his throat. “Can we cuddle a lot?”

“Only if we switch to college ball,” she teases, and he can feel her smile against his skin. “NYU’s playing.”

Jeff hands her the remote and then curls up around her while she surfs for the channel, breathing slowly against all the places that they touch.

~*~

“Have you heard of polyamory?” Jeff asks.

Parse pauses the video game they’ve been playing. “What?”

Jeff kicks his feet up on the coffee table and tries to get more comfortable. He hates Parse’s couch.
Their one at home is better. “Shani wants to like, uh, date other people. I guess.”

Parse puts his controller down and crosses his legs. “Like, ‘we should see other people,’ dating?”

“No,” Jeff says. He frowns. “Like, actually just. Dating more than one person. Like, polyamory.”

“You said that word twice,” Parse says.

Jeff rubs at his face. “That’s what it’s called.”

“Are you freaking out?” Parse asks.


“I think maybe just I am,” Parse says. He draws his knees up to his chest and looks over at Jeff, but Jeff doesn’t look all the way back at him. “You guys are like, stupid in love, you know? Like, if you broke up I’d just freak.”

“We’re not breaking up ‘cause she wants to date other people,” Jeff repeats. “That’s why it’s polyamory.”

Parse stands up and walks into the kitchen. “I want a beer. You want one?”

Jeff stares at the metal coffee table and explains, “I think the point is, uh. You can like. Love more than one person, right? Like, monogamy is a thing people do, but it’s not. Not everyone feels that way. About people.”

“That’s bullshit,” Parse says. The refrigerator door slams shut. “You guys’re soulmates. You meet the right person and that’s—that’s it. They get you. Why would you ever fucking fuck with that?”

“I don’t think so,” Jeff says. Realizes. He follows Parse into the kitchen and takes the bottle opener that he’s fumbling with and cracks the cap off for him, hand slipping on the neck of the bottle while he tracks the pissed-off tears welling in Parse’s eyes. “I think…you work for it. Uh, love. Like, someone said, I think, it’s a verb? I think it’s like that.”

Parse grabs at the bottle and tries to tug it away. Jeff doesn’t let go.

“So I think…I feel like if you wanna love someone,” he continues. “And you both do that. Then, uh. Maybe it’s not. There’s not a limit.”

Parse yanks the bottle free and gulps down half of it. His lips are shiny and he’s looking away when he says, “Yeah, well. Some of us are more work than others.”

“I don’t think you’re work.” Jeff snags the beer back and takes a drink too. “It’s not the people that are.”

“When it blows up in your face, I’ve got a couch for you to sleep on,” Parse offers flatly.

Jeff bumps their shoulders together. “Your couch is a piece of shit. I’d take the bed.”

~*~
Jeff finds Shani in the kitchen, chopping up carrots to put in a stew. He wraps around her from behind and hunches down so he can rest his chin on her shoulder.

“I thought about some boundaries,” he tells her. “And I think we should do it.”

---

There’s a basically-mandatory family skate at the end of September to gear everyone up for the new season. The PR team is hanging around, taking videos and pictures for social media—especially of the guys with kids. Shani’s basically a pro after three years of these things, so she’s adopted some of the other partners and is busy teaching them how to skate.

She definitely has a crush on Fish’s girlfriend. Jeff’s gonna chirp her pretty hard for it later.

“Heart-eyes alert,” Parse says, casually crashing into Jeff’s side instead of bothering to actually stop.

Jeff runs a rough hand through Parse’s hair, but not hard enough to push him away. It’s kind of weird sometimes to be on the ice without gear. He can feel Parse’s body heat.

“Fuck off,” Jeff says belatedly, smiling.

Parse starts, “Are you gonna—”

“Alright, everyone,” Coach says, skating out onto center ice. “Part of the pre-season skate is to finalize the leadership for this season.”

Jesus, it’s been a long year. Jeff barely remembers what happened last time, except thinking that it was weird to be on a team with three As instead of a captain. He looks over at Parse—he seems a little pale.

“Olsson and Angulo will stay on as alternate captains.” Coach pauses for everyone to throw out congratulations and, probably, for the camera to catch their reactions. “And—with the entire team voting unanimously—Kent Parson is officially the third youngest captain in NHL history.”

The rink erupts into applause and cheering, people throwing things out like Captain America and Golden Boy, and Jeff turns to Parse with a grin. He knew it—Parse works so fucking hard and he deserves this—he deserves fucking everything.

“I don’t want it,” Parse says.

Someone starts chanting for a speech.

“I’m gonna throw up,” he says, and by the time he’s at center ice there’s a smile stretched across his face.

Coach is holding Parse’s new sweater with the C on it. He holds it out for Parse to put on even though it’ll dwarf him a little, without the pads.

Parse looks so happy.

He waits for the cheering to die down and then says, “I was some broke kid with a single mom when I came here. I didn’t have a name, or a legacy, or skates someone else didn’t pay for. But that’s what
this city—this team—is. We make our own luck. Let’s do it again.”

Jeff couldn’t say how anyone else reacts. He can hear the commotion, guys posturing for the rookies and trades who’re still hungry for a Cup ring, just because he knows it should be there. It’s all background noise to the dead silence Parse skates back over in, sleeves brushing against his wrists.

“What?” Parse asks, narrowing his eyes at whatever Jeff’s face is doing. His bottom lip is jutted out defensively. He’ll make a great captain.

Jeff looks back out across the rink. “I was just thinking. How you can make everything look so easy.”

“If you smile wide enough,” Parse says, grinning right through Jeff, “no one sees anything but teeth.”

They’re still all crooked, Jeff thinks. And, You’re beautiful.

The ice is all cut up from too many skaters on it all morning. Jeff says, “Bet you can’t do one of those ice skating spins.”

Parse’s eyes glint and his smile shrinks, which means it might be real. He drags Jeff away from the boards by his collar and shouts, “Hey, Ashley! Get this on film!”

~*~

They’re running out of space in the picture frame.

~*~

“Fuck,” Jeff says. He puts his dying laptop on the coffee table and looks around on the floor. “Hey, man, toss me my bag?”

Parse chucks it over and Jeff digs through all the pockets twice, but his charger’s nowhere in there. He sleeps the computer and flops back dramatically.

“Well, that blows,” he says.

Parse gives him a weird look. “Just go home and get it.”

Jeff looks at the clock. It’s a little past six, which means the new girl Shani’s been seeing is probably already there, and he’s over here on purpose to give them space. Because his life is weird now.

“Is that awkward?” he asks. “I feel like that’s too awkward.”

Parse takes a swig of his beer. “I still think it’s stupid you’re kicked out to begin with, bro.”

Jeff scrubs a hand over his face. “I’m not kicked out. Naomi’s not out to her roommates and they should get to be alone if they want.”
“Then text and ask Shani if it’s weird,” Parse says. He flicks water droplets off his hand onto Jeff’s face. “Duh. I can’t believe I’m giving you relationship advice. We’re all fuckin’ doomed.”

Probably true. Jeff pulls out his phone anyway.

**Me (6:07 pm):** Forgot my charger. Is it weird if I swing by

**Shani (6:11 pm):** Of course not :)

Jeff snags his keys and says, “I’ll be back.”

“You can’t just say that and not do the voice,” Parse chirps.

Jeff has a horrible Schwarzenegger impression. He does it anyway to make Parse laugh.

~*~

Jeff unlocks the door and heads inside, calling, “Hey, it’s me!” as he kicks out of his shoes.

Shani answers, “Hey, baby!” from what sounds like the living room. “Naomi’s here. Come say hi!”

Jeff’s never met Naomi, but he’s seen pictures that Shani showed him; he didn’t expect to actually introduce himself so soon. She’s really pretty, curled up in Shani’s lap on the couch, and Jeff has no idea what to say to her.

He settles on walking into the living room and waving awkwardly. “Uh, hi. Nice to meet you.” She doesn’t say anything back right away, so he adds, “I’m…Jeff.”

“Hi, Jeff,” she says, waving back just as awkwardly. She’s looking at him like some of Shani’s friends from college used to—like she’s wondering what Shani sees in him.

Sometimes it makes Jeff wonder too.

He jerks his thumb towards the staircase. “I just, uh. Forgot something, so.”

Christ. He feels like such a tool. He wishes Parse were here to make conversation.

“Pretty sure it’s on the bed, baby,” Shani tells him. She’s half-watching the TV, but she turns her head and smiles at him a little.

He thanks her, reaching out to squeeze her hand when she offers it as he walks by, and heads up the stairs. He finds the charger on their bed and does a quick look around to make sure he didn’t forget anything else.

Back downstairs, Shani is whispering in Naomi’s ear and kissing at her cheek. They look really happy, which is good. Jeff’s not as jealous as he was worried he’d be, even though he wishes he could go over and give Shani a kiss right now too—but he thinks that’d be awkward, and he can kiss her tomorrow.

Naomi looks back at Jeff and kind of makes another face, her eyebrows kind of scrunching together. Which kind of makes Jeff feel gross and like he shouldn’t have come over and just stolen Parse’s computer if he wanted to go on MySpace that badly, and he wishes she wouldn’t look at him like
that.

Which. It’s not like he doesn’t kind of get it—guys suck, in general, and maybe she’s feeling kind of creeped out that he came back over—like she’s wondering if he did it because he wanted to watch or something. Jeff just wanted his charger. But he thinks about what Jordy said last season and feels like a creep, anyway.

“Do you guys, uh, want anything from the kitchen?” Jeff asks, like maybe it’ll help. It probably doesn’t.

Naomi says, “No, thanks,” but Shani asks if he could make her some tea before he leaves, maybe because she can tell he’s freaking out a little.

He’ll take it. He brews it the way she likes, stirring in two spoons of honey, and smiles when she kisses his cheek to thank him.

“Okay, uh,” he says, picking his charger up again. “Gonna get back to Pa—Kent, so.”

“Oh!” Naomi says, sounding actually excited about it. “Is that your boyfriend?”

Yes, Jeff wants to say. He feels like she’d like him more if he did. But they’ve been really careful about not saying what Jeff does until they really trust someone, and he doesn’t want Parse to get mixed up in that if it goes wrong. And also they aren’t dating.

“Sorry, was that rude?” Naomi asks.

Jeff rubs at his face. “Sorry, uh?”

“Think platonic soulmates,” Shani tells her, rescuing him. “They love each other very much and my boyfriend is very dumb.”

“Those are true things,” Jeff agrees. He leans in and gives Shani a quick kiss because his stomach feels like it’s going to explode. “And I’m really lucky.”

Shani hides a smile behind her mug. “Get out of here, you charmer.”

Yeah, good idea. Jeff straightens and says, “Uh, yeah.” He makes eye contact with Naomi and smiles. “You guys have fun. Nice meeting you.”

Naomi says, “You too,” and Jeff tries to not make it obvious that he’s booking it out of there.

~*~

Parse asks, “What happened?” before Jeff even takes his shoes off.

Jeff drops his charger on the floor and sits on the couch. Everything feels weird. He lays down, scrunching his body up to fit on the stupid sofa Parse obviously didn’t buy with the intention of anyone coming over ever, and puts his head on Parse’s thigh.

“You’re freaking me out,” Parse says. He reaches out and just barely brushes his fingers through Jeff’s hair.
“I, uh.” Jeff hesitates. “I don’t…wanna, uh. I’m just being shitty.”

It encourages Parse’s hand into Jeff’s hair, stutteringly massaging at his scalp. His fingers are thicker than Shani’s. Different. Parse says, “Welcome to the fucking club, man. Spit it out.”

“No, it’s—like, I’m being, uh, an asshole,” Jeff says. He knows none of it sounds different out loud. He can’t figure out how to make the words work.

Parse asks, “What could you literally say that’s worse than what I’ve pulled?”

It’s not the same.

“I know I’m…really privileged. Like, uh. I check…all the boxes that make people, in general, you know. Like me.” Jeff closes his eyes. He feels vaguely sick and like he wants to take it all back. “But I feel. Uh. Like, sometimes—that’s not. That I don’t…belong. In the life I want.”

Parse’s hand doesn’t still. If anything it gets steadier. Aggressively soothing.

Jeff tries to swallow and can’t. His knees are aching and he thinks his feet might be warping the armrest.

Parse tells him, “Everyone wants to belong.”

“I don’t know how,” Jeff admits. He could work up to crying and he doesn’t know how Parse makes him feel safe enough to do that.

Parse brushes the hair away from Jeff’s temple and says, “You’re here.”

Jeff rolls onto his back and opens his eyes. Parse is there, leaning over a little to watch his face, his hand displaced near Jeff’s cheek. It feels like something Jeff’s seen before and doesn’t all the way have—like getting blackout drunk and finding the grainy video footage the next day. Like someone laughing at someone else.

Sunflower, Jeff thinks, but the analogy doesn’t track because that would make him the thing giving off light. He rolls back onto his side and stops trying to have words.

~*~

“It’s weird that you start at the top,” Parse says. He’s squinting as he looks over the outcropping the parking lot is located on. “Like, ‘hey, let’s climb down this giant fucking hole.’ Dumb.”

So it’s one of those mornings. That’s okay—they’ll probably still have fun. Jeff finishes covering himself in sunscreen and wipes the excess off on Parse’s arm.

“You’ll love tomorrow, then,” he chirps. “Plenty of uphill.”

Parse wrinkles his nose, rubbing the sunscreen into his skin. “Yeah.”

“You’re really not excited?” Jeff asks. “It’s the Grand Canyon, man.”

Parse smirks at him. “I’m just here to make sure you don’t get lost.”
“Fuck off.” Jeff pulls Parse into a headlock and knocks his hat off to fuck with his hair. “And put on sunscreen.”

Parse shakes the dust off his hat and flips Jeff off, but he listens about the sunscreen. It’s just barely dawn and everything is a weird, hazy color, like something being born. There’re other groups of people getting ready to hike nearby, talking in murmured voices. Jeff waves to a family with kids.

They double-check their bags and get going mostly in comfortable silence, except for talking some logistics and laughing when Parse trips over a rock and almost eats it less than twenty minutes in. Jeff doesn’t mind that they don’t talk much, but he thinks Parse will get antsy after a while. He takes in the scenery until then—the canyon seems to change colors as the sun rises.

“Have you ever fought anyone? Like, not for hockey,” Parse asks eventually, after they’ve stopped to eat once and the sky has lost all its purple.

“Uh, yeah.” Jeff laughs. “Not recently, I guess.”

Parse lifts his t-shirt to wipe at his forehead. “So more than once?”

Yeah, you could say that. “Bars, if people started shit,” Jeff explains. He’d feel weird talking about it if it wasn’t with Parse, maybe. He pauses to take a picture of a scorpion skittering by. “Concerts. I guess that’s how I met my, uh, first girlfriend.”

“Seriously?” Parse asks, snorting a little.

Jeff grabs a water bottle out of his bag. “Some asshole was being a creep.” He takes a drink and half-shrugs. “She bought me popcorn.”

Parse is walking up ahead, but he stops and looks back at Jeff just to smile at him, one of those closed-lip ones that Jeff can never get on film.

“What?” Jeff asks.

Parse shakes his head and turns back around. He kicks a rock off the side of the cliff. “Never change, man.”

Jeff hasn’t really thought about Aimee for a while, but he hopes she’s doing okay. He says, “We dated for like, uh, almost a year. She dumped me before the draft.”

“Why?” Parse drinks some water too.

They’re making pretty good time, but they’ll have to take a break soon, probably. It’s heating up too much. Jeff shrugs again. “Didn’t ask.”

“Oh my God,” Parse says. “Why the fuck not?”

Jeff takes another drink and puts his water away. “I…don’t know? She was crying a lot and I, uh. Thought it’d be easier if I just left.”

Parse laughs, maybe a little meanly. “You’re not fucking real, man.”

Jeff shoves at him lightly, maybe to prove that he is. “Whatever.”

Parse shoves him back and doesn’t say anything else right away. When he does, it’s quiet. “I guess me and Zimms was a fight.” His breath huffs like he’s trying to laugh. “Except, like, ours.”
“Uh?” Jeff asks.

“You know, like, when you’re super fucking pissed and it’s just, like—” Parse makes an explosion noise. He sounds wistful. “I fucked up big time, that game, so I mean—I thought maybe he’d hit me. Maybe I wanted—? But I mean. Kissing was better, I guess. I came so fucking hard.”

That’s the end of the talking, maybe. And Jeff—Jeff hates all of it and he can’t figure out why, except he’s thinking that Parse deserves a better story. How if he kissed Parse, he’d do it right. And that’s—

“I think I have heatstroke,” Parse says. “Sorry for the TMI.”

“Doesn’t bother me,” Jeff says.


“No,” Jeff insists, “it’s really—”

Parse says, “You were all, ‘oh I fought a dude and then some girl bought me popcorn,’ and I followed it up with, like, ‘cool I came in my pants ‘cause that guy I wanna kill myself over didn’t punch me in the face,’ like a fuckin’ psycho.”

“Can we follow-up on the heatstroke thing?” Jeff asks.

“I don’t have heatstroke,” Parse says. “I’m just broken.”

Jeff can see the ranger’s station from here. He puts his hand on Parse’s back and gently urges him forward.

“D’you think people come here to kill themselves a lot?” Parse asks.

It probably says a lot that Jeff doesn’t flinch.

“It’s really beautiful,” Parse says. “In a stupid annoying desert kinda way. I feel like people would care about that.”

Maybe Jeff has heatstroke. He asks, “Would you?”

“I was thinking about how someone has to find you,” Parse tells him. “That’s pretty fucked up.”

“Uh, yeah,” Jeff agrees. He’s thought about it too. His hand tightens around the back of Parse’s sweat-damp shirt. “It’s. That’d be. Yeah.”

They get to the ranger’s station and Jeff forces Parse inside. The staff says Parse definitely doesn’t have heatstroke but he does have heat exhaustion, and to cool off and wait until the hottest part of the day is over before they hike more.

That’s what they were planning on doing anyway. Jeff sits with Parse inside and makes them both drink a shitton of electrolytes, and they mostly don’t talk about the dying anymore. There are people around.

But Parse digs his lunch out of his backpack and, halfway through a bite of his sandwich, asks, “Hey, Jeff?”

Jeff ruffles Parse’s hair. “What’s up, bud?”
Parse swallows. “I’d make sure it wasn’t you.”

Jeff hates himself, for being relieved.

~*~

They set back out once the heat cools off outside. Jeff thinks they should turn around and go home, but Parse insists on finishing the hike. It’s easier now that the sun isn’t bearing down on them as much, which is good, but Jeff is still pretty annoying about making Parse drink more water the entire time. Parse can whine at him all he wants—Jeff is always gonna care.

It takes a few more hours to get down to the bottom. The river is really beautiful. Jeff takes a picture of Parse backlit near it, gesturing broadly as he talks to some little kids who came and asked him for autographs. That’ll probably be the one they put in the frame. You can see the edge of his smile.

Jeff puts the camera away and lays out their sleeping bags. Parse is still talking to those kids and he seems like he’s enjoying it, so Jeff doesn’t feel like he needs to go rescue him—and he doesn’t really feel like joining the conversation, even if the kids would recognize him, which he isn’t sure they would. So he takes out his MP3 player and sits a little way’s down on the riverbank, listening to his music and watching the sunset through the reflection in the water.

The sky is turning deep purple by the time Parse sits down next to him and asks, “Whatcha listening to?”

Jeff takes out an earbud and offers it to Parse, who puts it in and scoots a little closer to rest his head on Jeff’s shoulder. That family was the only group of people who recognized them and they seemed pretty un-weird about it, so it’s probably fine.

It’s starting to cool off—Jeff thinks it’s probably like 12C—and Parse rubs at one of his arms. A few songs go by before he quietly asks, “Is it all this angry?”

Jeff clicks over to his ballads playlist and hits shuffle. Hayley Williams says, *When I was younger, I saw my daddy cry and curse at the wind.*

The river is going dark. Jeff can hear it flowing over the sound of the instrumental.

The chorus kicks in. Parse tilts his face up to look at Jeff. He’s smiling, but Jeff looks at the way his eyes are lit up.

“I like this one,” he says. His cheeks are pink with sunburn and sometimes it hurts to see him happy.

*I could hold his hand,* Jeff thinks. It’s brushing against Jeff’s thigh, fingers twitching slightly. It’s weird. He thinks maybe…other people, they don’t think stuff like that. Like maybe there’s something about Jeff, specifically, that it’s supposed to help him figure out.

Maybe Jeff is ready to listen.

He traces his fingers across Parse’s palm and takes Parse’s hand in his, their fingers interlocking. Parse flinches and widens his eyes at Jeff, and Jeff looks back at him with this fluttering in his stomach he almost can’t take.
Parse closes his eyes and squeezes Jeff’s hand. Jeff’s breath catches and he looks away, anywhere else.

Okay, Jeff thinks. The stars are so bright out here that it’s almost eerie. Okay.

~*~

“Hey,” Jeff says. He watches the dust swirl around Parse’s feet. “How’d you know, like, you liked, uh, guys.”

Parse huffs out a laugh as he wipes the sweat off his forehead. “Don’t make me tell that story again.”

“Oh,” says Jeff.

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Jeff holds the door open for Parse and Shani and then, once they’re all outside, says, “That, uh. Waiter was pretty cute, eh?”

No one says anything for a second, but Shani recovers first. “I liked his shoulders,” she says. “If you look like you can fuck me against the wall, you can get it.”

“Same,” Parse agrees. They high-five. “And like, nice dimples or whatever.”

“I mostly meant the dimples.” Jeff unlocks the car, hesitates, then deadpans, “Don’t think he could lift me.”

Shani cackles, swatting at his arm, but Parse gives him a confused look from the backseat. Jeff just turns the car on.

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Jeff’s google searches are getting a little weird.

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There’s a week left before pre-season starts and Shani is driving them back from their weekly brunch date. It’s raining, which is rare, and Jeff is staring out the window and watching the droplets race down the glass like he used to do when he was a kid and his family would go on road trips.

“I think, uh,” he says. He clears his throat. “I think maybe—I’m, uh. I’m…not straight.”
Shani reaches over and takes his hand. “Oh?”

“I guess, I’ve like, thought about stuff, and maybe.” Jeff closes his eyes. “Maybe some stuff I’ve, uh, been feeling. For a while. Would make sense if…if I was bi?”

Shani cranks up the windshield wipers and squeezes his hand so tightly that her nails accidentally dig in.

“That’s...uh, it.” The radio is still playing. Jeff turns it off and begs, “Can you say something now?”

Shani’s voice is wet. She says, “I’m so proud of you.”

Jeff swallows. He can feel his heartbeat. “Did you, uh. Did you know?”

“Only you could know,” she says gently. “But I…wondered? If there was something going on with you.”

“I feel like I should have known,” Jeff says. “Can you—can you pull over?”

Shani pulls into some random shopping center parking lot and turns off the car. The windshield wipers freeze halfway up the glass.

“I guess it’s not a big deal.” Jeff can feel his eyes getting hot like they do before he starts to cry. “I don’t want it to be a big deal.”

“I love you so much.” She squeezes his hand again. “It doesn’t have to be.”

Jeff leans over and buries his face in her chest. It’s a little hard to breathe. “I wasted—I took so much time, just. Lying. Lying to you.”

“You were the person you needed to be,” she whispers fiercely. Her hand is in his hair. “Never apologize for that.”

Jeff sobs. Just a little one, muffled in her shirt. He can’t make anything else come out and it hurts his throat to even do that. He thinks about his favorite songs, sharing beds on roadies in high school, water dripping off of Parse’s body in the summertime. The way his father talks when queer people make the news. The woman holding him now, her voice whispering something. He’s the same person. Scrubs at something inside him. The same. The rain is so loud.

His breathing steadies after a few more hard breaths, and she’s still holding him. She doesn’t wear perfume and she smells like the rain they walked to the car in, and the thing is that Jeff could have known, maybe. At thirteen or sixteen or twenty-one.

He’s twenty-three, in this car. It’s okay.

“I’m okay,” Jeff repeats. He presses his forehead against her collarbone and then lifts his face to look at her. “I’m okay. I—thank you.”

“All I did was love you,” Shani says, like he made it easy. She wipes at his face “You wanna go home, sweet man?”

Jeff nods, and they do. She drives them in silence, holding onto his hand and thinking, maybe. Jeff is thinking, too, but all he’s come up with by the time she pulls into their driveway is, “Uh, I think… Parse.”

Shani folds his hand over the keys. “Go get him.”
Parse is making a smoothie when Jeff shows up, and he seems a little thrown off by the fact that Jeff is there because he offers to make Jeff one too, even though he knows Jeff hates Parse’s smoothies. They’ve always got weird shit in them, like spinach.

“Suit yourself,” Parse says. He peels a banana and dumps it into the blender. “What’s up? Shani bail for a date?”

Jeff’s mouth feels dry. “Uh, no.”

Parse squints at him. “O…kay.” He pours milk into the blender and then turns it on high.

Jeff stares at the little fruit tornado and says, “I think maybe I’m in love with you.”

Parse turns the blender off.

“Like, in the gay way,” Jeff adds. For clarity.

“Can it be in the gay way if you’re bi?” Parse asks. He won’t look away from the blender.

Jeff might be dying. He clears his throat and begs, “C’mon, man. Help me out here.”

“Shut up, of course I love you,” Parse says, voice kind of strained like he might be crying. His arms are shaking from gripping the counter so tightly. “I just can’t move, maybe.”

Oh. Jeff can do that part. He stands up and almost knocks his chair over and boxes Parse in against the counter, one hand braced near his hip and the other cupping his cheek to get him to look.

Parse turns all the way around, his eyes wide and shiny. His lips are a little parted and Jeff can see a sliver of teeth. His hand reaches out and traces up Jeff’s stomach towards his chest, catching on his cotton shirt, going flat over the side where his heart is like he’s checking for it.

Jeff kisses him. Parse keeps the hand on his heart and slides the other one into Jeff’s hair and Jeff melts into him, leveraging against the counter to arch at the right angle for their hips to touch.

It’s weird, because Jeff thought it’d be different, maybe—kissing a guy. Like suddenly it’d be more aggressive, or something—that he wouldn’t want to be soft or maybe whoever he was with wouldn’t let him because—he doesn’t know. But Parse is just a person, like anyone else, and there’s nothing about this that takes away from that.

Jeff’s always wanted to be gentle.

He licks softly at Parse’s bottom lip and then drags his teeth over the same spot, caressing his thumb across Parse’s cheek where he knows the freckles are. His hold on the counter is given up in favor of touching Parse’s hip—fingers rucking up the shirt so he can feel more of his skin. It’s the right kind of not enough. His chest aches with soft want and he thinks, How could I think I didn’t?

Parse lifts up on his toes to bite at Jeff’s lip and starts unbuttoning Jeff’s pants.

“Woah,” Jeff says, pulling away a little. He smiles and chirps, “Are you paying me by the hour?”
Parse looks confused. He doesn’t move his hands away. “I—I thought you wanted…?”

“I mean, yeah, if you want,” Jeff says. He drags his thumb across Parse’s bottom lip and thinks, without meaning to, about Jack Zimmermann. “But I’m not, uh, in a rush. You know?”

It seems like maybe Parse doesn’t, is the thing—but he looks up from under his lashes and nods anyway. Maybe because he can tell it’s what Jeff wants. His hands slide up to Jeff’s hips instead.

Christ. Jeff’s stomach twists a little. He kisses Parse again, even softer this time. Barely touching, both hands cupping his face. Not to get him off—not even to get him part-way there, really. Like it’s the best thing Jeff will ever do, at the end of it all, to make Kent feel cradled.

Parse kisses back timidly, like he’s scared of it now. He keeps moving his hands like he doesn’t know anywhere they could belong and Jeff pulls away again to hold them. They’re trembling.

“This is weird,” Parse whispers. He’s staring at his knuckles.

Jeff traces his thumb over them. “We can stop.”

“No!” Parse says, too quickly. “No, I just—didn’t think—fuck.”

Jeff asks, “What?”

Parse looks up at him. His eyes are so green. “It’d be like this.”

Jeff closes his eyes. He sucks in a deep breath and presses their foreheads together, draping Parse’s arms around his neck before resting his hands on Parse’s hips. He’s so in love and it hurts, trying to get it all out in a way that Parse could belong and Jeff pulls away again to hold them. He knows better than to say it.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmurs earnestly. “I just wish…I’m sorry. I wish—I knew how—”

“Jesus, man.” Parse laughs, so close to Jeff’s lips that he can feel the exhale. “Are you always this sappy?”

“Yeah,” Jeff tells him. He smiles and kisses him again, sucking gently on his bottom lip. “Get used to it.”

Parse kisses him back, steady now, and almost…playful. He nips at the corner of Jeff’s mouth before he leans back and says, “Maybe I will,” like it’s a challenge he’s rising to.

Jeff grins. He can work with that.

They make out again and start to get into an actual rhythm with it—Parse flitting around coyly and sharp, like it’s a dance, and Jeff the sure, gentle thing he comes back to, there to kiss and hold him steady—and he loves holding Parse. Jeff feels so hulking, sometimes—that he’s just this body that things crash into or veer away from—but it makes him feel good, being immovable for Parse. He puts down roots and kisses Parse’s mouth until it’s warm and barely bruised and thinks, You belong here.

“I think,” Parse says. He stares at their feet. “I think I don’t—want to—tonight. If that’s, um, okay?”

Jeff cups his cheek but doesn’t make him look up. “Of course, baby.”

Parse shivers at the pet name and it gets Jeff his eyes, fixed on him shyly. “But you could, um—stay the night, I guess? I mean. If you wanna.”
Jeff really, really does. He smiles and says, “I’d love that.” But also, “It’s, uh, still only like three PM, though.”


“Yeah, no,” Jeff says. He makes a show of taking Parse’s hand to use his watch. “Seven hours of kissing is, uh, a little ambi—”

“Oh my God, you dick.” Parse punches lightly at Jeff’s arm, biting back a smile. “So like, new plan—we hang out, you pay for pizza because fuck you, maybe some more kissing, and then you, um. And then you stay?”

Jeff kisses him again, extra slowly, trying to hold onto the feeling. “I stay,” he says.

~*~

Jeff wakes up to Parse tracing lines across his chest, making Jeff’s cotton shirt tickle against his skin. Parse has ridiculous bedhead and an unreadable expression on his face—this look he gets when he thinks no one’s watching. He’s gorgeous and breathing with his teeth lightly pressed into his bottom lip, and he smiles crookedly when Jeff stirs.

“You know,” Parse chirps, “I totally underestimated how much worse your snoring is from the same bed.”

That actually kind of hurts. Which Parse must notice from something on Jeff’s face, because his tone changes instantly and he cups Jeff’s face. “Woah, hey, I didn’t mean—like, it’s not—fuck, I’m sorry.”

Jeff shrugs it off. “Eh, it’s fine. I just, uh. Didn’t used to, before my nose, so.”

Parse rolls onto his back and stares at the ceiling.

“It’s really fine,” Jeff says.

“I think you’re the only good thing that’s ever happened to me,” Parse tells the ceiling. The jersey he won the Cup in is framed over the headboard.

Jeff touches his arm. “Babe.”

“Sorry,” Parse says. “I just meant, like—you can snore like a fucking freight train for all I care. I shouldn’t’ve said anything.”

Jeff rolls on top of him, arms braced on either side of his head. He kisses him lightly, once, then reminds him, “I love you.”

Parse shivers and turns his head, lips brushing Jeff’s wrist. “I love you too. Fuck.”

Jeff kisses at his cheek and then down the side of his neck, sucking lightly below his throat until Parse says, “Come back,” so he does. They kiss again, Parse’s fingers threading through Jeff’s hair and Jeff thumbing at Parse’s jaw.

They’re both breathing hard by the time Parse comes up for air and asks, “Do you wanna…?”
“If you want to.” Jeff smiles.

“Fuck yeah,” says Parse, so Jeff grins wider and rucks up Parse’s shirt so he can kiss down the bare skin of his stomach. He squirms and twitches when Jeff adds a teasing scrape of teeth, then asks, “Uh, what’re you doing?” when Jeff tugs at his boxers.

Jeff looks up. “Uh, I mean, I was gonna blow you. Unless—?”

“Oh.” Parse wets his lips. “Is that—you haven’t, like, done that before, right?”

“You can tell me if I suck,” Jeff says. “Uh. Pun not intended.”

“I just thought you’d want me to, uh. You know.”

Which is why Jeff is down here first. He strokes his thumb along Parse’s hipbone and says, “Think of it as like, uh, a pop quiz. ‘How well has Jeff been paying attention during oral.’”

Parse snorts. “Should I tell on you to your girlfriend?”

“Make me a report card,” Jeff suggests. He’s actually only kind of half-kidding.

Parse puts his hands behind his head and chirps, “’Kay, commence performance review.”

Jeff’s head goes kind of fuzzy. Maybe like twenty five-percent kidding.

He licks his lips and helps Parse wriggle out of his boxers, tossing them onto the floor somewhere before sliding his hands up Parse’s thighs. Parse’s maybe half-hard, so Jeff takes his dick into his hand first and strokes at it for a few minutes, smiling when Parse breathes out a soft *fuck* and leans back against the pillows.

It’s maybe objectively more intimidating, putting a dick in his mouth instead of eating pussy. He can’t choke on pussy, even if it gets kind of hard to breathe sometimes. But the thing is—Jeff really fucking loves giving head. There’s something…really good feeling about it—getting to narrow his world down to making someone else feel good, ignoring his dick entirely and having a *job* to do.

Look, there’s a reason Jeff’s a sub. He unpacked that a long time ago.

So it’s not like he freaks out when he takes Parse into his mouth. He swipes at a drop of precome with his tongue and closes his eyes when Parse’s thighs draw up and close around his head, trembling already. It’s kind of like coming home.

He works at the base with one hand and braces the other on Parse’s hip, teasing a few inches in and out of his mouth while he presses with the flat of his tongue. Parse says something garbled that Jeff can’t hear and puts a hand in Jeff’s hair, tight. Good. Jeff is being good.

Jeff kind of wonders how much dick he can fit in his mouth. He tries to take the whole thing and chokes right away, spit dribbling down his chin as he pulls back off and has to gasp for air. Parse laughs and scratches lightly at Jeff’s scalp.

“Nice one, babe,” he teases, and Jeff opens his eyes to look up at him and finds him watching with this soft glow in his eyes, and just. Jeff hopes that he knows. That Jeff loves him. That Jeff wants to be good.

He goes back to work after that and loses time, hovering right above subspace as Parse starts to unravel. He could put himself there if he wanted, but he won’t. Not without Parse knowing.
“Jeff,” Parse pants, yanking suddenly at Jeff’s hair. “Jeff, fuck, I’m—can I—?”

Jeff squeezes Parse’s hip and takes him deeper, and Parse whines when he comes on the back of Jeff’s tongue, hips twitching like he wants to buck up into Jeff’s mouth and his feet scrambling for purchase against Jeff’s shoulders, helplessly pushing at him.

Jeff holds him steady and swallows him down.

Parse says, “Fuck,” and goes limp all at once when it’s over. He’s breathing hard and his hand falls away from Jeff’s hair, which makes Jeff kind of sad. He likes it when Parse is touching him.

He crawls back up the bed and nuzzles against Parse’s cheek and asks, “Was that good?”

Parse laughs breathlessly and reaches blindly for Jeff’s cheek, because his eyes are still closed. “Was it good? Fuck you, man.”

Jeff wriggles his face into the right spot and melts a little into the mattress when Parse drags his thumb across his lip. “Okay.”

Parse wriggles his entire body like he’s trying to get up, then flops back down on the bed. “Fuck, see—this is why I should’ve gone first. I’m a useless fucking come-drunk.”

Jeff kisses at Parse’s ear because it’s the closest spot in reach. “I’m okay. You don’t have to.” He’s pretty hard, but he can take care of that himself.

Parse cracks an eye open specifically to glare at Jeff. “Dude. Dude. I just saw God. I’m gonna blow you so hard as soon as my fuckin’ brain reconnects to my body.”

“I actually, uh.” Jeff clears his throat awkwardly. “Don’t really like blowjobs.”

Parse sits up. “What? Who doesn’t like blowjobs?”

“Me?” Jeff says.

Parse stares at him.

“I feel weird,” Jeff says. He keeps his eyes on Parse’s watch on the far nightstand. “When I’m, uh. Just. Sorry, can you not look at me like that?”

Parse slides down the pillows and rests his cheek on Jeff’s shoulder.

“I feel weird,” Jeff says. He keeps his eyes on Parse’s watch on the far nightstand. “When I’m, uh. Just. Sorry, can you not look at me like that?”

Parse slides down the pillows and rests his cheek on Jeff’s shoulder.


Parse slides his hand up under Jeff’s shirt and rests it on his chest. “Oh, okay.”

“I’d like it more if, like. Maybe we made out and you touched me, if you want,” Jeff says. “I, uh. Really like that.”

“I don’t understand how I met you,” Parse confesses. He presses his hand down over Jeff’s heart. “I don’t—I don’t know what I did without you.”

Jeff’s stomach twists. He tilts Parse’s chin up and touches their foreheads together, eyes closed and lips parted. “Survived,” he suggests, around the way his throat is closing up. “Thank you. For doing that.”
“You’re welcome,” Parse whispers, and kisses him.

~*~

Sundays are lazy mornings, when Jeff can manage it. He sleeps in and then goes to brunch with Shani, then heads to afternoon practice and a game if they have it. So really, not that lazy overall. But the mornings—Jeff stretches in the bed, texts Parse to wake him up, and looks for Shani.

She wanders back into the bedroom from downstairs, carrying two coffee mugs and looking so fucking beautiful in one of his old undershirts that his heart skips a beat.

“Oh, really? What’re you gonna do about—Jeff!”

Jeff grabs her around the waist and lifts her into the air as she squeals, kicking her legs at him and laughing. He spins her around and deposits them both on the bed (gently) and then goes for her feet, tickling up the arches until she shoves at his face to get him to stop.

“Oh my god!” she says. Her cheeks are stretched wide from laughing. “You’re such a ridiculous man.”

Jeff sighs happily, stroking his hand across her cheek. He loves her so fucking much and this—this is his favorite part of being in love with her. Socked feet and light through the curtains.

“I can’t wait to marry you one day,” he whispers, chest swelling, and then—stops. Shit. “Uh. I mean, only if you—”

“Baby,” Shani says. She shakes her head, still smiling. “Just…just close your eyes, okay?”

Jeff squeezes them shut and nods, and his hands start shaking when he feels her slip out from under him and start rummaging in their closet.

“Babe?” he asks cautiously.

“Oh my god, be pa—did you reorganize in here?”

Jeff rolls onto his back and tries not to hyperventilate. “Why?”

“Jeff.”

“Last week?” Jeff tries to think back. “I was looking for—”

“Fuck, here it is!” Shani shuts the closet door.
Jeff sits up and opens his eyes. “Are you proposing to me?”

“Hush,” Shani says, and gets down on one knee. “This is why we can’t have nice things.”

“Oh my God.” Jeff is already crying. “Baby.”

Shani’s crying too, fighting to keep her voice even. She snaps the ring box open and then takes his hand. “Jeffrey Troy, I love you so much—even if you ruined my proposal, baby, seriously—and I’m so, so proud of who we’ve become together. I want to keep growing with you forever.”

“Me too,” Jeff manages hoarsely. He helps her slip the ring on and then slides off the bed to kiss her. “Fuck, of course I—I love you so much, baby. Thank you.”

Shani kisses him back, all over his face and neck, then pulls back to smile at him. “One sec,” she says, then goes back to the closet. She comes back with three more boxes.

Jeff asks, “What’s this?”

Shani opens the other ring box first—it’s the same ring that Jeff proposed with last year, which was definitely supposed to be hidden in the sock drawer. Probably not the best hiding place when both of them do the laundry, but Jeff tried, okay?

“Fair enough,” he says, which makes her laugh as he puts it on her finger. It looks perfect.

Shani hands him one of the two other boxes, which are both wider than for rings. He opens it and she immediately says, “Oh, switch with me,” so Jeff does that and then looks down at the bracelet he’s holding. It’s a nautical bracelet in a dark material, with a silver anchor charm tied up in it. Shani’s is similar, but with thinner cords—maybe part of a matching set.

“For Kent and Naomi,” she says, brushing her fingers against Jeff’s knuckles. “When we ask them to join the wedding party.”

Jeff presses a thumb against the charm, watching it glint in the light. He thinks about the bones on Parse’s wrist, the way Shani’s eyes wrinkle up when she beams at him. Perfect stopped feeling like a word he wanted to find a long time ago, but he thinks that maybe people would say it, about this.

He takes her hand again and asks, “How soon can I marry you?”

~*~

Jeff is scrolling through his bank’s website when Parse comes up behind him and drapes himself over his shoulders, the cool metal of his bracelet brushing against Jeff’s neck. “Whatcha doin’, babe?”

Jeff turns his head for a kiss first, smiling when Parse hums at him. He gestures with his mouse on the screen and says, “I was looking, uh, at investment strategies.”

“Really?” Parse asks, sounding kind of skeptical.

Jeff shrugs. “I mean, yeah? Like, uh. Obviously I make a lot of money. And Shani has a good career too. But I won’t play hockey forever, you know? And I was thinking—maybe we should set up college funds. For if we have kids.”
“Oh,” Parse says. He walks away into the kitchen. “I just throw it all in my checking account.”

Jeff isn’t surprised. “I did too, at first. But I took those business classes, so, uh. Guess it made me think about the future more.”

A bottle cap clatters onto the counter. “That’s cool.” Parse pauses. “You’d need to, I guess.”

Jeff’s screen is going kind of out of focus. He rubs at his face. “So will you, bud.”

Parse wanders back into the living room and presses a beer-damp kiss to Jeff’s cheek before he vaults over the sofa and plops down. He leans sideways against Jeff’s body and props his feet up on the far armrest, and says, “I’m not gonna outlive hockey.”

Jeff wraps an arm around Parse’s chest and pulls him closer. “Hey—you promised the wedding, remember? You’ve gotta be my best man.”

“C’mon, man.” Parse tilts his head up and flashes a smile. “I promise I won’t ruin your big day.”

Jeff tucks his face into Parse’s neck and inhales his cologne. “I love you, Kent. So much.”

Parse takes a swig of his beer. “Sorry about that.”

~*~

After movie night one day, Parse says, “I guess we could figure out how to do butt stuff.”

“Maybe start by not calling it ‘butt stuff,’” Jeff tells him. He reaches for his computer. “But we can google it.”

~*~

Parse closes the laptop lid and says, “I’m not shoving an enema up my ass.”

“Eh, whatever.” Jeff pulls his shirt off. “Just use some soap.”

~*~

Three fingers later, Parse is practically sobbing into the mattress while Jeff presses against his prostate and smiles.

Parse is always beautiful, but there’s something about him during sex that really gets to Jeff. It’s the way he unravels, maybe—when he’s normally so careful. Even when the careful thing is the shortest way off a cliff.

But here, Parse is flushed and stammering, his voice cracking over Jeff’s name and cursing at him to
get the condom on already, and his hair isn’t gelled or stuffed under some hat. He’s wild, clutching at the sheets, and all of a sudden he’s begging, “C’mon, daddy, fuck me,” and—

Jeff absolutely does not do that.

Jeff freezes with half a condom on his dick and says, “Woah.”

Parse’s ass in the air is way more awkward now. He rolls onto his back and asks, “What?”

“You can’t just, say, uh…” Jeff gestures vaguely. “That, man.”

“What?” Parse repeats. He does that laugh like when Jeff is being dumb. “It’s just, like, sex talk, babe.”

Oh boy. Jeff rolls the condom off and chucks it in the vague direction of the wastebasket and says, “Let’s go for a drive.”

Parse stares at him. “Right now? We’re kinda—”

“You’ll have more boners, promise,” Jeff tells him. He gets up and grabs a pair of boxers—he thinks they’re Parse’s, but whatever. Elastic stretches. “We’ve gotta talk about kink, and honestly I feel kinda uncomfortable in here.”

Parse scrambles off the bed and pulls clothes on without another word, but he never takes his eyes off Jeff’s face. Fuck. Jeff’s probably freaking him out a little, but he…really needs some air. He tries to not look angry—and he’s not, is the thing. But he wonders how hard it is to see anything else in his face.

They get into the car and Jeff rolls the windows down as he pulls out of his spot, then beelines for the fastest road out, away from the city traffic. He waits until he doesn’t have to brake for traffic lights every half kilometer before asking, “Did you mean that?”

Parse is staring out the open window, ridiculous sex hair blowing in the wind. “What?”

“You think it’s…just normal sex talk?” Jeff says. He passes some Honda Civic going five under the limit. “Calling me ‘daddy’?”

“Well from the tone of your voice, I’m guessing it’s the wrong answer,” Parse snarks defensively. He flicks his eyes over and then back away.

The Honda swerves back in front of Jeff and gives him the finger. Whatever. “Why do you think that, bud?”

Parse snaps, “You know, it’s really fucking ironic to lecture me in a dad voice right now, right?”

Jeff keeps his eyes on the road.

“I thought everyone liked that,” Parse says quietly. “Like—you’re kinda gay ‘cause you wanna fuck your dad, right?”

Jeff only has a quarter tank of gas left. “Should I call you ‘daddy’ too, then?”

“No,” Parse says. He draws his legs up onto the seat. “That’s different. You’re—”

“Bigger?” Jeff suggests. “Or maybe not gay enough?”
“I’m sorry!” Parse shouts. He hits something against the dash—probably his fist, but Jeff doesn’t see it. “Ow, fuck! I’m—I’m sorry I’m a freak, okay? Forget I—”

“I never said that.” Jeff looks over for long enough to see tears in Parse’s eyes.

“But you’re thinking it—Kent the fucking freak—or you wouldn’t be—”

“I wear Shani’s clothes, sometimes,” Jeff says.

Parse stares at him.

Fuck. Well, he’s committed, now. He clears his throat and says, “We, uh. We do this sce—we play this game, I guess. Where, uh, I’m her…personal assistant? And I have to, uh. Try on her clothes for her. To see if they’re…nice.”

Nothing from Parse.

“So, you know.” Jeff fights the urge to throw up. “I don’t like. Being called a freak. So I wouldn’t… call you one.”

Parse says, “I’m sorry—I didn’t…”

Jeff takes the next exit and heads for the on-ramp back in the other direction. “So the daddy thing—it’s just not, like. Something everyone just does. It’s a kink. And I don’t want you to like—feel like you have to. I guess.”

“Okay,” Parse says.

“And I didn’t like having it sprung on me,” Jeff adds. “You—you don’t know if that’s something I want.”

Parse waits until Jeff merges back onto the highway. “Is it?”

“I don’t know,” Jeff admits. He looks over at Parse—he seems thoughtful. “I guess it depends on, uh. Why you like it. What you’d want from me out of it.”

“It’s just hot,” Parse says stubbornly. Which is, like—that’s fine, in general, and that’s all it is for some people. It’s just that Jeff figures it’s probably more than that for Parse, so he waits.

They get two or three kilometers down the road before Parse finally says, “I guess no one ever took care of me.”

Jeff’s chest goes impossibly tight. “Baby.”

“I guess, like, when I think about—what I wanted you to—” Parse cuts off and sighs. His voice is shakier when he starts again. “I feel like maybe I can’t handle anything, ever, and I have to all the fucking time.”

Jeff reaches over and gives Parse his hand.

Parse clutches it to his lips with both of his. “I’m just—so tired, Jeff—and I want—I keep waiting for someone to say, ‘You can’t handle any of this shit. I’ll do it,’ and no one ever—”

“I can do it,” Jeff says. He presses his lips together and breathes. “I can do it, baby—I’m here.”

Parse exhales shakily. Jeff feels it against his knuckles. It’s weird, having them used for something
“I’m gonna barf,” Parse says.

“Same,” says Naomi.

“They’re really nice,” Jeff assures them. He ruffles Parse’s hair and adds, “You met my family last month.”

Parse swats him away and tries to slick his cowlick back down. “Yeah, but—they didn’t know.”

Jeff’s not sure they ever will. But Shani’s family has always been great, and when Parse said his family couldn’t make it out this year...of course he was coming to their Thanksgiving, and Shani wanted to tell them about Naomi so Jeff and Parse agreed this would be okay too. Jeff’s not really having second thoughts, but it seems like maybe Parse is. Which sucks, since Shani explained everything over Skype like two weeks ago.

Jeff’s cell rings—Shani’s calling him. “Hey, babe.”

“Hey, baby. We’re like five minutes away,” she says. Jeff can hear voices in the background. “Is the food all ready?”

“We took care of it,” Jeff assures her. The turkey—well, Jeff is just gonna say situation —was a three-person effort, but that’s the advantage of a polycule, he guesses. Odds are someone knows that frozen things explode in deep fryers. And it was cool to hang out with Naomi for a while, now that they’re more comfortable together.

Shani says, “Thanks—love you and see you soon.”

“Love you too, babe,” Jeff says, and hangs up the phone.

Parse tells Naomi, “Not too late to flee the country,” and then the front door opens.

“We’re here!” Shani announces, mostly unnecessarily because her parents and grandma are already storming the living room.

Grandma Millie makes a beeline for Jeff and pinches at his stomach. “Jeff, sweetie! Have you lost weight?”

“Oh,” says Jeff.

“That’s probably my fault,” Parse says. He holds out his hand and gets mercilessly crushed into a hug instead. “Oof—uh, hi, I’m Kent.”

Jeff loses track of however that goes because Mr. Grady comes over to shake his hand. “Jeff. Good to see you again, son.”

“You too, sir,” Jeff says, clearing his throat, and then immediately hugs Shani’s mom next. “Hi, Mrs. Grady.”
Kent gets freed from Granny, who trades him for Naomi, and then gets sucked into hockey talk with Mr. Grady about their *damn good season so far, son*, which is probably manageable enough, so Jeff rescues Naomi from being tag-teamed by Granny and Mrs. Grady.

“Granny, have a seat,” he insists, guiding her to the couch by her elbow. “How’s your knee?”

Shani gives him a drive-by kiss on the temple as she whisks Naomi away into the kitchen, so he pats her shoulder and sits down between Granny and Mrs. Grady as they talk about the flight over from New York. Apparently there was turbulence. Yeah, that always sucks. No, he didn’t know they were serving pretzels *and* peanuts now. He does take planes a lot, but he normally sleeps. Kent does *Sudoku* puzzles to pass the time though—he’s not sure how to explain what those are—hey, Kent, what are *Sudoku* puzzles?

Naomi comes back from the kitchen looking slightly less panicked, and she also knows what *Sudoku* puzzles are. Jeff asks Mr. Grady how his promotion has been going, and they coast on that until it’s time to eat.

The dining room table was mostly set up already, but Shani brings out the sangria she just finished making and Parse remembers he left the extra wine glasses he was in charge of in the car, so he grabs those and then everything is ready to go. It’s kind of cramped, because they definitely didn’t buy this table thinking this many people would ever eat there at once, but they make it work.

“It’s so nice that the turkey is all carved already,” Mrs. Grady says. “But I do miss being able to say grace before we do it.”

The turkey is store-bought. Parse kicks Jeff’s ankle under the table and Jeff kicks him back.

“Sorry, ma’am,” Jeff says. “We just thought, uh, there probably wouldn’t be enough room to carve it now.”

Shani points out, “We can still say grace, Mom.”

Mrs. Grady says, “Of course we will,” and holds out her hands for the others to take.

Jeff’s not really religious and he knows Parse is, like, aggressively not. But they still bow their heads and listen to her pray. Jeff gives Parse’s hand a squeeze and gets a harder one back.

“And, Lord, we ask you to bless this beautiful family,” Mrs. Grady says at the end, “that we’re so happy has grown so much, and we hope will only grow more, ’cause you teach us that love is infinite. Amen.”

Jeff says, “Amen,” and opens his eyes. He keeps Parse’s hand and holds it down on his thigh, brushing his thumb across the side of his palm. Parse looks over at him, thoughtful, and then back away.

Shani, on Jeff’s other side, wipes at her eyes and says, “Thank you, Mama.”

“We love you so much, baby,” she answers. Her smile is so warm. “We may not always understand right away, but we just want you to be happy.”

“Excuse me,” Parse says, standing up suddenly and scraping his chair across the hardwood. He vanishes into the living room before faint footsteps echo up the stairs.

It takes Jeff a second to realize that everyone wants him to say something.
He settles on, “Uh,” and then, “He’s…okay. I’m just gonna—you guys can, uh. Start eating?”

“Okay, son,” Mr. Grady says, so Jeff squeezes Shani’s hand and then follows Parse upstairs.

He’s in the bathroom, spitting mouthwash into the sink, when Jeff comes up and hugs him from behind.

“What’s up, bud?” Jeff asks their reflections.

Parse closes his eyes. “Dunno.”

“Okay,” Jeff says. He closes his eyes too.

“I keep thinking I wanna punch something,” Parse tells him.

“Okay,” Jeff repeats.

Parse turns his head into Jeff’s bicep. “Fuck, I just—it’s not fucking fair.”

Jeff thinks about his parents, and how he’s never met Kent’s mom. He runs his hand through the sticky gel in Parse’s hair and agrees, “Yeah, it’s not.” He holds him tighter. “I think maybe, uh, we could let this family make up for it, though.”

Parse draws in a shaky breath against Jeff’s shirt and says, “I don’t belong here.”

“You do,” Jeff says. “You’re family.”

“I think that’s worse,” Parse says, but he rubs his face against Jeff’s sleeve to dry his eyes and then pulls away. “What if they hate my mac and cheese?”

Jeff turns on the faucet and puts Parse in a headlock to ambush him with washing the gel out. “More for me. Win—ow, stop biting me!—win-win.”

“Dude!” Parse kicks hard at Jeff’s shin, but he’s laughing. “Fuck you, stop—ugh.”

His hair is damp and gel-free now, and both their shirts are covered in water. Jeff might have miscalculated. Whoops. But Parse is also smiling at him a little and his cowlick is flopping in his face like it does before it dries, and Jeff would do anything to see him like this more often.

“Ready to go down?” Jeff asks.

Parse gasps dramatically and puts a hand up to his face. “Jeffrey, there’re people downstairs!”

Jeff punches his arm. “Stop. Let’s go.”

Parse smacks Jeff’s ass on his way down the stairs and suggests, “Raincheck, then?”

Jeff just rolls his eyes.

~*~

“Kent,” Granny says, “the macaroni is delicious!”
Jeff shoots Parse a shit-eating grin. Parse pinches his nipple when no one’s looking.

~*~

Parse is curled up sideways on the couch with his head on Jeff’s thigh, humming while Jeff plays with his hair, when he asks, “Where’s Shani’s grandpa?”

“Oh,” Jeff says. He looks around, but Mr. Grady and Shani are outside and the others are still chatting in the dining room. “He, uh. He died a few years ago. I didn’t know him that well.”

“I’m sorry.” Parse picks at a loose thread on the cushion. “What happened?”

Jeff traces his finger along the shell of Parse’s ear. “Uh, cancer. We…pretty much knew, that it was coming. It was, uh.”

Parse asks, “What?”

It’s weird, talking about death to your boyfriend who wants to die. Jeff touches his hair, the sliver of skin that’s showing where his shirt is bunched up.

“Everyone was there. To say goodbye,” he says. Parse’s skin is so warm. “I don’t remember, uh. A lot about it. But I keep thinking…he was smiling. He said he lived a good life. That part stuck with me.”

Parse tugs the thread free and watches it flutter to the ground. “I guess that’s the pipe dream.”

Jeff touches Parse’s freckles next. “Dying old?”

“Happy,” Parse says. He rolls onto his back and stretches through a wide yawn. “Think I might nap.”

Jeff traces the line of Parse’s lips, then down the curve of his throat. “Okay.”

He makes himself comfortable and lets Parse sleep.

~*~

The season is breathing down their necks. There’s talk of another Cup and talk that they won’t even make the playoffs if they can’t win on the road. Parse sleeps in Jeff’s hotel room.

~*~

Jeff pays the cashier for their tickets and then takes Shani’s hand as they head into the museum. It’s not super his thing, but she was excited that they have a new exhibit and he likes doing things that
make her happy. It’s always nice to spend time together, especially when hockey makes it hard for their schedules to line up.

They’re halfway through the second floor, chatting about what they want to do for lunch, when Jeff’s phone buzzes in his pocket. It’s a text from Parse with the link to some news article: “Zimmermann Denies Contract Negotiation Rumors, Hints at Scholarly Ambitions.”

Parse (12:13 pm): What if he never comes back

Parse (12:13 pm): He can’t do this

Parse (12:13 pm): I can’t fucking do this

“Shit,” Jeff mutters.

He flashes the phone and Shani says, “Go.”

~*~

“Go,” Shani says, halfway through a cake tasting.

Jeff still wonders what lemon chiffon would have been like.

~*~

The thing is: Shani always says go.

~*~

Shani drops her keys and sobs into her hands as soon as they hit the floor, both of them covering her mouth, and Jeff scrambles off the couch to meet her in the foyer.

“Baby,” he says, pulling her against his chest. “Baby, what’s wrong?”

“I—I just—” she manages between breaths. “Had the—the worst week, and I’m so—so tired.”

Jeff guides her to the couch and holds her in his lap, squeezing her tightly. He closes his eyes and tries to take it all for her. Like he could soak all the pain up.

“Ethan got promoted instead of me,” she says. Her tears are soaking into Jeff’s shirt. “Even though I’ve been here longer, and—and I’m so good at my job—and it’s just not fair! We all know it’s because—because—”

“Yeah,” Jeff murmurs. He kisses her temple. “Yeah, I know, baby.”
She sobs harder and takes three gasping breaths before continuing, “And then—Heather called in sick and no one—no one could get in for an hour—and this pileup on the highway—”

Shit. Jeff saw that on the news. People were airlifted.

“Sometimes it just—just feels like I can’t do enough,” Shani admits. “Like I’m failing.”

“You’re not,” Jeff insists. He rubs her back and clings to her everywhere he can. “Baby, you’re not failing, you’re so incre—”

Jeff’s phone rings.

He stares at it.

“Answer,” Shani tells him.

Jeff hesitates. “I—”

“Don’t let me fail him too,” she whispers.

Jeff picks up the phone. “Hey, bud, I can’t—”

“Please don’t leave me, okay? I’m sorry I’m so—I’m sorry I can’t—but you wouldn’t text me back and I can’t do this, Jeff, I can’t without you and—”

Shani sees it on Jeff’s face before he can open his mouth again. She climbs off his lap and goes to her bag to dig her cellphone out.

“I’ll call Naomi,” she says, wiping at her eyes with one shaking hand. “Go.”

~*~

Jeff finds Parse on the balcony, sitting on the railing with his legs kicking aimlessly over the edge. He’s next to a bottle of whiskey that Jeff hid from him last week.

“Hey,” Parse says without looking.

Jeff presses up against him and wraps his arms around his middle. His chest is tight with relief and something else that might be anger and the thing in his throat that’s keeping him from speaking is definitely shame.

“Are you mad at me?” Parse asks.

Jeff is shaking. He says, “I need you to come inside with me.”

Parse tips the bottle over the railing. Jeff watches it fall, smash on the pavement, glass spraying onto the street. Three stories down.

“Okay,” says Parse.

~*~
Jeff calls Shani twenty minutes later, while Parse is in the shower. Door open.

“Hey,” she says. Her voice is still wet, but even, now. “Naomi’s here.”

Jeff clears his throat. “I was thinking we could come over. All stay there tonight.”

“I…um.” She sighs. “I’d rather be…able to talk about things? And I feel like…I can’t, if…”


“I love both of you so much, baby,” she tells him. “It’s okay.”

Jeff leans his head back against the wall. “It’s not. None of us are. I love you too.”

“We’re going to get through this, Jeff. All of us.”

The water shuts off. Jeff watches Parse step out, dripping water onto the bath mat. There’s a column of lines on his inner thigh that Jeff’s been counting for months. The most recent one opened back up in the shower and a slow trickle of diluted blood is running down his calf, tangled in the leg hair.

“Yeah,” Jeff says. “I’ll tell him.”

---

No one talks about it for a week and a half, until their latest roadie is over and Jeff lets himself into the condo with a pizza in one hand and ginger beer in the other, fumbling with his keys. Parse is playing Call of Duty on the couch, bare feet up on the coffee table.

“Hey, babe,” he says, looking away from the TV for a second and then back towards it. “If there’s anchovies on that again I swear to—”

“I, uh. Kinda have something important to talk about,” Jeff cuts in. He’s sweating a weird amount for December. “Can you pause that?”

Parse throws a hand grenade at something. “What’s up?”

Jeff sets the six pack down on the table, next to Parse’s crossed ankles. He knows Parse’ll just go for the Heinekens in the fridge, but he likes to try.

“We, uh, haven’t done super great. At keeping boundaries,” Jeff says bluntly. “And we need to, uh, talk. About that.”

Parse gets a thirty second respawn timer. He still doesn’t pause the game. “Whatever.”

Jeff grabs the remote and shuts the TV off.

Parse closes his eyes and stops breathing. The controller in his hands is vibrating a little.

“I love you,” Jeff says slowly.

Parse gestures his controller at Jeff with a flourish and prompts, “But.”
“I love you,” Jeff repeats. He touches at Kent’s elbow and tightens his grip when Parse tries to twitch away. “And I love Shani too. And I haven’t, uh. I’ve been breaking promises—about spending time with her. And I can’t keep doing that, not all the time.”

Parse takes his feet off the table and draws his knees up to his chest.

“Sometimes.” Jeff takes a breath and sits down. He feels too stupid and fucking useless for any of this. “Sometimes I’ve gotta—I’ve gotta be there for her, too. And I wish—I wish we weren’t in this place where.” Jeff runs a hand through his hair. “Everything’s so hard right now, and I can’t—uh. I’d pick up the phone every time if I could, baby, I hope you—but, I don’t…know, uh, if I can.”

“I get it,” Parse says softly. He looks over at Jeff with a faint smile. “Sorry I’m in the way.”

“Kent, no. You’re not—you’re not at all, baby, that’s not what I’m—” Jeff moves closer, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. He hides his face in Parse’s hair. “I love you. So. Fucking. Much. You’re never in the way.”

Parse’s hands come up and grip lightly at the back of Jeff’s shirt. “I’m sorry.”

“Please don’t be,” Jeff begs.

Parse kisses the side of Jeff’s ear. “You and Shani—you’ve gotta hang onto that forever, you know? You guys—you’re so fucking special.”

Jeff pulls Parse all the way into his lap and whispers, “I wanna hang onto you, too, baby. You know that, right?”

Parse laughs so quietly that Jeff mostly just feels the wisp of breath. “You’ve been pretty damn good at it. ‘Preciate it.”

“I don’t…know what to do here,” Jeff confesses. Everything feels a little bit off, like that whole period he played before his knee finally popped. “Did I do something wrong?”


Jeff cups Parse’s cheek and makes him look Jeff in the eye. “C’mon, Kent.”

Parse gives him a lopsided smile. “Just one of those nights. Are you gonna stay?”

Jeff kisses the tip of his nose and promises, “Of course I am. Anything you wanna do.”

“Be with you,” Parse says. He flips open the pizza box—pepperoni. “Can we watch the sunrise?”

Jeff’s gonna be exhausted for brunch tomorrow. He grabs a ginger beer, twists the cap off, and puts it in Parse’s hand. “Sounds perfect.”

~*~

Jeff kisses the taste of burnt coffee out of Parse’s mouth, fingers threading soothingly through his hair as the sunlight creeps across the sheets. It’s too cold to be out on the balcony, but they kept themselves awake with old movies in bed and the confusing French press Parse bought on a whim last month, and the sky is beautiful through the bedroom window. Parse is beautiful too, smiling like
he means it, eyes nearly translucent when the sun hits them just right.

They’re past overtired and Jeff is almost hyper-lucid—a little shaky from caffeine and using his fingers to see little details he’s never found before. Dips on the sides of knees, different textures on each razor blade scar.

Jeff came once maybe three or four hours ago—stopped counting anything that wasn’t on Parse’s body, so can’t be sure—but he’s pretty sure he could go again. His arms are sore where Parse dug his nails in.

“Hey,” Jeff asks, kissing the corner of Parse’s mouth. “How come I never get to bottom?”

Parse’s eyelashes cast fluttering shadows when he blinks. “Do you wanna?”

Jeff leans him back against the pillows, bribing him with a few more kisses. “I mean, yeah. Why not?”

“You’re so, like—weird, man.” Parse brushes Jeff’s hair away from his face and laughs. “You no-homo me for, like, a whole year, and now you’re just all nonchalantly, ‘hey, babe, can I take it up the ass tonight?’”

Jeff shrugs, then cracks a grin. “Sex is so goddamn weird anyway. Seems like a dumb place to draw a line.”

Parse traces his fingers across Jeff’s bottom lip next, nails scratching lightly against his teeth. “…I love you.”

“I love you, too, bud,” Jeff answers. “So much.”

Parse tilts his chin up for another kiss, then asks, “Do you—wanna right now?”

“Yes,” Jeff says, pressing little kisses to Parse’s jaw. “If you want.”

“Okay.” Parse touches at Jeff’s collarbone, pushing lightly on it. “Lean back.”

Jeff flops over onto his back and watches Parse go for the lube and box of condoms. They’re both already naked, so that part’s easy. He scoots up the pillows so he can see better and rests his feet flat on the bed, knees up, and tugs idly at his dick. Parse looks more nervous that Jeff feels, accidentally knocking the condoms off the bed while he fumbles with the lube cap, which is maybe a little backwards.

“Hey, bud.” Jeff pulls Parse towards him so they can kiss, making Parse drop the lube bottle to to meet him. “We don’t, uh, have to do this. You know?”

Parse looks down. “I just, um, wanna make it good?”

“Babe.” Jeff tilts Parse’s chin back up. “It’s gonna be great. Wanna know how I know?”

Parse nods.

Jeff flips them over, cradling Parse’s head as it hits the mattress, and puts his lips up to his ear. “It’s you.”

Parse snorts, turning his face into Jeff’s hand. “Oh my god.”

Jeff chuckles awkwardly and hides his face in the pillow. “Too cheesy, eh?”
“Maybe.” Parse mouths at the side of Jeff’s thumb, nipping at the skin where it meets his palm. He traces his other hand up Jeff’s stomach, tickling at his happy trail. “Do you, um, really think that?”

Jeff slips his thumb into Parse’s mouth and shudders when he sucks on it. “Of course I do.” He shifts his weight so that his thigh grinds against Parse’s semi. “I just…wanna be with you.”

Parse tilts his head, letting Jeff’s thumb slip off his tongue. His freckles are so pronounced right now and his eyes are a little wide—that earnestness that sometimes makes Jeff uneasy. “Why.”

The sun is turning Parse’s hair into a halo. Jeff touches at his temple, watching his ring glint in the light, and tries to swallow down the lump in his throat. “I love you, Kent. So much.” He dips down to kiss him again, the slightest bit of tongue. “I want…all of this. You. I don’t know how else to say it.”

Parse blinks slowly, mouth open and his tongue peeking out like he can still taste the edge of Jeff’s teeth. His lips twitch like he wants to smile. “Take it,” he whispers. “Please.”

Jeff flips them over again, pulling Parse on top of him, and fumbles around until he lands a hand on the lube. He gets the cap off and touches at Parse’s wrist, asking him to hold his hand out—then pours the lube onto Parse’s fingers when he offers them up. It’s kind of weird, being the one holding his thighs open for someone else. And also—really hot.

“Oh, fuck,” Jeff says, dropping his head to the pillow. Parse stops moving his fingers—Jeff waves at him impatiently. “No, keep—it’s just. So fucking weird. But like. Good?”

Parse laughs and kisses at Jeff’s knee. “Wait ‘till I nail your—

“Fuck.”

“—oh, there it is.”

Jeff wriggles impatiently, trying to get Parse’s fingers back—there. Fuck, this is so good. He just wants—

“Kiss me?” he begs. “Baby, please come kiss me.”

Parse goes easily, slinking up Jeff’s body and biting at his bottom lip while his fingers work. And Jeff…needs this. Parse’s mouth on him, a hand in his hair. Something that isn’t just his—is about them. It’s not as bad as sometimes, because he knows Parse is fingering him so that they can fuck, and it’s less. Less like Jeff is just taking. But the kissing helps, and the precome that Parse smears against Jeff’s stomach when he shifts to find the lube again.

Then it’s three fingers, and Parse sucking a hickey onto Jeff’s shoulder, and the tear of a condom wrapper. Parse lines himself up with one hand, the other interlaced with Jeff’s against the sheets, pressing down to brace at the right angle.

The moment he pushes in—it’s like the moment Jeff locks his shoulders before a good check. The sharp, perfect sting and the way his body knows what it’s supposed to do. Half a breath, the thought that some people are made for certain things. Parse sobs and tries to break the bones in Jeff’s hand and Jeff says, “It’s okay, you’re okay, we’re here.”

“Jeff.” Parse manages. He moves forward, slipping a little deeper inside like an afterthought, just trying to rest his forehead against Jeff’s chest.

Jeff slides his free hand into Parse’s hair. “Hey, baby.”
“You feel—fuck.” Parse rocks his hips forward with a gasp. “Fuck, so good.”

And, yeah, fuck. Jeff’s never…he couldn’t have thought. It’s like he can feel every move Parse makes, every time he breathes or shifts, the tremble of his body, and he just—tightens the hand in Parse’s hair and tries to beg for more.

He’s always known he wasn’t good with words—from the very beginning. Toronto hotel rooms, cityscapes from wrought-iron railings. Jeff’s always been fumbling for something, wondering how to get it to crack open, praying in case it helped.

He should have known it was his body. I want this, I want this, please believe me.

Parse gets his breathing under control and lifts his head with the first real thrust, the full drag sparking across Jeff’s prostate and his balls slapping lightly against Jeff’s skin with the push back in. He’s normally talkative during sex, running his mouth to make Jeff laugh or keep the tension from building. But he’s blinking tears out of his eyes and just meeting Jeff’s gaze—chest heaving, crying and not pretending he isn’t, and Jeff cups his face in both hands and wipes at his cheeks.

“Baby,” he murmurs. “What’s wrong?”

Parse shakes his head and smiles, closed-mouthed and his lips half-pursed, licking at a stray tear with his tongue when it touches his lips. “Just wondering,” he says. He hits Jeff’s prostate again—fuck—and ducks his head down, face against Jeff’s neck. “I wonder if this—you know, if you’ll remember it. When you’re old.”

Jeff’s hips buck up, trying to take Parse deeper, head going a little fuzzy with it—taking, trying to—

“We both will,” he says. Hand in Parse’s hair, sweat smearing between them. He’s so hard and so in love and there are things people are made for. “Kent, you’re gonna grow old with me.”

Parse kisses him, a little salty, tongue warm.

“Kent,” Jeff says again. “Baby, I love you, promise me.”

“I love you too,” Parse answers. He smiles and Jeff thinks, sunflower, again, like he used to. “Can you do something for me, babe?”

Jeff thumbs at his bottom lip, memorizing the crooked teeth. “What, baby?”

Parse nuzzles into Jeff’s hair, his nose tracing a line up the side of his jaw, and asks, “Could you call me Kenny?”

Jeff tries to turn his head and find Parse’s mouth, gasping for breath, scrabbling for something besides that. He kisses him, barely hanging on. He feels like he could come any second and doesn’t know if he can without a hand on his dick, and he wants—wants to do what Parse wants and doesn’t—

“I love you, Kenny.” Like he’s bargaining. For what? “I love you, ple—fuck, baby.Fuck.”

Parse fucks him desperately, harder than Jeff ever does it—because Jeff can take it, he’s good for that—and his hand is on Jeff’s dick and he says, “Say it again—say it again,” and Jeff would do anything.

“Kenny,” he says again. “I—I’m close, baby—close, Kenny.”
“Fuck, _fuck,_” Parse whines, always so loud when he comes, and he kisses Jeff so soft while he does it because he knows Jeff likes it soft, he always does, and Jeff comes on his stomach with tears on his cheeks that aren’t his but might as well be.

Jeff winces a little when Parse pulls out and chucks the condom onto the floor. His thighs are twitching with aftershocks and he thinks he might feel it tomorrow, if that’s a thing that really happens. Parse’s never seemed like it—but Jeff’s never tried to make him. It’s hard to see. Everything’s blurry and he doesn’t think he’s breathing right. The come-down’s gonna be hard.

Parse wipes Jeff’s stomach off with someone’s shirt and tosses that on the floor, too. He’s not crying anymore and he looks like those people in movies, all lit up from the window, and Jeff is a body in a bed. He holds out a hand and Parse takes it—pressing the knuckles to his mouth.

“Thank you,” Parse tells him, lips right against the skin.

Jeff reaches his thumb out to stroke Parse’s cheek. “For what, baby?”

Parse laughs and shakes his head. The one where Jeff is being dumb. He lays himself down against Jeff’s chest and tugs the covers over them both even though Jeff is radiating maybe a million degrees of body heat, and says, “Get some sleep, babe.”

Jeff is out before the high wears off.

~*~

Jeff wakes up when his alarm goes off—he doesn’t wanna think about how little time later. He fumbles to turn it off and then drops his phone back onto the nightstand, wincing when it clatters.

It doesn’t matter, though, because Parse is already—or still, probably—awake, resting on one elbow and smiling softly at Jeff’s face. His eyes are light blue and shiny with something Jeff can’t place, and he looks…happy.

Jeff brushes his knuckles across Parse’s cheek. “Hey, bud. Didn’t sleep?”

“Nah,” Parse says. He trails his hand down Jeff’s chest, stopping right above his belly button. “And miss this view?”

Heat rises to Jeff’s face and his stomach flutters. He knows he’s not really much to look at, but the way Parse sees him…he thinks he knows what it’s like to be. He wishes he could do that for another person, this feeling he has right now. There’s never enough to give back.

“I love you,” Jeff tells him. “You should sleep before practice, though.”

Parse sticks his tongue out at him, so Jeff ruffles his already messy hair in return as he gets out of bed. His shirt from last night is covered in dried come—awesome—so he digs a new one out of the stash of his shit that Parse has been hoarding for months. It probably smells better than the old one, anyway.

Parse doesn’t get out of bed until Jeff walks into the bathroom to brush his teeth, and all he does while Jeff is in there is put on a pair of sweats. Not that Jeff minds, because he’s not exactly tired of looking at Parse’s body or anything. He’s kept more weight on so far this year, which is good for
him. Jeff gets nervous when he can see full hip bones.

“Guess I better head to brunch,” Jeff says after he rinses his mouth out. “See you this afternoon.”

Parse leans up for a kiss. “Tell Shani I love her, yeah?”

Jeff slides his hand into Parse’s hair and says, “Yeah, of course.”

It takes Jeff another five minutes of kissing before he makes it to the door, but he’s not complaining. He loves kissing Parse. He gets the door open, one foot in the hallway, and leans back in for one more.

“Bye, baby,” he murmurs, smiling into Parse’s mouth. “Love you.”

Parse’s hand lingers against Jeff’s jaw and then falls away all at once. He looks right at him, clear and easy eyes, and says, “Bye, Jeff.”

Jeff turns away as the door closes behind him, feeling a little silly as he pulls out his phone to send Parse a row of hearts, but not self-conscious enough to not do it. That’s the thing, about being in love—he misses him already. He hopes Parse knows.

~*~

Jeff’s phone chimes halfway through brunch, when he’s about to give his opinion on the two flower arrangement options that Shani narrowed down with the wedding planner yesterday. He likes things a bit simpler, but he’s pretty sure that Shani secretly wants the fancier one.

“I’ll get it later,” he says before she can comment. “I kind of like how this one is shorter. I feel like not everyone could see each other if it’s too tall.”

Shani frowns slightly. “I like the lilies, though.”

“Yeah, me too. Maybe we could—”

Jeff’s phone goes off again.

Shani covers one of his hands with hers and says, “It’s okay if you wanna check it, baby.”

“We just talked about this,” Jeff says. Parse seemed fine this morning. “It can wait.”

She stares at him like she’s trying to call a bluff. He looks down at his French toast and has to look away. He’s not sure why he ordered it. He’s not really hungry.

Jeff pulls his phone out of his pocket and mutes the ringer after the third text comes in. He puts it face down on the table and can’t look at that either, and that has to be okay. This is what boundaries feel like.

He was hungry when he ordered.

“What were you saying?” Shani asks. “About the flowers.”
Jeff doesn’t check his phone until he’s signed the bill and left cash on the table for the waiter. He figures he can pick Parse up for practice early and they can get Starbucks or something. Talk it out.

Parse (11:43 am): You don’t have to pick up the phone or anything

Parse (11:43 am): I don’t wanna ruin brunch :)

Parse (11:44 am): Just saying, it isn’t your fault. I wish someone had told me that.

[You missed a call from Parse at 11:47 am]

[One new voicemail]

“Baby?” Jeff asks. It’s 12:15. He feels nauseous and he can’t remember his voicemail password and Kent is such a good liar. It isn’t your fault. What isn’t? It feels like everything is.

Shani takes the phone out of his hands and types something in and hands it back to him, and then she pulls out her phone too.

‘You have: one new voice message. If you’d like to listen to your messages, press one. If you’d like to…’

Jeff wouldn’t like to do anything. He walks to the door because Shani left without him and is waving down a taxi.

“Take the car,” she says. “He’s not picking up. I’m going to the house in case he’s there.”

‘If you’d like to listen to your messages…’

Jeff stares at the taxi that pulls up. Where did they park? Where are his keys?

“Baby.” Shani puts her hands on his face and makes him look at her. “Listen to me. We are not panicking right now. Kent needs us. We do not get to panic right now.”

“I’m not panicking,” Jeff says. He hates lying to her.

Shani kisses him and gets in the taxi and then Jeff is alone except for the voice on his phone.

‘…to your messages, press one. If you’d like to—’

Jeff presses one. His car is across the street. He jogs over to it and almost gets hit by a truck.

“Hey, Jeff. I just, um, wanted—to say thanks, again.”

Jeff’s keys are in his pocket. He unlocks the car and hops inside and takes four tries to get the key in the ignition.

“You know, for everything, but—I think the thing is, like? I didn’t know life could be like this. It’s been really nice, getting to know that.”

Parse’s condo is a seven minute drive in good traffic. Jeff’s going to make it in five if it kills him.
“You’ve…you’re so good, to me, and I’m sorry I—I’m sorry I couldn’t be good back. I tried really hard. I’m sorry I can’t keep my promise anymore.”

Jeff nearly slams into a sedan when he runs the red light.

“But like I said—it’s not your fault, okay? I don’t—I don’t want you to— fuck. You’re gonna be okay, right? Just—just do that for me, okay? Just be okay.”

Six minutes away. There are so many people on the street. If he jumped someone would have seen.

“I really did love you. I wish someone would’ve said that, too.”

Jeff slams his hand against the wheel.

‘End of message.’

The light ahead turns green.

‘To delete this message, press seven. To replay this message, press five. For more options, press nine.’

Jeff fumbles with his phone.

“Hey, Jeff.”

He’d be able to see an ambulance from here. If someone had jumped.

“I just, um, wanted—”

Right?

“—to say thanks, again.”

Maybe he’s too late. Maybe they drove away already.

“You know, for everything, but—”

Maybe he didn’t jump.

“—I think the thing is, like? I didn’t know life could be like this.”

Jeff presses harder on the gas.

“I really did love you.”

‘To delete this message—’

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be good back.”

‘To delete this message—’

“You’re gonna be okay, right?”

‘To delete this message—’

Jeff parks two blocks away and leaves the phone and runs.
By the time he makes it up the three flights of stairs and fumbles with the spare key, he wants to throw up the half piece of toast he choked down earlier. He gives up on the key and just tries the knob—unlocked. Why wouldn’t it be?

“Kent?” Jeff shouts. No answer. “Kent?”

The balcony is empty. Jeff runs into the bedroom and that’s empty too, but the bathroom isn’t.

There’s a knife on the tile and blood everywhere, more than Jeff’s ever seen—do people make that much blood?—Jeff’s only ever seen it on knuckles and mouths or dripping out of noses, and it’s streaming out of—out of—

“Sorry,” Kent whispers. He tries to move the wrong arm and jerks away from himself and he’s alive. “You weren’t…”

Blood is warm. It soaks into Jeff’s pants and smears against his shirt and covers his palms where he tries to push it back into Kent’s veins for him.

“It’s okay, baby, it’s gonna—it’s gonna be—”

Kent’s voice is so small. “Shani’s right…it hurts.”

“I know, baby, just hang on, okay?” Jeff begs. He can’t breathe because he’s talking too fast and he can’t find his phone but Parse’s is on the floor. It keeps slipping out of his fingers. “Just stay, okay? Please, please stay, I love you so much, you can’t leave—”

“I’m sorry.”

“What’s your password, baby, I can’t—”

“You,” says Parse.

Jeff’s finger keep smearing blood over the screen and it takes him three tries and he thinks, What if he dies because you can’t dial a phone, and the password is 0-9-1-4 because Parse is American and Jeff says, “Hang on, baby, I’m gonna get an ambulance and we’ll be—”

“No.” Jeff freezes mid-panic and Kent’s eyes are so green and he pleads, “Can’t…go to…they’ll—”

“There’s so much blood, baby,” Jeff sobs. He’s covered in it. They’ll drown like this. “I have to—”

“I’ll never forgive you,” Parse says.

Jeff dials.

~

Jeff cleans up all the blood, because someone has to.
“I have to ask you to leave,” the nurse tells them.

Jeff stands up, shrugging Shani’s hand off his arm. “Bullshit. I know he—”

“I don’t care who you are,” the nurse says, his arms crossed, glaring up into Jeff’s face. “No one harasses my pa—”

“Harass?” Jeff shouts. The entire waiting room turns to stare at them and he doesn’t fucking care, he just—“I’m the one who saved him!”

Shani cuts in, “Jeff—”

“No!” Jeff throws his hands up. “You can’t—you can’t keep me from—”

“He doesn’t want to see you,” the nurse says flatly. “Security will escort you out if necessary.”

Jeff kicks his chair over and storms away before that can happen—or before he cries in front of anyone else today. He hears Shani calling his name again but it doesn’t fucking matter—nothing does—all he cares about is seeing Parse again. Throwing his name around, money. That didn’t work. But Jeff can wait. The shifts will change, or Parse—

Parse will remember. That Jeff loves him. That he had to.

*You had to,* Jeff tells himself. The concrete is a little cool and it stings his palms. He scrubbed them raw and they still feel sticky and it’s under his nails. The blood, and something else. The thing Parse doesn’t want anymore.

Shani sits down next to him and rubs his back. Jeff thinks this is the part where he should start crying again, but he missed the window.

“Maybe I hate him too,” Jeff tells his shoes. They’re not the ones he was wearing earlier. “See how that goes.”

Shani leans her cheek against his shoulder. “You couldn’t.”

“No,” Jeff agrees. He scrapes his sneaker across the blacktop. “The fucker.”

“He’s so scared, baby. And hurting so much.”

“Why couldn’t.” Jeff’s voice cracks. He draws his knees up so he can put his head between them. “Why can’t he—”

*Applebottom jeans, boots with the fur. The whole club was lookin’—*

“Fuck!” Jeff still has Parse’s phone. He pulls it out of pocket and nearly chucks it at the nearest car. “Mother fucker!”

*[Zimms (: is calling you]*

Jeff answers before he can think better and spits, “What the *fuck* do you want?”

Silence. A scared kid asks, “Who—who is this? Please, is he…?”

Fuck. Fuck it all to fucking hell. Jeff takes in half a breath and chokes on it.
“Please, he called me and—can I just—can I talk to him? I promise I’ll—”

“He’s alive,” Jeff manages. “I can’t do anything else for you.”

Jack Zimmermann says something in French.

Jeff closes his eyes. “How did…you know?”

Zimmermann asks, “Can you tell him I’m sorry?”

“How did you know?” Jeff repeats.

A pause. “He normally calls more than once.”

Jeff opens his eyes. There’s nothing to see. He can feel Shani watching him.

“Do you think it’s because of me?” Zimmermann asks. Christ, he’s so young. Kent’s age. He wants to go to college, Jeff knows. He took a lot of pills one time. He liked to back Kenny into walls.

“I don’t think you should call here anymore,” Jeff says. “And I hope you’re doing better now.”

“I am,” Zimmermann answers softly. “Maybe…you could tell him that, too?”

Jeff presses his free hand into the concrete until it screams at him and lies, “Yeah, sure.” His own cell buzzes in his pocket. Probably another call from Coach asking where the fuck he is. “Was he the…did he find you?”

“No one will tell me,” Zimmermann says.

*Must be nice, Jeff thinks. Not having to live with that.*

“I guess that means he did.”

Jeff should hang up the phone. Shani pulls his hand away from the cement and kisses at his burning skin, and he feels his heart just—it’s all bruised, all fucked. And he can feel her loving him and how little it matters and he wishes Parse were here. Wants to ask him, *Do you live like this?*

“Did you love him?” Jeff asks.

An ambulance veers into the parking lot and speeds up to the emergency entrance down the way. Jeff watches the paramedics unload whoever it is and hospital staff take the gurney from them.

Zimmermann says, “No one will tell me that either.”

The gurney vanishes inside and the ambulance speeds off again, sirens blaring. Busy night.

Jeff says, “Guess that means no,” and hangs up the phone.

Shani tries to say something, but Jeff pulls his phone out and calls Coach back. “There’s been an accident,” he says. “We’re not coming.”

He hangs up that time, too.
Parse saunters into his first practice in three weeks, grinning from ear to ear, and says, “‘Sup, bitches. Didja miss me?’

Jeff pulls his laces tight and holds them there, crossed over once and untied. It’s the only thing to do with his hands to keep them from shaking.

“Thank fuck you’re back, Cap,” Hatty says. He slaps Parse on the back as Parse tosses his hat into his stall and strips his shirt off. “We’ve been dying out—”

“Holy balls,” Jordy cuts in. “What the fuck happened to your arm?”

Jeff breathes through his nose. He tries to look—gets one glimpse of the angry red where a third of Parse’s forearm is scabbed over and has to hide his face between his knees. Jesus, Parse probably shouldn’t even be here. But it’s not like Jeff gets a say in that anymore.

Parse laughs. “Fuck if I know. Ask the dickweed who T-boned me, bro.”

*He’s alive, Jeff thinks. That’s enough.*

“What’s a matter, Troy?” Greg chirps, smacking his stick against Jeff’s shin. “Your fiancée keep you up all night?”

Jeff flips him off without looking and forces himself to finish tying his skate.

“It’s not gonna affect your game, though, right?” Hatty asks.

Parse snorts, brushing him off. “As-fucking-if. No pain, no gain, right?”

~*~

The thing is: it was never enough.

~*~

“Kent, wait up!” Jeff says, jogging after him as he strides towards the car waiting for him. “Please, just. Just talk to me, man.”

Parse turns to look at him, tugging his sleeve down over the arm that’s pulling open the car door. He smiles, and climbs inside.

~*~

“Troy, turn your fucking ringer off,” Rami snaps. “And pay attention.”
Jeff switches his phone to vibrate. Excuses himself halfway through the meeting, checks it in the bathroom, throws up in sink. Hyperventilates while the water runs.

Walks back into the meeting.

~*~

“I really did love you,” says the recording. “I wish someone had told me that, too.”

Shani turns off the bedside lamp and rolls over, away from the light of Jeff’s phone.

Jeff tugs his earbuds out, closes his eyes, and tries to get some fucking rest.

He wakes up at three AM when his phone chimes with an email notification. It’s too hard to sleep again, after that.

~*~

They leave for a roadie and come back. Fish grabs Jeff by the sweater after their first practice since, tugging him backwards while he pushes his goalie mask up his face.

“Uh,” says Jeff. “What’s up?”

“My Abby, you know?” Fish asks. He sounds more Swedish when he’s trying to be quiet. “You’ve noticed how she always wears long sleeves?”

Jeff hasn’t. He never notices much of anything, when it counts. “Sure.”

“Maybe Parse wants her number,” Fish says.

Jeff looks down at the ice. He digs the edge of his skate in, shaving off a little bit of ice. “Not from me.”

Fish tilts his head and tries to find something in Jeff’s face. Jeff is afraid, maybe. Of what he’d find there.

“Maybe you want mine,” he suggests.

Jeff says, “I’ve got your number, man.”

Fish skates away from him backwards, which is especially impressive in goalie pads. “Maybe you want to use it?”

Jeff watches him leave, waddling through the gate and down the tunnel to the dressing room. “Maybe,” he says, but there’s no one left to hear him.

~*~
He comes home to Shani already in the living room, watching TV and working her way through a pizza. She smiles tentatively and puts her pizza down when he curls up in a ball next to her, his head on her thigh. Her fingers are a little greasy in his hair and he doesn’t care.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers. “I’m so sorry.”

She’s so sad. He can feel it in everything, not just her voice. “For what, sweet man?”

Jeff stares at the coffee table. “I think I forgot. How to… be that person. That you love.”

“We love people how we find them,” she says. Her hand is steady and Jeff is so sad. “I’ll always know where you are, baby.”

Jeff closes his eyes. He can feel something shaking and it’s like… maybe he needs his whole body to breathe. He doesn’t feel much of anywhere.

It takes a long time, but he sits up again. A little room for things besides breathing. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and waits for something to change.

Shani picks up her pizza again and takes a bite.

Jeff texts Parse.

Me (4:32 pm): I did it because I love you.

Me (4:34 pm): I’d do it again. Every time.

~*~

Parse (4:57 pm): Can I come over?

~*~

Jeff opens the door twenty minutes later.

Parse is on the other side, hugging his arms around himself and wearing that old flannel that never really fit Jeff, either. It fits Parse worse. His eyes are wet and he’s still beautiful, even like this. Or especially.

“Thanks for loving me,” he says. Earnest, the raw thing in his voice again. He looks up. “Please don’t stop.”

Jeff swallows and says, “Never,” and Parse is in his arms, sobbing. Or Jeff is—or they both are. It’s all the same, and Jeff pulls Parse into the house so he can kiss at his hair, gasping for breath to choke out, “Never—never, baby,” and, “Just stay,” and, “I’ll always, Kent—always love you.”
“Don’t say that,” Parse whispers. His face is hidden in Jeff’s chest and his hands are clutching at the front of Jeff’s shirt. “Just—please don’t—say that.”

Jeff tightens his grip and asks, “That I love you?”

Parse shakes his head. He runs his thumb over the peeling logo on Jeff’s shirt. “That I’ve gotta stay.”

It takes everything Jeff has. Not to keep from doing something specific. Just to be. He clears his throat and strokes Parse’s hair and says, “I wish you wanted to.”

Parse says, “I know.”

“I love you,” Jeff adds.

“I know that too,” Parse says.

Jeff closes his eyes. His chest hurts. “Do you…still love me?”

“I don’t forgive you.”

“Ohkay,” says Jeff.

“And I think maybe I need you,” Parse tells him. “And I think maybe I love you so fucking much that it’s just another thing that hurts.”

Jeff opens his eyes. Parse is staring through the floor at something Jeff can never see. He says, “Okay.”

“Can I crash here for a few weeks?” Parse asks. He almost smiles. “I think my place is haunted.”

We’re not much better off, Jeff thinks. He ruffles Parse’s hair and turns to steer him into the living room. “It’s still your bedroom, bud.”

“Gross,” Parse comments, then sweeps Shani into the hug she’s been patiently waiting for. “Hey, pretty lady. I missed you.”

“Me too, sweetheart,” Shani says. She makes eye contact with Jeff over Parse’s shoulder. “Welcome home.”

~*~

Parse sets off their fire alarm trying to scramble eggs at three in the morning. They drive to IHOP and drink watery hot chocolate and talk about anything that isn’t hockey. Jeff wasn’t sleeping, anyway.

~*~

They make it to early February before Parse says, “So I found a new apartment. I can move in next week.”
Jeff takes a sip of his Pepsi as Shani puts a hand on his shoulder. *You can do this,* he thinks. The can makes a crunching sound under his fingers. “Okay. One condition.”

Parse snorts. “Uh, excuse me?”

“You’re not living alone unless you go to therapy,” Jeff says. His voice is almost steady. “I’ll sleep on your fucking floor if I have to.”

They talked about a lot of possible reactions ahead of time. Jeff didn’t consider that Parse would go so pale.

“No,” Parse says. “No, I’m not going to some fucking shrink like Jack had—”

Shani soothes, “Kent, this isn’t—”

“—that fucking ruined everything!” Parse insists. “You don’t—you don’t get it! Everything was—we were fine until Zimms started popping pills, okay? I’m not turning into some fucking zombie—”

“No one said anything about that, baby,” Jeff cuts in. He puts his drink down and takes Parse’s shaking hands. “I’ve—we’ve been looking it up, okay? No one can make you take anything.”

Parse gets up and sits down on Parse’s other side, rubbing his back. “You can just go talk, with someone who can help you.”

Parse rips his hands away from Jeff and presses them against his face. “You can’t fucking do this to me. What the fuck.”

“Or you can stay here,” Jeff says. “With us. Until you’re ready.”

Parse gets up and backs away, hissing, “I’m not your fucking prisoner. What the fuck—you think I’m some fucking basketcase? I’m not crazy, okay, I don’t need—”

“No,” Jeff tells him. “We don’t think that. We were actually thinking. We thought maybe we’d go too.”

Parse narrows his eyes. “What?”

Shani says, “To therapy, Kent. If you go, we’ll go too.”

“Oh, c’mon,” Parse sneers. He spreads his arms open wide. “You’ve got it all figured out already, don’t you, honey? What the fuck do you need therapy for?”

No. That’s it.

“What do I need therapy for, Kent?” Jeff asks. He stands up and slams his shin into the coffee table so hard it knocks over. He doesn’t feel it. “Maybe because I found your body. Or maybe because I can’t smell maple syrup without puking my guts out, and I can’t walk into a movie theater without having a fucking panic attack because I can’t handle going without my phone. Maybe—”

“Jeff—”

“Maybe I should go to therapy for how fucking angry I am at you—all the fucking time, Kent.” Jeff throws his hands up. “Or because I’m not sleeping. Or because I hate myself for not being enough for you. How’s that? Am I fucking crazy enough yet, Kent, or should I keep going?”

Parse is crying. Just a little bit—where his eyes are wet and his cheeks are barely damp. He sits down
on the side of the armchair and says, “This is why you should’ve let me die.”

“You’re not getting it,” Jeff snaps. He makes it all the way to Parse before whatever’s holding him up gives out and he’s on his knees. Nothing left, just shaking hands that reach up to cup Parse’s face. “You’re not…it’s not that you lived. It’s that. I could’ve lost you. And you don’t get how that’s the worst…it’s the worst thing, Kent. That you could ever do to me.”

Parse opens his mouth but nothing comes out. He shakes his head instead.

“You could give me five years. Ten, twenty, eighty-five,” Jeff says. He’s so tired and still so angry but in the quiet way. The kind that makes it hard to wipe Parse’s tears away without sobbing. “It’d never be enough. And I’m counting in days.”

“I’m not worth it,” Parse says.

“I’d do it again,” Jeff swears. “All of it. All of it’s worth it for you. But that doesn’t mean I’m not gonna go to fucking therapy. Because I sure as fuck wish those weren’t the choices.”

Parse hits the floor hard. Jeff catches him, cradling his head into the crook of Jeff’s neck.

Parse says, “I can’t give you what you want.”

Jeff can feel Parse’s lips against his neck, the ragged huff of his breath. He can feel Parse’s hair under his fingers, the trembling of his hands against Jeff’s chest.

“Can you try?” Jeff asks. He touches his forehead to Parse’s temple. “Just to see?”

Parse turns his head to press a single kiss to Jeff’s throat. Jeff thinks, Tear it out.

“For you,” says Parse.

~*~

Jeff and Shani’s support group meets in Henderson, Nevada, at the Barbara Greenspun WomensCare Center. Sometimes Fish is there, too, because there’s nowhere else to go for people like them. Jeff calls him Liam and they pretend that they don’t know each other except like this.

Liam Salstrom lost his not-quite sister-in-law last year. His girlfriend’s name is Abby and she hasn’t cut herself since, but that doesn’t mean Liam thinks she won’t. Ruth and Bobby have been married for thirty years. Their son died three months ago. Nina’s husband was a soldier, like the father Kent never talks about. Val leads their group and sometimes she talks about her brother and how old he would be today.

Jeff Troy wakes up some mornings and gets to touch the freckles on Parse’s face. He doesn’t belong here.

They pick Parse up from therapy on the drive back home and stop at the same Starbucks every time. It has a nice couch in the corner, out of the way. Jeff’s starting to wonder if vanilla lattes have always tasted this much like shame.
There’s this thing that happens, sometimes. Where someone goes to touch him and it’s like his entire world is ending.

“I can’t stop thinking it’s…my fault,” Jeff says. Everyone is looking at him and he can’t even stare at one person’s shoes for too long. “Like, if I had. If I’d hadn’t turned my phone off, or if we hadn’t had that stupid conversation—” He breaks off. He doesn’t have to worry about the shoes anymore, because it’s all just blurry. Nina takes his hand. “I think we’re all here to forgive ourselves,” she says. Jeff closes his eyes.

“I love you so much,” Shani murmurs in March, and Jeff kisses her. Her hand makes it all the way to his hip before he flinches. She rests her head on his chest instead and intertwines their fingers. They talk about progress, a lot. In group. Sometimes Jeff feels like he’s clawing for it.

“Do you think, like,” Parse asks in April. He’s chewing on his mouthguard, staring at the retreating backs of their teammates who are all still high off their 4-0 shutout. “We’re ever gonna fuck again?” Jeff leans his head back against the stall. “I kind of, uh. Keep thinking about that time.” “Where I almost died?” Parse clarifies. Jeff winces. “What if,” Parse suggests, tossing his bucket onto the ground and pulling his sweater off, “I promised not to almost die this time.” Jeff catches him by the hips when he leans in. “Are you on something?” “And I also made it, like, really subpar sex.” Parse does a weird thing with his tongue right in Jeff’s face. “So it’s like, not like that other time at all.”
“Dude!” Jeff actually laughs, turning his head to avoid getting licked in the eye. He slides his hands up experimentally, hitting Parse’s bare torso. Warm skin, and it feels good for the first time in a while.

Parse puts his lips up to Jeff’s ear. “I think maybe this is that manic thing. You should prob’ly take me home.”

Jeff’s mouth goes kind of dry. He undoes Parse’s pads, letting them fall to the floor, and asks, “Yeah?”

“And tire me out with sex,” Parse adds. For clarity. “Or I won’t sleep.”

“Are you threatening me?” Jeff asks. He fights the urge to nip at Parse’s collarbone. They’re in public.

Parse doesn’t seem to care, since his teeth are drawing goosebumps on Jeff’s neck. “Is it working?”

Jeff closes his eyes. “We’re calling your therapist in an hour.”

“Hour and thirty,” Parse bargains. He plays dirty, slipping his fingers under Jeff’s pants.

“God dammit,” Jeff hisses. He can feel himself tensing, even as he’s chubbing up in his sweats—that impulse to panic and run from the good thing. He’s not sure what he’s supposed to want. Where the shame comes from.

But the thing is: he doesn’t have to listen.

“An hour,” he insists. “But a quickie in the car before I start counting.”

Parse huffs out a laugh triumphantly.

~*~

Jeff climbs back onto the bed, ears still ringing from the squeeze of Shani’s thighs, and wipes at his mouth before he kisses her.

She’s watching him when he pulls away, her eyes shining with something that makes his chest hurt in the lamplight.

“What?” he asks, managing a smile.

“Nothing,” she says. She thumbs at the corner of his mouth. “I missed you.”

Jeff kisses the underside of her ring. Still waiting for them. “Me too.”

~*~

“So my therapist said—or, I mean, I said it, but I think she tricked me;” Parse says a week after they
get knocked out of the playoffs. His good hand is fisted in Jeff’s hair and Jeff’s face is three inches from a brand new slash mark on his thigh.

This feels like a “pause the blowjob” kind of conversation. Jeff pulls off Parse’s dick and stares up at him.

“Thanks,” Parse says. “Anyway, my therapist said maybe I should have some stuff to live for that isn’t a person or a sport that keeps trying to kill me.”

Jeff shifts his weight from knee to knee. “Makes sense.”

“So I was thinking maybe we could go to the craft store tomorrow,” Parse suggests. He bribes Jeff with head scratches, too.

“Sounds good,” Jeff agrees. He rests his cheek against Parse’s hip.

“Great,” Parse says. “As you were.”

Jeff licks his lips and gets back to work.

~*~

“It’s the ugliest scarf I’ve ever seen,” Shani says. She holds it up for the entire group to see and then uses it to wipe at her eyes. “I haven’t stopped crying since he gave it to me.”

~*~

“He bought a car last week,” Jeff says. “So now I keep dreaming that he crashes it.”

~*~

Parse grabs the GPS off the dash and then asks, “Mind if we make a pit stop?”

Shani meets Jeff’s eyes in the rearview mirror and merges onto the highway when the GPS says to. “It’s your weekend, sweetie. We can go wherever you want.”

Wherever Parse wants is an animal shelter in the heart of Vegas, the walkway decorated with tacky little American flags for the impending holiday. Parse unbuckles his seatbelt and says, “You guys can wait here.”

“Oh—” Jeff says as Parse slams the car door behind him. “Kay?”

They watch him vanish inside the building in silence. Shani leans her seat back to wait, and Jeff pulls out his MP3 to listen to music and watch the meager breeze play with the flags. One of them falls
over onto the sidewalk.

He can stand it for maybe half an hour before he pulls out an earbud and says, “Maybe we should go check on him.”

“Baby,” Shani says. She reaches behind her and he takes her hand. “I’m sure he’s fine. What could he do in there that’s so bad?”

Jeff is halfway out of the car when Parse walks back outside, a bag of something slung over his shoulder and a carrier in the other hand. There’s a ball of white fur freaking the fuck out inside of it.

So the bag’s cat food. Jeff finishes climbing out of the car and opens Parse’s door for him, then takes the food and chucks it in the back seat.

Parse pulls the carrier into his lap as Jeff trips over the cat food on his way back into the car. The new cat (Jesus) yowls and tries to shank Parse through the metal bars of her cage.

“Guys, meet Kit Purrson,” Parse says. “She’s the love of my life. Sorry, babe.”

“That’s okay,” Jeff says. Then, “…Kit Purrson?”

“I think this’ll be good on the whole not wanting to kill myself front,” Parse tells them cheerfully. “I’ll keep you posted.”

He sticks his hand into the carrier and wiggles his fingers at her. Kit Purrson—and, once again, Jesus—he hisses and claws his hand.

“Ow!” Parse sticks two of his fingers in his mouth and sucks on them. “Be nice to daddy, Kit.”

Shani says, “Kent, sweetie, not to be a downer, but? Have you thought about this?”

Parse punches another address into the GPS. “You know that new picture website thing? Instagram? I was thinking I’d make one for her.”

“Kent,” Jeff says.

Parse rubs at his scar without looking at it, his thumb skittering over the entire length from memory. He’s still watching Kit as she tries to jailbreak herself. “I think it’s time I have someone I can take care of,” he says. His lips curl up softly—not even really a smile. “I’ve always wanted a cat.”

Shani puts the car in reverse and points them towards home. “Okay,” she says, and that’s that.

~*~

Kit Purrson has, like, a lot of Instagram followers. Parse smiles at her even when he thinks no one’s looking.

~*~
Granny Millie is turning 80 this year. Jeff, Shani, Naomi, and Parse all pile into a plane and fill a row on both sides of the aisle, Kit Purrson mewling pathetically from under Parse’s seat the entire flight. Jeff hands the people around them earplugs and makes his ‘sorry’s extra Canadian for good measure.

Summers on Long Island aren’t hotter than Vegas, but they get up there. Parse wears long sleeves and laughs it off when anyone chirps him about it, and Jeff keeps a tight arm around his waist whenever he’s in reach. They spend the weekend celebrating—with one somber afternoon reflecting on Shani’s grandpa—and placing bets on how long it will take Kit to terrorize Granny’s two schnauzers into submission. (Jeff wins: less than twenty four hours).

On Saturday, Jeff finds Parse sitting on the back porch swing after the rest of the family is asleep, sleeves pushed up to his elbows. He sits down next to him and slings an arm around his shoulders, resting his cheek on the top of his head. There’s nothing out here to really see, but maybe that’s why Parse likes it.

“Come with me into the city tomorrow,” Parse tells him. “I’ve got a thing to do.”

“Ominous,” Jeff says. He ruffles Parse’s hair.

Parse kisses the ticklish spot behind Jeff’s ear and kicks his feet so that the swing starts to rock them back and forth.

“Hey,” Jeff says. “I’ve been meaning to ask you a thing.”

Parse nips at Jeff’s cartilage. Ow. “You can ask me a thing.”

“Are you, uh.” Jeff rubs the back of his neck. “Are you—will you still. Be my best man? At the wedding.”

Parse stiffens, just enough for Jeff to notice. “Of—of course I am? Unless you don’t want—”

Jeff’s face turns warm. “You just don’t, uh. Wear the bracelet? Anymore.”

Parse sits up all the way so they aren’t touching anywhere. He tugs his sleeve back down and says, “I couldn’t get the blood out.”

“Oh,” Jeff says. He reaches over and touches Parse’s hand, just above where the scar starts. “I’ll get you a new one.”

“I don’t deserve it.” Parse stands up and stretches. “Will you sleep in my room tonight?”

Jeff stands up too. “Yeah. But you can’t let Kit chew on my toes again.”

“No promises,” Parse says, grinning.

~*_~

The tattoo place that Jeff follows Parse into is as in the middle of nowhere that something can be in NYC, which means they took a couple weird turns to get there and it’s nestled between two shops that look like they don’t want to be touching a tattoo place.

“Hey,” Parse tells the guy at the counter. “I’ve got a ten-thirty for Kent?”
The guy shakes Parse’s hand. “Hey, Kent. I’m Rick, good to meet ya. Let me see the arm?”

Parse shoves his sleeves up and Jeff thinks, *Oh.*

Rick kind of makes a face. “Look, I know I said this already, but—this’d turn out way better if you gave it a few months. It’s gonna hurt like fucking balls and I can’t guarantee—”

“Don’t got that kinda time,” Parse tells him. He winks and everything, like it’s a big joke. “Will you do it or not?”

Rick looks at Jeff, like maybe he’s figured out who the voice of reason is in this operation. “At least let me line it and come back for the shading later?”

“No,” Parse says.

Jeff shrugs at Rick helplessly. He picks his battles, now.

Rick sighs, then walks towards the back of the shop, gesturing for them both to follow. “Let’s get started, then. Hey, Goliath—ya just here to handhold, or ya want a matching bad decision?”

“The first one,” Jeff says. “Thanks for asking, though.”

Rick says, “Sure,” while Parse helpfully points out, “I make enough for two of us.”

“Maybe three people,” Jeff chirps.

“Be nice to me,” Parse tells him. “I’m—*ow, fucker*—suffering over here.”

Jeff takes Parse’s other hand and lets him squeeze it while he watches Rick take the tattoo gun back to his arm. That part wasn’t even over the scar.

“You know,” Rick says, maybe to distract Parse from how every pass of the needle is coming closer, “I’ve done a coupla these coverups before. Most people ain’t so…chipper.”

Parse’s fingers twitch under Jeff’s hold.

“He’s lying to you,” Jeff says, right when the needle hits the scar tissue and Parse shoves his face into Jeff’s shoulder with a hiss. “You get used to it.”

~*~

“I’m gonna throw up,” Jeff says.

“Probably don’t?” Parse suggests.

“Oh my God,” Naomi says. “She’s so beautiful.”

Jeff snaps back to attention as the wedding march starts and Shani comes around the corner. She’s in a giant ball gown and her hair is done-up in the most intricate pattern of cornrows he’s ever seen, all twisted into a bun on the top of her head. Her veil is streaming from a tiara that catches, sparkling, in the light.
She looks like a princess. Jeff is crying before she even makes it to the altar.

“Baby,” Shani says when she gets to him. She’s beaming under the veil and her eyes are shining. “No crying yet! Nothing’s happened.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Jeff chokes out, smiling, to the laughter of the people in the first few rows. “You’re so, so gorgeous, baby.”

“Thank you,” she answers. “Can we get married now?”

Jeff wipes at his eyes. “I guess.”

The priest clears his throat and starts the ceremony. He keeps it short, like they talked about. Thank God, because Jeff is kind of just falling apart up here. He’s across from the woman he loves and Parse—Parse is alive and here to see it and loves Jeff too—and Shani is glowing and the prettiest thing he’s ever seen.

“It is time for the couple to say their vows,” the priest announces. “Jeffrey, will you repeat after me?”

Jeff clears his throat and says, “I’ll try.”

“Oh my God,” Shani mutters, biting back a smile.

The priest chuckles and begins reciting the vows and pausing for Jeff to follow along.

“I, Jeffrey Troy, take you, Shanelle Grady, to be my wife, and these things I promise you,” Jeff says. His voice is jumping all over the place and he’s not sure people can even hear him, but it doesn’t matter. Shani is mouthing along with every word. “I will be faithful to you and honest with you. I will respect, trust, help, and care for you.”

He takes an extra pause to clear his throat. He’s gonna look terrible in all the pictures. His face is probably so blotchy.

“I will—I will share my life with you. I will forgive you as—as—fuck.” Jeff takes a shuddering breath. He can feel Parse’s hand on his back. Real. “I will forgive you as we have been…forgiven. And I will try with you to better understand ourselves, the world, and—and God. Through the best and worst of what is to come…”

The priest says, “And as long as we live.”

Jeff closes his eyes. “And as long as we live.”

Shani repeats her vows next, and then Parse is pulling out the rings for both of them to take. Jeff’s hand trembles the entire time, but he slides the ring on Shani’s finger and keeps her hand in his, dragging his thumb over her knuckles, until the priest says, “You may now kiss the bride,” and he does that instead.

He can hear people cheering, including Kent and Naomi, but all he feels in that moment is his hands on her face, the way her lips taste, her nails scratching gently against his scalp the way he’ll always love. With the veil off, he realizes there’s glitter on her cheeks, shimmering against her beautiful dark skin. The little things.

“Everyone, I now present to you Mr. and Mrs. Grady-Troy!” the priest announces, and Jeff pulls his wife back into another kiss.
“I love you,” he whispers fiercely. “I love you so much.”

“She too, baby,” she whispers back. She wipes at the corners of his eyes. “So much.”

They get whisked away for pictures and a late lunch to tie them over until the reception that evening. The wedding photographer gets some great ones of Jeff wrapped around Parse, playfully kissing his cheek. He’s pretty sure she thinks they’re a joke—just like everyone else will, if anything ends up online. But he knows, and so does Parse, and so does Shani when she fusses with Kent’s hair and says something that makes him pull her into a hug.

The reception is at a hotel nearby. They eat the catered food and listen to toasts from their families, including one from Naomi as the maid of honor. Parse’s best man speech is last. He grips Jeff’s hand under the table so tightly that Jeff’s fingers go numb, then strides up to the podium.

“Hey, everyone,” Parse says. He taps on the microphone. “Uh, I’m not great at speeches—”

“Bullshit!” someone chirps from over at the hockey table. Probably Hatty.

“Yeah, yeah. I can hype up a locker room. That’s fine.” Parse runs a hand through his hair. “But—thinking about today—I guess I’m not sure how to get any of it out. Because I don’t think—”

Parse takes a breath and lays down his notecards on the podium.

“I don’t think we talk enough—about how people can save each other,” he says, and everyone in the room looks up. No more clinking forks or background chatter. “I don’t think we realize that. But the thing is—the thing is that, these two, over there. They saved me. And I’ve watched them save each other, too—every time—and I think maybe that’s what love is. Or, at least, the best of it, and maybe—maybe we could talk about that, a little more.”

And then he walks away.

There’s a delay before the applause starts, but by the time Parse is sinking back into his chair, it’s in full swing. Jeff takes Parse’s hand again and leans in close and murmurs, through the lump in his throat, “You saved yourself.”

Parse taps his head against Jeff’s shoulder and then sits back up again. “Love you, too.”

They move directly into cutting the cake and then the first dance. Jeff practiced his dancing, like, a lot, but not with anyone wearing a giant princess wedding dress, so it’s mostly a game of trying not to step on the skirt and eat it on the dance floor in front of everyone. Shani chirps him mercilessly the whole time and takes the lead over—which is a relief.

Jeff leans in close and mouths the words in her ear, _Hey moon, please forget to fall down_, and feels her laugh against his cheek. He could hear that forever. He hopes he gets to.

He dances with his mother and watches the cake get ravaged—mostly by his teammates—and loses Shani to a crowd of guests that want to tell her how beautiful she is. It’s about then that he realizes that he hasn’t seen Parse anywhere since the speech.

The balcony overlooks the edge of the city—palm trees and the strange barrenness of a place that held out against being swallowed up by the rest. Parse is sitting on the ground, legs sticking through the holes in the railing and swinging idly. His suit jacket is draped over the railing and his sleeves are rolled up.

He looks over when Jeff sits down next to him and says, “Oh, hey. I jacked your cake toppers.”
They’re sitting near his thigh, on the side Jeff isn’t. “I thought it’d be a cool pic out here, with the sunset.”

Jeff nods thoughtfully. He wraps his arm around Parse’s shoulders. “Thanks, bud.”

Parse rests his head on Jeff’s shoulder and stares out over the desert. “Hey, Jeff?”

The tattoo is fully healed now, the scar only visible underneath if you know what to look for. Rick did a great job with the Grand Canyon. Jeff still doesn’t know what it means.

“What’s up?” he asks, maybe too late.

“I think I’m happy.”

Jeff looks down at him—at the crooked teeth he can’t see and the way Parse’s eyes are perfectly clear. He looks away, at all the colors the sun still is.

“Yeah,” he says. “Me too.”

End Notes

Skipping the suicide attempt scene: To skip the explicit depiction of a suicide attempt, there are two options. If you would like to skip the panic surrounding the situation, including the reading of a suicide note, stop reading at "Jeff doesn't check his phone until he's signed the bill." If you would only like to skip the blood and injury, stop reading at "Jeff parks two blocks away and leaves the phone and runs."

You can resume reading at the line " “I have to ask you to leave,” the nurse tells them. " Which is two scene breaks later. Here is a brief summary of what happens in the skipped scene:

Jeff finds Parse and starts to call for an ambulance, but Parse asks him not to do so. Jeff calls 911 anyway, and Parse says that he will never forgive him.

This was an incredibly personal story for me to write. Thank you to everyone for reading <3

You can find me on Tumblr!

Works inspired by this one: fake happy [PODFIC] by read by Khashana (Khashana), SummerFrost

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!